

Matthew 11C

- We're in Matthew 11:16 studying how it could happen that Israel rejected their Messiah in the day He came for them
 - The Gospel of Matthew divides roughly into two halves between Chapters 12 and 13
 - That division, as you've heard me say before, is centered on the moment Israel formally rejects Jesus as their Messiah
 - In the chapters prior to that moment, Matthew's account demonstrates the truth of Jesus's claims to be Messiah
 - He records Jesus' words and Matthew documents the various ways Jesus validated His claims
 - Then as we approach the division, Matthew begins to prepare his readers for that coming rejection moment
 - Sometimes rejection is easy to understand

Three brothers each marry a woman. The first one married a woman from Alabama, and said to her, "When I get back from work, I want the house to be clean and tidy." He didn't see any changes on the first day, but on the second day the house was clean and tidy.

The second brother married a woman from California, and said to her, "When I get back from work, I want the house to be clean, the laundry done, and have food ready on the table." On the first day he didn't see any changes, nor on the second day either, but on the third day it was as he had asked.

The third brother married a woman from Texas, and said to her, "When I get back from work, I want the house to be clean, the laundry done, and have food ready on the table." On the first day he didn't see anything, nor on the second or even on the third day either. On the fourth day the swelling had gone down enough that he could begin to see a little bit with his left eye, and he gained enough mobility in his right hand to make himself a sandwich.

- Sometimes, rejection is easy to understand, but not in Jesus' case

- Frankly, if we didn't already know how this story ends, we would be shocked to discover that Israel rejected their Lord
- Israel's rejection of Jesus was so surprising that it could lead Matthew's readers to suppose the Jewish authorities found a flaw in Jesus' claims
- Perhaps Jesus wasn't the Messiah and that's why Israel rejected Him...certainly that's what Israel's religious leaders wanted people to think
- Matthew anticipated his readers' surprise, so he spends considerable time explaining how Israel's rejection happened
 - Matthew gives us that story across two Chapters, 11 & 12
 - In Chapter 11, he focuses on the first of two primary causes for Jesus' rejection: the hard hearts of the people and their leaders
 - Later in Chapter 12, Matthew gives the second cause which was Jesus' refusal to support the rabbinical system
 - Even today in Chapter 11, we'll begin to see evidence of reason #2
- At the end of last week's teaching Jesus was castigating the crowds for pursuing John and Jesus for cynical, selfish reasons, and He ended with a provocative statement
 - Jesus said in v.14 that had Israel received John's testimony in faith, then John could have been their Elijah – so to speak
 - Jesus was referring to the Bible's promise that the prophet Elijah will return to Israel before the Messiah's entry into His Kingdom
 - We know that John the Baptist was not Elijah, since he himself denied being Elijah
 - But John was the forerunner God sent prior to the Messiah's first coming
 - So John marks the Messiah's first coming while Elijah will mark Jesus' return
 - And Jesus tells the people that had they believed John, then they would have recognized Jesus as the Messiah

- And had they received Jesus as their Messiah, then they would have received the promised Kingdom in their day
 - So in that sense, Jesus says if they were willing to accept Jesus as Messiah, then John could have fulfilled the purpose of Elijah's ministry
 - But as it was, they ignored John, and since they did not receive John, neither did they receive Jesus either
- Consequently in v.15, the final verse we read last week, Jesus issued the call that "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"
 - That's the first time Matthew records this statement in His Gospel, but we're going to hear it a lot more often going forward
 - It's Jesus' way of saying "I know not all of you accept what I am saying, so I'm speaking to those who are truly listening"
 - Until now, Jesus hasn't had reason to say this publicly – because He's been offering the Kingdom to all Israel if they would receive Him
 - But now that the tide is turning, and Jesus knows it, He begins to acknowledge His coming rejection in this subtle way
 - So knowing He's preaching to a people who aren't listening for the most part, the time has come to explain the consequences of rejecting Him

Matt. 11:16 "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children,

Matt. 11:17 and say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

Matt. 11:18 "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!'

