

This morning, as we get back to our walk through the gospel of Matthew, we open our Bibles to Matthew 11 in the context of the “Kingdom Perspectives” conference that was held in our church last weekend, where Jan Hettinga led us through a deeper and fuller understanding of what Jesus meant when he spoke of the Kingdom of God. Last week Jan told us that Jesus began to define the “Kingdom of God” right after his baptism and temptation in the desert, when he began to preach: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”* (Matthew 4:17). And after that, *“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people”* (Matthew 4:23). That message did not change in Jesus’ three years of public ministry, in Luke 4:43 Jesus said, *“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent”* - and Luke 8:1 we then read that Jesus *“went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.”* It’s here we see the “good news” of the gospel is the *“good news of the kingdom of God.”* In other words, the *“good news of the kingdom of God”* is the full content of the “good news” of the gospel - in that the gospel is *“the Kingdom”* where Jesus rules and reigns as King in our hearts. The “good news” is that the dominion of God can be re-established over human hearts. A way has been made. There is a door of entry—none other than Jesus Himself!

Jesus’ mission on earth was to provide access to the kingdom of God for all who would repent of their insurrection and revolt against the Creator. He did this by substituting himself as the lightning rod for God’s righteous indignation and justice. Without question, God’s offer of re-entry into the realm of his eternal kingdom is only available through the work of the cross. Yet Jesus did not call the cross or his death or resurrection the good news. For Jesus, *“the kingdom”* was *“the good news.”* The magnificent work of the cross is just the beginning. Atonement, reconciliation, redemption, and justification are all essential ingredients of the gospel - but the theme of the “good news” is the rest, freedom, peace and the high investment of living life under the leadership of the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. But, that being said, the good news of the Kingdom was and still is a hard sell. Our collective fallen nature is prone to inherently reject the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* – in favor the Kingdom of Self that infected our souls when our ancestors rebelled rejected God’s sovereign authority over them.

In spite of Jesus’ gracious provision of an access point by which we may enter the Kingdom of God, we still continue to proudly wander through the strongholds and blind spots of our lives that are deeply rooted in the Kingdom of Self – believing the façade that our will is in perfect harmony with the will of God, while in reality our wills are actually enslaved to the god of the flesh of our own feelings. Thus, when presented with the good news of the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom of Self will resist, oppose, reject and rebel against the authority of God which comes with the *“good news of the Kingdom of God.”* We’ve already seen that opposition in Matthew’s gospel, in the response of some to Jesus’ miracles. He also warned his disciples he deemed apostles about this, as he gave them instructions as to how share the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* with the Jews of the nation of Israel. Jesus told them: *“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves . . . Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”* (Matt. 10:16:34).

*When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.* Matthew 11:1

The 10th chapter of Matthew records the commissioning of the apostles by Jesus to spread the gospel of the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* by going out and teaching, preaching and healing. As we step into chapter eleven Matthew moves away from Jesus’s disciples and focuses just on Jesus. After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on to teach and preach in the region of Galilee – which included the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum – which were cities where Jesus had already performed miracles. And its here we clearly see the Kingdom of Self opposing the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, '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, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." Matthew 11:2-19

Here we see Kingdom of Self opposing the Kingdom of God over the issue of *unmet expectations*. John the Baptist had been put in prison shortly after the commencement of Jesus' ministry and while John was there he received reports about what Jesus was doing. John then sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him whether Jesus was the long-awaited, God-promised Messiah "or shall we look for another?" This is a starkly strange question from John the Baptist because he had already publicly acknowledged Jesus, baptized him and gave testimony that he had witnessed the descent of the dove and the voice of God the Father at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In John 1:34 he declared: "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" and in John 3:30 he proclaimed: "He must increase, but I must decrease!"

The question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" most likely came from John the Baptist because he had foretold that the God-promised Messiah would bring judgment, destroying the wicked in the world - but Jesus allowed his forerunner, John, to be imprisoned by the wicked King Herod. Jesus had already identified himself as the one anointed by the Spirit in Isaiah 61, promising to "proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to the prisoners." Yet John remained in prison. What had happened and what was happening is not what John had expected. Now in prison, his expectation of the Messiah is being brought into question. Was Jesus really accomplishing the work John expected of him?

