

Faith, Followers, and Failures: People Telling God What to Do
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

One time I heard a story told by a youth pastor. He spoke about a young man in his group who was very angry. Being a good pastor, he wanted to find out why. So, on one occasion, he found a way to pull this young man aside.

He said, “I can see that there are some things troubling you - Do you want to talk about it?” The young man didn’t need to think hard at all. He immediately replied, “I’m sick and tired of people telling me what to do.” The youth pastor then asked, “So, what do you think you should do about it?” The young man answered: “The minute I can, I’m moving out and getting away from my parents.” The next logical question is, “OK. Once you move out, where are you going to go?” Here’s how the young man answered: “I’m going to join the Marines.”

There are of course, lots of good reasons to join the Marines. However, it’s not the place you want to go if you don’t like being told what to do.

I don’t think anyone likes being told what to do. Jesus talked about this once.

We’re in a series right now that we’re calling, “Faith, Followers, and Failures.” We’re watching Jesus as he shared some important truths to the world of his day. Some people responded with faith. Some people responded otherwise. Today, our message is: “People Telling God What to Do.”

Let’s read:

16 “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

17 ““We played the pipe 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, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.” (Matthew 11:16-19)

What's Jesus saying here? Let's find out by taking this apart.

I. Setting the mood

Jesus has just spent some time telling his followers about John the Baptist. In our list of "Faith, Followers, and Failures", John was definitely a picture of faith - Even though he had one occasion where he struggled with doubt.

Jesus and John had a lot of people who followed between them. So, now we need to address the failures. Both Jesus and John preached about things like repentance. There were lots of people who didn't like hearing about repentance. Those people reacted in a number of bad ways. We'll see Jesus talking about two of those ways today. Before he addresses that, though, he has a comment to set the mood:

To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: (Matthew 11:16)

First, Jesus wants to set a tone: "To what can I compare this generation?" Why did he start this way? Many people think that Jesus came out of nowhere one day and started saying a lot of new things. Actually, Jesus spent considerable time responding to the thinking of his day. The phrase, "To what can I compare" is a way that many rabbis of the day would start their discussions. So, Jesus is thinking about his listeners. Many of them listened to rabbis, so Jesus is putting on his "rabbi" hat.

For the next thing Jesus says, we need an alert: "Mean Alert!" Jesus has some mean things to say: Things like, "They are like children..." Well, that's not nice! Aren't we supposed to be kind and nice all the time? What kind of an example is Jesus setting here? Answer: Jesus is setting the example of someone with **authority**.

Someone with authority can say stern things - And Jesus said stern things many times. Later we'll learn about Jesus clearing money changers out of the temple with whips. Compared that that, this is nothing! So, Jesus is setting a mood here. He says many of the people who oppose him are acting like little kids.

How are they acting like little kids?

"...sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:"

Let's do a little exercise: Imagine your idea of an ideal child. What are they doing? If you're like most people, here are some things you might picture in your mind:

- They're in school learning.
- They're playing peacefully.
- They're reading a book.
- They're sitting with their parents in church.

When you imagined an ideal child, did you picture children:

- running around without their parents
- in the mall
- yelling things at shoppers?

Probably not. Well, that's what Jesus is picturing. Not only are his opponents acting like little children, but they're also acting like naughty little children.

What are they yelling? Let's read on:

“We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.” (Matthew 11:17)

To understand this, you have to understand the world these people lived in. There was no TV. There were no video games. The only entertainment for most people came during a big event in their village. An event like a wedding or a funeral.

We can understand weddings. There's a big celebration. There's music. There's dancing. In those days, the whole village was invited. So, if kids have nothing to do, they “make believe”. They could play “wedding”. They could imagine they were playing instruments, and they could dance around.

Funerals are a little harder for us to imagine. We talked about this a while back when Jesus healed a dead child. In those days, even a poor person was required to have some professional mourners. This would include musicians and women who wailed and moaned, even though none of them knew the deceased. So, you can imagine this being fun for kids to act out.

Now, if little kids are looking for something to do, and they find a game that keeps them quiet, That's generally no problem. In fact, there are educators who feel that we should allow children time to play and pretend.

