

Matthew 11:16-19

I. Verse 16a – “But to what shall I compare this generation?”

Jesus doesn't say: “To what would *you* compare this generation?” Jesus doesn't say: “To what *do you think I* would compare this generation?” Here's what Jesus says: “To what shall I compare this generation?” Obviously, this is a question that only Jesus could possibly answer. Jesus asks this question not to get an answer from the crowds, but rather to get them asking the same question, so that they might benefit from His answer and learn from His teaching. So let's ask ourselves: To what will Jesus compare the people of His day (especially those who follow in the steps of the Scribes and Pharisees)? And what does Jesus mean to *teach* us by this comparison? Are we prepared to listen to His words with humble and teachable hearts?

II. Verse 16b – “It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates...”

The marketplace was the center of community life in the culture of Jesus' day. It was a place for buying and selling, and hiring, as well as socializing and catching up on the latest news.

- ✓ Matthew 20:3-4, 6-7 – And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.” And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, “Why do you stand here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You go into the vineyard too.”
- ✓ Acts 17:17 – So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

If the adults were buying and selling, and looking for work, and socializing with their peers, then what do you think the children were doing? They were off playing! No doubt, Jesus visited the marketplace many times to purchase food, and there He apparently took an interest in the children's games. And now He sees in their antics an apt comparison to the adult generation of His day.

III. Verse 17 – “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”

Apparently, there were a group of kids who wanted to play wedding, so they played a tune on their “pretend” flutes and expected the other children to start dancing. This is, after all, what they saw their elders doing at real weddings. But for whatever reason, the other children didn't want to play wedding. Maybe they had already played wedding for several days now and were bored of it. Or maybe they thought they were too old for those kinds of games. But in any case, they refused to join in with the other children. Well, the first group of children could be flexible. If their companions didn't want to play wedding, maybe they would want to play funeral, and so they started singing a dirge in the expectation that their friends would play the part of the mourners. But they didn't want to play that either. There was nothing they wanted to play. They just couldn't be satisfied. So how are many of the adults of Jesus' day just like these children?

IV. Verse 18 – “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’”

Obviously, John *did* eat and drink! But Jesus’ point is that he abstained from wine and otherwise ate foods that most normal people didn’t eat.

- ✓ Luke 1:15 – And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.
- ✓ Matthew 3:4 – Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John’s lifestyle was more austere and ascetic. In other words, he lived only on the bare essentials and denied himself any unnecessary extras. The *reason* for John’s unusual lifestyle was to emphasize the desperate need for *repentance* and to warn of the looming *judgment* that would come upon all those who refused to repent. But the irony was that instead of repenting, the people actually used John’s lifestyle as a convenient reason and excuse to *reject* his message. Instead of being warned about the seriousness of the message by John’s lifestyle, the people used John’s lifestyle as a *reason* to reject the legitimacy of his message! They didn’t like what he *said*, so they just dismissed him as a madman and a lunatic. On the other hand...

V. Verse 19a – “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!’”

When Jesus says that He came eating and drinking, He just means that He wasn’t an ascetic like John. Jesus ate and drank just like other normal people. In fact, when a lavish meal was available, Jesus didn’t necessarily have any convictions against partaking in the feast.

- ✓ Luke 5:29 – And Levi made [Jesus] a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

You would never, ever, have found John at Levi’s feast, but Jesus is there! So why is Jesus’ lifestyle so different from John’s? The difference is just one of emphasis. John was emphasizing repentance in order to be ready for the arrival of the kingdom. Jesus was emphasizing the **joy** of the kingdom for all those who would repent. John still preached the kingdom, but his emphasis was on repentance. Jesus certainly preached repentance, but He also emphasized the joys and delights of kingdom living. When the Pharisees asked Jesus (immediately after His feast with Matthew) why He didn’t observe the traditional fasts, Jesus responded:

Matthew 9:15-17 – Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them... neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

The reason for Jesus’ willingness to turn water into wine (John 2), and tell stories about sumptuous banquets (8:11-12; 22:1-14; 25:1-12), and share lavish meals with repentant sinners was His desire to emphasize the wonderful blessings and joys of true kingdom living (such as

forgiveness of sins and *peace* of conscience). But the irony was that instead of embracing the good news, the people actually used Jesus' actions as a convenient reason and excuse to *reject* His message. Instead of being attracted to the joys of the kingdom by Jesus' willingness to feast with repentant sinners, the people used Jesus' feasting as a *reason* to reject the legitimacy of His message! They didn't like what he *said*, so they just dismissed him as "a glutton and a drunkard (cf. Deut. 21:20; Prov. 23:20-21), a friend of tax-collectors and sinners". How convenient!

