

Introduction

It is not unusual for me to misplace things. Not seldom do I end searching high and low for items I use every day. Remember my drivers' license a few months ago? But to misplace my keys, and my church keys at that, is not very common. But it happened to me this week. Monday morning I grabbed up everything I needed to take to the office with me but was unable to locate my church keys. I looked everywhere in the house that I could think of two or three times with no success. I sifted through the console of the truck but did not see them there. So I went on without them assuming I had probably left them on my desk here at church. But no. All day I was like, I can't imagine where my keys might be. I was talking with Melissa on the phone about it. She said, "I assume you looked in the truck." I said, "yeah I did, but I didn't see them and I just don't think that's where they would be." At the end of the day, I headed home. Getting into the truck, I decided to sift back through the items in the console once again. And nothing. Well, wait a minute. What was that shiny reflection coming from way in the back? Gotta be. Gotta be . . . Yes! My keys were right there in the console all that time. And I had missed them. You know it is striking how often we can be missing the very thing at which we are staring directly. This was a problem for many in the days of Jesus. They were living in the midst of a time of profound historical importance. And yet they were missing it. This is what Jesus draws to their attention in our text this morning.

[Read Text; Pray]

John the Baptist had become a topic of discussion because he had sent to question Jesus whether he was actually the Messiah. Jesus sent assurances John's way through his disciples. He then turned to those standing around to unequivocally affirm the greatness of John. His question was not a sign of weakness or a lack of faith but of lack of clarity to which he was subject because of his place in the course of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. He was a solid and faithful prophet. Indeed he was the forerunner which scripture prophesied would prepare the way for the Messiah. And yet Jesus

testifies that those IN the kingdom are even greater in that we bear an even greater ability than John to point to Jesus as Messiah with clarity and understanding. And yet do the masses realize what is going on before their very eyes? That is the burden on Jesus' heart as he continues.

I want you to see in verses 12-15 . . .

I. A Monumental Time in History.

A. Jesus explains that beginning with the days of John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven was vigorously pressing forward. Think of how this progress was exhibited in the repentance of folks in the days of John. People were pouring from their towns and villages to go out and see this prophet in the wilderness. And from the time that John pointed the people to Jesus, Jesus was actually working violence against the sad and debilitating effects of sin through unprecedented miracles of bringing sight to the blind, cleansing to lepers, even life to the dead, and preaching good news to the poor.

There is a translational challenge in verse 11 because of the Greek verbal form. Commentators and translations differ as to whether Jesus is saying that the kingdom as it is progressing is experiencing violence from the outside or that those who enter the kingdom are doing so through a violent break with the world and sin. In actuality both of these translational possibilities are true. It is true that as the kingdom advances there are those who violently refuse it and reject it. Jesus had recently warned his disciples of the sword of hostility they would face from their own family members. Jesus has also said that the narrow way that leads to life is a hard way. It too is a violent way in that those who are on it figuratively tear out their eyes and cut off their hands in order to pursue righteousness.

This verse reminds us that entering the kingdom is not for the faint of heart. You need to be determined; you need to persevere; you need to expect that entering the kingdom means you will have enemies, and they will fight against you; you must overcome them. In his first epistle, chapter 2, John says twice that he is writing to the young men in the faith because they have overcome the evil one. 1 John 5:4 says, "everyone born of God overcomes the world." Each of the 7 letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation hold out kingdom promises to "the one who conquers."

As it advances, the kingdom of heaven will be assaulted. And those who enter it are ones who are determined to assault with spiritual weapons the sin in their lives as well as the assault of the world and the devil upon their souls. Brothers and sisters, we can't take it easy. Every day we must engage. We must engage in battle. We must build walls of protection around the things that matter most and determine to keep them as priorities. Reading the word, meditating on the word, prayer, encouraging one another, and excelling still more and more. Abhor what is evil and cling to what is good. You do not pursue genuine love and holiness by laying around spiritually, but by fighting, conquering, and overcoming.

There is contextual importance to this point. Jesus is declaring that this aggressive move of the kingdom commenced with the coming of John. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven is advancing." This coming of the kingdom from the days of John the Baptist marks a significant point in history.

B. To be clearer, Jesus draws attention to the fact that the law and the prophets, the scriptures of the day, looked forward until John. There was forward movement through those scriptures which pointed ahead. . . until John. Since John, the kingdom has been on its way. Until John the kingdom was prophesied. It came to the threshold in John. Now the kingdom is here. What the law and the prophets anticipated has come to be.

