

## ***“Believe It Or Not”***

*Matthew 11:1-19*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Well we have now been studying the Gospel of Matthew together for the past six months. One of the things I hope you have seen in this study is the way that the gospel is brilliantly organized. The first four chapters are sort of a prologue or introduction to the public ministry of Jesus. That's where we find the genealogy and birth of Jesus, a few brief stories about his childhood, Jesus' baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, and the calling of his first disciples. The point of that first major section is to establish Jesus' identity as Son of God and Messiah.

The second major section we studied, chapters 5-7, is the Sermon on the Mount. This is a large collection of the teachings of Jesus, including the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. The theme through the whole Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus speaks with the authority of God, not like the Scribes. Jesus' words are then followed in Matthew by a collection of miracles in chapters 8 and 9. Miracles, by definition, are things that are impossible. They are supernatural and Jesus performs a number of them. We saw how he healed people who were sick, including the blind, lame, mute, and even lepers. He cast out demons, calmed a storm, and raised a girl from the dead. Like his words, these stories were not included randomly. Like Jesus' words in the previous section, These miracles were selected to show that Jesus acts with the authority of God as well.

Then in chapter 10, Jesus sends out his disciples on a mission trip and delegates some of that authority to them so that they can heal and cast out demons. In each of these sections, Matthew has been making the case for who Jesus is – that he is God. Chapters 11 and 12, then, are a key turning point in the gospel. This section is about how people responded to Jesus.

Last week we looked at how John the Baptist responded when he didn't understand what was going on. He was locked in prison and Jesus wasn't fulfilling John's expectations of what the Messiah would do. He had some doubts. We talked about how important doubt is to faith. In fact, without some level of doubt you couldn't call it faith. If you absolutely know for certain you don't need faith. So it's OK to have some doubts and to be honest with yourself about them. But you also must go on living your life and that requires you to make a choice about how you will live. Either you will live as if there is a God or you will live your life as if there isn't.

I'm reminded of the old TV show from the 80s, *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, hosted by Jack Palance. At the end of each of the scenes, after telling the story, Jack Palance would say, "believe it ...or not." That's kind of what Matthew is saying here. Everyone who has ever come in contact with Jesus, whether through the Bible, through his followers, or in person has had to make the same decision – whether to believe that he is who he says he is or not. John the Baptist's question to Jesus was, "Are you the one or are we to look for another?" Jesus reminds him of the things he has done, his miracles, that fulfill the prophecies about the Messiah. John has to make a choice to believe or not. Jesus then explains to the crowd that John fulfills the role of Elijah the prophet who was promised to return. They must choose whether to believe as well.

Today's passage begins, "Then Jesus began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent." We don't know all that much about Chorazin or Bethsaida except that they were along the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee. They were only a few miles from Capernaum, about the same size, and

they were primarily engaged in fishing. In fact, Bethsaida literally means house of fishermen. We do know that three of Jesus' disciples, Peter, Andrew and Philip, all came from Bethsaida.

They are important here because this was the area where Jesus performed most of his miracles, called here "mighty works." He says that if the cities of Tyre and Sidon had witnessed those kinds of miracles they would have "repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." Tyre and Sidon were both Roman port cities along the Mediterranean. Even in the Old Testament they were notoriously wicked cities, and of course they were not Jewish, they were pagan cities. Yet Jesus says that if he had done his miracles there, they would have repented and believed.

Capernaum was also along the Sea of Galilee and it was Jesus' home base for his ministry in the area. He has even stronger words for them. He says, "if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day." As we heard in our reading from Genesis, Sodom was completely and violently destroyed by God because they were so wicked. Jesus uses that image to tell the people of Capernaum that their rejecting him is worse than the evil of Sodom. Capernaum, remember, is where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and it's where the paralytic was lowered to Jesus through the roof because there were so many people crowding into the house to hear Jesus teach. There were certainly many other miracles done there as well. And yet there was not a mass repentance by the people. They heard the teaching, saw the miracles, and were not moved to change.

Notice that nowhere does the Bible say that the people of Capernaum rejected Jesus. Instead, they were indifferent. We face the same danger today. We have heard the message of Jesus, we have heard about the miracles he did that prove who he is. For most people today, the danger is not that we

will reject him, like the New Atheists do. The bigger danger in our country today, especially within the Church, is that we will be indifferent. Repentance and belief requires action on our part. We have to change our thinking, which is what "repent" literally means, and we have to change our way of living. We have to decide if we believe it or not.

In the last half of this passage Jesus reveals what has become one of the most important doctrines of the church, the doctrine of election, which says that ultimately it is God who chooses who he will reveal himself to. Jesus says, "you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children." The only way we are saved is by faith in Jesus. But it's like we have a veil over our eyes because of sin. Like the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum, we don't naturally understand who Jesus is. Even his own disciples struggled with this while they were with Jesus. But as we hear the good news, the Gospel, God chooses to reveal himself to some people so that they are able to believe. And as Jesus says here, God's choosing is not based on education or knowledge. It's based solely on God's "gracious will." He is sovereign and can do whatever he wants, and he wants to save us from our sin so that we will be with him forever.

We reach the climax of this passage in verse 27, which the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance called the "center of the Gospel," and "the most important verse in the Bible." Jesus says, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

One of the criticisms aimed at Christianity is that it is too exclusive. The charge goes something like this: "How can you claim that Jesus is the only way to God?"

The argument is that all of the world's major religions lead to God. They use the analogy of God being on the top of a mountain and that there are many ways up the mountain. Christianity is only one of them. Matthew 11:27 shatters that idea completely. Here we find Jesus plainly explaining why he's the only way to God – it's because he IS God. Perhaps John 10:30 makes it clearer when Jesus says, "I and the Father are one."

Here in Mathew 11, Jesus has just called God the Father the "Lord of heaven and earth," then he says that "All things (meaning heaven and earth) have been handed over to me by my Father." He goes on to say that the only way to know the Father is for the Son to reveal him. Jesus is the very image of God. In John's gospel Jesus says, "If you've seen me you've seen the Father." In other words, Jesus is the very God who created heaven and earth. Rather than being exclusive, Jesus is quite inclusive. You can now know God personally and have a relationship with him.

That's what Jesus is inviting you to do when he says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." A yoke was commonly used to hitch animals together to pull plows or to perform other work. The yoke, therefore, became a symbol of slavery.

It represented a burden placed on people. So it may sound surprising that Jesus says, "take my yoke upon you." But that's exactly how we find the rest we're looking for. The New Testament makes it clear over and over again that we find freedom in Christ. But that freedom is not a freedom to do whatever we want, it's a freedom from the yoke and burden of sin. That freedom comes by exchanging the burden of sin for the burden of following Christ, which he says is light. One of the Apostle Paul's favorite expressions is that he is now a slave of Christ. You and I are as well. That's what it means that we were "bought with a price." Jesus paid the debt of our sin. We are his now. While sin was a hard master with a heavy burden, Jesus is a gentle master with a light burden. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me.

Let me conclude by telling you that within 20 years of Jesus' resurrection, Capernaum became one of the leading centers of Christianity. They finally heard and repented. So we've been presented with the evidence. Jesus tells us plainly who he is and what he wants. You may still have some doubts, and that's OK. But you have a choice to make. Either you will choose to follow Jesus, believing that he is who he says he is, or you will choose to reject him. But one day each of us will be judged on that decision. You will either hear Jesus say, "blessed are you," or "woe to you." Believe it or not.

*Amen*