

“Crickets Chirping”

Reading: Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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I am not a comedian — you have surely noticed this — but I do know that the surest way to kill a joke is to have to explain it. You’ve probably seen it done, and cringed while it was happening. Or if not, maybe you’ve been the one doing it, and you didn’t realize how cringeworthy it was. Someone tells a joke, and maybe the joke wasn’t really all that funny, or maybe they have a different sense a humor than everyone else, or maybe they told the joke wrong. For whatever reason, they don’t get the response they want, and so they make the unfortunate decision to explain why everyone should have laughed. And the level of awkwardness just keeps creeping up. Maybe you have a friend like that, or maybe you’ve seen a comedian who just wasn’t very good, or, dare I say it, maybe you’ve even had a preacher who has told a joke that has simply fallen flat, and the only sounds are the proverbial crickets chirping in the silence. You may make a joke about the joke being bad, or you may just move on with things, but don’t try to salvage the unfunny joke! Those crickets will only chirp that much more loudly.

We could be talking about any number of situations — a group activity, the telling of a story, a family get-together — and for whatever reason, it just doesn’t *click* with everyone. Not everyone laughs, or not everyone participates, or not everyone enjoys the story, and if it’s bad enough, the event or story or joke can be ruined for everyone, because those who are in on it can feel self-conscious about those who are out. The silence of their non-participation, the sound of those crickets chirping, can be deafening.

That’s kind of the situation we find ourselves in if we put ourselves into this episode in Jesus’ life that we read about today. Jesus is getting a little exasperated at this point in His ministry. He looks around at the people crowding around Him and says, “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’” They’re telling jokes, but they’re not getting the laughs they want, so they’re making things worse by trying to force their audience to laugh. They have expectations of a response but aren’t getting it; there’s other more important business to be done, and the children’s expectation of a party or a mock funeral is hardly the top priority.

There’s a major disconnect in everyone’s expectations, really, because at the same time, Jesus is also not getting the response He’s looking for. There’s an event taking place, a joke, a song, a story, a party, a funeral procession, and instead of *getting it*, no one is responding or joining in like they should. They laugh during the funeral, and they stay silent after the jokes. Jesus is wondering whether anyone is really *in* on this message He is proclaiming, or is this turning out to be a dance with no one dancing, a funeral with no one crying, a joke with no one laughing, a party with no one celebrating.

This is a point of transition in the story of Jesus’ ministry according to Matthew. Matthew begins by telling the story of where Jesus came from; His lineage, His birth, and a little bit about His childhood. Then Matthew skips ahead to Jesus’ adulthood and the beginning of His ministry when He was baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus then withdraws into the wilderness for forty days of testing, after which He confronts His culture by preaching the Sermon on the Mount, then confronts the

fallen world by healing the sick and casting out demons. A few weeks ago we jumped into the story in chapter 10, when Jesus sends out His most advanced students to carry out the mission of preaching the good news of the arrival of the kingdom of God. They go out into the surrounding towns and do exactly the same sorts of things Jesus has just been doing: healing the sick, casting out demons, and preaching the word. He gives them fair warning, though, that their mission will be opposed by some people, and they will face opposition and even persecution.

And in our chapter for today we see that sense of opposition continuing and growing. Jesus is making it clear that not everyone is receiving His message; not everyone is in on the joke or participating in the party. He's preaching His message and hearing an awful lot of crickets chirping in response. And then some messengers reach Jesus sent by John the Baptist, the one who was there when this whole adventure started. John is in prison by this point; he's finally crossed the line in his provocative preaching. Even John seems to be in some doubt about Jesus, or at least he's in need of some reassurance. He sends some of his students to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Maybe John wants to know if his work, which seems now to be at an end, was worth it, whether he prepared the way for the right messiah. Jesus sends the message back, in a rather coded way, that He is indeed the right Messiah, and encourages John to persevere.

While John's students are walking away with this message, Jesus takes a moment to take stock of His audience. It's almost a pronouncement of judgment upon them. They're like children playing a game in the marketplace, thinking that their game is the most important thing going on, when in reality all the other business of the market is the real reason for the marketplace. They have unrealistic expectations, and then they're upset that those expectations aren't being met. Why isn't the entire marketplace performing according to our games?

