

God's Upside-Down Wisdom

Matthew 11:16-30

19 February 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Why do people reject Jesus?

Big Idea: Many people reject Jesus despite the evidence and consequences, but there is blessing in coming to him.

Introduction

The last few months have been crazy-busy, but on those nights where the body is aching and the brain is fried, it's so nice to unwind by watching some light fluff on TV.

One show that fits the bill is *Penn & Teller's Fool Us*.

Although it's not perfect, it's about as clean as TV gets while still being worthwhile watching.

Penn & Teller are two world-renowned magicians.

They've been doing magic for well over forty years and so they know just about every trick in the book.

The idea of the show is that they get other magicians to come onto their show and perform.

Penn & Teller then try to guess how the magic was done.

If they get it right, then the contestant loses.

But if Penn & Tell can't work out how the trick was done, then the contestant wins a prize.

Some of the performances have been really, really good.

Even watching carefully, I usually can't work out how they did it.

Sometimes, even the professionals get fooled.

What makes this show fun is that it turns everything upside-down.

I know that magic isn't real.

A magician can't make someone disappear and reappear or read minds.

In the case of Penn and Teller, they're self-avowed sceptics and atheists.

Regardless of the fact that I know it's all an illusion, I want to be fooled.

When I watch magic, I choose to believe an illusion rather than what I know to be true.

Our passage this morning shows us that the same thing is true of the way that people respond to Jesus.

Regardless of the evidence that shows that Jesus is the Messiah, most people refuse to recognise him as God's saviour.

Outline

This term, we're studying the book of Matthew.

We're going to be looking at a section of story that covers chapters 11 and 12, and is followed by another section of sermon in chapter 13.

In these chapters, Matthew shows us how people respond to Jesus.

On the first read, the last half of chapter 11 might seem like three completely disconnected chunks.

We're going to see that they actually fit together nicely to tell us some profound truths about believing in Jesus.

Many people reject Jesus despite the evidence and consequences, but there is blessing in coming to him.

1. The Irrationality of Unbelief
2. The Foolishness of Rejection
3. The Blessing of Acceptance

1. The Irrationality of Unbelief

Firstly, the people of Jesus' day refused to accept the evidence that he is Messiah.

Last week, we saw how John the Baptist responded to Jesus.

Jesus gently and patiently explained the miracles that he performed showed that he is Messiah.

He then talked to the crowd about John's ministry and showed how it also pointed to him as Messiah.

Now, Jesus starts talking to the crowd about their own response to him.

Jesus show them that their own rejection of him is irrational because they refuse to be satisfied.

Shakespeare famously wrote:

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.¹*

Jesus described the people of his day who'd seen his own ministry as well as the ministry of John the Baptist first-hand, by comparing them to a bunch of kids.

Even though it's two thousand years later, I'm sure you're familiar with this kind of scene.

There's a bunch of kids sitting around on the school holidays or at a party, and they can't agree what they're going to play together.

One of the girls says, "Let's play weddings!" (Flutes and dancing were usually associated with weddings in the ancient world.

"Martha can be the bride and Miriam, Anna, Abigail, Deborah and Jemima can be the bridesmaids."

At that point, some of the boys in the crowd speak up and say, "Yuk. We're not playing stinkin' weddings – we're not coming within two cubits of a girl."

And the rest of the girls say, "Well, don't think we're playing if we're not allowed to be the bride."

Then one of the boys pipes up, "You know what'd be fully sick? Playing funerals."

"Yeah, Jacob can be a rotting, four-day-old corpse and Stephen, Shamir, Nun, Malachai, Kenaz and Jude can be the pallbearers."

Some of the girls respond by saying, "Really? That's actually pretty disgusting. You can count us out."

Some of the boys object too, saying that unless they can perform autopsies on all the corpses first, then they're not interested.

These kids are impossible to please.

Jesus describes the ridiculous situation where nothing will please these children.

No game – regardless of whether it's happy or sad – is good enough for them.

Jesus says that's exactly how most people in the crowd are responding to what God has shown them through John's and his own ministry.

Basically, what Jesus was saying was this:

“Even though many of you flocked to see John initially, you didn’t accept his ministry because he wore camel hair and ate locusts and honey.

“In fact, because he lived such a basic lifestyle, you actually accused him of having a demon.

“You didn’t like my ministry either.

“Through my miracles, I showed you that the new messianic age is here.