Jesus responded to John's question by affirming his identity as the promised Messiah by appealing to his supernatural miracles: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." And then Jesus said: "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." In other words - "blessed are those who are willing to suffer for Jesus without being offended by Jesus even if Jesus is the source of their suffering." Sometimes our expectations of Jesus Christ can lead us to be disappointed or disillusioned with Jesus. We can be like John the Baptist, who interpreted the Old Testament promises of God to send a Savior into the world *through the lens of his painful experience*, which blinded him from seeing the greater picture of who Jesus was and of what Jesus was fully doing - causing him to have expectations that did not come to fruition. The question of divine healing is an example for us. The apostle Matthew indicates physical healing is included in the effects of the cross of Christ when he quoted Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases" - yet the primary and greater divine healing spoken of there is the Jesus divine spiritual healing from sin.

Our experiences are prone to affect our expectations of God – especially when we are experiencing pain. Much of our questioning of God comes because our experience does not match up with how we expect God’s will to be carried out. And so many of us can relate to John’s situation, that when times of struggle, pain or suffering come we ask God the question: “Why are you letting this happen to me?” It’s at such times, Jesus’ response to John’s question reminds us that our own personal experiences exert a powerful influence on our expectations for what God should or shouldn’t do in our lives and in the lives of others. And Jesus’ words to John’s disciples tells us we will find the fortitude to joyfully endure times of struggle, pain and suffering - when we seek the greater purpose and deeper understanding of God’s will according to his Word. Our expectations of God must be guided by the full reality of God’s Word.

After mildly rebuking John for not seeing Jesus’ purpose and the full picture of his messianic call with eyes of faith - Jesus speaks to the crowds about John, giving a glowing tribute of John’s purpose and his partnership in Christ’s call to fulfill the promise of God to send a Savior into the world to restore His people back into a relationship with God forever. John the Baptist was a key transitional figure in preparing the way for Jesus to come and proclaim the gospel of the “*good news of the Kingdom of God*” – which would be met with great resistance and violent opposition. “*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force*” (vs 12). In the light of the dark circumstances of John the Baptist and the rising opposition to his own ministry, Jesus points to the ongoing opposition that the Kingdom of God has encountered since the days of John the Baptist – both from the religious establishment of the day and the forces of evil like Herod Antipas, who imprisoned John. This also foreshadows the gathering opposition to Jesus, which will come to a climax in his arrest, trial, and execution by the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

“*For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” (verses 13-15). Here Jesus calls out for a response from the crowd listening to him - and at the same time, Jesus’ rebukes of nation of Israel for rejecting John’s role of preparing for Jesus as Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom of God. Jesus confronts the Kingdom of Self within those who are opposed to the Kingdom of God by tapping into the cultural setting of his day by drawing on games that children played in the marketplace. In many towns the marketplace was the regular playground for children while their parents shopped, bartered, and exchanged local news. But Jesus compared the innocence of child’s play with the deviousness of his generation of adults who were playing an evil game. When children invite other children to join them in playing games, selfish children insist on having their own way. He states that the current generation is like such children, who continually want to set the agenda of games. They are like pouting, petulant children who criticize other children because they wouldn’t go along with their agenda. When they announce to everyone by playing a “*flute*” that the game they want to play is wedding, they become upset when other children don’t go along by “*dancing*.” Then when they change the game and announce a “*funeral*” game by singing a “*dirge*,” they are upset when the other children don’t immediately fall in line by putting on a face of mourning. Selfish childishness insists on having its own way. Likewise, Jesus’ generation rejected the invitation to the Kingdom of God because John and Jesus didn’t play the game that they wanted to play. They rejected John because he did not “*dance*” when they wanted to be merry; they are rejecting Jesus because he does not “*mourn*” when they want to fast. The generation of Jesus’ day expected John and Jesus to conform to their expectations and refused to allow God’s agenda to alter their own. Kingdom of Self opposes the Kingdom of God over issues of unmet expectations.

“*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, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds*” (verses 18-19). Those who rejected John interpreted his rugged appearance and desert habits as proof that he was demon-possessed, like the demoniacs in tombs in the desert. The same people rejected Jesus when he ate and drank with the social outcasts of his day. By calling himself the “*Son of Man*” Jesus affirms he is the Messiah and confronts the Kingdom of Self.

*Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."* Matthew 11:20-24

Here we see Kingdom of Self opposing the Kingdom of God over the issue of *personal responsibility*. Having just rebuked the crowds and the Jewish religious leaders for rejecting and opposing his ministry and that of John the Baptist - Jesus then speaks words of judgment on those who lived in the cities of Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. These are the three cities in which Jesus' performed most of his miracles – and in spite of that privilege, all three of those cities opposed and rejected Jesus as Messiah. Brothers and sisters – consider the incomparable privilege of bearing witness to personally seeing Jesus Christ! Those of the "generation" Jesus just spoke of, saw the culmination of the history of the salvation God had promised, put into place. They were privileged to witness the unfolding of biblical events we read of in the Bible. Listening to John the Baptist declare: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" (Matt 3:2). Watching John baptize Jesus, seeing the dove come down from heaven, hearing the voice of God the Father come down from heaven: "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Mark 3:17). Hearing Jesus proclaim: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matt 4:17). Seeing and hearing Jesus preach and teach and heal. Watching Jesus performing supernatural miracles. Yet, in spite of everything they had experienced - they opposed the Kingdom of God and they rejected Jesus.

There is unavoidable responsibility that accompanies the privilege of experiencing the reality of God. Whenever we are privileged to have an experience with God - we are given an opportunity to be loved and forgiven and changed by God - which then brings the unavoidable joyful responsibility to love God and to surrender to God and worship God and serve God and live for God. When we are privileged to witness the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we are responsible is to respond in humble belief and commitment. John and his disciples were privileged to prepare the way for Jesus, but that privilege brought the personal responsibility to continue humbly believing in Jesus as Messiah and pursuing his mission, even when things weren't going as they had expected. But this also brought them a greater responsibility, because if they did not in faith continue to humbly follow Jesus as Messiah and King - and live out and share gospel of the "*good news of the Kingdom of God*" - they would lead others astray.

Experience brings personal responsibility. The more we know, the more responsible we become. The self-serving agenda of the Kingdom of Self in Jesus' generation caused them to question and oppose and reject Jesus. The people of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had seen sufficient evidence to understand who Jesus truly was, but they failed to repent and acknowledge that reality – and the smugness of their fallen, hardened heart leads them into impending eternal judgment. This principle is for us also. As disciples, as follows of Jesus Christ - the privilege of the faith we have been given in Jesus Christ is to be lived out with responsibility – whether it be baptism or church membership or serving or teaching or tithing or evangelism or missions. The more we know Jesus, the more we are responsible to be obedient to sharing about our relationship with Jesus and sharing what we know about Jesus.

*At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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. 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."* Matthew 11:25-30

Here we see Kingdom of Self opposing the Kingdom of God over the issue of *wisdom and knowledge*. Immediately after condemning Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum Jesus prays: *“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”* We hear these words and we wonder – Why would Jesus hide the gospel of the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* from those who *“wise and understanding”*? Is the gospel of the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* only for the foolish and dumb? Well, many of those who oppose Christianity would say so. But that’s not what Jesus is saying; that’s not is that what Jesus meant. The apostle Paul gives us a clarity about this in 1 Corinthians 1:25-30.

*For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.* 1 Corinthians 1:25-30

Why would Jesus hide the gospel of the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* from those who *“wise and understanding”*? Well, first of all, because we all have a sinful nature. We rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden way before sin came into the world *because* we thought we knew better than God. Well, we didn’t know more than God way back then and we surely don’t know more than God now either. And the other reason, which is connected to the first reason, is *“pride.”* Just as we pridefully thought we knew more than God in the Garden of Eden, the same is still true today. In 1 Corinthians 8:1 the apostle Paul wrote: *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”* So, in other words, knowledge about God is not about *information* about God, but rather about a *relationship with* God. Or to say it another way - knowing God is not about our wisdom or our intellect - but rather about our hearts and our wills.

You see the wise and intelligent are those who, more often than not, think they have enough wisdom and intelligence to figure out things and do things their own way. And when it comes to the Christian faith, the wise and intelligent are often the ones who think they don’t need a Savior because they think they can figure it all out on their own and live their lives for themselves. Jesus’ words here - when he thanked God for hiding the gospel of the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* - are an acknowledgement of the foolish pride of fallen humanity which schemes, plots, and develops their own religion. This way they do not have to trust in God and His mercy and His grace alone, but can by their own effort achieve their own ends by their own means and methods. This was exactly what the religious leaders of Jesus’ time had done. They modified the Mosaic Law to the point that they actually thought they were keeping it, and therefore were pleasing God to the point that He would have to let them be part of His kingdom.