C. One more element establishes that this is indeed a monumental point in history. That is who John is. Jesus says he is Elijah, if you care to accept it. Now, John the Baptist had been asked if he was Elijah and he had said "no." They had asked if he was the Christ and he said, "No." Are you Elijah? "No."

But Jesus is asserting that though John was not himself Elijah the man, he is Elijah the figure, as prophesied by the prophet Malachi. Malachi had prophesied that the Lord would send Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. The Jews longed for and looked for that day. As of the time of John, it had been some 400 years since Malachi's

prophecy. So Jews had been anticipating first the coming of the Elijah figure and then the coming of Messiah.

And so when Jesus says that John is Elijah as prophesied to come, what is the implication in regard to Jesus? It is that he is Messiah! Both of these prophesied components to which the law and the prophets pointed are now and finally here! The Scriptures and the prophets until now have pointed to this very moment. NOW at this present time, Elijah has come. And the one to whom he was pointing is here as well. THESE ARE the days! . . .if you care to accept it. If you have ears to hear, then hear.

Well, many did not accept it and still do not accept it. In his commentary, R. C. Sproul points out that "to this day when the Jewish people celebrate the seder feast, they leave an empty chair for Elijah, because they are convinced he has not come yet. And since they believe Elijah has not come, they believe the Messiah has not come." It was a monumental time. It was staring them in the face. But they missed it.

From this monumental moment in history, we turn to . . .

II. An Oblivious Generation. (16-19)

A. So Jesus declares that the time to which the law and the prophets pointed, for which the Jewish world had waited, has arrived. This is it. Elijah has come and announced Messiah and here is the Messiah talking with you right here, right NOW! And yet, for the most part, this generation is OBLIVIOUS! Let's look at how Jesus makes this point. It starts with the first word of verse 16. But is the most common word of contrast there is in the English language, and it rightly reflects the Greek word Matthew used here in quoting Jesus. On the one hand, this is the culminating time to which the scriptures pointed. But on the other, this generation is on a different wave length. The time is now, BUT this generation is somewhere else, looking for something else. BUT to what shall I compare this generation?

B. Children! Children. This generation is like children. Jesus used the figure of a child as a picture of how one must enter the kingdom. In the singular, a child is a portrait of simple trust. But together in the market place playing, the image of children is quite different.

When children play together, every one of them wants to be in charge. Each child in the group wants to be the one telling the others what to do. There is always a power struggle. Church nurseries all across the land are witness to this. When one child begins playing with a particular toy, that toy often becomes the one everybody wants because no child wants other children to get ahead of them. The sinful nature is clear and observable.

When children start doing role playing games, each child wants to be the one to determine who is in what role—who is the mother, who is the father, who is the baby.

There is even squabbling over what game is to be played. "I do not want to play that game. I want to play my game." And to this reality Jesus turns in order to describe the generation which finds itself on the stage of climactic historical events. This generation is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, "we played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." This generation is saying you did not play our game by our rules! When we played a happy song, you didn't dance and when we played a sad song, you did not mourn." You are not playing our game our way and so we don't like you. We are not going to play with you.

And here is how it played out. When John came, he lived out in the desert, wore rough clothing, ate a meager diet, and abstained from alcohol. And they didn't like it. They said he was crazy. They said he had a demon. They said that they played a happy song but he would not dance. He preached repentance and sorrow for sins. When Jesus came along, Jesus ate and drank; he went to weddings and turned water to wine. He turned people's sorrow into joy as he healed the sick and raised the dead. But the generation did not like Jesus either. They said he was a glutton and a drunkard and a man of the world. They said they played a dirge but Jesus would not mourn. He would not play along with their game.

You cannot win for losing with these people! They have defined the terms; therefore they cast aside everyone who does not fit into their terms. It is the most monumental of times since the fall of man and these people will not recognize it because they are like willful little children determined to

play their game their way. And it is really not about what the game is as much as it is about who makes the rules and who is in charge. The masses were being molded and shaped in their thinking by the scribes and Pharisees and because of that they were willfully oblivious to the truth.