“My lifestyle was very different to John’s – I ate and drank regular food like the rest of you.

I even turned water into wine at a wedding banquet.

“However, because I also dined with the outcasts, sinners and tax collectors, and called them to repent, you said,

Matthew 11:19b (NIV) ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’

It’s probably no coincidence that Jesus sets his parable in the marketplace because in the ancient world, that’s where court was held and the decisions were made.

For many in the crowd, the verdict’s already in: Jesus is nothing more than a crank.

He’s no more the Messiah than Brian.

They point-blank refuse to accept any kind of ministry that shows that Jesus is the Messiah.

A nice guy? Yep, we’ll take Jesus as that.

They might even praise parts of his teaching.

Yet the majority rejected his central claim.

Popularity is often a very poor determiner of truth.

That’s what’s wrong with the ‘seeker sensitive’ movement that says that the church’s message should be shaped to meet people’s felt needs.

The problem is that what most people think they want isn’t what Jesus offers.

I hope our church tries to be outsider friendly.

We don’t go out of our way to make people think that they’ll never belong.

One thing we do is try to make things understandable, rather than using words that nobody understands.

Not quite the “tongues” of 1 Corinthians 14, but we try not to speak in our own dialect of English called Christianese.

Yet Church, by its very nature is weird.

I’m the first one to recognise that there are even some things – especially under our second and third points this morning – that are hard to hear.

We don’t we, we won’t, we can’t alter the gospel message.

We need to say what God has said and wants us to hear, not what’s popular.

And we trust what Jesus says, that the evidence speaks for itself.

Did you notice that puzzling little phrase at the end of verse 19:

Matthew 11:19b (NIV) But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.

It means something like, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

The right way of doing thing will produce change and results.

The people in Jesus’ day saw the results as the blind could see and the lame were able to walk.

Today, as we preach the gospel, we see the results as people’s lives are changed by meeting Christ.

People leave behind sins, habits and addictions.

We’ve seen that in the history of our own church as we’ve grown by trying to faithfully preach Jesus and not by doing all the things the church growth experts say.

Many people in Jesus’ day saw the evidence, but they simply wouldn’t accept it.

Sadly, in rejecting Jesus, they were rejecting God’s saving plan for humanity.

And we shouldn’t expect things to be any different today.

2. The Foolishness of Rejection

Next, we see that their scepticism will get them nowhere as there are significant consequences for rejecting Jesus.

Jesus says quite clearly that judgement will be pronounced on those who don't repent.

Matthew 11:21a (NIV) ²¹ "Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida!

Why? Because the people of these towns saw Jesus' miracles – they saw the evidence – yet they didn't think they had anything to repent of.

They thought that they were right with God because of what they did.

They even thought that God should be pleased with them because of all their religious acts and the good things they'd done for him.

In the parallel passage in Luke, we read:

Luke 7:29–30 (NIV) ²⁹ (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

The sinners acknowledged God's way, but the religious people didn't want their world rocked.

The Pharisees and experts in the law simply wanted to keep going with their religious traditions.

It's not just that they'll be judged, Jesus also talks about how they'll be judged.

He does this by drawing a comparison, between the towns that he's ministered in and some other well-known towns in the Bible.

Firstly, there's Chorazin and Bethsaida.

These are two towns at the north of Lake Galilee – the area that Jesus did many of his miracles.

Interestingly, neither of these towns are mentioned elsewhere in Matthew's gospel and Chorazin isn't actually mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, except for the parallel passage in Luke.

Bethsaida was a small fishing village.

It's where Philip, Andrew and Peter came from.

Mark records many of the miracles that Jesus did there including healing a blind man and feeding the 5,000.

Even after seeing all this, the people of these towns refused to repent.

Jesus compares them with two other towns – Tyre and Sidon.

They're gentile towns just to the north of Israel.

These towns were renowned in the Old Testament for their wickedness, idolatry and rejection of God.

The people of Tyre were proud and conceited.

Isaiah, Ezekiel and Amos all prophesied against them.²

If Tyre and Sidon had seen the same miracles that Chorazin and Bethsaida had, they would've repented, verse 21.

Jesus isn't saying what did happen, but he knows what would've happened.

Nor is he saying that they won't have to give an account for their sin.

He is saying that it'll be better on the day of judgement for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida.

Matthew 11:22 (NIV)²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.

The same thing is true of Capernaum.

Capernaum was Jesus' mission base for most the time he was in Galilee.

