

Jesus The Judge

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to the passage that we read there in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 11. It's all about Jesus. Now, as a throwaway line, that could sound a little trite, but it's true. It really is all about Jesus. And today I want us together to meet Jesus as He is revealed to us in the passage that we read. And as we meet Him, may we respond to Him as we ought. So, if you're thinking about what this morning and indeed this evening is about, it's not so much track and trace, but meet and respond. To meet Jesus and to respond to Jesus. To give a little bit of the context of the passage, chapter 11 in Matthew's Gospel marks a shift in Matthew's presentation. In the first 10 chapters, following the birth narratives, we are provided with a record of what we might call the deeds of the Messiah. To pick up on the very language that we have in verse 2 of chapter 11, here in the NIV, it speaks of what Christ was doing. But the actual expression that is used there is the deeds of the Messiah. And in many ways, the first 10 chapters of Matthew's Gospel are a presentation of the deeds of the Messiah. And as of chapter 11, the narrative moves on to record the manner in which people and communities respond to those deeds and to the person of Jesus. Of course, the division isn't quite as neat as I'm suggesting, but the shift in emphasis is an evident one. And this record of how people respond to Jesus reaches a climax with Peter's confession. In chapter 16, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. You know, a passage that Ivor was preaching on just, I think, a couple of weeks ago.

In chapter 11, in the verses that we've read, we are presented with two contrasting responses, that of the wise and the learned, represented by the unrepentant cities, and that of the little children, to use the very vocabulary that Jesus employs in His prayer recorded in verse 25, where He contrasts these two groups and these two responses of the wise and the learned, so called, and of the little children. The wise and the learned reject the invitation or call and refuse to repent, and the little children receive the invitation or call and embrace Jesus and find their rest in Him. And I want us to consider these two contrasting responses this morning and this evening. On both occasions, the focus will be less on those to whom the call to repent or the invitation to rest is directed, and more on the one who directs the call and the invitation, namely Jesus. Jesus as judge in verses 20 to 24, and Jesus as the giver of rest in verses 25 through to verse 30. So, this morning, our concern is to discover what we learn about Jesus as the judge in the material we have in this first section from verse 20 to verse 24.

If you're looking for gentle Jesus, meek and mild, then look away now. You will have difficulty finding Him in these verses, though significantly, I'm sure, a gentle Jesus will feature prominently in the following passage or in the second half of the passage that we'll be looking at this evening. Of course, it's the same Jesus, and it's not for us to pick and choose the Jesus we prefer. Jesus is both the judge of the living and the dead and the giver of rest to the weary and burdened. But the language in these verses, in verses 20 to 24, is the language of judgment. And Jesus makes specific reference to the upcoming day of judgment. There in verse 22, but I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And He repeats that same reference to the day of judgment in verse 24. So, very explicitly, this section is on this theme. It is about judgment, the day of judgment.

Well, what do we discover about Jesus as judge in these verses or these woes that Jesus pronounces on the unrepentant cities? I think we can draw out four characteristics of Jesus the judge as revealed in this passage. First of all, I think we can identify Him as the loving judge, the loving judge, but also as the patient judge, but also as the patient judge, thirdly as the all-knowing judge, and then finally as the just judge. These are the four aspects that we want to draw out or highlight from the passage concerning Jesus. And let's think of each of them in turn. First of all, a loving judge.

[5 : 43] Now, to be fair, He doesn't sound very loving when we look at the language that is employed. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! And then in verse 23, He addresses Capernaum, and you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths.

And the tone is the same throughout the verses. It doesn't sound very loving. But I think we need to step back and consider the facts before we conclude if we can legitimately describe Jesus as a loving judge. And what are the facts? Well, the facts, first of all, are what we could call His loving actions. Notice how the passage begins there in verse 20. Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Chorazin!

Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, and so on. So, very explicitly, Jesus highlights the fact that in these places that He is pronouncing these woes on, He had performed many miracles. And those miracles were themselves loving acts on the part of Jesus. The judge comes to these communities and performed loving acts of mercy, miraculous acts on their behalf. But the miracles were not only loving acts in and of themselves, which they were.

The miracles also, and perhaps even more significantly, attested to the identity of the one performing the miracles. They attested to and gave authority to the message that accompanied the miracles. And what was at the very core of Jesus' message? Well, precisely the call to repent.

So, what we have is that the judge, conscious of the fate that awaited the good citizens of Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum, came in person to call them to repent. This in itself was an act of love.