But sometimes, unsupervised children can get out of hand. Imagine that it's 2000 years ago. You're in the marketplace shopping for food for dinner (or whatever). You run into a group of children playing one of these games. One of the kids turns to you and pretends they're playing an instrument. If you're not in a hurry, you might stop and watch. You might even play along - For a little while - For a few minutes. But then, you have to move on. So, you say, “Have fun kids” and you start to leave.

But then, the mood changes. The kids yell out, “Hey! We're playing a happy song here. You come back here right now and dance.” Then, they change: “Hey, now, we're playing a sad song. You're supposed to cry.”

Well now – this is starting to feel weird. You start thinking, “Are there any adults in charge here?”

Now, what does all this have to do with Jesus? We believe that Jesus was God visiting the face of the earth. None of us like being told what to do. But there is one individual who has the right to tell us: That’s God. God has the right to issue commands to his creation. He has the right to tell us what to do. Why? He is the Creator. We would not exist without him.

You might say, “Well, why does God command us? Is he a mean-spirited being who likes to order us around?” No. God loves us. He is good. He has all knowledge. He is infinitely wise. Yes, he issues commands. But, when he gives a command, he does so with our best in mind. So, he has the right to tell us what to do.

Jesus said that, when he came to the earth, sometimes he felt like he was dealing with little kids ordering him around. People were saying that somehow God was not acting the way they liked.

They wanted to talk about prosperity. Jesus talked about righteousness.

They wanted to talk about victory over the Romans. He talked about victory over sin.

Let’s ask a question: Do we ever do that? Do we order God around? Do we tell him he’s not good enough? Do we tell him he’s not meeting our priorities? If we do, that’s not a good idea. When God speaks, it’s good for us to listen.

So, Jesus starts by setting the mood. He was God visiting the face of the earth. But sometimes, people acted like obstinate, naughty little children. Jesus then moved on to make this more specific.

II. The Ways that People Fail

Let’s look at two of the ways that people can act when they fail to follow Jesus.

A. Attack

One way people can fail is to attack. Let’s read:

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, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” But wisdom is proved right by her deeds. (Matthew 11:18-19)

When people fail, they can attack. If they have power, they can cause physical harm. King Herod had power, so he could arrest John the Baptist. Most people though, don't have that kind of power. So, what Jesus ran into was cheap tricks.

There are all kinds of cheap tricks. Believe it or not, there are lists of these tricks. They have nice, academic names. Here's a good one: "Ad Hominem argument." Pull that one out at your next party! That's Latin for attacking a person instead of their arguments. This is a great example. John the Baptist claimed he was speaking for God. He said that the Kingdom of heaven was near, and that people needed to repent. So, all people needed to think about were two questions: Is he speaking for God? If so, do they need to repent?

Rather than think about those two questions, people attacked John. Some people said, "Why listen to him? He's some kind of nut. Look at him: He's out there in the middle of nowhere. He eats locusts and wild honey. He must have a demon!"

Then Jesus comes along. He doesn't just speak for God - He is God. He said things that challenged people. But again, some people didn't like what he had to say.

So, what's the excuse now? Jesus spends his time with people in local towns and villages. If someone offers him a nice meal, he accepts. So, people who oppose Jesus can't use the same argument they used against John. Without a thought, they just accuse Jesus of, guess what? Eating! The fact that he eats dinner with people means he's a glutton.

The charge of drunkenness is particularly interesting. Recall that Jesus turned water into wine. To any observer, it was a great miracle. To these people, it was providing the alcohol for a drunken party.

So, people who didn't want to follow God attacked him Jesus and John. If they had the power, they attacked physically, as with John. If they didn't have power, they just made-up nonsensical arguments. To these people, Jesus simply says: "But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

Do you ever run into people who do this? Are you ever attacked? Let's say that you tell your friends about Jesus. They come back with something like, "Well, look everyone - here's a 'holy roller'", or "this person thinks they're better than everybody!"

Of course, we should mention that we want to watch ourselves. In humility we should make sure we don't think we're better than others. But in the end, that shouldn't matter. What matters is that everyone needs Jesus.

So, some people attack. There's another way that people can fail to follow Jesus:

B. Ignore

Tragically, people can just ignore Jesus. And, apparently, they can ignore big things. Let's read about that:

20 Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. 21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! (Matthew 11:20-21(a))

Chorazin and Bethsaida were towns in ancient Israel. And yes, they were very significant in the ministry of Jesus. Concerning Bethsaida: The four core apostles were born there - Peter and Andrew, James and John. Because of that, Jesus spent a lot of time in that town. This town saw healings. This may have been close to the feeding of the 5,000. The list goes on.

