

The Armchair Critics

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[0 : 00] So nice to see you all. My name is Aaron. If you haven't met me before, I'm the minister that looks after the service. Come and say hi. Come and say hi afterwards.

So we are in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 11. Just four verses, four cheeky little verses tonight. Let me give you some context here.

So you remember at the beginning of chapter 11, you hear what John thinks about Jesus.

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And John has some doubts. He's not sure about Jesus. So he sort of sends some people to question Jesus. And then the next bit, we hear what Jesus thinks of John. And Jesus thinks John's fantastic. He's great. He's the best ever.

So the first bit, what John thinks of Jesus. The next bit, what Jesus thinks of John. And now we hear what the crowds think about the both of them. And we don't hear it from the crowds. We hear it from Jesus.

[1 : 02] Because Jesus knows their hearts. And Jesus says, most of you guys don't think much of us. Jesus says, you look at John and you think he's demon possessed. And you look at me and you think I'm a drunk.

So that's a bit of context, a bit of overview. Let's dig a bit deeper here. Verse 16. So verse 16, Jesus is speaking to the crowds. And he basically says, look, you guys are not really, most of you anyway, are not really interested in following me.

And you know what you guys remind me of? You know what you remind me of? Let me tell you.

And then he gives them a little parable. He says, you guys are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates.

We played the flute and you did not dance. We sang the dirge and you did not mourn. Right then, what does that mean? A bit of cultural background here. So the marketplace was the centre of the community in these villages.

And it was a place where all the trade was done. So mum and dad might have like a stall where they sold things. Or it was the place that the family went to buy all their stuff. And whilst the parents were doing their business, the kids would go out and they'd go play.

[2 : 11] They'd go hang out and play with each other. And village life was, as you can imagine, really boring. But there was two really big things that happened with regularity. And they were weddings and funerals.

And they both lasted a while. And in these, they were quite regimented sort of affairs, these things.

And so people had quite specific roles in weddings and funerals.

So at weddings, men would dance. And if you can just Google this, you can just go Jewish men dancing at weddings. And there's thousands of hits.

So men would dance at the weddings. And at the funerals, the woman's role was to mourn, was to wail, was to cry. And so as you know, kids sort of just play what they see. They just play what they see.

And they see these things all the time. And so that's what the dancing and the mourning refer to in the parable. So in the parable, some kids are wanting to play weddings.

[3 : 12] And some kids are wanting to play funerals. So you've got these two groups. Some kids are saying, Okay, you be the bride and you be the groom. And you be the priest.

And then we'll do a little thing. And then when we start singing, you boys all start doing the dance. Right? You guys all do the dance. And there's this other group in it saying, Okay, listen, you be the corpse.

And you will, I don't know. Like I'm making this up pretty much. And we're going to sing some. We're going to stand around and we'll sing some songs. And when we start singing the songs, you girls all start crying.

All right? Because this is just what these things look like. And it'll be fun. Ish. So Jesus has probably seen these kids play these games.

But in the parable, the kids aren't playing nicely with each other. I'll remind you of a little parable again. Verse 17. We played the flute and you did not dance.

[4 : 14] We sang a dirge and you did not mourn. So the girls are saying, We played the wedding song. We had the bride and the groom. We had the whole thing. We had it all set up. Boys, you didn't dance.

Why didn't you dance? And the boys are like, We did the dirge. We had the bride. We had everything. And you didn't do the crying thing. Jesus unpacks the parable for us now.

So that's what the parable means. Now he explains it all. Verses 18 and 19. He says to the crowd, You guys, you know what you remind me of? You're just like these kids.

You're just like these peevish little children in the marketplace who don't get with the program. Even when it would have been awesome if you just got with the program, if you did the stuff, it would have been great.

The girls have this great idea to play weddings. And the boys are like, I don't want to play weddings. And the boys have this great idea to play funerals. And the girls are like, I don't want to play. Jesus says, You're just like these kids.

[5 : 16] Nothing will please you. Now look at how Jesus relates it to himself and John. Verse 18 and 19. For John came neither eating or drinking, and they say he is a demon.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking. And they say, Look at him. A guy and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Let me just make that connection for you there. What's he saying?

Awesome John the Baptist turns up. The greatest of the prophets, Jesus says, turns up, and the crowds are just, they're not into it. We don't like John. We don't like him. We just don't like him. Why don't they like him?

Because it says here, he doesn't eat or drink. And this is, John ate honey and locusts. He lived this very austere life, which mirrored what he proclaimed.

It mirrored the message he proclaimed. So his call to the crowd, to the people, was to mourn. Mourn over the state of the church, and mourn over the state of the country. And he would say to people, repent.

[6 : 17] Repent from your pride. That was his big message. And he calls them up to mourn. And they won't play along. They're not into it. And the crowds look at him and go, oh, he's just a crazy person.

He's a crazy person. He's demon possessed. We don't like him. Not interested. Not interested at all. So that's John. Jesus, the Messiah, turns up.

He'll eat anything with anybody. The rich, the poor, the despised. It doesn't matter who asked. He would eat with them. And it's this beautiful, beautiful picture of the kingdom of God breaking in.

The kingdom of healing, and joy, and forgiveness. And it's wonderful. But the crowd's not into it. We don't like Jesus. We don't like him. Why not? What's the reason they give?

