

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Parable of the Brats**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 11:16-30

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DATE: December 9, 2007

The last half of Matthew 11 is a series of seemingly disconnected discourses by Jesus. But they only *seem* to be disconnected; they actually are intimately related to one another. I have entitled my message this morning *The Parable of the Brats*, because that is what the passage opens with, but the parable leads directly into three other brief discourses by Jesus—a denunciation of the cities of Galilee, a praise to His Father for hiding truth to some and revealing it to others, and a promise to give rest to the weary.

Perhaps you have never heard of the *Parable of the Brats*. But it is right here in the text, and I believe it offers profound insight from Jesus into the nature of unbelief. Listen, beginning in Matthew 11:16, as Jesus speaks:

"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

" 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.'

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners.'" ' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

Jesus bemoans the irrationality of unbelief through a profound parable. (16-19)

I want to suggest to you that the point of this parable (and I believe every parable has one fundamental truth) is “unbelief is essentially irrational.” I am of the firm conviction that very few people have real intellectual problems with the Gospel, but a lot have moral problems with it. The Gospel calls people to repent of their sins and to live righteously. That is not a popular message. And since it is not easy for most unbelievers to even acknowledge that they sin, much less that they like to sin and don’t intend to quit, we find many sinners using other excuses for their rejection of Christianity, often pseudo-intellectual reasons. In this parable Jesus is dealing with people who have rejected John the Baptist and are in the process of rejecting Him as well, and for no better reasons than the skeptics of our day often use.

Now let me set the context of our story. Jesus has just offered His divine affirmation of John the Baptizer, which we focused our attention on last Sunday. John, claims Jesus, is a prophet; he is more than a prophet; in fact, he is the greatest of OT saints. Yet John was not universally appreciated in his day. On the contrary, it was mostly the scum of society who responded to his preaching and repented.

There is a very interesting addition to Matthew’s account that is found in the parallel passage in Luke 7. In fact, I’m going to ask you to turn to that chapter, keeping your finger in Matthew 11.

Notice in Luke 7:28 we find the same statement as in Matthew 11:11: “I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” And in verse 31 the Parable of the Brats, which we just read, is also repeated. But notice what comes in between in verse 29 and 30:

“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. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.”

To me that’s one of the saddest statements in the Bible: “they rejected God’s purpose for themselves.” God’s purpose for them was good; God’s purpose was forgiveness of sin and eternal life; God’s purpose was fulfillment, joy, and peace that passes all understanding. But they rejected it all by refusing to be baptized by John. And why did they refuse his baptism of repentance? Because they didn’t think they had anything to repent of. After all, they were the most religious people of all. They knew the Law forwards and backwards. They kept all the rites and rituals with exquisite care. They tithed all their income. But tragically they missed out on God’s purpose. You know, this tells me there will be a lot of religious people in Hell. There will be a lot of good people in Hell. There will be a lot of tithers in Hell. Only those who repent of their sins and receive forgiveness through faith in Messiah Jesus will be allowed to spend eternity with God in Heaven.

Now Jesus compares these religious leaders to little brats in the marketplace. The marketplace was the center of community life, where people worked, where goods were bought and sold, and where children played. A group of little children (these aren’t the brats, mind you) decide to play Wedding, and they choose a girl to be the bride, a boy to be the groom, another to be the preacher, and they start whistling a wedding march. But the brats hanging around say, “Phooey, that’s silly girl’s stuff. We’re not going to play.”

“OK,” the little children respond, “then let’s play Funeral.” And they choose someone to be the funeral director, different ones to be the pallbearers, and even someone to be the corpse. And they begin to sing a doleful funeral hymn. But they are soon drowned out by loud protests from the brats: “Cut it out. We want none of this sad stuff.” So a petty quarrel develops in which the children who suggested the games are saying to the brats, “You’re never satisfied. You don’t want to play wedding and you don’t want to play funeral. What do you want to play?”ⁱ

Now Jesus drives home the point of this parable by saying to the crowds, and particularly to the religious leaders,

“You critics are so childish. You’re never satisfied. John came living with a hermit’s austerity. You called him a mad eccentric and said he was demon possessed. But then when I came to you, I did not come as an ascetic. I ate and drank like ordinary people. I attended weddings and parties. I freely associated with sinners. And your reaction? You called Me a glutton and a drunkard. You obviously are just looking for excuses for your unbelief!”