Matt. 11:19 "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

- Rhetorically, Jesus asks to what could He compare this generation of Israel?
 - He's searches for a comparison to illustrate the heart of an entire generation of Israel

- And He lands on a comparison that would have been very familiar to anyone in His day: children in a marketplace
- Marketplaces were the center of life in a small town, a place of hustle and bustle that attracted adults and children alike
- Even the very young would wander out to play in the dusty square
- And children's games of that day weren't much different than those played today – except their games didn't require WiFi or batteries
 - They only required imagination and they often took the form of role playing
 - A child would propose a storyline, like cops and robbers, and then the rest of the children joined in playing parts of the story
- Even though that storyline wasn't scripted, the group understood the general way things should be done
 - Each child was expected to play his or her part accordingly
 - But if a child refused to play his role as required, he spoiled the fun for everyone else in the group
 - So naturally there was peer pressure to do what's expected
- Jesus compares Israel's treatment of John and Himself to that of children complaining that a child broke the rules of their pretend game
 - The children say they played the flute but the child didn't dance or they sang a funeral dirge but the child didn't mourn
 - Jesus is describing an ancient form of the game "Simon Says"
 - A leader initiates a certain action and then the rest in the group are supposed to respond in an expected fashion
 - And to trip up the contestants, the leader issues contradictory commands hoping to catch the group unaware
 - So in this case, a child pretends to play a flute and the group must perform a gleeful dance
 - Then the leader sings a funeral dirge, which forces the group to suddenly change from dancing to mourning

- But what if a child refused to dance or mourn during the game? The whole game comes to a stop and the fun is ruined for everyone
 - As is obvious, Jesus is comparing the Jewish crowds and their religious leaders to those complaining children who want everyone to follow the rules
 - Which means John and Jesus were that child who refused to play along with the game
- Religious life of Israel was a lot like playing Simon Says...it was a gigantic game consisting of leaders and followers
 - It had many rules, often contradictory, and these rules could change at any time
 - And the followers in the game – Jewish society – were constantly being tripped up by these rules
- The game we're talking about is rabbinical, Pharisaic Judaism which ruled religious life in Israel in that day as it does today
 - In past chapters we learned a little about the rabbinical system
 - How rabbis added rule upon rule to the Law of Moses over centuries until the Law itself was unrecognizable
 - Those rules were codified into a work called the Mishnah, and that code grew until it eclipsed the Law itself
 - As a result of the rabbinical system, Judaism evolved into a system of manmade rules and ritual
 - Effectively, it became a new religion – let's call it Pharisaism – and it was unrecognizable from what God gave Moses at Sinai
 - It was a false religion invested by rabbis over centuries, and yet everyone in Israel was told it was what God gave to Moses in the beginning
 - The rabbis manipulated this game for their own gain...and protected it at all costs
 - Including changing the rules when necessary to catch people in violation, very much like a leader of Simon Says
 - In v.18 Jesus cites examples of how the religious authorities played their game against John and Jesus

- Jesus says John fasted regularly and refused to drink wine as part of his ministry of being set apart in the wilderness
 - His choices were not a sin, of course, neither according to God's law nor even by the rabbi's own standards
 - Nevertheless, the Pharisees seized on John's unique lifestyle to claim he was possessed by a demon
 - We don't have a record of their accusation in the Gospels, except by Jesus' testimony here
- On the other hand, Jesus ate without regular fasting and drank wine like anyone else, so the Pharisees changed their rules
 - Like the leader of Simon Says, they switched things up to trap Jesus
 - They told the crowds not to follow Jesus because He was a gluttonous man and a drunkard
 - And because Jesus showed compassion for the repentant, they accused Him of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners
- Here again, there was nothing in the Law of Moses nor even in the rabbinical system that prohibited these things
 - But it's how they played their game, always to their advantage
 - So they played a flute for John, but he wouldn't dance
 - Then they sang a funeral song for Jesus, but He refused to mourn
 - Then they blamed both of them for ruining everyone's fun
- Obviously, Jesus was fighting against the corrupt and hypocritical Pharisees
 - But the challenge Jesus faced in winning over His people went much deeper than mere corruption or hypocrisy
 - Jesus was fighting against hard hearts, hearts that weren't listening to the Spirit
 - Instead, the Israel of His day was trapped in a systematic pursuit of self-righteousness in the form of Judaism
 - For all intents and purposes, the religious practices of Jewish society in Jesus' day – let's call it Pharisaic Judaism – constituted a false religion

