

The Times they are A'Changing

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 August 2024

Preacher: Joe Hall

- [0 : 0 0] Come, gather round, people, wherever you roam, and admit that the waters around you have grown, and accept it, that soon you'll be drenched to the bone.
- If your time to you is worth saving, then you'd better start swimming, or you'll sink like a stone, for the times, they are a-changing.
- That songwriter Bob Dylan wrote and sang those words in the 60s as an anthem of change. Time is moving on, and you'd better keep up.
- When it comes to your place in history, it's sink or swim. In a much bigger sense, that's the message of our passage tonight, and in some ways, it's the message of the whole gospel.
- The 60s were a time of great change. 60 years on, we live in a time of immense change, but it's nothing compared to the change that Jesus came to announce 2,000 years ago.
- [1 : 0 9] The waters are rising, and it's sink or swim. The times, they are a-changing. So, what's changed?
- We're picking up tonight a new section of Matthew that runs from chapter 11 through to the end of chapter 13, which brings us into a new phase of the war.
- God's kingdom is advancing through the words and works of the Messiah, and now through the words and works of his people, the Twelve. But in war, as in ministry, when God's kingdom pushes forwards, the kingdoms of this world push back.
- Jesus knows that. He says there in verse 12 of our passage, from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, or advancing violently.
- It could be either, both the true and violent people have been raiding it. Violence. Over the last few weeks, we've heard Jesus prepare his followers to face persecution and conflict.
- [2 : 2 3] God's kingdom isn't welcome here. Which might leave us, as it left John the Baptist, wondering as we follow Jesus. Verse 3, Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?
- If you are God's king, right, why am I in prison? Verse 2. If God's kingdom has come, why doesn't it seem to be winning?
- Remember what John preached back in chapter 3. If the gospel, as he looked forward to the one greater than him who was coming, what did he say? His winnowing fork is in his hand. And he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn, and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.
- Jesus seems to have left his winnowing fork at home. I can't see a barn where his people are safely kept. I can't smell the burning of an unquenchable fire.
- Most days, it's hard to see much difference, isn't it? Life seems to tick on like normal. Which might wake us wonder then, is he the one?
- [3 : 3 8] Or should we be looking for someone else? This is relevant, a question for us today, as it was for Jesus' followers back then. We've staked our lives on God's kingdom.

How can we tell it really is coming? Well, thankfully, it's the question that the next three chapters of Matthew's gospel are here to help us with.

So let's hear Jesus' answer tonight and begin to see why it's not obvious to everyone that his kingdom is indeed here. Firstly, then, say what you see, rounds one and two.

Both rounds help us to see God's kingdom coming, but from two different angles. So round one, here we go. God's kingdom is here. And I'm slightly showing my age now, because if you don't get the reference, it's because it comes from a 90s game show called Catchphrase.

This was Saturday night viewing in my house. Doesn't look like it was in many of yours. So basically, some contestants had to work out from a picture what well-known phrase or catchphrase it was there to illustrate.

[4 : 50] And I was going to say it was better than it sounds, but actually, when I thought about it, I'm not sure it was. And as the contestants struggled to work out what was going on in these pictures, the host would say, rather unhelpfully, say what you see.

Say what you see. Now, if it was that simple, it wouldn't be a game show, right? They did say what they see, and they got it wrong. And yet, when they did see it, you would sit at home and say, of course.

How did I miss that? In the moment, the message was hard to see, but once it was pointed out, it was impossible to miss. It turned out in the end that it really was as simple as, say what you see.

That captures, I think, what's going on in verses 2 to 15 of our passage. John the Baptist is in prison, staring at a picture that he can't work out.

Jesus is not doing the things that he thought the Messiah would or should do. He's not judging sin and punishing sinners and separating them from the saints.

[6 : 00] Right? There's no fork, no barn, no fire. So when he heard about the deeds of the Messiah, what Jesus was doing, he sent disciples to ask him, are you the one who's to come, or should we expect someone else?

Listen to Jesus' reply. Jesus simply says, verse 4, go back and report to John what you hear and see. Forget for a minute what you don't see and what you want to see, and very simply say what you do see.

Now, if this was a Bible study and not a sermon, I'd say flick back to the start of chapter 8 and say what you see. You could do that later on at home, but the list we come up with is pretty much verse 5.

Say what you see. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the good news is proclaimed to the poor. We're not just being told those things have happened.

We've seen those things happen in the gospel. And Jesus is very simply saying, say what you see. Say what you see.

