

Matthew 11D

- We're studying the reason why Israel rejected their Messiah
 - And as we do, we're also considering why people today still do the same
 - Including why Christians sometimes get caught up thinking as the world does in these things
 - In last week's passage Jesus told the crowds they wouldn't receive Him, for the same reason they rejected John
 - The people were too invested in a religious game invented by the rabbis – a system called Pharisaic Judaism
 - That system dictated religious life for everyone in Israel, and it created a culture committed to self-righteousness and presumption
 - The system reinforced the thinking that they must depend upon their own works under the Law to please God
 - And they believed themselves to be a privileged class of humanity, chosen by God and destined to Heaven automatically
 - As a result, the people of Israel were deeply invested in a religious way of life that they weren't willing to abandon easily
 - Simply put, they had hard hearts – and that's what we learned last week
 - A hard heart doesn't necessarily require that a person be mean or stubborn or even unreligious
 - A spiritually hard heart is simply one that is closed to the suggestion that they don't know the truth about God
 - An atheist can have a hard heart, certainly, but so can an unsaved Baptist or Catholic or Methodist
 - On the other hand, we can find a Mormon or Muslim or other pagan who has an open heart to know more about the God of the Bible
 - So the issue isn't where a person starts in their journey toward knowing Christ...
 - The question is how receptive that person is to the suggestion that what they know now is wrong, and needs to change

- An open heart is open to change, ready to listen, eager to find the truth
- A hard heart isn't – and that's what Jesus encountered in Israel in His day
- That's why John the Baptist and Jesus came preaching "repent and believe" to Israel
 - Israel had to turn away from Pharisaic Judaism and self-righteousness *before* they could receive the Kingdom by faith
 - They had to reject the authority of their religious leaders before they could embrace the Messiah's reign over them
 - But the people took a look at the unimpressive man from Nazareth standing before them, and their hearts closed up
 - Their pride and devotion to their religious game blinded them to the obvious truth of Jesus' claims
 - In a sense, we could say Israel knew too much about God and too little about themselves to receive the truth
 - Their heads were filled with religious notions invented by the rabbis, which distorted their understanding of the Messiah and His Kingdom
 - So in that sense, they knew too much about God to accept the truth
 - And Pharisaic Judaism taught the people to rely on a system to make them righteous and deserving of the Kingdom
 - Such that they didn't recognize they were sinners in need of a Savior, so in that sense they knew too little about themselves
- That's the situation Matthew is showing us in Chapter 11
 - So now he moves to recording Jesus' judgment of the people, and it's not pretty

Matt. 11:20 Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.

Matt. 11:21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

[Matt. 11:22](#) “Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

[Matt. 11:23](#) “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.

[Matt. 11:24](#) “Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.”

- Jesus denounces the people by naming three cities in the Galilee: Bethsaida, Capernaum and Chorazin
 - These three settlements were the most prominent Jewish towns along the western, Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee
 - Capernaum was on the northwestern shore of the lake, and it was Jesus’ adopted hometown during His time of ministry
 - Chorazin was a short distance away at the northern tip of the lake
 - While Bethsaida was the edge of Jewish settlements at the northeast
 - So in effect, Jesus is denouncing the entire Jewish community using these three cities as example for the whole
 - And the Greek word for denounce could be translated “reviled”, and it’s a very strong word in Greek
 - Jesus isn’t holding back or pulling punches here; He’s speaking in the strongest possible terms
 - Jesus condemns the Galileans for not repenting, having seen the great many miracles Jesus performed in their presence
 - Now notice, the issue for Jesus was repentance
 - Their rejection of Jesus as Messiah was just a symptom of a larger problem, and that larger problem was an unrepentant heart
- Remember what we learned last week about repenting, with a capital “R” vs. a small “r” as I defined it
 - Jesus is speaking of repent with a capital “R”, which in this context is something very specific