There is no logic, no reasonableness in their position; they simply do not want to reckon with God's claim on their lives, and they manufacture reasons for passing it by. Frankly, I think if Jesus were speaking today he might say it a little differently. He might say, "When you hear the Gospel, you constantly bring up excuses, like:

'What about the heathen?'

'How could a good God send anyone to Hell?'

'Where did Cain get his wife?'

'Why does the Bible condemn homosexuality when all the experts tell us people are just born that way?'

'How can you believe the earth was created when 95% of the scientists believe in evolution?'

Or you object,

'There are too many hypocrites in the church;'

'The church is too emotional, too intellectual, too large, too small, too evangelistic, not evangelistic enough, too doctrinal, etc., etc.;' And when one of your issues is addressed, you just think up three more to justify your rejection of the Good News."

In the end, says Jesus, such skepticism and cynicism will get you nowhere. Only the truth will produce lasting results. He personifies Wisdom: "Wisdom is proved right by all her actions." Wisdom does not need people to commend her, for the deeds of those who accept her vindicate her. In other words, "the proof is in the pudding." John's preaching about repentance had produced a significant change in many lives. The religious leaders of Israel had produced nothing of lasting value.

When we see the changed lives of those who have come to God in repentance; when we see Christ turn a messed up addict into a family man who brings his paycheck home, loves his children, and serves the Lord; when we see a family lose a husband and father in the prime of life and praise God anyway (as in Angie Rogg's testimony last Sunday; when we see a testimony like Gracia Burnham's in the Wichita Eagle this morning—that's all the proof you need that their faith is a reality.

Now this Parable of the Brats seems to me to lead directly into the next paragraph.

Jesus denounces the cities where He performed His greatest miracles. (20-24)

Let's read verses 20-24:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for

you."

This passage is quite similar to one we came across several weeks ago in chapter 10:15, 16. As Jesus sent out His Twelve disciples, He said that if they were not received in a home or town they should shake the dust off their feet when they leave. "I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." Here the same kind of judgment is pronounced, not just on those who refuse to show hospitality to His apostles, but also on those cities where He did most of His miracles.

What is the basis for this judgment? Because they did not repent. The miracles of Jesus testified to the presence of the divine in their midst; therefore the people who saw them should have asked themselves where they stood with God, but they didn't. Jesus declares woe, an expression of regret and warning on three particular cities—Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Their judgment is compared to that of three other cities—Sodom, Tyre and Sidon. Jesus tells us that if the miracles that were performed in these three Jewish cities had been performed in those Gentile cities, *they* would have repented long ago, and in sackcloth and ashes.

Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum were towns within four miles of each other, forming a triad on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. Korazin was the home of one of the earliest synagogues, but it is mentioned only here and in the parallel passage in Luke 10:13. It is a reminder of how little we know about the full ministry of Jesus that we have only this one reference to what was evidently an extensive ministry during the course of which a number of miracles were performed.

The small fishing village of Bethsaida was the home of three of Jesus' disciples—Philip, Andrew and Peter—and was the place where Jesus healed a blind man and where the feeding of the 5,000 took place. Capernaum is one of the most frequently mentioned towns in the New Testament. It was a sort of base of operations for Jesus' ministry. In Capernaum, Jesus found his first disciples, taught in the most elaborate synagogue in Galilee, lived in Peter's house, and healed the sick.

In other words, these three cities had an incredible amount of evidence offered to them of the power of God and the person of Messiah. There was every reason to think of its inhabitants as "most likely to believe in Jesus." The cities Tyre, Sidon and Sodom, on the other hand, represent the "most likely *not* to believe." These cities were ancient strongholds of pagan beliefs, idolatry and hostility to the people of God. They were all vigorously denounced by the prophets for their wickedness (see Isa. 23; Ezek. 26, Amos 1:9-10).