John came emphasizing the message of repentance for all who would enter the kingdom and the people said that he was crazy – a religious fanatic. Jesus came emphasizing the joys of the kingdom for all who had repented and the people said that He was not holy enough (cf. Hagner) – He was too free and too loose with His lifestyle. They were just like children in the marketplace who refused to play funeral because funerals were too sad, and who refused to play wedding because weddings were too happy. What frustrating and stubborn obstinacy! One commentator says: "Those who oppose God will always seem to have *reasons* to resist" (Hagner). But in the end, their reasons can never make sense because they are just the inventions of an unbelieving heart. It would be one thing if the reason people didn't believe is *because* they thought they had legitimate reasons not to believe. Then they would be very *innocently* breaking the first commandment which is written on the hearts of all human beings, and which says: "You shall have no other gods before me". Well that may be God's command, and it may be written on their hearts, but so far these sincere people honestly feel like they have *good reasons* not to obey it! But people *never* disbelieve *because* they feel like they have good reasons not to believe. It's actually the opposite. People come up with reasons not to believe *only because* they don't *want* to believe. And you can imagine that when people *start out* not *wanting* to believe, they're not likely to see the obvious contradiction in rejecting John because of his extreme lifestyle of self-denial, and then turning around and rejecting Jesus for His willingness to feast with repentant sinners – even though the ministry of John pointed to Jesus and the ministry of Jesus was the fulfillment of John! You see, if you don't *want* to believe, you'll *always* come up with *reasons* not to believe! And because those reasons are *always* being invented by an unbelieving heart, they will always be irrational (though we'll always deceive ourselves into thinking that nothing could possibly make more sense). What a frustrating and discouraging commentary on the hearts of all men! And so I would appeal first of all to any who have not yet believed: Why will you keep on inventing reasons to reject the truth instead of surrendering to God? Your reasons for resisting only exist because you don't want to believe. Won't you see that unbelief is irrational, and surrender to the message of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ – which leads to everlasting joy and peace in the kingdom of God? But then to all who have believed: We must not deceive ourselves into ever thinking that we have legitimate reasons for doubt. We must recognize in ourselves how foolish and irrational are all forms of doubt and unbelief.

So will there be no *vindication* for John, and *ultimately* for Jesus? Will they simply be written off the stage of world history as a demon-possessed man and a gluttonous drunkard? This sure would be a gloomy and hopeless passage if it were not for the last seven words!

VI. Verse 19b – "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

In Luke's parallel to this story, Jesus says: "Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

What is this *wisdom*, and who are the *children* of wisdom? Notice the similarity between verses 29 and 35:

- ✓ Luke 7:29 – “All the *people* [“having been baptized with the baptism of John”]... justified **God**” [Greek].
- ✓ Luke 7:35 – “**Wisdom** is justified by all her *children*.”

In Luke, “wisdom” is the wisdom of *God*, proclaimed in the preaching of John and incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. John *proclaimed* the wisdom of God and Jesus *is* the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18-31)! And so the children of wisdom are all those people who *accept* the teaching of John (“having been baptized with the baptism of John”) and who *believe* in Jesus. In Matthew, the “children” of wisdom is changed to the “deeds” of wisdom. But is there any significant difference? I don’t believe so. In Luke, John’s disciples reported to him “all these things” (7:18; the things Jesus was doing), but Luke doesn’t use the word “deeds”. Matthew, however, says: “Now when John heard in prison about the *deeds* of the Christ...” (11:2). So when Matthew records Jesus as saying: “Yet wisdom is justified by her *deeds*” (instead of “children”), he may be thinking specifically about the deeds of Jesus, the Messiah. But is this really so different from Luke? After all, what are the deeds of the Messiah?

- ✓ Matthew 11:5 – “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*.”