- He's not directing the people to simply feel sorry for committing a certain sin (that's what I call repentance with a small "r")
- Jesus was calling for a change of heart, a change in perspective, a turn from living in disobedience to God, to obedience in faith
- That kind of repentance starts with recognizing we are sinners in trouble with God, Who is our judge
 - For many of us, repentance leading to faith began as a feeling in the pit of our stomach telling us we've been found out
 - Of knowing God is aware of your sin and you can't hide
 - Like the feeling of looking in the rearview mirror and seeing the police car lights flashing and knowing you were just speeding
 - It's the panic that says "I'm in trouble and there's no escape"
- But even more than that, it's realizing that God will hold you accountable in the day of your judgment
 - Repentance means abandoning any pretense that God accepts you the way you are
 - It's ceasing to think you will survive His judgment by doing good works or living a "good" life because there is no such thing
 - It's coming face to face with the reality of how much we deserve God's judgment apart from His grace
- Repentance with a capital "R" doesn't manifest in each of us in exactly the same way, but it will always have the same effect
 - Our concerns over sin lead us to seek a solution, which then causes us to embrace the grace and mercy of God in Christ
 - And at that point, our feelings of fear or sorrow are turned to relief and joy as we understand His plan of salvation
 - So repentance by its very nature leads a person to Christ and to a reconciliation with God
 - But that journey depends on an open heart, a heart willing to receive God's provision in Christ
 - That's why Jesus' offer of the Kingdom was expressed as, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand"

- Jesus was saying to Israel, to have your Kingdom, you must receive me as your Messiah
- And to receive me, you must recognize your need for a Savior to take away your sins
- And to recognize your need for a Savior, you must acknowledge you are a sinner in need of God's mercy
- Or simply put, "Repent and I will give you the Kingdom"
- Now if Jesus had made this declaration by itself, then the people of the Galilee could be forgiven for ignoring Him or dismissing His claims
 - Words are cheap, and any crackpot could have walked around making such an offer and it would have been meaningless
 - And over the centuries, many imposters did just that; claiming to be the Messiah sent to Israel, and none of them were true
 - But that's not what Jesus did, of course, as Jesus Himself reminds them in this passage
- Matthew says in v.20 that in these three cities Jesus performed *most* of His miracles
 - The Gospel records miracles in Bethsaida and Capernaum but none in Chorazin
 - But apparently, the miracles Jesus did in Chorazin were just as substantial as those done in the other two cities
 - So Jesus' message came with power – demonstrations of God's authority – proving His claims
 - He didn't demand that Israel accept His words without evidence...the Lord condescended to their doubts
 - That's a remarkable demonstration of God's grace to His people
 - The Bible testifies that we come to the Father only by His grace through our faith in His Son
 - Nevertheless, in Israel's case the Father was willing to go the extra mile of backing His Son's claims with signs and wonders

- And then add to that the fact that God sent Israel the prophets, to speak the word of God telling them what to look for when the Messiah appeared
 - So between the prophecies of God's word and the miracles Jesus performed, the people of Israel had everything one could ask for
 - No one in that day could claim Jesus didn't make clear the truth
- That truly exceptional dispensation of grace made Israel's rejection of Christ all the more shameful
 - In the history of this age, the Lord will only offer four generations of humanity the privilege of receiving visible signs of His power
 - Only the generations of the Exodus, of Elijah's and Elisha's ministry, and those of Jesus' first and second arrivals witness miracles routinely
 - Apart from these four periods of history, the world comes to know the truth of God by faith alone in His word alone – apart from such signs
- And of course the reason such things are rare is because they are easily counterfeited and manipulated by the enemy
 - If the Lord depended on such things routinely, then we would find ourselves in a constant state of confusion at the hands of the enemy
 - Moreover, the Lord would find Himself competing with the enemy for our attention, which is not something He will do
 - So instead, the normative experience of every child of God is to know of Him by His word and to depend upon it entirely
 - Only in exceptional circumstances, when it suits God's purpose, will He supplement the revelation of His word with signs and wonders
- But for that reason, when the Lord does interrupt the course of history to confirm His word with supernatural displays, it deserves special attention
 - An encounter with the supernatural demands we ask fundamental questions and embrace the unavoidable answers
 - More than that, it begs the question why...what does the Lord want to change by a display of His power?

- That's what repentance is all about
- Repenting is the result of an encounter with God that causes us to reconsider everything we hold to be true and right
 - When the Lord makes Himself known to us, we must repent of our independence from Him
 - When the Lord displays His power to us, we acknowledge His authority over our lives
 - It's the height of foolishness to experience such things yet then proceed onward in life as if nothing has changed
 - But that's what Israel did
- So then Jesus explains where their willful ignorance is taking them
 - Jesus pronounces woe on these towns and their citizens
 - The word woe could be translated "alas", and it's an expression of grief or denunciation
 - But when spoken from the mouth of God, it's a final and irrevocable judgment
 - In literal terms, it's the Lord declaring "go to hell"
 - Jesus placed these towns under divine judgment...both the people who failed to receive Him and even the physical settlements themselves
 - The towns were condemned to being uninhabited and in the centuries that followed, they were eventually abandoned
 - Today, they are all in ruins apart from tourists who flock there
 - So you can draw a line between verses 19 and 20 in Matthew 11
 - This is the moment Jesus turns against that generation of Israel
 - Before this moment, the Kingdom invitation has been shared without hesitation or condition
 - But now Jesus becomes a different kind of witness, declaring judgment on His own people – beginning with those in the Galilee
- And the people in these towns will suffer an eternal judgment that exceeds even the Gentile enemies of Israel, Jesus says

