

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 11:20-30

Sermon Title: "What Is Hidden Is Made Known" (A Journey through Matthew)

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We don't see Jesus get angry often, but he sure seems to be very angry in Matthew 11. Matthew tells us that Jesus "reproaches" certain cities for not repent of their sin. Other translations say that Jesus "rebukes" those cities, "denounces" them, "sets his teeth against them." When you set your teeth and talk through them, you are seething with anger about something. Jesus uses the word "Woe," which is an exclamation of grief. When you say "woe," it is like saying, "Wow, look at you! You are a disaster! Is there any escape?" The city of Chorazin is in trouble. So are Bethsaida and Capernaum along with it. These are Jewish cities. The people belong to a group claimed by God. They have God's laws and God's priests, and now they have God's Son. And they are thick, senseless. They don't see God as they should, and it is their fault. They should have seen – they should have known.

The cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom are also in trouble. These are pagan cities, and although they do not have God's law and God's priests, they still have

God's Son. God's Son showed them a different way to live. He offered them an escape from their pagan chains, so they may walk in the light of God. But they refused. They ignored God's Son, and it is their fault. Jesus does not call himself a judge in Matthew 11, but he knows what is going to happen to these six cities. It isn't going to be pretty.

Then in verse 25, Jesus makes the shift to the kind of *Savoir* we are familiar with. In verses 25-30 Jesus is not making judgment calls. He is praying with God the Father, and giving thanks, and opening up possibilities for healing. We run into a famous couple of verses at the end, in which Jesus tells the labored and heavy-burdened to come to him, to learn from him, to take on his yoke and follow him. "I am gentle and lowly in heart," Jesus says, "and you will find rest for your souls."¹ In these verses there is no punishment. There is no getting anybody for ignoring the Son of God. There will be no destruction, only healing, restoration, life. We feel at home with the last five verses of Matthew 11.

What is troublesome about these 10 verses, 20 through 30, is what Jesus says in verse 25. When he makes the transition from judge to comforter, he says

¹ Matthew 11:30.

this in the middle, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things.” What are “these things” that Jesus is talking about? Is Jesus thankful that the Father has hidden the importance of the Son’s mission on earth? Not everybody understands what Jesus is doing. Most of the citizens in those six doomed cities haven’t a clue as to why Jesus performed great miracles within their city walls. They thought a magician had come to entertain them, and that was it. A great teacher was in our midst, a great moralist who tried to tell us what is right and what is wrong. God the Father hid from them that fact that Jesus is not a magician but the Lord of all. Jesus is not a moralist but the Savior of the world who alone can and will remove our sin. All of that was hidden from them.

But why would God the Father do that? Why would the Father hide anything from his chosen people in the Jewish towns, and his lost pagan people in the Gentile towns?

I was thinking of the Book of Exodus while reading Matthew, and I started thinking about Pharaoh and how God hardened his heart. A plague would attack the city – frogs, locusts, hail – and sometimes it would say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, so he would not listen. He would not budge. That sounds

counterproductive, doesn't it? Why would God try to get somebody to listen to him, and then hardened his heart, close his ears, and make him refuse anything that God is saying?

In the story about Pharaoh, God hardens the heart of Pharaoh only about half the time. When Moses performs the miracle of changing Aaron's staff into a serpent (you may remember), it says that Pharaoh hardens his own heart.² He keeps his heart hard, and his mind closed to anything Moses is doing. To anything God is doing. Pharaoh doesn't want to know. He would rather go on with his life as supreme leader of the Egyptians. He would rather keep his own busy schedule, rather than put up with Moses all day. He would rather just be left alone.

Let us go back to Matthew 11, and Jesus gritting his teeth against six cities. Nothing has been hidden to them at all – Jesus has been perfectly public about his message. He has healed and taught and saved lives, all out in the open. Nobody can deny it. But they can refuse to accept it. They can harden their hearts toward it, and close their minds, and wish Jesus would leave them alone. They want to get on with their lives rather than put up with Jesus all day. He will not leave them alone. It is not Jesus' fault for

² Cf. Exodus 7:8-13.

bugging them; it is their fault for not trying to understand what Jesus was doing, and be thankful.

So Jesus says these things are hidden. Those who refuse Jesus hid themselves from him, and at some point it will be too late. Those things of God will be hidden forever, and those people will not be able to find them. They will not be able to find God.