[8 : 16] On the part of the judge. And of course, even though we don't have that in the passage itself that we've read, we know that it is the case that it was the judge who not only called sinners to repentance, but who died in the place of those self-same sinners that forgiveness might be gifted to those who do repent. And that love of the judge is evident today, as the call to repent is directed to sinners. As the call to repent is directed to sinners such as you and me, even this morning.

This alone is evidence of the love of the judge. So, his loving actions attest to this claim that he is a loving judge. But we can also notice in our passage what we might call his tender, even passionate concern for these communities. The expression that is predominant really, that we're drawn to in the passage, this woe to you, is language that sounds to our ears very forbidding, even harsh. But it is far from being so. It is solemn, but it is not harsh.

Leon Morris, a commentator who has written a very helpful commentary on this gospel, argues that the language by Jesus is, and I quote, not a grim call for vengeance, but an expression of regret. It combines warning and compassion.

We might say, I think, legitimately that what we find here as we view Jesus, we find that Jesus is heartbroken by the fate of these communities. He is declaring these woes on them from that place of heartbreak and pain as he is evidenced, or as he sees their failure to repent, their refusal to repent. So, his loving actions and his tender concern lead us, I think, legitimately to describe him as a loving judge. Before we move on to the second characteristic, and perhaps just as an aside, and maybe an aside that it would be interesting to develop a little more, but we're not going to do so, but as an aside, I am struck by Jesus' compassion and concern for whole communities, for Chorazin, for Bethsaida, for Capernaum. I think it is fair to say that the concern that Jesus is expressing shouldn't simply be reduced to saying, well, he's concerned for the people who live in these communities. Now, evidently that is true, but there does seem to be a concern for the communities as communities. Just as a kind of bit of background to that, it is evidently the case, and we know that it's the case, that there were individuals within these communities who did repent.

So, it's not a case that everybody in Bethsaida or everybody in Capernaum refused to repent. We know that that is not so. With regard to Bethsaida, just as an example, Mark in the eighth chapter of his gospel tells us very explicitly that Philip and Andrew and Peter were all from Bethsaida, and no doubt there's simply a representative sample of many in that community who did repent.

[11 : 49] In Capernaum, where Jesus spent so much time, we can only imagine that there were many who did repent, and yet as communities, they did not repent. In that corporate sense, as a community, they rejected Jesus, and Jesus is concerned for them at that level as communities.

And I throw it out just for us to perhaps ponder on. I wonder if there is a lesson or challenge for us who perhaps focus almost exclusively, or at least there's the danger of so doing, on the individual and on the individual's need to come to Jesus. Important indeed though that is.

What do we think of and what is our attitude towards the communities that we ourselves form a part of, be that Aberdeen or be it Rosemount or be it some other kind of community that we form a part of.

A loving judge. But let's move on to the second characteristic of Jesus the judge that we find in this passage, and that is that He is a patient judge. Now, we know that God is patient. The Bible tells us so, and that is enough evidence for us. Perhaps in particular, in relation to this passage, we think of the words of Peter that we find in 2 Peter 3 and verse 9, where He is speaking precisely on this same subject of the day of judgment, the coming day of the Lord. And what does He say on that occasion? In 2 Peter 3 and in verse 9, we read, The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise. As some understand slowness, He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. And so there, Peter very clearly, very explicitly describes the Lord as patient, and patient in the context of a judgment, not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the patience of the judge is also, albeit indirectly or obliquely, found in this passage. And I would draw your attention to what

Jesus says in verse 21. He's addressing Chorazin and Bethsaida. Notice how He expresses this woe. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, two cities that represent the pagan world, the worst of the pagan world. If these miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. And I'm focusing on that expression, long ago. He's saying, if they had seen these things, if they had heard me preaching and calling to repentance, they would have repented long ago. What's the implication? Well, the implication is that Chorazin and Bethsaida had had ample opportunity over a prolonged period of time. They had witnessed the miracles. They had heard the call to repentance. And yet, day by day, week by week, month by month, they refused to repent. It's not that they had been given one fleeting opportunity that had passed them by, but rather, Jesus had patiently provided them opportunity after opportunity, and yet they did not repent. Jesus is saying in Tyre and Sidon, perhaps one opportunity would have been enough. But in your case, how many times have you seen me and heard me and witnessed the deeds of the Messiah, and yet you refuse to repent? When we think of Capernaum of Chorazin and Bethsaida, it's stated explicitly that they stand in contrast to Tyre and Sidon, who would have repented long ago.