- Jesus compares these disobedient Jewish towns to three notorious Gentile cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom
 - Now all of us have heard of Sodom, the town together with its sister, Gomorrah, famous for depravity in the story of Lot
 - Because of its great sin the Bible says the Lord destroyed it in a particularly public fashion as an example of God's judgment
- But the Phoenician cities of Sidon and Tyre were equally terrible in their day, worshipping Baal and persecuting Israel
 - These cities were wealthy trading centers that reigned unchallenged over the Mediterranean coast for centuries
 - And naturally with wealth and impunity comes great depravity... just look at Hollywood or Washington DC
 - So like Sodom, these towns were judged by God, ceasing to be important centers of power by Jesus' day
- But amazingly, Jesus says that these three pagan cultures would have reacted differently to Jesus had He visited them in their day
 - Jesus says they would have put on sackcloth and ashes, Jesus says
 - He's referring to a particularly Eastern custom of mourning, where people exchange normal clothes for rough burlap
 - And they would toss ashes in the air to cover themselves in the dust
 - It was a public expression of inconsolable mourning
 - Jesus is describing the intense sorrow that a person experiences when they fully appreciate how the Lord sees their sin
 - It's sadness born out of shame and self-loathing
 - It's regret at a wasted life lived apart from God
 - And it's horror at the prospect of receiving the penalty we justly deserve
 - That's what Jesus says those ungodly, pagan worshippers would have felt had they encountered Jesus' power

- Despite not being Jewish and not having the benefit of Scriptures or even knowing what a Messiah is...
 - Despite the depths of their depravity and the height of their power and arrogance...
 - Nevertheless, these people would have understood what they were witnessing, drawn the obvious conclusions, and repented
- Now as we read this, we have to wonder if Jesus was speaking purely literally or simply hypothetically...would those pagan cities truly have repented?
 - If you or I made this comparison, we could only mean it hypothetically
 - We can't change history or know what might have happened had history gone differently...all we can do is suppose
 - But Jesus is God so He knows all things, including what would happen if any detail of history had proceeded differently
 - So we have to leave open the possibility that He means this literally, that these cities *would have* repented
 - I believe He did mean it literally, because when God acts to reveal Himself to people, He does it for good reason
 - And with complete assurance of what will come to pass
 - As Isaiah declares

[Is. 55:10](#) "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
 And do not return there without watering the earth
 And making it bear and sprout,
 And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;

[Is. 55:11](#) So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
 It will not return to Me empty,
 Without accomplishing what I desire,
 And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

- As Isaiah declares, the word of God goes out on a mission, and it will accomplish that mission as God has determined
 - In the case of Tyre or Sodom, had Jesus gone there to perform miracles, it would have brought about whatever purpose God had in mind

- So if God's purpose had been to bring repentance, then they would have repented
- Just as Nineveh repented when Jonah eventually preached to them as God directed
- So why isn't Israel repenting now? Why isn't that God's purpose? The answer is that God's purpose was for Israel to reject Jesus
 - Through their rejection, Jesus will end up on a cross, which is where He was supposed to be in the end
 - And as Paul explains, by Israel's rejection of Jesus, the riches of the Gospel could come to the Gentiles
 - But Scripture also testifies that eventually, the Jewish people will receive their Messiah in a future day so that all receive mercy
- So if the outcome lies in God's hands, how can Jesus condemn their rejection of Him?
 - The answer is that we need to understand Scripture from God's point of view, but we need to read Scripture from man's point of view
 - From God's point of view, outcomes are according to His will and purpose
 - And once we enter into eternity, we will share His perspective, and from that perspective everything will make sense
 - But until that day, we see things from our very limited point of view, and from that vantage point we can only see things as men and women
 - The word of God was written from the perspective of humanity and it was written for humanity
 - So we need to read it from that point of view, especially in situations like this
 - Speaking as a man to His brothers in Israel, Jesus says you should know better
 - You've seen and heard plenty to know the truth
 - And you can't stand before God in your judgment and use His sovereignty and providence as an excuse for your sin

