

Acting Like Children

Matthew 11:16-24

It's not a very happy title, is it? "Acting Like Children." You get the idea immediately, that Jesus isn't dealing with something very good. He describes the generation of those who lived on earth with him as "children sitting in the marketplaces." What he means by that rebuke will be our focus tonight.

But sometimes, in other places of the Bible, children are set before us as a good example. We are called to be like little children. Specifically, as we will study next week,

Mat. 11:25 "At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. 26 Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight."

More explicitly,

Luke 18:15 "Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called them to Him and said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. 17 Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it."

I believe the idea there is the trusting confidence of the simple faith so well demonstrated by little children. Little children believe what they are told and trust their parents who tell them. But our situation in our text this afternoon is very different. The childishness which Jesus identifies is not praiseworthy at all, for the context of it all is,

I. A REJECTION OF JESUS.

"This generation" of verse 16 is the generation of those who refused their own Messiah, the ones who would face the judgment of God for their unbelief. And look at how Jesus exposes them, with their stubborn refusal to receive him. It is,

A. The illustration of children expecting to get their own way.

That's the childishness that is before us. Children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates.

v.16b-17

So self-absorbed. So immature. So...childish. They expect Jesus to perform at their bidding, it seems. To be their play toy. It's a child's game, in which they are the master of ceremonies and all of the action revolves around them, around their wishes and their desires. "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance."

Jesus, of course, didn't always do what others expected him to do, did he? He didn't always respond the way others wanted him to. In fact, almost never. He is Lord, he is the son of his father, who came to do his father's will, not to be a man-pleaser. He didn't come to make everyone happy, to be an enabler for all their sins and selfish preoccupations. In fact, remember what we saw in,

Mat. 10:34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; 36 and a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' 37 He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy

of Me. 39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”

But selfish people still want their own needs met first. They want to remain at the center of the world, sovereign in their own sphere, able to command control of everything all around them. So their childish rant continues,

v.17b “...We mourned to you, [We sang a dirge,] And you did not lament.”

Jesus didn’t come to meet the expectations of the world, that is for sure, and so this childish generation would reject him, and they would be condemned. Such a sad commentary on the world into which Jesus was born.

The world hasn’t changed any, has it? There is still this sense in the minds of many people that God is a magic genie. God as a wizard to grant you three wishes. God as a slot machine, if you pull the right lever at the right time, out comes all the money. For many people, God is a good luck charm. A superstitious object of hope, or a merely sentimental place of safety and refuge. We want God to make everything seem OK, to make everything feel all right, we want God to satisfy all our selfish little urges, and if we don’t get what we want? Well, we try something else.

That’s the generation in which we live in as well. And that temptation would come to our souls rather easily. So we get upset when trouble strikes. Or we chafe under his authority and exercise of sovereignty. We can easily become like these little children, always expecting to get their own way, and that’s the danger Jesus is addressing.

His descriptive rebuke of that generation continues in,
v.18-19

Here we see even further,

B. The demonstration of a stubborn self-righteousness.

Just think about it. John seemed very strange to them. His message was a call to repentance, and he lived out the humility and self-denial that was an appropriate preparation for the gospel of the kingdom of God. “John came neither eating nor drinking.” They thought him crazy, accused him of having a demon.

Actually, no doubt it was their own guilty conscience, for the evident example of his own personal righteousness made them very uncomfortable. Within their own self-righteous hearts, it would expose their own sin. John had more self-control than they. John’s call to repentance was accompanied by the severity of his lifestyle, a whole lifestyle that might be compared to fasting. And they couldn’t handle it. They accused him of having a demon!

So then what? Well, Jesus came along “eating and drinking.” It was time for a celebration, for the messiah was here. The bridegroom had arrived, and the party began, so to speak. Go back with me to Matthew 9. It is the same message.

Mat. 9:14 Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?” 15 And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. 16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. 17 Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

Jesus’ presence on earth was illustrated by a wedding

banquet. Interestingly, that same image is used of our future heavenly glory as well. That's what makes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper such a delight as well, for the image of the celebrations of a wedding banquet is acted out as we eat and drink together at the Lord's table.

So they complained that John didn't eat and drink, feeling the guilt of their own worldly indulgences. But they didn't accept Jesus either.

v.19a

Their hypocrisy was obvious, wasn't it? And Jesus exposes it for all to see clearly. They rejected John as the messenger, because his call to repentance made them feel guilty. They rejected Jesus, because he demanded their honor. In their childish selfishness, they simply would not receive Jesus as the messiah. They would not acknowledge him as the sovereign Lord. They would not submit to his authority or live their lives for his glory. Thus Jesus concludes his rebuke with a declaration regarding,

C. The need for true wisdom.

The words seem a little strange, or at least, a bit out of place.

v.19b "Yet wisdom is justified by her children."

