



Sermon: *Wisdom is Proved Right By Her Actions!* - Pastor Todd Goldschmidt

Sunday 10:15 am – October 30th, 2011 – At Living Hope Lutheran Church

Sermon Text:

Matthew 11:12-19 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear. 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 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, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.”’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.”



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“The proof is in the pudding”—or so it’s said. What does that even mean? I did a little online research on that old expression, and one site said this: “Perhaps it’s a sign of our increasingly fast-paced, short-attention-span society that even our old proverbs are being shortened and clipped down from the original full sayings. Word Detective and other etymology sites point out that the phrase originated as “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” It means that the true value or quality of something can only be judged when it’s put to use. The meaning is often summed up as “results are what count.” According to Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*, the phrase dates back to at least 1615 when Miguel de Cervantes published *Don Quixote*. In this comic novel, the phrase is stated as, “The proof of the pudding is the eating” (<http://ask.yahoo.com/20020903.html>).

That’s essentially how Jesus concluded His sermon, when He told the crowd that came to hear Him preach one day during the early stages of His public ministry in His hometown region of Galilee. He said, “But wisdom is proved right by her actions,” i.e., “The proof is in the pudding.”

Jesus’ frustration with the unbelief of His fellow Jews is evident in our text. The kingdom of God worked powerfully through John the Baptist as well as through Him. Yet most Israelites reacted to their ministries with indifference. John was arrested, imprisoned and ultimately beheaded because He’d publicly condemned King Herod for taking his brother Philip’s wife Herodias as his mistress. In Jesus’ estimation, John was “the Elijah who was to come” predicted by Malachi (the last prophet Jehovah sent to His people Israel until John arrived on the scene over 400 years later to usher in the Messianic age). Jesus had by this time already proven beyond a shadow of a doubt through His mighty miracles, powerful preaching, and compassionate heart that He was the long-awaited, oft-promised Anointed One of God. Yet, as the evangelist John says near the outset of his Gospel: “he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (1:11).

In order to illustrate His countrymen’s stubborn unbelief, Jesus likened them to children who refuse to play any game in the marketplace, whether they’re invited to mourn or to dance. It was customary in Jesus’ day—as it still is today in southern Europe, Turkey, & Near Eastern lands—for children to play games together in the public marketplaces, often situated in the city’s center. When a wedding procession with its joyful music and dancing passed through the town square, the children would play at “wedding.” At the same time, when a mournful funeral procession wound its way to the gravesite, the games of the children echoed its solemnity. Such emulations are natural for children. Only truly obnoxious ones would refuse to join in such communal acts.



You and I can be just as stubborn and hard-hearted as the people of Jesus' day, whom He likened to such contrary brats. How do we respond when someone points out our sins? Do we blurt out a quick "I'm sorry," just to get the person off our back? Do we make excuses for our actions or rationalize our bad behavior —blaming others or our circumstances for our sins instead of honestly "owning" them like we know we should deep down inside? Or are we apt to get angry with our accuser—like Herod did with John the Baptist—because we know we're busted and our sinful flesh doesn't want to let go of the vice, addiction or sin it craves so terribly much? All too often, we're those who refuse to mourn repentantly when the funeral dirge of God's law is sung.

The situation in the medieval church of the 1500s was much the same as in Jesus' day. Rather than acknowledging man's total spiritual depravity before God and its consequent need for a Savior from sin and death, the church was offering a save-yourself-for-cash scheme: indulgences. Indulgences were slips of paper authorized by the pope in Rome guarantying that those who purchased them could buy time off for themselves or for their deceased loved ones in Purgatory. Purgatory was a place where the souls of the dearly departed supposedly went in order to make up for their lack of good works in this life. There they suffered the temporal punishment still due their sins before entering heaven. No one, save God (and the Church apparently), knew how long that suffering would last. So into the nether regions of the Holy Roman Empire Pope Leo X's indulgence peddlers went. One of them, John Tetzel, was an extremely successful indulgence salesman. But he chose the wrong town to set up shop—Jueterbock, a village about 20 miles from Luther's Wittenberg and just across the Saxon border.