They had every advantage. Listen to some of the miracles that were performed there:

- The centurion's paralysed servant was healed
- Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law
- All kinds of demon-possessed people and the sick were healed³
- The paralysed man on the mat was able to walk home.⁴
- The daughter of the synagogue leader was healed
- The woman who bled for 12 years was healed; and
- Jesus healed two blind men.⁵

That's quite a catalogue of miracles, all in one place.

Jesus compares Capernaum to Sodom.

If you've read Genesis 18-19, then you'll know that Sodom is about as bad as it gets.

No one in their right mind would want to be compared to Sodom.

It represents the worst of the worst, the most depraved, wicked and vile human nature on display.

However, if they'd seen all the miracles done in Capernaum, the people of Sodom would've repented.

As hard as it is to hear, Jesus clearly says:

Matthew 11:23–24 (NIV)²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

The people in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum might've been wowed by Jesus' miracles, but they didn't repent.

They rejected Jesus' new kingdom.

Because of their unbelief, they continued in their sin.

That sin has consequences.

According to Jesus, people will be judged according to different levels of accountability.

The more evidence you've seen, the more you'll be accountable.

That's why it will be worse for these for the people of these towns on the day of judgement.

What Jesus points us towards here is made very clear in Luke 12:

Luke 12:47–48 (NIV)⁴⁷ "The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows.⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Those who've seen more evidence of who Jesus is will be held more responsible for their rejection of him.

Jesus didn't just say this was true of one town, so don't think that it just applies to the towns that are specifically mentioned here.

I take it that what was true of them is no less true of us today.

How much more those of us who've not only "seen" the miracles, but also God's greatest miracle of raising his son from the dead?

Which is why I need to warn you today.

Friends, if you are here this morning, I plead with you to realise that you can't sit on the fence when it comes to Jesus.

If you don't trust the death and resurrection of Jesus, then you're not okay with God.

To not believe in Jesus is to reject Jesus.

If you're someone who's been in church, if you're someone who's heard the gospel clearly and yet not repented, then you will be judged even more severely because of this.

And Jesus tells us that our rebellion against him will have eternal consequences.

So, I urge you to repent and come to King Jesus.

3. The blessing of acceptance

It all sounds very depressing up to that point.

In spite of the evidence – having seen the miracles of Jesus – many people won't repent.

But there's good news as our passage turns a corner in in verse 25.

In these verses, we find out the reason behind the reason that so many people reject Jesus despite the evidence.

God has hidden "these things" from them.

Verse 25:

Matthew 11:25 (NIV)²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

The "these things" in this verse is the spiritual truth that Jesus is the Messiah and his kingdom has come as demonstrated by the ministry of the Baptist and Jesus.

We get some really deep theology in verse 27, which is worth thinking about because it's the key to what God has done.

God the Father and God the Son live in perfect relational unity.

The only being who knows the Son is the Father.

And the only being who knows the Father is the Son.

Verse 27:

Matthew 11:27 (NIV)²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

There is one exception though.

The Father can be known by anyone Jesus chooses to reveal him to.

In fact, the only way to know God the Father is through God the Son.

In the words of the apostle John:

John 14:6 (NIV)⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Knowing God isn't something we can do autonomously – without the help of anyone else.

Hiding these truths from people was something God was pleased to do, verse 26.

Yet it's a truth makes a lot of people nervous.

It concerns them that God would actively hide these things from people.

Not Jesus, though.

He sees this truth as the reason to praise his heavenly father.

This seems to be because becoming a follower of Jesus isn't about how smart you are.

In fact it's often a liability because you have to come to Jesus in repentance and humility.

You need to cast yourself on God's mercy and not your own ability.

Often people with a great intellect struggle bring themselves to do that.

Many leading atheists are smart people.

Christians sometimes think to themselves, "How can they not see?"

It's not because they're unintelligent.

It's because they're blind.

When I was a uni, one of my friends met with someone else on campus to learn about the gospel.

He came from an atheistic family and he was a very clever bloke with a very high GPA.

After a couple of meetings, I asked him how it was going.

I was flawed when he said, "It's just the same thing week after week. I understand what he's saying, but I don't think I believe it."

I felt disappointed that my friend who could understand so many things wouldn't accept the good news of the gospel.

While someone with a brain the size of a small planet may not be able to get the gospel, even a small child can.

Think about who Jesus' disciples were: they were the fishermen.