C. This is the way human beings treat God in general, is it not. Fallen humanity would just as soon discount God from everything altogether. But with the proof in creation and the inward knowledge that he is, they resort to setting the terms for God themselves. They reject the truth of God in exchange for a lie. They tell God who he must be. With their eyes firmly focused on themselves they create a god in their image to suit their own passions. This threat will always be around. Every generation of Christ's disciples will have to contend for the faith delivered to the saints because a new generation will rise up to challenge the truth. Paul charges Timothy with the full seriousness of the responsibility to "preach the word [of God] in season and out of season." He is to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching." And the reason is because of this constant tendency for those who are exposed to the truth to want something else, something more suitable to their fleshly passions. "The time is coming," says Paul, "when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

So I am urging my brothers and sisters in the Lord to be sure you watch those itching ears. Whenever teaching feels good and feels natural to you, to your terms, look out. Beware. Determine to know God as he is. Know the God who reveals himself in the scripture. Challenge your own presuppositions with what the scripture says. In scripture you do not see a God who winks at sin or whose standards of righteousness change. You do see a God of love but it is not the love of a spineless parent afraid to offend their child. It is not the love of a friend who is determined to let them go their way and be who they want to be. It is a love which is unwilling to tolerate the compromise of holy standards but which will open its arms wide and run toward a sinner who, repenting and clothed with shame and regret, has turned back to seek him with faith that he will forgive.

The most glorious and most momentous reality in all human existence is that the God who created heaven and earth and made humanity in his own image, who is holy, holy, holy, the God who will not leave the guilty unpunished, is also the God whose determination to justify sinners resulted in the giving of his one and only son to absorb his holy wrath against those sinners. This God is calling out to sinners to come to him, to turn from disobedience and receive eternal life, forgiveness, to be declared righteous and acceptable to him by faith in his crucified son. The times are amazing. The kingdom is making strides, but it is encountering violence. And yet what this generation must not miss is that God is the king. He makes the rules. He supplies the savior. God is not receiving persons into his heaven because they think they are good or because they haven't done that many bad things, or because they have tried really hard. Religion is not a pathway to the one true God. It is not as though any religion you choose will get you to him. Do not be staring the gospel in the face and miss it because it's not the game you wanted to play!

D. Jesus closes this section with an intriguing statement. "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." Luke 7:35 quotes it this way, "wisdom is justified by her children." Jesus is declaring that despite the fact that opponents are rejecting his message and John's message, the wisdom they preach will become evident by the fruit they bear, by the children they produce. And these who have rejected will bear the shame of their foolish rejection.

So finally we turn from the oblivious generation to . . .

III. An Ominous Punishment of Judgment. (20-24)

A. What Jesus says in verses 20-24 is a reiteration of what he had said to his disciples back in chapter 10 where he commissioned them to shake off the dust of their feet when they departed a house or a town they rejected their message. People who stare the truth in the face and reject it bear a greater degree of punishment because the guilt is greater.

The Jews had a unique inward hostility to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because they were notorious historically for grievous sexual sin. Of course it was so bad that the Lord destroyed those cities for it. He absolutely obliterated them. The Jews were also filled with animosity toward the cities of Tyre and Sidon. These cities of Phoenicia had historically exhibited

arrogant hatred toward God and his people. They Jews adopted a prideful “we-are-better-than-that” attitude to all these cities. But Jesus declares to the Jews that the sin they are committing in resisting him, in resisting the testimony of his works in their midst, is a greater sin than even the notorious arrogance of Tyre and Sidon and the infamous immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah. And judgment will correspond to it.

B. It does not make any difference how highly you think of yourself; what matters is what God thinks of you, your heart, and your life. We are all law breakers. We will all appear before the judgement seat of the Lord. Have we had other gods before him? Have we made him in our own image and worshiped a god of our own making instead of the one true God? Have we blasphemed the holy name of God? Have we dishonored authority, defamed his Sabbath? Have we murdered even in thought, committed adultery even in thought, stolen even in thought? Have we lied? Have we coveted? Our sins cry out to God for justice.

But when it comes to judgment, the horrors of eternal destruction will be worse for those who rejected the light than for those who sinned without it. It is a greater sin with greater guilt and more intense punishment. You hear the word today. You will go one way or another. You will either be shielded from the punishment of God because you have heard the word and taken refuge from the wrath of God in Jesus, or you will be punished justly and more brutally in the day of judgment than will be the people of the most immoral places the world has known.

Conclusion

We don't like to think about hell. Having itching ears, many in this generation have turned to go after teachers who blatantly reject the testimony of the scriptures to declare that there will be no hell. These also present a diminished and weakened picture of Jesus himself. These remind me of the generation in the monumental times when Jesus walked the earth. Can you imagine being right there to see Jesus stretch out a withered hand, cleanse a leper, still a storm and then hear him speak the gospel with authority and yet say, “Ah, that can't be true!” Oblivious to the obvious!

Rightly did Jesus say, "he who has ears to hear, let him hear." Spiritual ears to hear are a gift from God. If you have them, listen with them!