

## **The Nature of Unbelief**

Scripture: Matthew 11

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**“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, ‘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, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”** (11:16–19)

Although Jesus’ miracles had already established His messianic credentials beyond any legitimate question, most of the Jewish people who witnessed those miracles refused to recognize the facts or accept Him as the Messiah.

**But to what shall I compare this generation** reflects a common oriental expression used to introduce a parable or other illustration. The Midrash, an ancient compilation of Jewish traditional teaching, contains many expressions (such as “To what is the matter like?” or “How can I illustrate this point?”) used by rabbis to introduce illustrative metaphors, analogies, and stories. In this tradition Jesus was saying, “How can I illustrate the responses of **this generation** of God’s people to His truth and work? To what do they **compare?**”

Some of those who refused to believe the gospel covered their unbelief with criticism. Jesus compared them to foolish **children sitting in the market place** who objected to everything the other children did. They were like many people today who find fault with whatever the preacher and other church leaders do. No matter what is said or done, such people pick it apart and use the objection—whether real or imagined, justified or unjustified—as an excuse for rejection. Because they have no saving relationship to Christ, they refuse to receive His truth or serve in His church. But they love to harp against both.

The *agora* (**market place**) was a central area of cities and towns where people went to do business and to socialize. On certain days of the week, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants of all sorts would bring their produce or wares to sell from stalls, tents, carts, or simply from a cleared place on the ground.

Children played with each other **in the market place** while their parents sold, bought, or visited. Two games, “Wedding” and “Funeral,” were particularly popular. Weddings and funerals were the two major social events, and children liked to mimic their elders by performing mock weddings and mock funerals. Weddings involved festive music and dancing, and when children played the wedding game they expected everyone to **dance** when the imaginary **flute** was played, just like grownups did in the real ceremony. Likewise, when they played the funeral game they expected everyone to **mourn** and wail when the imaginary **dirge** was played, just like the paid mourners did when a person actually died.

There were always holdouts, however, who refused to go along with the rest of the children. If the game was “Wedding,” they wanted to play “Funeral,” and vice versa. Nothing the other children did satisfied them. They were peevish, perpetual spoilsports who threw a wet blanket on everything their friends did.

Jesus applied the first illustration to the response of the people to John the Baptist. When **John came neither eating nor drinking**, the people said, **He has a demon!** The phrase **neither eating nor drinking** was a figurative description of John’s austere life-style. He ate a Spartan diet of locusts and wild honey, and he lived in the desert and dressed in uncomfortable garments of camel’s hair (Matt. 3:4). His message was serious and severe as he cried out for repentance and for corresponding good works.

John’s message and way of life were in the funeral mode, so to speak. Some people became so resentful of his continual emphasis on repentance and judgment that they charged him with having a **demon**. He grated against their immoral and unspiritual nerves, and they railed out against him. They tolerated him for a short while, enjoying the novelty and excitement of his preaching. But he would not let them be neutral bystanders, uncommitted onlookers who heard and observed without decision or commitment. When they saw they had to choose, they chose not to believe or follow him. Instead of accepting John’s rebuke of their wickedness, they rebuked his righteousness. They charged the prophet who had no equal, who was greater than any other person “born of woman” (11:11), with being demon possessed.

Jesus applied the second illustration to the response of the people to Himself: **The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!”** Jesus lived basically in the normal pattern of Jewish life, **eating and drinking** like everyone else. In contrast to John’s ascetic life-style, Jesus participated in all the

normal social activities. He traveled throughout most of Israel, going from city to city, village to village, synagogue to synagogue. He had individual, intimate contact with many hundreds of people as He talked with them, healed their diseases, forgave their sins, and called them to follow Him.

Just as John lived in the funeral mode Jesus lived in the wedding mode. That fact did not escape the notice of John's disciples, who had already asked Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" (Matt. 9:14). In reply, Jesus used the figure of a wedding: "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" (v. 15). But Jesus' critics ridiculously exaggerated His normal activities, charging Him with being **a gluttonous man and a drunkard**.

The wine Jesus and most other Jews drank was *oinos*, a drink made by boiling or evaporating fresh grape juice down to a heavy syrup or paste in order to prevent spoilage and simplify storage. To make a beverage, water would be added as needed to a small quantity of the syrup. That mixture was nonalcoholic, and even when allowed to ferment it was not intoxicating, because it was mostly water. Perhaps Jesus miraculously made wine from water for the wedding at Cana by creating the paste.

The second charge, that Jesus was **a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners**, was true, but not in the sense His critics meant. In identifying Jesus with those social and moral outcasts the critics also intended to identify Him with the outcasts' sin and wickedness. But when Jesus associated with sinful people, He not only did not participate in their sin but offered deliverance from it—because that is why He came to earth (see Matt. 9:12–13).

As William Barclay points out,

The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they will easily enough find an excuse for not listening. They do not even try to be consistent in their criticism. They will criticize the same person and the same institution from quite opposite grounds and reasons. If people are determined to make no response, they will remain stubbornly and sullenly unresponsive no matter what invitation is made to them. (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958], 2:10)

Jesus' unnamed critics were not interested in truth or justice but in condemnation. John the Baptist and Jesus were enemies of traditional religion, with its elevation of human wisdom and disregard for divine. Because John and Jesus could not be reasoned down they would be shouted down; and if no truth could be found against them, falsehood would be eagerly used.

**Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds**, Jesus said. Corrupt human **wisdom** produces corrupt human **deeds**, such as the false accusations against John and Jesus. On the other hand, the righteous, divinely empowered **wisdom** of John and Jesus produced righteous **deeds** that resulted in repentance, forgiven sin, and redeemed lives.

Through the centuries the church's detractors have found it easy to criticize its people and its work. Yet they are hard pressed to explain how so many lives have been changed from wickedness to righteousness, from despair to hope, from anger to love, from sadness to happiness, and from selfishness to self-giving by the power of Christ.

Jesus' rebuke of His critics was serious, but it contained a certain restraint, a restraint not seen in the brief series of withering rebukes He proceeded to give those who treated Him with indifference.

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