- Pharisaic Judaism substituted manmade rules and ritual for a true relationship with God
- Which is what every false religion does...including those false religions that take a Christian form
- In fact, let's drop the word "false" at this point, because all religion is a substitution for knowing God
 - Religion is man's attempt to reach God through a set of rules, rituals and creeds
 - Religion creates an outward appearance of piety, and we assume piety means a person possesses insight about God
 - And sometimes it does, but only if that person has a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ...otherwise, it's just a game
- A true saving relationship with God, with our Creator, comes only by a revelation from God to our spirit
 - The Bible says a true knowledge of God must come from above, God must reveal Himself to us, or else we won't find Him
 - So when God's revelation concerning Himself is lacking, all that remains is religion
- Religion is attractive because it seems to us like something God Himself might invent
 - Religions feature elaborate and mysterious pageantry, they demand commitment to a routine, and they offer moral lessons that seem wise
 - And of course, religions have millions of devoted followers... people flock to religions of various kinds
 - And a large following only serves to reinforce the notion that everyone must be on to something
 - But the truth is that it's just a game of Simon Says...people agreeing to follow the leader in an elaborate game
 - And they hate it when someone won't play along
 - Because if enough people stop playing, everyone will wake up to the reality that religion is false

- That it was devoid of truth and purpose because it operated absent divine revelation
- Do you remember the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis?

Gen. 11:4 They said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

Gen. 11:5 The LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.

- In v.4 we're told that ungodly humanity built a giant tower hoping to reach into the Heavens
 - In the end, God comes down to see what the sons of men did
 - You won't find a pair of more ironic verses in the Bible, God mocking the ridiculous notion that we can reach God
 - The people were engaged in a game of Simon Says and the leader, a man named Nimrod, directed them in a false religion
- How did God respond? He scrambled the language of humanity, so that no one could understand each other any longer
 - And when no one could follow the leader, the game stopped
 - It put an end (or rather it slowed) the spread of false religion because it put an end to Simon Says
- That's what Jesus was confronting...a false religion that stood in the way of His claims
 - And it's no wonder that the Pharisees opposed Jesus, and neither is it a surprise that the Jewish people aligned with their leaders over Jesus
 - Jesus was offering a new and better relationship with the God of Israel
 - Because only a relationship with Christ solves our key problem... the problem that no mere religion can solve...the problem that separated us from God in the first place:
 - Our sin

- And the only solution to sin is Christ's death on the cross, and when we place our trust in that sacrifice, we enter into a relationship with Jesus
- That's the relationship Jesus was offering Israel
 - But if they were to receive Jesus as their King, they must do it in place of the Pharisee's leadership
 - Which would have meant an end to the Pharisee's game of Simon Says
- So it's no wonder the Pharisees opposed Jesus, but now we're understanding why the people also rejected Jesus
 - Because their hearts were too invested in the game
 - Once someone gets hooked into the ritual and rules of a religion, it can be nearly impossible to pull them free
 - People assume all that pomp and circumstance is proof there's someone behind the curtain
 - And they will rebel at any suggestion they've been duped
- So as demanding as Pharisaic Judaism may have been, the Jewish people were invested in it
 - As the saying goes, the devil you know is better than the one you don't
 - And when you add to that resistance the constant accusations of the Pharisees, it's not hard to understand why Israel turned away
- That's what happens when manmade religion comes face-to-face with the living God
 - Apart from those hearts touched by God's spirit, the rest remain in their sin
 - That's why Jesus called Israel to repent and believe in the Gospel
 - That repentance step does not refer to a repenting of our sins, as in a repudiation of doing bad things
 - Good luck with that...who can fully stop sinning this side of glory?

- The repentance step of “repent and believe” means to turn away from false ways to God
 - Repent of self-righteousness, of salvation by human works, from trying to live apart from dependence on Christ
 - Simply put, it’s a forsaking of all other gods and all religion for the opportunity to enter into a relationship with God
 - Not everyone will make that trip, which is why Jesus said him who has ears to hear, let him hear
- Unsaved humanity prefers religion over relationship: religion is visible, tangible, and ultimately predictable and controllable
 - A relationship with God is none of those things, which is scary for the heart that hasn’t been quickened
 - But even true Christians are susceptible to attractions of religion over relationship...we call it legalism and it’s pervasive in the church
- Legalism happens when we try to impose religion on top of our relationship with Christ
 - Legalists tell you their ritual and rules are requirements that came along with the relationship
 - But usually it’s just a new game of Simon Says again
 - “Simon Says don’t dance, drink or chew, or date girls that do”
 - Or when those rules don’t suit us any longer, we change the rules, all the while telling ourselves God gives us the rules
- Legalism doesn’t just rob us of our liberty in Christ, it also erodes our trust in our relationship with Jesus
 - Over time believers can begin to place more importance on their rules or their unique doctrinal perspectives than on the relationship we have with Jesus
 - And at its worst, churches or entire denominations move away from relationship altogether to become false religions
- Now of course, our relationship with Christ isn’t without structure or rules

