

GREATER LIGHT – GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY

(Matthew 11:21-22)

There was a cluster of cities in which Jesus did MOST of His mighty miracles. However, they did not repent! Christ responded by pronouncing JUDGMENT upon them!

Matthew 11:21 (NKJV)

21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

In context, Jesus singles out 3 cities in particular for condemning rebuke. Those cities are Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum – all of which were located in the vicinity of the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, which is where MOST of Christ’s miracles were performed.

“Woe” is an announcement of coming judgment and doom.

These verses remind us that the Gospel accounts are selective and not exhaustive. Chorazin is mentioned only twice in the Bible – here in Matthew 11:21 and also in Luke 10:13. And there is no gospel record of any miracles happening there. Bethsaida only has a record of two (cf. Mk. 6:45; 8:22; Lk. 9:10). This shows us that although Jesus’ healing ministry was extensive, the record is merely selective.

John 21:25 (NKJV)

25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

Of course, John is here using hyperbole to make his point, but the fact is the gospels are merely selective in what they address. They present all the evidence that we need, but it is not the complete record.

Jesus holds these cities in which MOST of His miracles were done MOST accountable because of the amount of light they were given.

Jesus acts as if He is God here in that He claims to know both all things actual and all things possible, which only God can know. This is omniscience (knowing all things), which is an attribute that belongs only to God. This once again serves as an indicator that Jesus is in fact God - knowing what only God can ultimately know.

He claims here to know that if Tyre and Sidon had been privileged to have this amount of evidence, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. They would have responded sooner, and they would have responded with repentance.

Tyre and Sidon were prominent coastal sister cities on the Mediterranean in the region of Phoenicia in the OT. They were pagan/idolatrous cities often denounced by the prophets, especially for their worship of Baal (cf. Isa. 23; Ezek. 26-28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9-10; Zech. 9:2-4). Jezebel was from Sidon.

The wearing of sackcloth and ashes was a common Eastern way of demonstrating grief and brokenness – in this case, repentance. Sackcloth was rough fabric commonly made from short hairs of camels and worn next to the skin. Thus sackcloth was very uncomfortable and was worn to express inward pain (cf. 2 Sam. 3:31; 1 Kg. 21:27; 2 Kg. 6:30; Joel 1:8; Jon. 3:5-8).

Matthew 11:22 (NKJV)

22 But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

As wicked, as pagan, as idolatrous as Tyre and Sidon were, yet in the eyes of God their sin was less offensive than that of Chorazin and Bethsaida. As offensive as gross sin is, there is nothing more offensive than the rejection of God's Son – the Lord Jesus Christ. This is at the top of the list.

Condemnation is ultimately for not believing in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the first and foremost reason why people go to hell.

1 John 5:10 (NKJV)

10 He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.

And the more light a person has concerning the person of the Lord Jesus Christ the more accountable they are. And that is the great issue here. These people had first-hand LIGHT on an unparalleled level. They saw the power of God on display first-hand in and through the person of Christ. That is a lot for which to account.

Luke 12:48 (NKJV)

48 But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is

given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

The greater the light given, the greater the level of accountability. And truly the light shining through the ministry of John and then followed by the person of Christ was very GREAT indeed. There was no excuse! In context, most commentators agree that the “woe” of Christ signifies a coming physical judgment. Today, when tour guides take you to the suggested sites of these cities, all you find are ruins.

But beyond the coming physical judgment, the text looks forward to a future coming “day of judgment” when the condemnation of these Jewish cities will suffer a worse fate than that of the wicked pagan Gentiles. This is clearly evident because in verse 24 the judgment of Sodom “is still looked upon as being future,” when in fact Sodom had been wiped off the map thousands of years earlier (Toussaint). This looks forward to the final unbeliever’s judgment before the great white throne of God spoken of in Rev. 20:11-15 (cf. Mt. 10:15; 12:36).

We note a couple of other things here. First, God does not owe anyone anything. He does not owe anyone a certain amount of revelation; otherwise there would be injustice in the withholding of it, but there is not. Second, there are degrees of eternal punishment corresponding to the opportunities given. The greater the opportunity – the greater the judgment for not responding (cf. Mt. 12:41; 23:13; Lk. 12:47-48). “God measures sin by the light a person, a city, or a nation has been given.” (John Phillips)

“There will be degrees of punishment in hell, just as there will be degrees of reward in heaven (1 Cor. 3:12-15). The single sin that consigns men to hell is refusal to submit to Jesus Christ (John 3:36). But the depth of suffering in hell is conditional on the privileges spurned and the sins indulged.” –

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