

## Denunciation

**Matthew 11:20 (2016 ESV) — 20** Then He began to denounce the cities where most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

The word *denounce* means to find fault with something in a harsh and demeaning manner. It means to reproach, to rebuke, to mock, to hurl insults upon, to revile, to find fault in a public, shaming, demeaning way. That doesn't fit the common idea of who Jesus was. It's not a word we like to think of anyone using about *us*. It's certainly not what we would want to hear from the mouth of the Lord.

The fact that the Lord Jesus *denounces* these three cities – Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum – must have been shocking at the time. He spent more of His earthly ministry there than anywhere else. “Most of His mighty works had been done” in these cities.

At various points Jesus traveled throughout Israel, from Jerusalem in the south to Mount Herman in the north, and from the coastal areas to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River. He spent far more time in Galilee than in Judea, but He spent most of His time on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in the 30 or 40 square miles marked out by these three villages, than elsewhere in Galilee.

Jesus has the reputation of being an itinerant, traveling teacher, but He didn't travel nearly as often as we might think He did. “Most of His mighty works had been done” in these cities.

**More eyewitnesses** to the power of Jesus could be found there than anywhere else. **More ears** had heard His teachings. **More bodies** had been healed. **More demons** had been cast

out. **More people** had been raised from the dead.

They had **seen** the most. They had **experienced** the most. They had **witnessed** the most. But, “they did not repent.” His words fell on spiritually deaf and dead ears. Their minds were unconvinced. Their hearts were unchanged.

**TRANSITION:** Their refusal to repent is a deadly serious issue. Eternity hinges on what we do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Repent and believe, and be saved. Refuse to repent, continue in sin and unbelief, and remain condemned.

## A Cry Of Grief And Horror

**Matthew 11:21–22 (2016 ESV) — 21** “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, *they* would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. **22** But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.”

The word “woe” is an onomatopoeic word. That means it sounds like what it is. We use them ourselves when we say *bang*, or *pop*, or *swish*, or *splat*. The Greek word is *ouai*, and it sounds like what it describes – a howl of grief and horror. It is a wail, a moan.

“Woe to you” doesn’t mean “down with you” or “curses on you.” It means “One day Chorazin, one day Bethsaida, you will howl in grief, and cry in horror at the judgment of God against you.”

“If the mighty works done in” Chorazin and Bethsaida had been done in Tyre and Sidon, “they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes,” in genuine, heartfelt, true repentance. They would not have made some half-hearted, superficial efforts at looking

sad. They would have fallen to their faces, crushed by their guilt, terrified of the judgment to come, crying out for mercy to the merciful God.

Now, what an incredible blessing it was that the Son of God was sent to the house of Israel! What a blessing that His power was meant for them, His truth was meant for them, His kindness was given to them, His striving was for their good.

But what a terrible shock that those who saw the greatest concentration of Jesus' power and kindness and mercy and good will were so utterly cold and unmoved by Him! They didn't love Him; if they had, they would have obeyed Him.

The truth is that they used Him as a ready source of miracles, but refused to *listen* to Him and *trust* Him so as to be saved. They called on Him for healings, for exorcisms, for resurrections, for cleansings, and received those things. But they never called upon the name of the Lord, even though "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13).

Jesus says that Tyre and Sidon, those ungodly, rich, oppressive coastal cities, will have an easier time of it in the judgment than Chorazin and Bethsaida. Sidon was an ancient city, indeed. It was named for Noah's great-grandson, Sidon, the son of Canaan. It was the first home of the Phoenicians. It was part of the territory assigned to Asher, but they never conquered it, and Sidon continued to oppress Israel even through the time of the judges. It was eventually overshadowed by Tyre, which, during the time of David, became the most important city on the Mediterranean. Tyre became very wealthy through sea trade, primarily in cedar wood – as in the cedars of Lebanon – and purple dye, created from shellfish. Both Tyre and Sidon were pagan cities, famous for Ba'al worship and wickedness.

And those two ungodly, wicked, pagan cities will have an easier time on judgment day

than Chorazin and Bethsaida. Why? Because while *they* were shrouded in spiritual darkness, Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum were home to the Light of the World!

If Jesus had gone back to Tyre and Sidon during their heyday, and performed the miracles He performed in Galilee, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes, just as Babylon did when Jonah strode through her streets. But the pride and self-assurance of Chorazin and Bethsaida blinded them to their own spiritual state. “Aren’t we blessed? Aren’t we wonderful? Aren’t we important? Jesus is in our villages all the time!”

TRANSITION: Jesus isn’t done yet, though. The village of Capernaum was Jesus’ adopted hometown.

## Will You Be Exalted?

**Matthew 11:23–24 (2016 ESV) — 23** “And you, Capernaum, will *you* be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. **24** But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Jesus speaks sarcastically here: “And you, Capernaum – will YOU be exalted to heaven?” That’s what they thought.