The Scribes, the learned ones, are the ones who often rejected Jesus.

At the same time, it's convenient for people like Richard Dawkins to make out that Christians are simple, unthinking fools.

However, churches do have smart people in them.

In 1 Corinthians 1:26, Paul suggests that we shouldn't expect there to be all that many though.

Most importantly though, it wasn't their smarts that go them there.

God's wisdom is different from the world's wisdom.

Everyone enters the kingdom of God in exactly the same way, regardless of whether you have an IQ of 200 or 50.

It is only through faith, trusting in the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

It's by God's grace that we're saved, not by what we do.

Jesus took away our shame. He bought our freedom.

In Jesus, we're given the new life that we all desperately yearn for and couldn't earn.

This section ends with Jesus extending an invitation in the last three verses:

Matthew 11:28–30 (NIV)²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

How exactly does this invitation fit with the sovereignty of Jesus revealing the father to whomever he chooses?

I’m not sure. I don’t think I’m even smart enough to ever work it out.

Obviously though, Jesus didn’t have a problem with how these two things went together at all.

We live in a fast-pace, high-energy, live-in-the-moment world.

Most people have more demands on their time and energy that probably any point in history before.

One of the consequences of feeling physically exhausted is that we feel emotionally and spiritually too.

People are craving rest. That might well be you.

Do you want rest?

Not just the kind of temporary break that going on a 5-star cruise ship gives (as good as that is).

But the kind of soul-satisfying rest that can only be found in Jesus.

I’m sure you’ve all had days where you’re absolutely dog tired and all you want to do is fall into a heap.

Perhaps you’ve spent the day on the end of a shovel or running around all-day, all around the city, running errands.

After a frantic day, isn’t just so satisfying to fall into bed?

That’s what Jesus offers you.

If you’re feeling weary and weighed down, then come to Jesus.

Lay your burdens down at the feet of the Messiah who will who gladly give you rest.

Jesus isn’t looking for all the people who think they can do it in their own strength.

Jesus isn’t looking for the ones who are impressive.

He’s not swayed by fancy idea and PhDs.

He loves to reach out to people who are weary and burdened.

So, come to him.

However, you need to understand what that means.

Jesus offers you a yoke, a new yoke.

A yoke is the harness that you stick on a pair of oxen.

The yoke does two things.

Firstly, it restricts the movement of the two oxen. They have to move as a team together.

Jesus offers freedom, but it's not the freedom to live with complete liberty and autonomy, to do whatever you want.

Being a follower of Jesus isn't a choose your own adventure.

Freedom in Jesus is freedom from sin which constricts and entangles us by offering so much and delivering so little.

Freedom – with the help of the Holy Spirit – to stop hurting yourself and others.

Secondly, it means that they share the burden.

Together they pull and do the work.

When one is tired the other can help make up for it and vice-versa.

Jesus will lighten your burden, he will help carry the load.

And especially the great load of your sin.

Jesus' yoke is a yoke, but it's a light and easy one.

He offers the gentle leading of a saviour who cares for you.

Jesus invites you to come to him and learn from him.

That's the blessing for all those who come in humility to him.

Conclusion

This passage leaves us with two clear choices.

We can reject Jesus despite the evidence he's given us to know who he truly is.

The consequence of this is judgement and punishment.

And the more we've been exposed to this message, the more we know, the more we'll be held accountable.

Or we can come to Jesus in repentance and faith.

More than that, he will carry our burden and direct our path.

He will take on the punishment that we deserve because of our sin.

So would you join me in asking God that he would give us eyes to see who Jesus really is?

¹ Sonnet 18

² Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26-28 and Amos 1:9-10

³ Matthew 8:5-17

⁴ Matthew 9:2-13

⁵ Matthew 9:18-34

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Introduction

1. What was wrong with the kids in Jesus' story?
2. How should we shape the gospel message so that people will accept it?
3. What's the difference between Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, and Tyre, Sidon and Sodom?
4. Given what Jesus says in 11:20-24, do you think that the people who haven't heard the gospel will be saved?
5. Do you think there will be different degrees of punishment for our sin? Is that fair?
6. If the Son has to reveal the Father to people, then why do Christians bother sharing the gospel? How should this affect our expectations of evangelism?
7. From verse 28, do you think that Christians should have an easier life than non-Christians?
8. What are the two functions of a yoke and how does it describe a Christians relationship to Jesus?