- Biblical Christianity has doctrine and even practices a little ritual, but those rules are all found in God's word as interpreted by God's spirit
 - But unlike the Simon Says game of religion, God's rules don't change...they always remain the same
 - And they aren't intended to trip us up or accuse us or disqualify us, and they certainly don't take the place of a relationship
 - On the contrary, God's rules exist to guide us into a deeper, more abiding relationship with Him
- For example, a true Christian should never say "I know the Bible says 'go left' but our pastor says we should go right"
 - We don't follow leaders when they tell us to do things that contradict God's word
 - Nor can a believer say "The Spirit tells me that this verse means go left, but our denomination believes that it says go right"
 - We don't let denominational rules direct us away from the word of God and the leading of the Spirit
- But for the same reason, we also can't say "I know the Bible says go left, but I personally feel the Spirit is saying to me go right"
 - If you hear a voice tell you to go against the Bible, then it's not the Spirit you're hearing!
 - A true and abiding relationship with God under the leading of the Spirit, remains true to His word
 - In fact, when a true believer disobeys the word of God, he or she will feel conviction to know they are wrong
- That's what Jesus means at the end of v.19 when He says wisdom is vindicated by her deeds
 - He's using a proverb of the day which simply says that our behavior ultimately reveals what we hold to be true
 - Our wisdom is vindicated or proven by our deeds
 - You may say you believe something about God, but in the end I will know what's truly in your heart by what you do

- Jesus isn't making a litmus test for salvation here, but He is saying we judge our sources of "truth" by how they live
 - So in John's case and Jesus' case, what would someone have seen in their daily lives?
 - Both men lived upright, even sinless lives (in Jesus' case), and both men honored God and served Him in holiness
 - Both men loved those who came to them, and served them by teaching them the truth about God
 - And both men willingly suffered at the hands of God's enemies
- So their wisdom was vindicated by their deeds
 - Had the crowds considered each man honestly, they could have easily recognized that the Pharisee's accusations were false
 - They would have seen their deeds, and realized that these men could be trusted in what they said
 - On the other hand, if the crowds had evaluated their own leaders in that same way, they would have come to an opposite conclusion
- When people try to add rules and ritual to your relationship with Jesus, or when you have to sift through multiple voices offering us contradicting truth, remember Simon Says
 - First, remember you don't have to dance to someone else's song... you're responsible to obey the Master Who has bought you
 - God isn't pleased with ritual for ritual's sake
 - And He certainly doesn't want us thinking we can make ourselves righteous by following rules
 - Remember what Jesus told the woman at the well when she asked Jesus which rules should she follow to worship God

[John 4:20](#) "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

[John 4:21](#) Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

[John 4:22](#) "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

[John 4:23](#) “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.

[John 4:24](#) “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

- The woman asked Jesus to settle an argument between Jews and Samaritans over where God wanted people to worship
 - She was trapped in the Samaritan’s false religion just as Jews were trapped in Pharasaic Judaism
 - And what mattered to her was getting the rules right, but what mattered to Jesus was getting the relationship right
- So Jesus told the woman, you worship what you do not know
 - Wow...imagine learning you are worshipping a God you do not know
 - Jesus told her that the Jews were the ones who had the right God, at least in the sense that they were the true chosen people
- But then notice Jesus didn’t say the Jews have the right rules...because finding God isn’t about finding the right rules
 - It’s about a true relationship with Christ through His word
 - And so Jesus told her that the time had come for true worshippers to find God in spirit and in truth
 - In other words, it’s not what you know, it’s Who you know
- We must worship God in Spirit and in truth, not in rules and ritual
 - So let’s never let out relationship take a backseat to rules or ritual that can’t substitute for spirit and truth
 - And let’s continue working together to teach San Antonio and beyond how to find God through relationship rather than rules
- I believe the Lord has some exciting things coming for this body in the near future, things that have the potential to grow us and extend our reach
 - But to whom much is expected, much is required, or to quote the more familiar wisdom of our day, with great power comes great responsibility

- Growth is a double-edged sword...it can bring new opportunities but it will also bring new challenges
- One of those challenges will be not becoming too “corporate” in our approach to ministry even as we strive to be efficient and effective
- We need to always remember that what we’re here for is relationship, not religion
- We never want to become like first century Israel, so committed to playing our game of religion that we miss the Lord when He comes calling