**KINGDOM STUDENTS**

**AND SPIRITUAL TRUTH**

**(Matthew 11:7-15)**

 I heard a story about three friends who decided to go deer hunting together. One was a lawyer, the second a doctor, and the third a preacher. As they were walking on the edge of the woods, all three spotted a big buck up ahead. All three raised their rifles, took dead aim, and all three of them pulled their triggers simultaneously. Immediately, without even taking a step, the big ole buck dropped to the ground. When the three reached the fallen buck, they began to argue as to which of them had actually killed the deer. Each one claimed the kill for himself, of course.

 A few minutes later a game warden came by. He saw the men arguing. He knew all three, and he asked them what the problem was. The doctor spoke up explaining the situation. The officer said, “Let me take a look.” He gave the deer a good once over and said confidently, “I can tell you right now: It was the preacher who shot and killed this here deer.”

 The lawyer protested, “How can you be so sure?”

 The warden explained, “It’s easy. The bullet went in one ear and out the other. It had to be the preacher.”

 Through the years, I have been the pastor of five Southern Baptist churches. In every one, I have aimed my sermons to the ears of my members, and I can’t tell you how many times my sermons have entered one ear and gone right out the other. I am quite certain that on some occasions, the message left the second ear with the same velocity that it entered the first one because there was nothing in between the two to slow it down. Of course, that has never happened here.

 Jesus must have had similar experiences because over and over He said, “He who has an ear to hear, let Him hear.”

 God has given us spiritual senses in addition to physical ones. Physically, we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. We can also do those things spiritually. We can hear and see spiritual truth. We can feel the presence of God. We can also come across things that don’t smell right and don’t taste right spiritually.

 The Bible was written over a thousand-year period during which tie most people were illiterate. They would never be able to pick up a copy of the word of God and read it for themselves. It would have to be read to them. They would use their sense of hearing to interact with the Bible. One day they might hear Psalm 34:8 read to them which says, “Taste and see that the LORD is good.”

 We are encouraged to use our senses to know the goodness of God and the truth of His word.

 One thing that separates a Christian and a lost person is that the Christian is able to use his or her spiritual faculties and senses to recognize spiritual truth while the lost person cannot. Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 2:14 when he writes: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

 A few verses earlier, Paul wrote of believers: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.”

 Christians are spiritually equipped to receive and understand spiritual truth.

 Before Jesus arrived on the scene, there was one man sent by God to prepare the people to hear Jesus. Basically, his message was, “The King and His Kingdom are coming. Get ready.” That man was John. We call him John the Baptist because he went around baptizing people signifying they had repented.

 Pastor Kevin Miller told a story to illustrate what John was doing. He said:

 When I was in middle school, whenever the teacher had to leave the room, I’d start running around, wrestling, and throwing Dennis Baker’s gym bag over the hanging light fixtures. We knew full well the teacher didn’t want us doing any of this, but we didn’t care. We always had a sentry. One kid would stand by the door and look down the hall. As soon as he saw the teacher coming, he’d yell, “Teacher’s coming!” When we heard that, we’d all run to our desks and sit there straight and smiling as if we’d been conjugating verbs the whole time.

 When John the Baptist cries out about the kingdom of God, he is yelling: “God’s coming!” Everyone who heard him said, “I don’t want to end up in the office to try to explain all of this to God, so I better get back to what I’m supposed to be doing.”

 Now, unlike the clueless teacher in Miller’s story, Jesus knows exactly what each person in the entire class has been up to, and that’s why John tells them to repent. He is telling them to quit bothering their neighbor, to sit up straight in their chairs, and pay attention because the Teacher is about to enter the classroom.

 When Jesus begins His public ministry, John’s comes to an end. John was to herald the message the King and His Kingdom are coming. When King Jesus arrived, He brought His Kingdom with Him. John had fulfilled the purpose God had for him, and God was ready to bring him home. In chapter 14 of Matthew we will see how God did so.

 Let me just add that God will gladly bring you home when you have fulfilled the purpose for which He has placed you here. That means, if you are still here, God is not through with you yet. He still has something for you to do.

 Two Sundays ago, we saw that Jesus had a discussion with the disciples of John. Those disciples leave, and Jesus the Teacher, begins to instruct His large class about John. As we look at Matthew 11:7-15 we are going to focus on “Kingdom Students and Spiritual Truth.”

1. **THE EYES OF KINGDOM STUDENTS LOOK FOR**

 **SPIRITUAL TRUTH.**

 Three times, Jesus asks his students the same question, “What did you go out to see?” As a matter of emphasis, Jesus offers a couple of incorrect answers. Initially, He says, “When you went out into the desert, were you looking for a reed shaking in the wind?” What did Jesus mean by that expression? The rabbis used that expression to refer to a person who would compromise his message to fit in with whatever the prevailing mood was. Such a person would bend whatever direction the wind of public sentiment was blowing. John wasn’t that kind of person. Had he been, he would not have wound up in Herod’s prison. He was in prison precisely because he said the unpopular thing to Herod’s face.