[7 : 16] Put it together. Do the math. What do you get? Isaiah 35 says, when God comes to rescue his people, then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue sing for joy. Isaiah 61 says, we'll know the time that God's grace is here when the one filled with his spirit comes to proclaim good news to the poor.

These are signs of God's coming kingdom. Matthew has shown it's all happening in the life of Jesus and then some. But John needed someone to point it out.

Now that doesn't mean that the evidence wasn't there to see. It just means he wasn't seeing it. Because in the end, it really was as simple as, say what you see.

Part of the beauty, isn't it, of reading or going through your gospel like we're doing is getting to see the real Jesus.

[8 : 27] Now that's so important if it's all brand new to you. Lots of people who read a gospel for the first time find the real Jesus to be so much more than the Jesus that they've picked up through pop culture or heard bits about at school or imagined in their heads.

And suddenly someone who they've written off as can't be the Messiah now could be the Messiah and then must be the Messiah.

And not because somebody's given them loads of clever arguments or worked hard to convince them, but simply because they come to you, say what they see. So if you want to know the real Jesus, this is where to start watching him in action, seeing him live in the gospels.

Perhaps you're here tonight and you've never done that. I hope there's somebody sitting next to you who can help you point out along the way what there is to see. Or keep coming back for our series in Matthew.

That's all I'm here to do is point out what's here. One more thing says Jesus, verse 6, Blessed is anyone who doesn't stumble on account of me.

[9 : 42] Just because you expected something different, don't trip up on the real thing when you see it. And if we're already following Jesus, that's still so important, isn't it?

The whole Bible is about Jesus. But he is nowhere more close up and personal than in the gospels. And we all need that, don't we?

Regularly and often. Our own idea of Jesus as Christians can fade, can't it, or drift into something that becomes unrecognizable from the real Jesus.

Because he doesn't do what we want him to do. And he doesn't say what we think he should say. And so our hearts drift, don't they, into seeing him as a harsh tyrant or a distant dad or a difficult boss instead of our good and loving king from God.

We need to see him again for who he truly is. Here we do that, don't we? Say what you see. God's kingdom is here.

[10 : 49] Now we have time for round two. Jesus says, say what you see. Times are changing. Times are changing.

See how the seeing theme carries on in verse seven, Luke. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? Verse eight, what did you go out to see? Verse nine, what did you go out to see?

Couldn't be more obvious, could it? What is he asking us to do? Now in one sense, he's telling the crowd about John the Baptist, but really he's holding John up as a mirror in which he's inviting the crowd to see his own reflection.

All right, so let's just see that together. He gives us four comparisons between himself and John. See them with me. Number one, John is the messenger to prepare the way, verse 10.

And that's a quote from Malachi three, where the one who's being prepared for is the Lord himself. So John is the herald who goes before the Lord Jesus.

[11 : 58] All right, number two, John was the greatest until now, verse 11. It's an incredible honor Jesus gives him, isn't it? Among those born of women, there is not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.

Yet, whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. So John stands at the very top of the first flight of stairs, but whoever follows Jesus from now on, he says, starts on the first step of the second flight of stairs.

John was the greatest until Jesus came as the one true king. Mirror number three, John was the last prophet of the old order, verses 12 and 13.

All the prophets and the law prophesied until John, but from the days of John until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence or coming violently, and people have been raiding it.

So John stood at the end of that long line of faithful prophets pointing to what Jesus would do as king. Now, King Jesus has come.

[13 : 15] The kingdom is pushing forwards, even though the world is pushing back. So up to John was kingdom promise with Jesus, his kingdom reality.

And number four, again, pointing to the end of Malachi, verse 14, where God says, he'll send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

Jesus says, if you can believe it, John is Elijah 2.0, who God promised to send ahead of himself. So John is the prophet who goes before the coming of the Lord, God himself, Jesus Christ.

So say what you see, says Jesus. If you went into the wilderness to see the last and the greatest prophet, what does that make me? John was the end of the old.

I am the beginning of the new. John promised the kingdom. I am bringing a kingdom. John was a prophet. I am the Lord.

[14 : 26] The times are changing, says Jesus. Most of us won't have experienced a big regime change or an overhaul. Perhaps the closest kind of recent examples in the news were the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

Maybe we think of the kind of the stretch of the law of mainland China into Hong Kong. Or I guess if you've left those places and moved to another country, that's a kind of regime change, isn't it?

Suddenly the rules of everyday life change. There's a new order that you have to bow to or resist. The change that Jesus is announcing is like that.

