

October 4, 2026
 Pursuing the Kingdom: Woe to you
 Matthew 11:20-24
 Vernon Advent Christian Church

There are moments in life when we're warned about something and we know we shouldn't ignore it. A doctor overlooks our chart and says, "You need to make some changes." A parent warns a child. A friend who loves us tells us something difficult, but necessary. And we may not like what we hear, but, more often than not, the warning is an expression of love because the person understands that our response matters.

Matthew 11:20-24 is one of those passages where Jesus gives a serious warning. And these are not easy words. In fact, they are some of the strongest words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. You see, Jesus had performed many miracles in the midst of the people, and yet many of them refused to repent. They had seen the evidence of God's kingdom come. They had heard the message of Jesus and still they remained unchanged.

You see, the clear teaching of scripture is that greater revelation brings greater responsibility. And that is an important truth for anyone who is pursuing the kingdom of God. Because following Jesus is not simply about being around "Christian" things. It is not enough to hear sermons, attend church, know Bible stories, sing worship songs, or even to be impressed by Jesus. The question is, "How will we respond to the light God has given us?"

In our passage today, we're going to see Jesus rebuke those in the crowds that had refused to repent. And the reason for Jesus' rebuke is not because they hadn't seen or heard enough. It was because they had seen and heard much and still refused. Jesus is teaching us that the greatest danger is not simply hearing too little about God. It is hearing the truth and refusing to respond. And so let's jump into this passage together and see what these verse have to say to us. If you are able, please stand as I read the word of God found in Matthew 11:20-24. [Read Passage]

Matthew begins by saying, "Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done." These cities included Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, also known as, the Evangelical Triangle. These were places where Jesus had ministered extensively, about 90% of His miracles took place here. [Refer to slide and put in plug for presentation]

Think about what these people had experienced, especially Capernaum. All the miracles Matthew records for us in chs. 8-9, the leper, the centurion's servant, the woman with the issue of blood, the paralyzed man who was let down through the roof by his friends, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, and everyone else included in Matthew 8:16 where it says, "That evening they brought to him many who were possessed by demons and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick."

They had all seen the miracles and they had heard Jesus teach. And not only did He teach in their cities, but the whole Sermon on the Mount took place on the hillside looking down over the shores of Galilee where these cities and towns were located and only a few short miles away. They had experienced the presence of the Messiah in their midst.

And yet Jesus says, “They did not repent.” Now that word “repent” is important. You’ve heard it said before, but I’ll say it again. Repentance means more than simply feeling sorry for what we’ve done. It literally means turning around. It involves a change of mind that leads to a change of direction.

Imagine you're driving down a road and your GPS says, “Recalculating, turn around.” And in that moment you have two options. You’ve heard the voice and you can feel sorry about going the wrong way, you can even apologize to those around you for going the wrong way, and you can keep driving in the wrong direction. Or you can experience all those same things and make the decision to turn the car around. You see, that's the difference between simply hearing and responding. The people in these cities had heard Jesus, they had seen the miracles, but hearing and seeing had not produced repentance.

And that raises an important question for us, “What are we doing with what God has already shown us?” We live in a culture with extraordinary access to God’s word. We can open a Bible on our phones. We can listen to sermons anywhere we go. We can study Scripture at any hour of the day. We can read books, listen to podcasts, attend Bible studies and gather freely for worship.

But access to the truth is not the same as obedience to the truth. You see, we can become so familiar with “Christianity” that we stop being transformed by Christ. In other words, we can hear the gospel so often that we stop hearing it. It’s possible, that we can become familiar with the story of Jesus, while remaining distant from Jesus Himself. And that's the danger Jesus is confronting here in this passage. The question is not simply, “Have you heard about Jesus?” The question is, “Have you responded to Him?”

Well, Jesus now moves from the general statement about these cities to a direct word of warning. And His first warning is directed toward Chorazin and Bethsaida.

Jesus says in vs. 21, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” The word “woe” is a serious word. It expresses grief, warning and impending judgment. And, here, it serves as an ominous warning that rejecting God's grace brings severe consequences and accountability. Now, it’s important for us to realize that Jesus is not just venting anger here. No, He feels profound sorrow and grief over the stubbornness and lack of repentance of these cities.

And He continues, “For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” Now, Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities located on the Mediterranean in present day Lebanon that had become symbols of wickedness and opposition to God. In the Bible, they are both used as an example of worldliness and idolatry.