[15 : 59] But what of Capernaum? Capernaum, as I think already commented just a moment ago, was Jesus' adopted hometown, the most privileged of communities. The citizens of Capernaum, perhaps more than any other, had witnessed countless miracles, had heard Jesus teach and preach on innumerable occasions.

How many times had Jesus urgently and tenderly directed to them the call to repent, but in the words of Jesus, they did not repent? Jesus the judge was patient. He was so patient, and he still is. But the patience of the judge is not eternal. On that we need to be very clear.

The day has been set. He will come, and he will judge the living and the dead. A loving judge, a patient judge. But also I think we discover in these verses, the portrait of an all-knowing judge.

I think we rightly, I hope that we rightly hold judges in our legal system in high regard. We know how important it is to have a functioning and integral legal system. They have a solemn duty to perform judges in that system. But they have their limitations. And perhaps the most significant limitation is their limited knowledge. That is true for any and every judge. They don't have all the evidence. They don't know for certain the truthfulness of the testimony that is being given, be it by witnesses or even by those who are prosecuting or defending. They can't possibly know if everything that is being said is true or not. They can't know that the motivations that may drive people to act or testify in one way or another. They are limited by their lack of knowledge.

Now, that's not to say that they can't do a good job, but that is a very real limitation. But not so with the judge. Not so with Jesus, the judge. He knows everything. He knows the accused.

[18 : 33] He knows the citizens of Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum. He knows us. He knows all who are accused and charged with this accusation of failure to repent. He knows our hearts. He has all the evidence at His disposal. Indeed, He knows even before the trial what the outcome will be. Now, in our system, that would be an outrageous thing to state of somebody. But in the case of Jesus, the judge, that is an entirely reasonable thing to affirm. He does indeed know the outcome even before the trial. What does He say to Capernaum? There in verse 23, we could maybe use popular language and say that what He says to Capernaum is, you're going down. You're going down. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? They were very proud of their status. And imagine that they had some privileged place in the heavens. And how does He respond to their presumption? No, you will go down to the depths. He's already declaring what the outcome of the trial will be, because He has all the knowledge that allows Him to come to that conclusion and to affirm that judgment upon them. And there's another intriguing element of this omniscience, this perfect knowledge that we can draw from the words of Jesus. And it is this, His knowledge of what would have happened in a given scenario. Now, this sounds maybe a little bit kind of airy-fairy,

His knowledge of what would have happened in a given scenario. But He very explicitly makes it clear that He has that knowledge when He speaks about Tyre and Sidon and about Sodom. He says, Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented. And He says the same thing in different words concerning Sodom. He knows what would have been the response in the event that these communities had been given the opportunities that Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were given. I think it's important to stress that Jesus here is not speculating concerning what might have happened.

He's not saying that on the basis of His knowledge of these cities, He concludes that they would have, in all probability, repented. That's not the manner in which He expresses Himself. He states with a clear and settled and firm conviction that they would have repented. Now, what do we make of that knowledge other than acknowledging it? It's perhaps unwise to draw too many inferences from this, but I wonder to what extent this knowledge will be a mitigating factor on the Day of Judgment. Clearly, the fact that they, Tyre and Sidon and Sodom, unlike the unrepentant cities, did not witness the miracles of Jesus is deemed by Jesus as a mitigating factor. That much is clear. And perhaps the fact that they would have repented had they witnessed the miracle will also be weighed in the balance on that great and solemn day. Well, we leave that just as something to perhaps ponder on without being unwisely dogmatic on the point. But let's get real and personal about this judge who is all-knowing.

If he is all-knowing, and he is, then he knows you. He knows your heart. Jesus, the judge, knows you. He knows you in the innermost of your being. He knows your motivations. He knows everything about you. He knows all the opportunities that you have had to repent, just as he knew that of Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida. And so, the call this morning is to make sure that we have made use of those opportunities, that we have responded to that call to repent and be forgiven. Because be assured that the judge on that day, when he comes to a judgment, will do so on the basis of his perfect knowledge. But then finally, I just want to highlight a final feature characteristic of the judge that we find in the passage, and that is that he is the just judge. Perhaps if there was one feature of a judge that is important, perhaps even above all others, is precisely that, that the judge be just, that he act in accordance with justice. Well, what do we discover in our passage that allows us to affirm that Jesus is a just judge? Well, one thing that we can say is that we discover that he will only condemn those guilty, indeed, he will only condemn those guilty of this one charge, failure to repent.