So, you would think there would be lots of people turning to God in these towns, right? Well, apparently not. Somehow, most of the people in these towns ignored what they saw. And this caused a very serious problem: It made Jesus say, "Woe to you..."

Woe is a very strong word. Bad things are going to happen to people when "woe" falls upon them. Let's read on:

For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. (vs 21(b)-22)

Today, there are people who we consider to be the worst players in history. For this title, we think of people like the Nazis. In the eyes of ancient Israel, Tyre and Sidon were like the Nazis. They rebelled against God. They were terrible. These cities are a whole lesson in themselves. We won't go there, but Ezekiel talks about them in chapter 28 of his book. The king of Tyre was so evil, that God associated him with Satan. These were bad people.

So, understand what Jesus is saying here. Again, another "mean alert." Tyre and Sidon **rebelled** against God. However, Bethsaida and Chorazin **ignored** God. In God's mind, that makes Bethsaida and Chorazin **worse**.

Jesus says that, if these pagan cities had seen the miracles that were happening in Israel, they would have repented. As it is, things will be worse for these Hebrew towns.

And they're not the only ones:

23 And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.” (Matthew 11:23-24)

Capernaum, according to Jesus, will suffer a similar fate. Apparently, the people who lived in those towns thought very highly of themselves. They assumed that there were so good, they didn't need Jesus. They were so good, they would go straight to heaven someday. To this, Jesus says, “no”. These people are in for a horrible surprise. They will go the other way. Many people are familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus says that, for these people, it will be worse.

How does the fate of these towns relate to us? First, they remind us that miracles do not always produce faith. I've often heard people say things like, “If only God would show us a miracle, then we could have faith.” Well, it doesn't work that way. We've spoken together about different aspects of faith. For now, let's just be reminded that the greatest faith appears even when there is nothing miraculous happening.

Next, ignoring God is even worse than fighting against God. People ignore God for all kinds of reasons. For these towns, apparently part of the problem was a sense of self-sufficiency. That's going to be a big problem in the end times. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John was given a vision of seven Churches. One of the churches was in a place called Laodicea. Here's what God has to say to them:

15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:15-16)

This is another one that's a whole message. Hot food is great. There's something about the sizzle of food coming off the stove that's very appetizing. If people are hot, that means they have zeal for God. That's preferred, of course.

Before the food is heated, we store it in the refrigerator. It's often times not edible yet. But, if we can get it to the stove, we're ready to start. Cold people fight against God. That's not good, but there's even worse.

Lukewarm food has been sitting around for too long. Sometimes, you take a bite, and your stomach isn't quite right. God is saying that lukewarm people make him want to throw up. That's what the people were like in these towns.

How do people get themselves into this state?

17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. (Revelation 3:17-18)

People get into this state because they think they can get along without God. In reality, they desperately need him. It was true for Laodicea. It was true for Bethsaida. It was true for Chorazin. It was true for Capernaum. And guess what? It's still true for us today. In fact, I think this is a big problem for most of the nations of our world.

But it's also a problem for us as individuals. Do we sometimes allow ourselves to get into a state where we think we don't need God? That's a bad place to be. That's a dangerous place to be – It's a place of woe. All the miracles in the world won't help. We need to go to God and ask him to help us.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Nobody likes to be told what to do. And if we don't like it, we certainly shouldn't treat God that way. He is the only being in the universe who is worthy of giving commands to the human race. His commands are based in his infinite love, his infinite knowledge, and his infinite wisdom. It's one thing to have someone tell you what to do. It's another thing when you're lost, and someone knows the way. It's one thing to have someone tell you what to do. It's another thing if you're sick, and someone knows how to get well.

Today, we have it much better than people in the past. In the days of Jesus, people had to go see him to hear his words. Today, his words, and all the other wise words of God are recorded in the Bible. That's why we study it - Because we desperately need it. And we don't just need parts of it. We need the whole thing!

In the days of Jesus, there were people who failed at faith. Some of those people were guilty of telling God what to do. And you know what? A lot of people still do it today.

Instead of telling God what to do, let's commit to listen. Let's listen to the God who loves us.

He's the only being in the universe who is always worthy to tell us what to do.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net