The Bible describes the people of Tyre as proud (Ezekiel 28:2, 17), conceited (Ezekiel 28:3-5) and wicked (Ezekiel 28:18). Sodom, of course, is the city on the plain of Jordan described in Genesis chapter 19—so wicked that God rained burning sulfur down upon it from heaven and destroyed it so completely that its location has never even been clearly identified.

Notice that Jesus says even these horrible, sin-filled cities would have repented long before this if they had seen Jesus in action. Tyre and Sidon would have grieved over their sin and Sodom

would have escaped the destruction of God. They would have acknowledged who He was, they would have gotten down on their knees before God, and they would have repented of their sin. Please note that Jesus does not say that they will not be punished for their sins. He simply says that on Judgment Day those who have had greater opportunities (the people of His own day who saw His miracles) will be judged more severely.

This passage perhaps has relevance to the problem of those who have never heard the Gospel. All unbelievers will not experience the same degree of suffering in hell. People will be judged on the basis of the knowledge they have received. But what does that say to us here this morning, who have more knowledge, more books, more churches, more opportunities, more resources than perhaps any group of people in history. We are heaping judgment on ourselves if we do not repent.

Now before going further I want to comment on the relationship between this paragraph and the preceding parable. Just as the spiritual leaders of Israel were so jaded in their unbelief that they acted like brats, rejecting John the Baptist because he was an ascetic and rejecting Jesus because He was not, so the towns where Jesus conducted most of His ministry were jaded in their unbelief as well. It was not a matter of evidence—they had more evidence than any cities ever had. Their sin clouded their minds and caused them to use irrational excuses for their unbelief.

Jesus praises His Father for hiding truth from some and revealing it to others. (25-26)

Look at verses 25-26, which record a brief prayer of Jesus expressing His thankfulness to the Father and also a reflection on the relationship between Him and His Father:

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. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."

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.

The key to understanding the connection between this paragraph and what comes before is the phrase "these things" in verse 25. What things is Jesus saying have been hidden? I believe He's talking about the truth that all of His miracles pointed to—that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of the World.

God in His wisdom has hidden these things from the wise and learned, from the religious bigwigs, from the intellectual elites who constituted so much of first-century Pharisaism (and I might add, of twenty-first century Pharisaism as well). And Jesus praises God for this. What is His point?

I don't think He is telling us that God makes it impossible for the intelligentsia to understand, but He does make it impossible for them to understand through their normal ways of acquiring knowledge. Scientific investigation will never reveal ultimate truth. The pursuit of power and wealth will never result in finding God. Otherwise the brilliant and well-educated would have a

leg up on everyone else, as would the powerful and the wealthy. Instead God has made it so that everyone has to approach Him the same way—by faith, as a little child does. This, of course, does not mean that all the wise are lost or that all children are saved; it means that the knowledge of God does not depend on human wisdom and education. Don't ever forget that 1 Cor. 1:26 does not say, "Not *any* of you were wise by human standards; not *any* were influential; not *any* were of noble birth." Rather it says, "not *many*."

Friends, the deep things of God are not discovered with the mind alone, no matter how sharp it is, or the feelings alone, no matter how sensitive they are. They are only illuminated to the mind of people in a spiritual way, and only by the Holy Spirit (according to 1 Cor. 2:10-14), as He is pleased to reveal them. It was God's good pleasure that the young, the lowly, the weak, the despised could find the truth, and that if the clever found it, it would be in the same way as the rest.ⁱⁱ

Jesus' prayer is short and he now addresses the disciples on a difficult topic. If God hid truth from some and revealed it to others, that must mean that He is sovereign in the salvation process. People aren't saved by chance, or by osmosis, or by research, or by intuition. They are saved as God sovereignly chooses them, calls them, reveals Himself to them, and redeems them. Look again at verse 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."

Jesus is here claiming the closest possible relationship with the Father—a unique relationship. He has real knowledge of God, perfect and intimate (in contrast to what the teachers of the law claimed to have) and the Father has the same kind of knowledge of Him. He also claims the sole power to reveal the Father to people. In essence Jesus is adding to His well-known claim in John 14:6, that "no one comes to the Father except through me," an additional truth: "no one knows the Father unless Jesus reveals Him."

