

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 07/09/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, July 9th

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

An unresponsive generation

In this week's lectionary text, Jesus compares His ministry with that of John the Baptist and how the religious leaders of the day, blinded by their own arrogance and human distortions of God's Law, were unresponsive to both. In the text, Jesus contrasts His call to discipleship from the legalistic burdens of human religion. In our day, the wise are still blinded by their own arrogance. Our responsibility as disciples is to keep inviting the weary and the burdened souls to rest in Jesus. This text also confronts the church. Is the church now the unresponsive generation, focused inwardly like the Pharisees on tradition rather than the call of Christ?

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 Commentary

After the conclusion of mission discourse (10:1-42) which the lectionary text has focused on for the past three weeks, the text now shifts to Jesus' response to questions from John the Baptist and His tribute to him, words of judgment on the unrepentant, followed by words of invitation (11:1-30). This transition is also the beginning of a broader section of significant opposition emerging to Jesus' ministry (11:1-12:50).

¹⁶ "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹ 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 16-19 are understood in the context of Jesus addressing the crowds (11:1) and in responding to questions of John the Baptist brought to Him by John's disciples. The topic is the response of the crowds and religious leaders to John and Jesus. As is the case here, "*Generation*" (Greek: *genea* - the origin of the genealogy) is also used in this Gospel in a negative light, or in the context of judgment (Matthew 12:41-42; 23:36; 24:34). The issue with this generation is unresponsiveness - to both John and Jesus. Verse 17 uses the image of children inviting their friends to play. The flute carries the image of a wedding and the expectation is to play-dance. A dirge portrays the image of a funeral and the expectation is to play-mourn. Both ends of the spectrum are illustrated which perhaps illustrates the very different approaches to ministry of the forerunner and the Messiah. John is too dire, Jesus is too happy. This *genea* would not play. The contrast between John and Jesus is further explored in v.18. John lived an ascetic lifestyle eating locusts and wild honey (3:1-4). This caused some to accuse him of having a demon. Jesus, on the other hand, came eating and drinking but did so with sinners and tax collectors. He

did not fast according to the expectations of the Pharisees (9:14) and thus they called Jesus a glutton and a drunkard! This "damned if you do, damned if you don't" is because neither John nor Jesus conformed to conventional expectations. As is often the case today, human intellect knows better than God!

Jesus concludes with how wisdom is vindicated by her children or deeds. In other words, you recognize a tree by its fruit (7:15-20). Earlier, in response to the questions posed by John's disciples, Jesus responds, "*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*" (11:5). This generation is apparently blind and deaf and remains unresponsive.

²⁵ *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; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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.*

³⁰ *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Jesus then condemns unrepentant cities in a section not included in the lectionary text (vv. 20-24). The phrase "*at that time*" connects the following verses with the preceding verses and thus Jesus is talking about His rejection. The religious leaders (the "*wise and understanding*") should have been the first to recognize Jesus for who He is. Yet it is often the wise and understanding whose presuppositions and preconceptions prevent them from seeing the obvious. The "*little children*," on the other hand, are the humble and unlearned. These are simple people who do not have any false preconceptions and are thus open to the truth in front of them. Spiritual understanding does not depend upon human intellect or educational status. Verse 27 illustrates how knowledge of God does not come naturally but through Jesus the Son. The Son is doing the will of the Father. God decides.

In the final three verses, Jesus issues His invitation. Those who "*labor and are heavy laden*" refers to the burden of the legalistic demands of the Pharisees (see 23:4). Rather than honor God, this religion had strayed to the point of becoming a heavy burden to the average Jew. For all the strict demands of a disciple of Jesus, it is a life of freedom and joy, compared to a life of slavery to something.

Reflections

As church attendance continues to hit new lows and the future of some denominations is in question, it is tempting to compare the unchurched to the unresponsive generation in the text. After all, there are so many expressions of Christianity today. There are those who emphasize the formality of Matthew and the Christian Pentateuch. The more evangelical perhaps look to Mark and the cross. The mainline denominations perhaps lean more to Luke's radical inclusivity. Then there are the "born-again" who look to John. Yet what if it is the other way around? There are still plenty of seekers, they are just not seeking God in the inherited expression of church. What if the unresponsive generation is the generation in the church? The inherited expression of church was once new and it replaced another expression, which in turn replaced another expression, and so on all the way back to Acts. Like the Pharisees in the text, is the church focused inwardly on tradition rather than failing to respond to the call of how Christ is doing new things in our time?

Application

- To what are you yoked?

For to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail david.r.lyons@gmail.com