He eats and he drinks too much. So they didn't like austere John's message because apparently it's because he didn't eat properly. And they didn't like Jesus' incredible message because he eats and drinks too much.

[7 : 25] What do you do for these people? So what's the big thing Jesus is trying to get at here? He's not just sort of calling them out. He's not just insulting them. He's trying to tell us something about the nature.

And this is important. Okay, so listen. If you've tuned out, come back, right? He's trying to tell us something about the nature of unbelief. And the big thing he's trying to say is that unbelief is often unreasonable.

It's often unreasonable. I don't like him. He just eats too much. I don't like him. He doesn't eat enough. There was no reasonableness about their positions.

They were finding excuses to evade God's claim on their life. They didn't want to have to deal with it. So they'd make up these things, these reasons for passing it by.

And Jesus shows them how unreasonable their reasoning was by showing them to be flip-flopers. We don't like him. He doesn't eat. We don't like him. He eats too much. Their objections to Jesus and John just collapsed under the smallest amount of scrutiny.

[8 : 37] So if the excuses are not real, which is what Jesus is trying to get at, if the excuses are not real, he's showing us, because he's showing us like nothing will please these people. If the excuses are not real, what is the real reason they're evading God's prophet and they're evading God's son, Jesus?

What's the real reason for their evasion? And it's this. There is something in a person's heart that, and this will all sound really strong, okay? This is what he's getting at. There is something in a person's heart which hates and fears the message of Jesus.

There's something in a person's heart which fears and hates the message of Jesus. Remember the kids playing. Why didn't some of them want to dance? Why didn't some of them want to pretend to be mourners?

Why didn't they do that? Remember the story. We played the flute, and you weren't into it. We sang the dirge, and you didn't get on board. They didn't want to get on board because it was somebody else's tune.

Somebody else was playing the tune, which meant they weren't in charge. See, the crowd, Jesus said, is just like these children in the marketplace. They're not satisfied with anyone's tune but their own.

[9 : 54] We want to be the ones playing the flute. We want to be the leader. We want to be playing the tune. We want to set the agenda. This is why people don't believe often, probably mostly. This is why often people don't want to believe despite the evidence.

They don't want to give up control of their life to God. That's the reason behind the unreasonable excuses of the crowd. That's the simple message behind Jesus' words here.

Now, let's finish by thinking about this in terms of two things. Let's finish by thinking about this in terms of, one, witness, and two, discipleship.

First witness. If you are public about your faith and you're sharing Jesus, you'll experience something like this.

People will always have reasons for not believing. Noah's Ark is ridiculous. Religion causes violence. These things. That's fine. There's always a reason not to believe.

[11 : 07] But unbelief is not just a lack of faith. It's not like they just don't believe enough. Unbelief highlights the presence of something else in people's hearts.

And that's something else in people's hearts is the desire, the great desire, the overwhelming desire to dance to your own tune, to use the parable.

To be completely in charge of your life. That's what's behind most of the resistance to Jesus' amazing message of grace today. That's why you can't argue somebody into the kingdom of God. Apologetics is helpful, but all the evidence in the world is not going to overwhelm that desire to run your own life. So in our witness, I just want you to remember that.

It's good to have apologetic responses and reasons for your faith, reasons for people's objections, but ultimately, we pray. We pray for the miracle. And the miracle is this, is that God enters our heart and he changes it and he makes us open to the claims of Jesus.

[12 : 13] He makes us open to the lordship of Jesus. It's a miraculous thing. Remember at the end of chapter 9, Jesus looks out on the crowds and he says those well-known words, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

He looks out, he sees all of these people and he goes, I'm the only guy working on the job, we need more discipleships. And the very first thing he calls us to do is not strategize, it's not recruiting.

The first thing he says is this, pray earnestly for the lord of the harvest that he would send out more laborers. That's his first action point. We pray because salvation is a miracle.

Because our hearts don't want to change and God has to change them for us. So, we pray for our friends who don't know Jesus. also, what has this got to do with our own discipleship?

You might be thinking, this resistance you're talking about, this kind of like, I don't want to do this, I don't want to do, you know. You might be thinking, I know that resistance to God, even though I'm a Christian.

[13 : 20] And Paul sums this up very well in Romans 7. Let me read a few verses from Romans 7 to you. I'm going to read from the message version. Translated by Eugene Peterson, who just died

actually.

This is a great, he translates this, Romans 7, very well. Here we go. I'm full of myself. After all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison.

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another. Doing things I absolutely despise. Something has gone wrong deep within me and it gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does and he acted to set things right in my life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but I'm pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

[14 : 36] It's a lovely translation by Eugene Peterson there. Our resistance to dancing to God's tune is still present and it still trips us up, but God has made a way for us and the way is Jesus and to use these ideas from the text, the way forward is this, is Christians, we are dirgy and we are dancey.

We are dirgy and we are dancey. The dirgy part. We mourn over our sin. We repent and we never stop that regular rhythm of life and we dance.

We remember and we celebrate that God is doing something new in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is remaking our hearts. The very life of God is inside of you, remaking you.

So we pray, God, please keep working on us, making us more like Christ. We don't want to be like this crowd 2,000 years ago. We want to join the dirge.

We want to join the dance. Amen.