- That's a little like a Nazi concentration camp guard claiming that he was only following orders
- This generation will be rightly judged for rejecting their Messiah in His day
 - And the fact that the Lord turned their rejection of Jesus to good in the end, doesn't reduce their culpability one bit
 - They received more grace than any generation of humanity before, and they turned away from it
- Such was their offense, the Lord says, that they will suffer more than those pagans in the cities of Sodom
 - In v.22 and v.24 Jesus says the judgment experience for Tyre, Sidon and Sodom will be more tolerable than it will be for that generation of Israel
 - There is no side-stepping what Jesus is saying
 - He's implying that there are different levels of punishment in eternity
 - In this case the pagans would experience less suffering in eternity than the Galileans
 - Obviously, it's hard to step into a conversation about eternal punishment, because the concept is so hard to wrap our brains around
 - But the Bible is explicitly and repeatedly clear about the reality of Hell, and later the Lake of Fire
 - We won't take time to visit all the biblical references today, but suffice to say there are many and they are not ambiguous
 - Those who die apart from trusting in God's provision of Christ will suffer an eternity of punishment, because the Lord is just
 - But the Lord is so just, that His assignment of punishment is proportional in some way that we don't fully understand
 - We can't imagine what it will be like to experience an eternity in punishment – what fills the time, what goes through the mind
 - So we can't begin to appreciate how that experience could be made to vary by degree

- But Jesus says that judgment will be more tolerable for one group than for another, so we know it won't be uniform
- And that makes perfect sense when you remember that eternal rewards will also vary according to our service to Christ
 - So just as all believers enter Heaven by faith alone, yet our rewards in Heaven will vary by the degree of service
 - Likewise, all unbelievers will enter Hell for lack of faith, yet their degree of punishment will vary by degrees of sin
- So the very worst among humanity will experience something less tolerable than the others
 - And among the very worst of this age we will find those of first century Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum
 - They stared Jesus in the face, heard His words, saw His miracles and said no to His offer
- We all have our own ways of racking and stacking sin we see around us
 - Certain sins seem worse to us than others, and many secretly hope that God does apply stricter judgment to those sins
 - But be careful what you ask for, Christian
 - Before we encourage God to judge sinners, we should pay attention to what God values
 - Do you suppose think homosexuality is the worst sin? Or maybe idolatry? Or greed or some other depravity?
 - You could find all those things in Sodom, yet the Lord judged His generation of Israel to be worse than all that
 - And what was their offense? Turning away from the revelation of God
 - Remaining hard hearted to God's mercy, close-minded to His truth
 - So is your "worst sin" the same as God's?
 - I know Jesus was speaking about the sins of unbelief, and of course we here are believers, and therefore we will not know His judgment at all

- But if your understanding of Jesus' words go no farther than that, you're missing the main point here
- The principle is simple: to whom much is given, much is required
- In His perfection, the Lord takes everything into account when levying judgment, including what grace we received
 - In the case of Israel, they received immense grace
 - They had the Law, the covenants, the prophets, the temple service
 - They had the revelation of Jesus Christ in the flesh
 - They saw great miracles and were presented with an open offer of the Kingdom
- They received so much, which is why their judgment was so severe
 - It wasn't just that they disobeyed Jesus...it was that God had made it so easy for them to obey
 - That's the point here...to whom much is given, much is required
- So Christians what have you been given?
 - First and foremost, you have received grace in Jesus Christ
 - You are free from judgment
 - No matter what you have done or will do, no matter how far you stray from Christ, you will never be condemned
 - You have received the righteousness of Christ by faith, and therefore though your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow
 - Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool
 - But more than that, you have the whole council of God's word
 - Angels longed to look upon the things you have received, Peter says
 - The saints of old received but a portion of these things...they lived their entire lives seeing only pieces of this

- But you were born into an age in which God's word was fully revealed to you
- Moreover, you have received the indwelling of God's own Spirit, so that you have access to the mind of Christ at all times
 - You can know His will in ways no other age could
 - And if that weren't enough, you have spiritual powers, spiritual gifts, that are available for your use to glorify God
 - My goodness, I dare say we have received far more than even those in the first generation of Israel
- So what do you suppose God's expectations are for His Church?
 - Knowing how He judged the disobedience of Israel, can we afford to be complacent or cavalier in our service to Christ?
 - Have we not been given much, and therefore isn't God going to require much of us?
- And what does that look like? It means making your life a living sacrifice...seeking His will for how we may spend every day, every hour in His service
 - We aren't under judgment for sin, and Heaven will certainly be our home no matter how we serve Him
 - But we neither should we take His grace for granted, nor should we waste the opportunity He's given us to glorify Him with our life
 - Time, talent and treasure...we owe Him it all