Jesus the Son thanks God the Father for hiding all things of God from the wise and the intelligent. However, those who are not so wise and not so intelligent are able to see all those holy things. Jesus says that the infants and babes can see God.³

When we read the Bible, and we see the wise pitted against the not-so-wise, we cannot help think of the chief priests and Pharisees and Sadducees on the one hand, and the rest of Israel on the other. Usually we place the religious elite in the category of those who are wise. They read the Bible often, they give instructions to people in spiritual matters, and they are able to the holy things in worship. So we can say that they are more responsible for what happens and doesn't happen, spiritually, in Israel. If the worship of God is lagging, the religious elite must handle it. If morality is down, the religious elite must help to raise

³ Matthew 11:25.

it. But the wise and intelligent religious elite like privileges, not so much the responsibilities. They like the chauffeured limousines, and a private table at Fogo De Chao, and the endless credit at Neiman Marcus. They love it when people see them and bow to them. They love it when people give them praise and honor for doing nothing. They look like Beyonce and Jay Z walking through the Cuban airport, treated as though they are gods. Anyone of us could get caught up in all of that. Anyone one of us could turn into arrogant jerks, if given just a little too much. We may have heard stories of people who win the lottery, and they say it would never change them. All of a sudden, they don't return phone calls; they are living in large gated communities, safe from all the common people; they are always traveling to Conte Carlo or Singapore. They only have time for people of importance – they are not your friend anymore, because you are so uninteresting.

That is why we can say that, when Jesus mentions the wise and intelligent in Matthew 11, he may not be speaking about the chief priests and Pharisees and Sadducees alone. He could be talking about anybody who thinks himself or herself so wise, so intelligent, so “all that.” The wise and intelligent are proud people, and they don't like to be told what to do.

Wisdom and intelligence here has nothing to do with how many diplomas and academic honors you have achieved. It all has to do with attitude.⁴ Anybody can become prideful, so filled with pride as not to listen to anybody. “Leave me alone – I know what I am doing,” when we don’t know what we are doing. Some who are intelligent refuse help. Those who count themselves as wise believe they you are the only one who have a brain. Everybody else is stupid. Mom and Dad are stupid, obviously. My teachers are stupid, duh. My friends are stupid, I don’t know why I hang out with them. Wisdom with pride refuses to listen to anybody, refuses to learn and grow. Wisdom full of arrogance shuts people out, even God. God’s ways are not intelligent enough. People have no patience to sit at the feet of Christ and understand his ways.

It has all to do with attitude. We don’t like to be told what to do. We don’t want to be shown the right way to go. It would be no surprise if Jesus gritted his teeth toward us, and said, “Woe unto you, you are a disaster! Is there any escape?”

We sure do love the labored and heavy-burdened

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, cf. 430.

bit of Matthew 11, don't we? We love it when Jesus says, "I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."⁵ In order to get there, however, we have to get past those first five verses in Matthew 11. We have to understand that we may be just as guilty as those six cities. We have taken God for granted. We have not listened to what the Spirit has been trying to tell us. We think of Christ as our Savior out there, not really a part of our daily schedules. We have hidden the word of God, the good things of God, from ourselves and others. If we want "the lowly in heart and give you rest" bit, we need to repent of our arrogant wisdom and close-minded intelligence.

One of the pastors during my preaching conference in Nashville asked us, "What distinguishes us in this world? What sets us apart as Christians?" It isn't happiness, that Christians are so much happier than others without God. Others may be just as happy in what they are doing. It isn't success or purpose, because even Donald Trump has those. It is because we are grateful for what Jesus did, what Jesus does, and what Jesus is going to do. It all has to do with attitude. Praising God that nothing is hidden to us. Praising God that nothing is hidden to anybody. Nobody has to have a special degree from a certain

⁵ Matthew 11:30.

university that is difficult to get into in order to know God. Nobody has to have the right amount of cash and have the best financial portfolio in order to experience God. Nobody has to be anything special. If you have a brain and ears and eyes and a heart, you can experience God. You may see his ways and get on board with them. It is all out there, ready to be had. Just reach out and grab it.

“Come to me,” Jesus invites us. “Come to me all who are overworked and carrying way too much.” Jesus’ gritting teeth turns into a smile. Come and learn a new way of life. Come and find a new way to carry on with life and bear its responsibilities with Christ beside us.