And Jesus makes a shocking comparison. Remember, He’s talking to these people. He says, essentially, “If the people of those worldly, idolatrous cities had seen they things that you have seen, they would have responded differently.” This is meant to draw our attention back to the story of Jonah in the Old Testament. Remember Jonah? After he was swallowed and spit back up on dry land by the big fish he then went to the wicked city of Nineveh and preached a simple message of repentance, when his heart wasn’t even in it, and the people wept in sackcloth and ashes, repented and turned from their wicked ways.

Now we need to be careful here. Jesus isn’t saying that the people of Tyre and Sidon were innocent. No, they were still going to be held accountable for all the evil they had

done. But Jesus' point here is that responsibility that comes with revelation. The people of Chorazin and Bethsaida had been given an awesome privilege. They had witnessed the ministry of Jesus firsthand. And Jesus says that privilege increased their accountability.

And this principle appears throughout Scripture, greater light brings greater responsibility. Jesus isn't saying that salvation is earned by this knowledge. He is saying that rejecting greater revelation is a more serious matter.

Think about a courtroom. If someone has never heard a law, when they stand before the judge for breaking that law their situation is different from someone who has been clearly warned about the law, understood the law and deliberately violated it. No, knowledge of the law doesn't save us. But knowledge does increase responsibility.

Or, think about a lighthouse. If you suddenly had the ability to sail, and you're sailing at night and there is a lighthouse warning you about dangerous rocks in the area, then the light is a gift. But if you see the light and deliberately steer toward the rocks, the problem isn't the lighthouse. The warning was given. The question is how you responded.

In the same way, God's revelation is a gift. Every time we hear the gospel, every time we open Scripture, every time someone lovingly points us toward Christ, we are being given another opportunity to respond. If you've heard the gospel many times, don't assume that familiarity means safety. Let the gospel continue to confront you. Let it humble you. Let it lead you to repentance. And let it deepen your love for Christ.

Well, then, Jesus makes the comparison even more personal by addressing Capernaum, the city where He had spent so much of His ministry, as was mentioned earlier.

Vs. 23 says, "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades." Now, first of all, Jesus isn't trying to avoid using the word "Hell" here, as if He's trying to use an alternative cuss word. No, the word Hades, when used in the Bible, speaks of the place of the dead, or the grave. Jesus' point is to use Hades as the opposite of being "exalted to heaven." In other words, Jesus is saying, "You think you're all good, but you have another thing coming."

You see, Capernaum was especially significant. As has been pointed out, it became a home base of ministry for Jesus. And people in Capernaum had an extraordinary opportunity to witness all that Jesus said and did. They were close to the activity of the kingdom. But proximity to Jesus didn't guarantee repentance.

That's an important warning for the church today. You can be close to "Christian" things without belonging to Christ. You can grow up in church without personally trusting Jesus. Again, you can be familiar with Jesus and still not follow Jesus.

Imagine someone who works at a restaurant but never actually eats the food. They may know the menu by heart. They may know how the kitchen operates. They may know the ingredients for every dish. But knowing about the food isn't the same as being nourished by it.

In the same way, knowing facts about Jesus isn't the same as knowing Jesus. Following Jesus is not about simply knowing a lot of information about Him. It is about having a surrendered relationship with Christ through faith in His work on the Cross.

Remember the warning that Jesus gave back in Matt. 7:21 that “not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom.” The issue is not simply whether we know about Him. The issue is whether we belong to Him.

And then Jesus reminds Capernaum that, again, the problem wasn't a lack of evidence. The problem was a refusal to respond and Jesus wants them to see the seriousness of unrepentance.

He says, “For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” We all know the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the Old Testament. God rained down fire and sulfur from heaven in judgment for all the wickedness that had taken place there.

And so, these cities, especially Sodom, became one of the clearest symbols of wickedness and judgment in the Old Testament. And, again, Jesus says something shocking here, just like He said earlier when speaking of Tyre and Sidon, and I'm paraphrasing, “if Sodom had witnessed what Capernaum witnessed, Sodom would have responded differently.”

And then Jesus says, “But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.” Now, those are sobering words. Think of the shock and awe among the people. How could this be? But Jesus is teaching them that unrepentance, especially in light of everything they had seen and heard, leads to God's judgment.

Now, we don't like talking about judgment. We would much rather talk about things like God's love, grace, mercy and His blessings. And we should talk about those things because they are just as true.

But listen to me, brothers and sisters, we cannot understand the beauty of God's grace without understanding the seriousness of our sin. Grace is only amazing because judgment is real. The cross shows us that God takes sin very seriously. It's not that Jesus' warning here is inconsistent with His love. It is actually an expression of it.