It's a question of expectations, and unfortunately, expectations can be deadly to one's life in the kingdom of God. I'm not even convinced that the crowds and the religious leaders had settled on what they were expecting from a prophet or a messiah; one moment they want a dance, while the next they want a dirge. John came as the forerunner or prophet of the Messiah, but they criticized him for being too extreme, too confrontational, too intense for their liking. We don't like his message of repentance, so we'll write it off by criticizing his ascetic lifestyle and say that he's demon-possessed. Meanwhile, Jesus comes along and has a comparatively indulgent ministry in the sense that He does not refrain from eating and drinking and attending parties. But Jesus is now seeing that some people cannot be pleased; they're criticizing Him for doing the opposite of John, only now they have a new criticism: He's a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of *those sorts of people*.

These guys don't look like the sorts of messiahs and prophets we expected them to, and their kingdom doesn't preach what we thought it would, never mind that we don't even really agree on *what* we were expecting. And Jesus could easily say much the same thing about them: you're chirping like crickets when there's music playing and you should be moving in response; you're just not getting it. They have this list of expectations for what God's kingdom ought to look like and how it ought to act. The only kingdom they can accept is the one they expect, which means that they want their own kingdom, not God's. Their expectations poison their taste of the kingdom of God.

We flip the page and come to chapter 12, and these children in the marketplace illustrate the sorts of expectations they have for Jesus. Jesus and His disciples are walking through a grain field on

the Sabbath, and they pick some grain and eat it, which violates these peoples' expectations of how the Sabbath laws ought to be observed: there was to be no harvesting on the Sabbath, so how could this be the Messiah? Jesus casts a demon out of a man, and they claim that Jesus is casting out demons using demonic power. They've been watching Him perform miracle after miracle, and yet they insist on one more sign for proof; they want what they want, not what they're given. Even Jesus' mother and brothers seem uncomfortable with His ministry, and they come to speak to Him and perhaps rein Him in a bit.

We have our definitions of what this kingdom should look like, Jesus, and you're not fulfilling it. Dance to our tune, please. You aren't telling people to repent the way we think you should, or maybe you're telling *me* to repent and I don't think I need to. We think your kingdom should be compassionate, and we like that part, but we don't like some of the hard things you're saying about sin and repentance and depending on the grace of God. Or maybe we think those people need to hear about sin and repentance, but we don't think you should be showing them so much compassion. We'll play the tune, and you can dance in time to what we play. That's the kind of kingdom of God that we can accept.

We skipped some of the verses in the middle of chapter 11 that are an interesting part of Jesus' speech. Again, this is coming at a point of transition in Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry, as He is wrapping up His initial stage of teaching and healing and proclamation of the kingdom of God in His home region of Galilee. In the verses we skipped over, we get a retrospective of "the towns in which most of His miracles had been performed." These are the people that had a front row seat to the good news coming straight out of Jesus' mouth, and they saw firsthand the power of the kingdom on display. But they didn't repent. They saw the kingdom come right in front of them, and they said no thanks. And Jesus says that if pagan cities, Gentile cities, non-religious cities full of sinners, cities without their expectations of what the kingdom of God ought to look like, had seen these miracles performed, they would have repented long ago. In spite of being pagans and sinners, they would have been more open to the actual working of God than religious folks with their expectations.

"Wisdom is proved right by her deeds," Jesus said. What matters is what the kingdom of God is actually doing, not what we want it to do. Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." Those who think they know what God ought to do and how God ought to act end up having God hidden from their eyes in the end, while those who are humble and open as though they were children before their Father will have the kingdom revealed to them. It's a shocking sort of thing to say: God is hiding the things of His kingdom from some people and revealing them to others, so what real hope is there for us? It sounds like our inclusion in God's kingdom is entirely up to the whims of God, so how can we truly seek His kingdom if He may just hide it from us?

In a relationship with a friend, or in a relationship with a spouse, if you base your relationship on what you think that other person ought to be, or if the other person tries to shape themselves to fit what you want them to be, it will not be a healthy relationship. It is only as that other person reveals who they really are and you accept them as they really are that true intimacy and relationship can happen. And so it is with the message of Jesus and that action of His kingdom: try to get it to dance to your tune and you won't end up with the kingdom at all, but if you dance to the kingdom's tune, it will be revealed to you.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” Jesus said. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The call is to set aside the yoke of our expectations of what God ought to do, or the yoke of someone else’s expectation of what your religion ought to look like, and instead take on Jesus’ yoke, to bind yourself under His calling and His expectations and His presence, and find that the burdens He places on us are a joy to carry in comparison to the rules and expectations of others. The call is to walk in daily relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and as you know Him, He reveals Himself and His kingdom to you. Take this yoke upon you and find its joy.



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