John was the ambassador sent from the kingdom of heaven to speak for the king. Jesus is the king from heaven. Come to bring his good and loving rule on earth.

So look into the mirror of John and say what you see. Times have changed, says Jesus. There's a new kingdom over you.

[15 : 33] All people must now bow or resist. The real Jesus is king. He is Lord. He is God. Do you see yet?

Do you see? Jesus is the best guy to himself, isn't he? Aren't you glad he's the one showing us how his kingdom comes? But we need it pointed out to us, don't we?

Especially when it comes to Old Testament stuff, right? It's all there to be seen, isn't it? But it's not all on the surface. Times have changed.

God's kingdom is here. So why don't we see? Or why don't some people see? Or thirdly, our survey says not what we're looking for.

Okay, this goes back a little bit further to another game show. See how our Saturdays were spent. Family fortunes. Okay, similar idea to catchphrase, but this time the contestants had to guess not the closest answer, but the most popular answer to a set of questions.

[16 : 48] Right, so they would guess an answer to the question and the host would say, our survey says, and up would come a list of answers given earlier by the audience ranked top to bottom, again, not in order of accuracy, but in order of popularity.

And the more popular the contestants' answers were, the higher they ranked on the table and the more points they got. Well, says Jesus, I've done a survey of this generation.

One question, is God's kingdom here? But the right answer to the question isn't the most popular answer.

So you won't get points for guessing the right answer on this one, he says, because our survey says Jesus isn't what we're looking for. Now, you might be wondering how that's different from John's doubts in verse three.

He's not sure himself, is he, if Jesus is who he's really looking for. The difference is, I think John is asking genuinely and really wants to know the answer.

[17 : 56] Is Jesus the real king or is it someone else? But Jesus says, this generation isn't asking the question because they've already made up their minds.

And so no amount of seeing is going to persuade them they're wrong because the real Jesus simply isn't what they want. To what can I compare this generation, he says?

They're like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others, we played the pipe for you and you didn't dance. We sang a dirge and you didn't horn. We would say, wouldn't they, they want John and Jesus to dance to their tune.

And when they don't, they're like children throwing the toys out of the pram because the king and the prophet won't play by their rules. And they're silly rules, aren't they?

Rules like what you eat and drink. Right? Just see how silly their expectations and wants are from Jesus. John came neither eating nor drinking and they say he has a demon.

[19 : 03] The son of man came eating and drinking and they say here's a glutton and a drunkard. Perhaps you've been in a situation like that where you realize that whatever you do it's wrong.

Have you ever experienced that? Right? I turned that bit of work in quickly and they wanted me to do more on it. I spent more time on it and they wanted it sooner. It's frustrating, isn't it?

It's maddening. But, when you see it, it's actually liberating, isn't it? Because then at least you know that the problem isn't you, it's them.

their expectations, their desires are unreasonable, unrealistic. The people of his day are like that, says Jesus. John hardly ate and drank anything and they said there's something wrong with him.

I ate and drank normally and they said I was a reprobate. You can't get it right with them. And what a silly set of rules to have to follow anyway. See, the truth is they weren't interested in the truth.

[20 : 07] Do you see that? Whatever there was to see, if Jesus didn't do what they wanted him to do, then he couldn't be their king and they didn't want him. Dig down in our generation and we find, I think, much the same thing.

How many people have you ever met who don't follow Jesus but are really genuinely interested in whether or not he's the Messiah? Most people we meet have never given a moment's serious thoughts in their lives but if you were to bring it up, they would tell you just what they think of Jesus and exactly why they're not a Christian and we'll wonder how they could even be convinced of their own position because the Jesus they're talking about is not the real Jesus of Scripture.

It's a half Jesus or a twisted Jesus. I have known people who've been genuinely interested in whether Jesus is the Messiah and seen what there is to see and then decided not to follow him but not because that was the right answer because it was the most popular answer.

Brothers and sisters, if you're confused about why God's kingdom doesn't seem to be winning, you need to know it's not because the evidence isn't there to be seen.

it's because many, many people are not interested in what there is to see, only what they want to see and what they don't see.

[21 : 41] Many people are interested only in what Jesus isn't rather than what he is. Understand, disinterest, indifference to Jesus, it's not neutral, it's spiritual resistance and we will meet people who no answer will satisfy.

Some of you will know that from CU events. If you spent hours talking to someone, hours answering their questions and another question comes, hours over a coffee talking to someone and another objection because they simply don't want to know him.

Jesus helps us see how childish that is. It's so freeing to realize lots of people won't get Jesus not because he's unreasonable or illogical but just because they don't want to know it's all there to see but they've got their eyes squeezed tight, shut and their fingers in their ears saying, I'm not listening.