That's hard for many people to accept. It sounds too much like the doctrines of election and predestination. Indeed it does sound a lot like that, but that is no reason to reject what Jesus says. The fact of the matter is that the Scriptures are always incredibly balanced, and nowhere do we see that more clearly than right here, as we look at the last paragraph of Matthew 11.

Jesus promises to give rest to the weary. (28-30)

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

I think it is so important that this particular promise comes immediately after one of the strongest statements Jesus makes about the sovereignty of God in salvation. Look again at verse 27: "No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." God is in control. If God doesn't reveal Himself to you, you're toast. But then immediately we find

these words, “Come to me, *all* you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” He doesn’t leave anyone out. He doesn’t say, “Come to me, all you to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father;” that wouldn’t be encouraging, because a person might think, “But how do I know if I’m one of the chosen.” Instead He says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. . .” That includes all of us.

Some Calvinists and Arminians love to fight over whether God is sovereign or man is responsible and free. The Scriptures just quietly respond, “Yes, God is sovereign, and yes, man is responsible and free.” Can anyone come to the Father unless the Father first reveals Himself to that person? No. Will God turn away anyone who wants to know Him personally? No. Does God choose us before we choose Him? Yes. Is it also true that “whosoever will may come?” Yes.

This promise of rest for the weary is one of the most comforting passages in all the Bible. Jesus’ proposition is eternally more beneficial than the remedies our culture offers: taking more vacation or ignoring our problems or exercising more. Jesus does not say to people who are exhausted, “Get away to a quiet campsite,” or “Take a sedative,” or “Meditate,” or “Hold your chin up and tough it out!” He says “Come to me!”

Friends, Jesus knows exactly what you are going through. He is intimately knowledgeable of everything that is happening in your life.

He knows your trials.

He knows how tired you are.

He knows how stressed and overwhelmed you often feel.

He knows if your bank account is overdrawn and creditors are hounding you.

He knows if you are hurt and angry because your parents are getting a divorce.

He knows if you have been looking unsuccessfully for a new job for months.

He knows if your education fund for your child has evaporated in the stock market.

He knows if you have been diagnosed with cancer.

He knows if your mother or father has Alzheimer’s and doesn’t recognize you.

And he says anyway, “Come to me! And I will give you rest.”

What kind of rest is Jesus offering? Will He pay my bills so I don’t lose my house? Will he cure my disease? Will he restore my family? Perhaps, but He doesn’t promise that. What may surprise you about Jesus’ offer is that He doesn’t say, “Come to me, and I will *take away* your burden.” He says, instead, “Come to me and *exchange* your burden for a different one.” He speaks of His own yoke He wants us to carry.

The “yoke” is the apparatus that is put on a team of animals to pull heavy loads. Jesus takes one side of the yoke and we take the other side, and with his help we can pull our load easier. In Jesus’ day, the yoke was a symbol for obedience and submission to authority and the discipline of discipleship. When Jesus says, “My yoke is easy . . . and I will give you rest,” he means it in the sense that His yoke is a better obedience, a better life. Rather than just enduring the heavy burdens of life, the result of taking Jesus’ yoke is that we can have a heart that is refreshed and a renewed vigor to deal with life and serve Him.

Let me use an illustration that I trust will shed light on the difference between the two kinds of yokes—the one the world thrusts on us versus the one Jesus offers. I'll do so by asking the following question: Would you rather work for \$100 an hour or \$10 an hour? Most of you would choose the former, but trust me, you really don't know enough to make that decision. What if the work for \$100 an hour was chopping wood with an extremely dull axe? And what if the \$10 an hour job was doing something productive, meaningful and fulfilling? I dare say no one in this room could do the former job for more than a few hours. The pay has nothing to do with it—we have a desperate need to be productive, to make a difference.

Well, Jesus offers that. His yoke is more than relief from the trials of life that we all face, it is rest for our souls – a deep, satisfying assurance that we are participating in the plan of God as his followers.

Friends, don't be like the brats who are always looking for excuses, nor like the cities of Israel that refused to believe despite incredible evidence. Come to Jesus and accept His yoke. By comparison it is easy and it is light.

i. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 400.

ii. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 293.