Notice that the emphasis here is not so much on Jesus’ deeds in themselves, but rather on the *results* of Jesus’ deeds *in the lives* of those who had *faith to believe* in Jesus! And remember, too, that these physical results were all pictures of the spiritual realities of opened eyes and ears, of spiritual rebirth and resurrection, and of the forgiveness of sins. “Deeds” in Matthew means essentially the same thing as “children” in Luke. And so the meaning is this: God’s *wisdom* (proclaimed by John, and incarnate in Jesus) is justified and vindicated by the transformed lives of those who *believe* (cf. Prov. 1:20-23). And now let’s put this in context: The world will always find *reasons* not to believe, yet God’s *wisdom* (proclaimed by John and incarnate in Jesus) is vindicated by the *transformed lives* of those who *believe*. And in the face of this vindication, the foolishness of the world’s reasonings is fully exposed. In Jesus’ day, these transformed lives could be especially seen in those whom the Pharisees liked to deride as “tax collectors and *sinners*”. The tax collectors and sinners first believed in *John* (Luke 3:12; 7:29; Mat. 21:32; who proclaimed the wisdom of God in the message of repentance), and then they believed in Jesus (who *was* the wisdom of God as prophet, priest, and King). And in their transformed lives, the wisdom of God was vindicated, and all the reasonings of men were proved to be utterly futile and empty.

So what about us? Are we a vindication of the wisdom of God? Our words, actions, and attitudes are not simply a reflection on ourselves, or our family and friends, but above all else a reflection on the wisdom of God. Do our lives prove and demonstrate to the world that *the Gospel is true*? Is our very existence an exhibit that proves the foolishness, and futility, and irrationality of the reasonings of the world? We trust not to any intellectual arguments or persuasive words of wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-5), but always and only to the wisdom and power of God in the *Gospel* (Rom. 1:16) – ***which is manifested in the changed hearts and lives of those who have been***

delivered from sin to serve, and love, and worship the one true God. Here is the vindication of God's wisdom! By God's grace, may we be a daily vindication of the wisdom of God against the sinful irrationality of the world's "reasons" for unbelief. And may God then use our lives to bring others to faith in Christ – even as He brought us!

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 – For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 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. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Teaching our Children

- Q. When Jesus was walking in the marketplace one day, what did He notice was happening among the children at play?
- A. ~ Some of the children wanted to play "wedding" (they pretended to play the flute), but the other children wouldn't join in (they refused to dance). So the first group of children decided they could play funeral (they started singing a sad song), but the other children didn't want to play funeral either (they refused to cry).
- ~ Point out that Jesus was not judging the children. Point out how special it was that Jesus took time to watch the children at play!
- Q. How did Jesus compare the adults of His day to the children that He saw in the marketplace? (Hint: How did the adults respond differently to John the Baptist and to Jesus?)
- A. ~ John came neither eating nor drinking, and the people said that he had a demon.
- ~ Jesus came eating and drinking, and the people said that He was a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.
- Q. Why did John refuse to drink any wine and eat only locusts and wild honey?
- A. John was trying to show the people their desperate need for repentance in light of the coming judgment. But the people actually used John's lifestyle as an excuse to reject his message!

- Q. Why did Jesus sometimes drink wine and even accept invitations to feast with repentant sinners?
- A. Jesus was showing the people the wonderful joys of true kingdom living for all those who repent. But once again, the people actually used Jesus' lifestyle as an excuse to reject his message!
- Q. Do people ever refuse to believe in Jesus *because* they feel like they have *good reasons* not to believe?
- A. No! People come up with reasons not to believe only *because* they don't *want* to believe – just like the people in Jesus' day.
- Q. Are there any good excuses or reasons not to believe in Jesus?
- A. ~No! There are no reasons to reject Jesus that could ever make sense.
 ~ Talk about how the people contradicted themselves by rejecting both John and Jesus for opposite reasons even though John and Jesus went together (they testified to each other).
 ~ We must learn to see the foolishness of our own doubts and unbelief.
- Q. John was rejected as a madman and Jesus was rejected as a glutton and drunkard. But the message John proclaimed was the *wisdom* of God, and Jesus was *Himself* the *wisdom* of God! *How will the wisdom of God be vindicated (proved to be right) against the reasonings and excuses of the world?*
- A. ~ Wisdom is proved to be right by her *deeds*.
 ~ The wisdom of God is proved to be right by the *transformed lives* of those who *believe*.
 ~ Note the example of the repentant tax-collectors and sinners who were baptized by John and who believed in Jesus! (Look up Luke 3:12; 7:29; Mat. 21:32)
- Q. Are our lives (words, attitudes, actions, thinking) a testimony to the wisdom of God against all the foolish reasonings of the world?
 (Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 on page 5; see bolded portion on bottom of page 4 and top of page 5)