And so brothers and sisters, don't let the survey shake you or cause you to doubt. The most popular answer out there isn't the right answer. You won't score any points for following Jesus but that's okay.

It doesn't matter. Wisdom is proved right by her deeds says Jesus. This generation might act the grown-ups. Their questions might go way over your head but their reaction to Jesus shows them for what they really are unwise, childish.

[23 : 17] selfish. If you're here tonight and you're not yet following Jesus, please don't make that mistake. Don't judge him on what he isn't or what you want him to be.

Judge him on what he is. Ask genuine questions. Let him tell you about himself. Don't settle for the popular answer especially if you haven't yet taken the time to find the right answer.

And when you do come to the right answer, say what you see, confess it openly and publicly, bow to him as Lord and as King. Finally then, we've seen and we've seen why some don't see.

Lastly, Jesus tells us then what's at stake, what they refuse to see, the signs of the times. Verse 20, then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed because they did not repent.

Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum had the greatest weight of evidence yet didn't bow to him as Lord and so we find they are first in line for his judgment.

[24 : 33] That's an important point that we don't often touch on. God is perfectly just. God is those who don't bow to Jesus as Lord, they always get a guilty verdict, but those with the most to go on are held to a higher standard than those with very little to go on.

People sometimes ask, don't they, what about people who've never heard of Jesus? Well, here's part of the answer. It will be more bearable for them on the day of judgment than those who have heard of Jesus and not turned to him.

If you ask that question, trying to find unfairness in God, you should be more concerned for yourself than you are for unreached people because in doing so you're rejecting the evidence that other people don't even have.

And Jesus says, that's worse. Even among the three towns there's a sliding scale. If Tyre and Sidon had had the evidence that Chorazin and Beth Sider had had, they would have repented long ago.

If Sodom had had the evidence that Capernaum had had, which was Jesus' base of operations, it would still be here, he says. But as it is, you got the signs and wonders and so, verse 22, I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.

[26 : 00] And let this sink in. I think this is sobering to hear from Jesus, isn't it? Verse 24, I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

That turns our whole scoring system on its head, doesn't it? Who is most guilty before God? Jesus says it's not those who commit what we think of as the worst sins, but those who had the most opportunity to turn to Jesus and didn't.

That is the greatest sin of all, he says. Think about it, there are people who have been sitting in churches their whole lives, who Jesus says are more guilty now than those who have never sat in church in their life.

Capernaum was a good Jewish town, Sodom is a proverbially bad pagan city, but better on the day of judgment to be from Sodom in the time of Genesis than from Capernaum in the time of Jesus.

Because the miracles that Jesus did in Capernaum were signs of the times. They were warning signs that times are changing, God's kingdom is here, a new regime is in place and judgment is coming.

[27 : 25] Not as soon as John the Baptist thought, but Jesus is not thrown away as winnowing fork, it's just leaning against the wall. The barn is being built, the fire is being lit.

What Jesus began in his first coming, he will finish in his second coming. It's what so many of his parables in chapter 13 are about. And Jesus says plainly here that a day of judgment is coming, and his miracles should have convinced those who saw them that that was true.

Understand the message of his miracles, was turn now while there's still time. If God has been patient enough to push back the day of judgment, don't say, great, a few more years of living life without God before I have to worry about it.

Both Jesus and John preached the kingdom of heaven has come near, so repent and believe in the gospel, turn and trust in him.

Ignoring the signs is not a neutral act. Jesus says it is the worst kind of rebellion and it will be punished. Sometimes perhaps you've heard people talk about signs of the times.

[28 : 42] Well, understand that the times have already changed. They changed 2,000 years ago. Jesus' ministry in the gospels is the clearest sign that the kingdom is really here.

Paul in Acts chapter 17 says, God confirmed there would be a day of judgment when he raised the judge from the dead. Friends, that happened a long time ago. See the signs.

So see it and say it. Bow to him as king. Confess him as Lord. It's all there for us to see, isn't it? It's all laid out so clearly. The stakes are far too high, aren't they, for us to squeeze our eyes shut or shrug and say, I've still got time.

Don't need to worry about that. I'll put that off. Look at it. See the signs. Read a gospel. Talk to someone about it. Turn to him now and be spared his judgment forever.

We'll hear more in the coming weeks about how we recognize God's kingdom coming. But now let's turn our hearts to him and trust in him as we pray together.

[29 : 54] Let's pray. Let's pray.