Think about a responsible parent who sees a child walking toward a busy street with cars speeding by. The parent doesn't gently whisper, “Please reconsider your current direction.” No, the parent shouts to get the child's attention and to warn them of the danger.

Jesus is doing something similar here. He is warning people because He loves them. His “woe” is not the cold advice of someone who doesn't care. It is the serious warning of the One who knows what rejection ultimately leads to.

And this is where the good news of the gospel becomes so important. The warning of judgment is not the end of the story. Jesus doesn't warn us about judgment and then leave us without hope. He goes to the cross. The One who warns us about judgment is the same One who bears judgment for our sin. The One who calls us to repentance is the One who provides forgiveness. The One who exposes our guilt is the One who offers His grace. And that's the good news of the gospel.

So if Jesus' words are a warning, what should we do with them? How should we respond? First, don't confuse hearing the gospel with responding to the gospel. Maybe you've sat in church most of your life. You've heard the gospel, that Jesus died for sinners and that He rose from the dead. You've heard that salvation is by grace through faith alone.

But hearing is not the same as believing. And at some point, the gospel requires a response.

Second, don't become so familiar with the gospel that you become complacent. The people of Capernaum were familiar with Jesus, but that didn't save them. We can become so accustomed to church that we stop being amazed by grace. We can hear the story of the cross and forget how wonderfully beautiful it is. Don't let familiarity replace real faith.

Third, if you're here today and you haven't ever surrendered your life to Jesus then respond to God's grace while you have the opportunity. The appropriate response to the voice of the GPS telling you that you're going the wrong way is not to say, "I'll think about it," as you continue to go in the wrong direction down what the Bible describes as "the broad road to destruction." No, Jesus is calling you to repent, to turn around, and no longer travel the road that leads to destruction, but enter the path, through Jesus, that leads to eternal life. And the invitation is now. For the scripture says, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts..." (Hebrews 3:15) Every time the gospel is proclaimed, God is graciously giving us an opportunity to respond.

And finally, let the seriousness of sin and God's judgment deepen your gratitude for grace. When we understand the seriousness of sin, then the cross becomes more precious to us. When we understand what we actually deserve because of our rebellion against God, then God's grace becomes more beautiful. You see, the gospel is not that good people can become better. The gospel is that dead people become alive and sinners are forgiven through Christ and what He has done.

So, while this is a difficult passage speaking of God's judgment, it is also a passage of grace because Jesus is warning us before judgment comes. The question is not whether God has revealed Himself. He has. The question is not whether Jesus has given evidence of who He is. He has. The question is, "How will we respond?"

Maybe you've been around the "church" and "Christianity" for years, but you've never personally trusted Christ. Maybe you've heard the gospel many times, but you've never surrendered your life to Jesus. Maybe you've been relying on coming to church or being a good person and thinking that will be enough for God to allow you into His kingdom someday.

But Jesus calls you to something deeper. He calls you to turn from sin and turn toward Him. To place your trust in Jesus...His death for your sin, His resurrection and His promise of salvation. You don't earn salvation by becoming good enough. You receive salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

So if the Spirit is convicting your heart today, don't ignore that invitation. Don't assume there will always be another opportunity. Come to Jesus. Trust Him. Repent of your sin and receive His grace.

And for those of us who already belong to Christ, let this passage awaken gratitude in us. We have received tremendous light. We have heard the gospel. We have experienced God's grace. So let us not simply hear the Word. But let us live it out. Let us continue to pursue the kingdom. Let us respond to Jesus with repentance, faith and obedience.

For, you see, the same Jesus who warned these cities is the same Jesus who went to the cross for sinners. And the good news of the gospel is that the door of grace is always

open because Jesus has already paid the price. And as we think about that glorious truth, let's pray and prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we come before You with humility because Your Word reminds us that Your grace is a gift and that our response to that grace matters. Forgive us for the times when we have heard Your Word without obeying it. For when we have become familiar with the gospel without allowing it to transform us.

Lord, thank You that You did not simply warn us about judgment. But You came to bear judgment in our place. Thank You for the cross, where You took our sin, and for the empty tomb, where You conquered death and opened the way to eternal life for those who believe.

For anyone who has never truly trusted You, draw them to Yourself today. Give them the grace to repent, the faith to believe and the courage to surrender their lives to Christ.

And for those of us who already follow You, keep us from complacency. Help us never to take Your grace for granted. May the truth we hear become the truth we live. And may our lives demonstrate genuine repentance, genuine faith and genuine love for Jesus.

As we enter into this time together around Your table help us to remember... We ask all of this in the name of Jesus. Amen.