

Title: Sodom had no Bible
Text: Matthew 11.20-24
Theme: More Light brings greater accountability
Series: Matthew #64
Prop Stmtnt: Hearing Christ without repentance brings judgment.

On July 31, 1941, Hermann Goering, reichmarshall and commander of Germany's air force and designated successor to Adolph Hitler sent an order to the head of the Reich Security office that read, "*I hereby charge you with making all necessary preparations with regard to organizational and financial matters for bringing about a complete solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.*" The Jewish question was; how do we rid Germany and Europe of Jewish people? This was the formal order that set into motion all of the logistics that became known as the Holocaust.

When W.W. II was over, Hermann Goering, along with the other high-ranking officials in the Nazi regime were imprisoned and tried in the city of Nuremburg. In spite of the mountains of evidence that directly linked him to the atrocities of the Holocaust including the genocide, the "medical" and "social" experiments, the slave labor and confiscation of property and possessions, Goering refused to admit guilt but rather said, "The only motive which guided me was my ardent love for my people, [Germany's] happiness, its freedom, and its life. And for this I call on the Almighty and my German people to witness." How blind can one be to call upon Almighty God as a defense witness in anticipation of exoneration in the murder of 6 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of others? Did he really believe that he was innocent of actual guilt? I do not think so.

On the other hand, Wilhelm Keitel was one of Hitler's leading generals. In passing down orders from Hitler, Keitel, among other things ordered the execution of captured Russian Communist Party officials instead of imprisonment and gave Germany's SS troops full freedom to carry out their brutality upon the people of Russia. Like Goering, Keitel was captured and tried at Nuremburg. In his statement to the court, he sounded much different than Goering. In fact, Keitel actually admitted guilt and used that very word. He said that while he had done what he had been ordered, that if he were to do it again, he would chose death rather than cooperation. But, he didn't and while he was following orders, he, nonetheless was guilty, though as I study and even parse his statement, I am not convinced that he understands the guiltiness of his guilt, but then, I wonder if I do?

These two men illustrate the two different types of people. The one, like Goering can listen as the truth of their actions are revealed to them and the world and claim that everyone else is just as bad and that it wasn't their fault and even lash out at the accusers. The other, like Keitel can confess and seek mercy. These are the two different types of people that Jesus is addressing as Matthew 11 comes to a conclusion. Our text this Sunday addresses the first group, and the text next Sunday addresses the second.

Read Text: Matthew 11.20-30

We are partway through Matthew's gospel and studying the life and ministry of Christ. We are witnessing something that is unsettling. People who were initially impressed with Jesus are beginning to turn. We know that most of them will end up calling for his execution and will believe/assume that God agrees with them. It is astounding. How does that happen? Are we beyond that? It can happen when we believe that we sit in judgment on God's Word. It can happen when we treat the Bible as just a source of interesting information that has helpful suggestions for life instead of the actual Word of God that is the binding authority of God that is designed to arrest your heart, change your heart and therefore, change your entire life from the inside out. It happens when we pick and choose the parts we like and skip the uncomfortable sections.

If you wanted to skip some uncomfortable portions of the Bible, this would be one. The language is not only strong, but Jesus is the one who is speaking. Jesus is committing the greatest "sin" that you can commit in our day. He is judging someone. In fact, he is judging a lot of people. He is telling the people in the cities of Chorazin (about 2 miles north of Capernaum, recipients of most of his attention – near Sea of Galilee) and Bethsaida and Capernaum that they (as a group) are condemned to hell for their rejection of his ministry and message. This is what Jesus said. By the way, the idea that the God of the OT is angry and mean and the Jesus of the New Testament is only kind and gentle is absurd. In this text, Jesus is pronouncing judgment on people. It went over then about as well as it goes over now.

You may remember from our study in Isaiah that Isaiah used this word "woe" as an instinctive reaction when he was confronted with the unveiled glory and holiness of Christ in Isaiah chapter 6. He was so overwhelmed by his vision of Christ that he was convinced that he was going to die in the most violent manner. Woe is the English translation of the Hebrew word 'oy. It is one of those words that are categorized as onomatopoeia. These are words that sound like what they mean. (Of course onomatopoeia does not sound anything like what it means) But, when you say the word 'oy, you have to say it with your gut. It is as if you are mimicking getting kicked in the gut. The air is going out of you.

But here is the difference. When Isaiah saw Jesus in his glory, he was overwhelmed and thought he was going to die. When these people saw Jesus in his power, they were underwhelmed and eventually decided that he should die.

I. **Why did Jesus pronounce judgment on these people?**

A. **The people did not respond to the Word of God with repentance.**

Remember that Jesus was just talking about John the Baptist. He was pointing out that both he and John were prophets. The people should have realized that John the Baptist was a prophet who fulfilled an OT prophecy. God said (11.10) that he was going to send a messenger who would go before the Messiah. Since John was sent by God (John 1.6) John would be preaching a message from God. To reject John's message was to reject God's message. They did reject John and they rejected Jesus (11.18-19). They rejected

both the prophet and the Messiah. This was evident because they did not repent of their sins. They did not turn around in response to the message.