This is the charge that will be leveled. This will be the bar by which we are judged, whether we repented or whether we failed to repent. This is the charge that is leveled against Capernaum. They failed to repent, yet you did not repent. As one writer has expressed the matter, only the rejection of forgiveness is unforgivable. I'm not sure if we would qualify that as some kind of absolute theological statement, but it captures, I think, a truth. Only the rejection of forgiveness is unforgivable. Only the guilty will be condemned, and there will be no miscarriages of justice on that day. We know that he is a just judge because he will only condemn those who are guilty, but also because he will sentence appropriately.

[24 : 53] You know, one of the tasks of the judge is to determine an appropriate sentence for the guilty. And in this language that we find, or in the passage, we find the language of sentencing evident here. He speaks of how it will be, Jesus speaks of how it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon and for Sodom than for Bethsaida and Capernaum. And that speaks of the sentence that will be delivered on that day. The judge will sentence having weighed up all the evidence and bringing to bear all the mitigating and indeed all the aggravating circumstances. In the case of Tyre and Sidon, there were mitigating circumstances. They had not witnessed the miracles. In the case of Capernaum, there were aggravating circumstances. They had witnessed the miracles. All of this will be weighed in the balance on that great day. And we can trust that the right decisions and the right sentences will be given. Perhaps many of us struggle with some aspects of God's judgment, not that we question the truth of what is stated in the Bible. That is not the issue. But we struggle with some of the implications and some of the aspects of it that we have difficulty in understanding.

And questions are raised. And perhaps sometimes they're not genuine, but I think for some they're very genuine and searching questions. What do we make of those who have never heard the gospel?

What about those who have lived good lives in as much as we can speak of good lives as followers of other religions? And there are other questions that people pose. And sometimes with a legitimate motivation, I don't have all the answers, but one thing I do know is the judge is and will be just in his judgment and in the sentences that he declares. And so here we are presented in these verses as Jesus the judge. Jesus presents himself in this capacity as the judge, as the one pronouncing judgment, in this case on the communities named in these verses. And as he does so, we are able to discover some features of Jesus the judge. He is the loving judge, the judge who left heaven to come and warn the accused that they might flee from the judgment to come. He is the patient judge who gives ample opportunity to repent. He is the all-knowing judge, and he is the judge who will always act justly in all that he does. Now, at the beginning, I said that the purpose of the sermon was for us to meet and respond, to meet Jesus and respond to Jesus. Well, we have met Jesus, the loving, patient, all-knowing, and just judge. And there remains the question, how do you respond to him and to his call to repent?

If you are not yet a Christian, if you have not yet repented of your sins and put your trust in Jesus as your Savior, then the urgent call directed to you this morning is that you would repent, and that you would do so today. You would repent of your sins and rest in Jesus and in the forgiveness that only He can grant. If you are a Christian, then the call is also to repent. Repentance is not some one-off dramatic event. Rather, it is, if you wish, the lifestyle of the believer. Day by day, we come again and again in repentance, acknowledging our sin, acknowledging our shortcomings, and receiving the forgiveness that God is ever ready to grant to us. So, we also have to repent, but perhaps for Christians there is a further response required, and that is that we are to call others to repent.

We are to be the voice of Jesus in calling others to repent, in warning them of the judgment to come. And maybe sometimes we imagine that they'll not be interested. They don't want to hear that invitation, that call. There's no point in making it because we'll just be rejected. Well, maybe you'll be surprised by their response. I think this passage provides us with that real hope that there can be very surprising responses. Who would have thought that Sodom, had they been given the opportunity, would have repented? But that's what Jesus says. Who would have thought that Tyre and Sidon, if they had seen the miracles, they would have repented? Who would have thought? But Jesus says that they would have thought that they would have thought that they would have thought that they would have been given the opportunity. And so, I wonder if there are people in your circle, people who you know, who are, if you wish, represented by Tyre and Sidon and Sodom. The most surprising people who, if only they were given the opportunity, if only the call was made, they would respond and would repent.

[30 : 10] We'll never know until we perform that task, until we make that call, until we are the voice of Jesus calling others to repent. Well, may God help us to repent and also to winsomely and graciously and courageously call others to do likewise. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

We thank You for Jesus. We thank You for who He is. We thank You that He is the Judge of the universe. We rest in the assurance that the Judge is all-knowing, that the Judge has all the evidence, that the Judge will always act in accordance to justice. But we thank You also that He is and has shown Himself to be, and indeed continues to show Himself to be, a loving and a patient Judge.

And for that, we are grateful. Help us to respond to that call to repent. Help us as opportunity affords, and as we seek out opportunity, to share that call to repent and indeed to rest in Jesus to others. And we pray in His name. Amen.