Calvin expresses the meaning of those words this way, "First, the words of Christ contain an implied contrast between true children and [illegitimate children], who hold but an empty title without the reality; and they amount to this: "Let those who haughtily boast of being the children of Wisdom proceed in their obstinacy: she will, notwithstanding, retain the praise and support of her own children."

In other words, the true children of God will have true wisdom,

and that wisdom will be made obvious by its good effect upon the lives of God's people. True wisdom, true faith, will be demonstrated and made known by its fruit. It is a direct contrast to those childish and selfish unbelievers who simply wanted God to give them their own wishes and desires. True wisdom, beginning with the fear of God, true wisdom will be made known, it will be proven to be true, by the fruit of good works. "Wisdom is justified by her children." Sometimes translated by the earlier texts, "by her deeds."

James really says the same thing when he writes,

James 2:17 "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

That does help explain James' use of the word "justify," which is the same Greek work as Jesus uses here in Matthew 11. James is, I believe, saying the same thing as Jesus. And James 2 continues with these words,

James 2:24 "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

"Wisdom is justified by her deeds." And with that rebuke comes,

II. A WARNING OF JUDGMENT.

A severe warning. The day of judgment.

v.24

Beloved, the day of judgment will come. It is sure and certain.

That is a plain biblical teaching.

Heb. 9:27 “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.”

2 Cor. 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

Jesus himself would declare this,

John 5:24 “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. 25 Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, 27 and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

The resurrection of judgment. That’s the warning. And,

A. The judgment of God will be pronounced against those unwilling to believe.

Unwilling to repent of their unbelief.

v.20-21

They saw the work of God. They saw the power of God They saw the goodness and the mercy of God. They saw the miracles. They saw his supernatural authority over all of the world, even

over death itself. And they did not repent.

Jesus goes on with the same thought in,
v.23

There is no room for the self-righteous to boast. They will be judged for the hardness of their hearts. They saw the power of God and they would not trust in Jesus. They saw the power of God, but they were still unwilling to believe.

Do you remember the account of the rich man and Lazarus. It is in Luke 16. It is such a useful rebuke to those of our own age who put God to the test, as if some further demonstration from God would be sufficient to enable them believe. And God says, “No.” He has already given the greatest sign possible, in the person of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, that greatest of signs was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, an absolute demonstration of absolute power. Here’s the description.

Luke 16:19 “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. 20 But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, 21 desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

24 “Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ 25 But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those

who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

27 "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' 29 Abraham said to him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 But he said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'"

No, says Jesus. I won't send them another prophet. They already have enough. "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." Of course, someone would rise from the dead, and many people will still refused to believe. Thus God's judgment is perfectly just. And, so clearly illustrated.

B. The judgment of God is illustrated by historical example.

The city of Bethsaida, which saw many miraculous signs.
v.21-22

And then Capernaum, and look at the historical reference,
v.23-24

You remember, no doubt, what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, a frequent biblical illustration of the severity of the judgment of God.

Gen. 19:24 "Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens. 25 So He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. 26 But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. 27 And Abraham

went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. 28 Then he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace. 29 And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot had dwelt."

Destroyed for their abundant wickedness, the burning ashes of the city of symbol of that judgment. And that judgment becomes an integral part of the gospel itself, for the judgment of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous are twin truths that stand together. And the invitation of the gospel is the invitation to escape that judgment. The declaration of the gospel is, itself, a warning of judgment. As Peter puts it in,

2 Peter 2:4 "For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; 6 and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; 7 and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)— 9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority."

So I declare to you the judgment of God. The terrible

judgment of God, judgment as upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. With this warning of judgment to the wicked,

Rom. 2:3 “And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? 5 But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who “will render to each one according to his deeds.”

That warning is an invitation. The two shall ever be joined. It is a warning of the most severe judgment possible. And the gospel is an invitation to escape that judgment, an invitation to which we will turn next week. For today, as we focus more upon the judgment, let me leave you with those words from Romans 2 again, urging you not to “despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance.”

So don't harden your hearts and reject John, as the messenger of God. And don't reject Jesus, as the messiah.

Heb. 9:27 “...as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.”