That pride is still very much present today. It is found in the false religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. It is found in the Christian cults that speak about Jesus, yet they have a different Jesus and/or they achieve salvation by their own efforts. Last week Jan Hettinga spoke of the reality that even many within the evangelical movement have traded the gospel of the *“good news of the Kingdom of God”* for the gospel of the Kingdom of Self. And so instead of placing their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior alone, they have replaced it with a trust in something they have done themselves alone.

*“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.”* This verse should remove any pride from anyone trying to know God by wisdom or intellect or works. We do not come to God on our own power by our own understanding. We come based upon Jesus’ granting to us the needed revelation to know and understand him. To whom does Jesus choose to reveal himself? To those who are like humble *“little children.”* Jesus said: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* and *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”* (5:3,6).

*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* The English words *“Come to me”* here are actually one compound word in the original Greek, which literally means *“here”* plus *“come.”* And so what Jesus is doing is calling out to us and saying, *“Come here to me.”* This involves a dramatic change in direction, and hence a change in life – which would involve both repentance and conversion. It is a change of mind resulting in going from one direction to now going in another. What is the heavy-laden burden that is being carried that makes us so weary? It is our efforts at dealing with our sin problem by our own means and methods. Sin is a heavy burden to begin with, which is only compounded when we try to deal with our sin by ourselves. But we are completely incapable of dealing with it on our own and we only make the problem worse when we try. This is where modern psychology fails because it is focused on the self. We cannot “cure” ourselves of anything. The most we can do is trade one sinful attitude and/or practice for another deemed more acceptable by society such as trading one compulsive behavior for another. A cure of sin is only accomplished when the person in both action and attitude does what God desires of him in response from what Christ has done for them on the cross.

*“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 in Jesus’ day was a device that was crafted to the specific animal so that it could pull more comfortably and effectively. It was made out of wood and carved to fit the individual animal. That would provide part of the comfort. The other aspect of the yoke is that it would distribute the weight evenly which would make it both easier and more comfortable to pull. The term *“yoke”* was often used as a metaphor for submission. In particular, it was used of students who attached themselves to a teacher to learn from him. For example, the ancient Jewish advice to students was, *“Put your neck under the yoke and let your soul receive instruction.”* The yoke here symbolizes obedience to Jesus which includes learning his ways and following them. That is emphasized in the phrase following Jesus’ call to take his yoke, *“and learn from Me.”* Jesus is saying that He would release us from being heavy-laden and give us rest and that we would become His disciples.

The reward of taking Jesus’ offer is a change of Kingdoms, a change of masters, a change of life that brings rest to our souls. Jesus is King but He is no taskmaster. He is gentle and lowly in heart. His yoke is easy. The load of following Jesus’ commands is light in comparison to following the schemes of man, or even our own way. What a wonder of reward it would be if Jesus just gave us a better fitting yoke and a lighter burden - but Jesus also gives us rest for our souls. There are several aspects of that rest. There is the sense in which there is a cessation of action, motion, labor, or exertion – in that all of our efforts at earning our salvation will cease and will be put to rest – giving us freedom from that which makes us weary. Spiritually, Jesus gives those that come to him freedom from the cares and distress that would rob them of peace and joy. This rest includes the peace that passes all understanding that comes from being able to bring everything to Jesus in prayer and cast all of our cares upon him.

The *“rest”* Jesus promises us is also something that is fixed and settled. To *rest* in Jesus involves the wonderful assurance that our eternal destiny is secure in Him. We need not be bothered by the uncertainties and struggles and pains and sufferings of life. We need not fear anything - even death, for our hope, our assurance, is that Jesus is always with us here on earth and someday we will be with Jesus for all of eternity. *Rest* also speaks of being confident and trustful in that Jesus not only gives us God’s rest that assures us of eternity with Him, but also that our lives have meaning in the present and for eternity. Philippians 1:6 tells us that, *“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* And finally, this rest describes being able to *“lean, repose, or depend upon.”* The rest that Jesus gives us is that he will take care of us because we are fellow heirs with Him and children of God. In Philippians 4:19-20 the apostle Paul declares: *“My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.”* Jesus is speaking to us today. He is saying, *“Come to me. I have carried your burden to the cross. Turn from the Kingdom of Self and follow me into the Kingdom of God and I will give rest to your souls!”*