You say, "I believe in Jesus." Ok, what does that look like? Is there evidence in your life that supports that claim? Part of that evidence would be a spirit of repentance. In other words, your life would be characterized by humility, sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, and openness to being confronted and admonished. But, when you talk to people about that, you get this idea that what I believe about Jesus just stays with me and Jesus. It is this private thingy we have going on and you have no right to question me. In other words, "I don't want anyone judging me. And we have taken the definition of judging and expanded it way beyond its borders of meaning to the point where we now have this idea that if you love me, you will never correct me. If you love me, you will only support me and will never get in my face and tell me that I am acting like an idiot. Even if I am acting like an idiot." Ok, I want to ask this in love, I really do? Who do you think you are? Do you really think that all of your thinking and behaving is so perfect, so mature, so fitting that you are way past being challenged? Have you surpassed all other humans on this earth that you do not have any room for improvement? Seriously, do you honestly believe that you are above correction? Where do we get this idea that you have no right to confront me? The fact is, you are my brothers and sisters and you not only have a right to confront me when you see me going off the rails, you have a responsibility. Hopefully you will do it in love, but my responsibility before God and you (and our responsibility before one another) is to have openness to not only suggestions, but to correction. That starts with an attitude of repentance before God.

It is so difficult, in fact it is impossible apart from the grace of God, to repent when you believe that you are privileged and that the rules apply to everyone else. What has happened in this text? The people from these cities, the Jews, were privileged. They were part of the people of God who had received the Word of God through the prophets of God. Therefore...watch this now, because this is a very BIG therefore! If you are privileged to receive greater revelation or have greater opportunities, or have greater abilities, what does that mean? Let me tell you what it does NOT mean. It does not mean that you are intrinsically better. It DOES mean that you have greater responsibilities!!!

Greater revelation means greater responsibility! Do you see what happened? The Jews assumed that since they had been chosen to be the people of God, that they were better. They were not better. Instead of being proud of the fact that they had God's Word, they needed to be humbled by what God's Word said. But, they were so proud, so obnoxiously proud that when God showed up to them, they refused to hear him with their hearts. They rejected the Word in flesh. It is impossible to be proud and to repent.

When the court in Nuremburg declared Herman Goering guilty, he was sentenced to death by hanging. He was appalled at the indignity of being executed by hanging as if he were a common criminal. He was, after all, (in his mind) a soldier, and an officer. He was not a common criminal. It would be an indignity for him and for all officers if he were to die by hanging. He deserved to be executed by a firing squad. He at least deserved that. And we are totally befuddled. Goering, what do you know about indignity? What do you

call Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto and Treblinka and Dachau? Yet, isn't Goering's response so convicting? We can be caught red-handed and exposed as guilty as hell, (literally) and we are complaining about someone else and the injustice in the world and how we are being disrespected.

You know that you starting to understand the gospel when you stop worrying so much about the faults of others because you are so overwhelmed at your own.

B. They “wasted” the miracles.

Jesus said that if the miracles that were done before you, were done in Tyre and Sidon and Sodom, they would have repented. They would have repented, but you did not! Do you see the point that Jesus is making? The miracles that were designed to authenticate his ministry, and did authenticate his ministry actually became sources of judgment for many of these people who witnessed them because they did not repent of their sins nor believe what Jesus was telling them. They liked the show, but they wanted a Messiah who would affirm their worldview, not challenge them. Christ did not want their amazement. He wanted their repentance.

The miracles and the message demanded a response. Most of the people, while initially impressed were fundamentally unmoved. So, Jesus simply pointed out the obvious. He said what was true. Your failure to repent is itself a response. You see...

C. There is no middle ground.

They have rejected Christ. They have sat in judgment on Christ. Jesus is making it clear that their rejection brings consequences because no one is neutral about Jesus. He is the one person that you simply cannot ignore. To ignore him is to reject him. To love him is to submit to him. There is no middle ground. To simply admire him, respect him, but not to worship him, love him, submit to him, and trust him is to reject him. And

II. What is the nature of the judgment?

A. It is devastating and severe. – “woe” (21)

Jesus' use of the word (woe) only underscores the severity of the judgment. I have learned that there are certain people who will tell me how awful and terrible something is and I was initially inclined to believe them, and did only to discover that time after time that whatever they thought was a huge problem was in reality not that big of a deal. So now, whenever I hear them panic, I listen but with much less urgency. But Jesus is not dramatic. His words always fit the occasion, perfectly. So, if Jesus is saying that these people are under the judgment of God, we need to recognize the severity of their condition.