When Luther discovered that many of his parishioners from St. Mary's Church (where he served as pastor at the time in addition to teaching theology at Wittenberg University) were traveling to Tetzel to buy indulgences, he was furious! Some of those simple souls even believed that the indulgence forgave the eternal guilt and punishment of sin. "So what if we sin," they thought. "All we need to do is buy an indulgence and all will be well." Luther preached a powerful sermon, condemning Tetzel and the false sense of security he was selling, but to little avail. Only after Tetzel left the area did the interest in indulgences die down. But Luther wasn't done. In the custom of the day, he brought these matters to the attention of church officials but inviting his fellow professors to a public debate. He wrote his thoughts in a document we know as his *Ninety-Five Theses*, had it printed & nailed it to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church on Oct. 31, 1517.



Luther also wrote to letters: one to Archbishop Albert of Mainz and the other to Bishop Schulze of Brandenburg, urging them to put a stop to Tetzels activities. He included a copy of his *Ninety-Five Theses*, in which he objected to using indulgence money to finance the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome and to the Pope's claim that he had power over the souls in purgatory. The *Theses* also argued that religion was a personal matter between God and man and that the Gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ was of paramount importance. But alas, the medieval church responded to Luther's efforts in much the same way that the people of Israel responded to the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus: with outright rejection. In fact, Pope Leo X signed a document that officially declared Martin Luther a "heretic" for no longer believing and teaching as the church did. He further ordered that Martin be arrested and held prisoner indefinitely.

We know the rest of the story: Luther's reformation of the church spread throughout Europe, and eventually the rest of the world. The hallmarks of his preaching—sin & grace, law & gospel—are still preached and taught in churches like ours to this day. So, too, are his three *solas*: *sola gratia* - that we are saved from sin, death and hell purely by God's grace; *sola fidei* - that forgiveness and salvation become ours the instant the Holy Spirit calls us to faith in Jesus as our personal Savior; *sola Scriptura* - that this saving message is found in sacred Scripture alone.

We can be like children who refuse to dance the wedding tune when the flute of God's gospel is played for us, falling prey to the belief that the good news of God's forgiving love is too simple to be true. We must have to do *something* to contribute to our salvation. But hearken back in church history, and you'll hear this happy tune of full and free forgiveness playing throughout the ministry of Jesus. He came in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "anointed" by "the LORD . . . to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners . . . to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (61:1-3a). Those are works He alone did—in concert with the Father and the Spirit—to reconcile us to God!



This beautiful gospel of Christ was Martin Luther, a humble German monk's, greatest discovery! One day in 1514 he had what has become known as his "turmerlebnis" or "tower experience." Luther was studying Romans in his private office, a room on the 2nd floor of a tower attached to the monastery. While working through chapter 1, he came to this passage: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . . For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" Here Luther finally found the answer to the question that had tortured him for so long: "How can I be sure that God has forgiven my sin and that He loves me?" He sang out joyfully: "I am holy in God's sight because I know and believe that Jesus is holy for me and has taken my punishment!" From that time on, the great Reformer sang the funeral dirge of the law and the wedding tune of the gospel loud and clear!

Brothers and sisters, "From the day of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men take hold of it." You and I are among those the all-powerful Holy Spirit has swept up in the net of the gospel; the "good fish" who've been gathered by faith in Christ into His glorious kingdom of grace! We are sons and daughters of the King, royal priests of the New Covenant, heirs of the Reformation and co-heirs with Christ of the glorious kingdom of heaven! Yes, "the proof is in the pudding"—"Wisdom is proved right by her actions." As those who have been saved by grace alone through faith alone, God wants us to deeply mourn our sin and guilt. But above all else, He wants us to dance the wedding dance of utter joy in knowing that our sin and guilt has been finally & forever removed by His Son Jesus! He wants us to warmly, yet boldly invite those who don't yet know that truth, "Care to dance?"