Jesus was the resident celebrity of Capernaum. People came from all over to seek Him out. The village was known as His hometown. Everyone knew who He was. Crowds frequently moved through the streets, following Him, or looking for Him. If *those* times were like *our* times, it’s possible that a tourist industry of sorts popped up over time, providing food, shelter, perhaps clothing and other goods as well, all the things people need when they travel.

Whatever light shone in Chorazin and Bethsaida, it was greatly multiplied in Capernaum, but it didn't relieve their blindness one degree. They thought Jesus lived among them because they were so special to God. Jesus' power was probably poured out in Capernaum far more than any other single place. If the Son of God would live among them and do such things, then obviously, they were destined to be exalted to heaven!

And yet, because of their own unbelief and unrepentant hearts, Capernaum as a whole would "be brought down to Hades."

Jesus says that if Sodom had seen His miracles, it would not have been destroyed by the judgment of God. Those twisted, sick, perverted people would have repented and received mercy. And Jesus makes a stunning statement: On the day of judgment, the people of Sodom will have an easier time than the people of Capernaum.

Do you understand the comparison? It's as though Jesus had said that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Nazi Germany than for Norfolk; on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the people of San Francisco than the people of Creighton.

"Will YOU be exalted?" He asks. "No," He answers, you will be brought down to Hades."

**TRANSITION:** Why? For the same reason as with Chorazin and Bethsaida: because they did not repent.

## **They Did Not Repent**

I want to emphasize something here.

Matthew does not write, “they did not *believe*.” He says “they did not *repent*.”

They certainly believed certain things about Jesus. They believed that He had the power to heal any sickness and disease. He had the power to cast out any demon. He had the power to raise anyone who is dead. He had the power to feed thousands of people from a handful of food. They believed many things about Jesus. They believed they deserved His blessing and His miracles. They thought that His blessings and miracles were signs of their good character. Those mighty works were actually signs of His good character, especially since the people of these villages deserved not a single good thing, period.

What they didn't believe was that they needed Him as a Savior. They didn't believe they needed His forgiveness. They didn't believe they needed His mercy. And so, they did not repent, because they didn't think they needed to repent. They *saw* more of Jesus' mighty works than anyone else, but they were no more likely to repent than anyone else.

We might think, “Then Jesus should have gone in heavy-handed, swinging hard, demanding that they repent.” Remember that His foundational message was always “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” He talked about repentance all the time.

But remember, too, that “God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Romans 2:4). When God is kind to us, it is not a reward for our good and holy works! It is a gracious, kind, tender, patient invitation for us to realize that we are nothing like Him, and deserve nothing from Him. Every time Jesus healed a leper, it was an invitation to call on Him to cleanse spiritual leprosy. Every time Jesus gave sight to the blind, it was a reminder that He can give sight to the spiritually blind as well. Every time Jesus cast out a demon, it was a reminder that He can cleanse us of our evil. Every time Jesus raised the dead, it was a promise that He can take away our judgment and give us eternal life.

The people of Capernaum apparently never stopped to think, “Wait – no, we aren’t good people at all, are we? We are sinners, full of wickedness, prone to sin. These miraculous blessings aren’t a reward for *our* good character, they are evidence of *God’s* good character in spite of our sin! He is loving and kind; but He is also holy and just, isn’t He? These miracles are being given to us to show us what kind of a Savior our God will be if we repent and trust Him; if we refuse to repent, we will continue to be under His judgment.”

## BRINGING IT HOME

People today will often say that they would believe if only *they* could see and experience what *those* people saw and experienced in Jesus’ time. The people of that time had an advantage that we don’t have: they could actually see Jesus in person.

What if we today could go back and see Jesus in action on the couple of days described in Matthew 8-9? In just a couple of days Jesus healed a leper, healed a paralyzed man, healed Peter’s mother-in-law, healed many of all sorts of diseases, calmed a storm, cast out demons, forgave and healed another paralyzed man, healed a woman of a terrible affliction, raised a little girl from the dead, healed two blind men, and restored speech to a mute man.

A skeptic might say, “Well, if I saw that, of course I would believe.”

But the people who DID see those things didn’t repent and believe the Gospel.

Jesus once told a parable about a man who died, and found himself suffering while awaiting judgment. The man said to Abraham, “Please, send someone to my brothers to warn them!” Abraham said, “They have Moses and the Prophets – the Word of God.” The man said, “But if someone rose from the dead, they would believe him.” And Abraham

said, “Well, actually, no they wouldn’t. If they are not convinced by the Scriptures, even a miracle won’t convince them.”

The Christian life is a life of repentance.

What should we do with this truth? We should repent. What if we have been blessed greatly by God? We should repent. What if we have suffered in life? We should repent. It’s actually very simple: *all* of us should repent of our sins and rebellion. In fact, the Bible commands us to repent, and believe the Gospel.

My prayer is that you would come to Jesus Christ in humility and confession, calling on Him for salvation, for mercy, for forgiveness, for eternal life.