B. It is humiliating and condemning. – “brought down” (23)

The citizens of Capernaum obviously had a rather smug and exalted opinion of themselves. They assumed that they were destined for heaven. In this verse, listen carefully to what Jesus is saying and try to get the arms of your heart around it, because this is not the Jesus that most people think of. Jesus is telling these people that they are going to hell. Do you see that in this verse? Just as the word heaven refers to the highest place of bliss, hades refers to the lowest place of darkness and torment. I know that this does not sit well with our world, but my chief concern is you. Are you willing to accept the fact that Jesus said this? Do you believe that Jesus is actually pronouncing judgment upon these people? I am not asking you if you enjoy it because Jesus did this with a broken heart. But my concern is that some of you have view of Jesus that you have created instead of the view of Jesus that is.

C. It is proportionate. – “more bearable” and “more tolerable” (22, 24)

Tyre and Sidon and Sodom were notorious for judgment. Their stories and their ruins were undeniable examples of the wrath of God against sin. Tyre and Sidon were not very far from Galilee. These two coastal cities on the Mediterranean enjoyed a time of incredible wealth and security. Tyre, in particular was a city not only on the coast, but it’s greatest wealth and splendor was on an island just off the coast. The city boasted of enormous defenses that they thought were impenetrable because no army could march out to it and they were able to defeat all those who attempted to assault it by boat. They boasted that they were undefeatable. The prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Amos all spoke against them and warned them of their impending doom. Alexander the Great carried it out and those cities never recovered. The ruins spoke of the fact that God’s word of judgment comes true. Sodom was also notorious for its wickedness. Even in our language and culture some 4,000 years later, we have even taken the noun, Sodom and have turned it into a verb that describes a criminal act. Jesus is saying, “You think that they are bad? You hear their stories and you look at their ruins and you shake your head in sadness over their fate, yet you are actually worse! Jesus is saying that! In the end, they will receive a lighter sentence because they did not have access to me, like you have.

III. What should we conclude?

A. Great miracles do not necessarily produce great faith.

B. Great preaching does not necessarily produce great faith.

Technology allows us access to preaching both in written and oral forms that are unprecedented. You can hear the great ones 24 hours a day. But, just because you know what great preaching sounds like and you even enjoy listening to it, does not mean that it is doing you one bit of good. If you are not hearing with your heart and submitting yourself to the authority of the Word, then you are being deluded, deceived and even hardened. Just as the same sun melts butter and hardens clay, so the same Word makes repenting hearts soft and unresponsive hearts hard.

C. Greater privilege means greater accountability.

Capernaum could make a museum out of the house that Jesus used as his headquarters. They could take you on tours of the places where Jesus taught and performed miracles. They could put up billboards enticing travelers and tourists to come and visit the city where Jesus spent more time in than any other. And what does it mean? It means that they have a greater judgment because they were exposed to the perfect prophet who preached a perfect message. Every OT prophet had issues. If you wanted to find fault with any of them, you could. It would not be an excuse to disbelieve, but they were sinners. But Jesus...there was no fault with this guy. Capernaum saw the real deal and they tried to kill him.

D. God is serious about our hearing, applying and submitting.

We say that “talk is cheap.” But the talk of Jesus is not cheap and he will not consider us as his followers based upon cheap talk. One of the reasons why God has raised up the church is so that we could be part of a community of believers who could assure us that we are indeed following Christ, or warn us if our words and our actions do not match.

What are good, godly people trying to tell you that you do not want to hear? How much effort are you expending in your attempts to justify your position, or justify your actions?

E. The severest warnings of Christ are for the religiously self-assured.

It would be an incredible tragedy for us to conclude that we are exempt just because we are not Pharisees. The people we are most likely to condemn may be better off than us.

Both Goering and Keitel were in prison in the same complex as the court and the room where the hangings were to occur. The gallows were constructed in a gym. Goering would never hang; he had been able to hide a vial of potassium cyanide in his pajamas. That same evening the prison chaplain visited him one last time imploring him to trust in Christ. He refused. His final words to the chaplain were, “I’ll take my chances, my own way.” Not long after that he broke the vial and within a few minutes was dead.

Wilhelm Keitel stood at the top of the gallows. He prayed with the chaplain and said, “Christ’s blood and judgment are my adornment and robe of honor; therein I will stand before God when I go to heaven.” Amen.

As I read the accounts of these two men this past week, I thought of the two thieves who died on either side of Christ. The one, like Goering only mocked Christ and refused his salvation, while the other, was broken and repented and even in the final moments before he died came to faith. These two thieves and these two German officers and these two audiences before Christ reveal the two ways to live. There are those who hear the words of Christ and believe them from the heart, the evidence of that belief is seen in a life that is marked by humility and growth in Christ. There are the rest, some of whom may hear, but they do not really listen. My greatest joy is for you to be the first group. My greatest grief is for you to be in the second.