 Herod’s lover divorced her husband, who happened to be Herod’s half-brother, and Herod divorced his wife, so the two could get married. John said to Herod, “What you did was wrong.” Herod took offense and had John put in jail.

 According to the 1st Century, Jewish historian Josephus, John was put in prison in Machaerus, a fortress which belonged to Herod on the east side of the Dead Sea, and it was there that John was executed.

Some think that Jesus may have been referring to Herod in his remarks because it just so happens on the coins that Herod had minted, there was a reed. Then, in v. 8 Jesus asked, “Did you go out to see a King wearing soft clothes?” That could have been a reference to Herod because Herod had fortress residence out in the desert.

 Finally, in v. 9 Jesus identifies who they went out into the desert to see. They went there to see a prophet. They went looking for someone who could declare the word of God to them and tell it to them straight, without compromise, and who told it without any intention of enriching themselves. That was John.

 The people went to an unexpected place to find the truth. They didn’t go to the centers of learning in Jerusalem, the religious capital. They went to the backside of the desert. They went to an unexpected place to hear from a man you would not expect to be a religious authority. John dressed oddly. He wore camel hair robes. Can you imagine how itchy that would be next to your skin? He had a strange diet. He ate dried locusts that he dipped in wild honey. Smothered in honey would be the only way I could one of those down.

 If we will listen to the Spirit of God, He will direct us to where we can find spiritual truth. It may not be from the sources where we would normally look.

 I happen to believe in education. I went as far as I could go in terms of formal schooling. If someone has the aptitude, I encourage him or her to go as far as he can go. Sometimes God used highly educated men. In the OT there was Moses and Daniel. In the NT there was Paul and Luke. At other times, God uses those who have little formal schooling. Many of Jesus disciples were rough and rugged fishermen who had little formal schooling, but then again, they had Jesus as their personal tutor for over three years.

 The one book that has been translated into more languages than any book other than the Bible was written by a man who didn’t even have the benefit of a high school education. His book was *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. By the way, a new animated version of that book is being released as a motion picture in 700 theaters nationwide in April. I hope it comes to Enid. If it does go. Regardless, get the book and read it. The book is always better.

 Be careful where you look for truth. Sometimes, it is the most educated who are the most dangerous. Don’t believe everything you read. Don’t believe everything you see. Ask God to guide you to reliable sources.

 By the way, don’t take what I say from this pulpit as being necessarily the truth. In Acts 17 Paul preached to a group of believers from Berea. We are told in v. 11 of that chapter that they searched the Scriptures daily to make sure that Paul taught them was so.

 I encourage you to study God’s word to make sure that what I say matches up with what God’s word says.

1. **THE HEART OF KINGDOM STUDENTS ACCEPT SPIRITUAL TRUTH.**

 Jesus had some wonderful thing to say about John. Look at v. 11. Can you think of anyone who was not born of a woman? Jesus was saying that John was the greatest who has ever come along. Now. In the first few verses of Matthew 11, we saw that John was struggling with doubt. That means even the greatest people struggle sometimes. No one is perfect, except Jesus, so don’t be so hard on yourself when you get it wrong from time-to-time.

 Notice v. 13. John could be called the last of the prophets. In our day, the gift of prophecy still exists, but no one is a prophet in the OT sense.

 Look at v. 14. Jesus says, “if you are willing to accept it.” Accepting spiritual truth is not so much a function of the head as it is the heart. It is possible to accept spiritual truth before we truly understand spiritual truth. For instance, I accept the NT doctrine that God is triune. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all while being One. I don’t fully understand that, but I accept it.

 Our culture teaches that you have to know something before you can believe it. Christians maintain that you must believe something before you can truly come to know it.

 St. Anselm, the Bishop of Canterbury in the 11th Century put it this way: “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may under-stand.”

 In other words, you can’t understand your way into believing, but you can believe your way into understanding.

 What does Jesus say we are to accept? We are to accept that John is the Elijah whom the OT prophesied would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. It does not mean he is Elijah come back to life, but rather, he is like Elijah in spirit and power. Look at the last two verses of Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6.

 Some Bible teachers claim that Elijah must come back before Jesus returns. According to Jesus, Elijah did come. He came in the person of John the Baptist.

 Still today, when Jews observe Passover, they leave an empty chair for Elijah. They are still waiting for the Messiah and for Elijah to both come. I believe both already have come. Jesus said He is coming again. He said nothing about Elijah coming again, but He did say Elijah has already come. He came symbolically in the person of John the Baptist. Staying here in Matthew, look at 17:10-13.

 The disciples of Jesus were confused about the coming of Elijah. Jesus sought to clear it up. I would say there are still followers of Jesus who are confused about it. Let me try to clear it up. Elijah has already come. Our job is not to look for Elijah. We are to be looking for Jesus.

 N.T. Wright is a well-known and well-accomplished theologian. He uses the analogy of waking up in the morning to illustrate how some people come to Christ through a dramatic, instant conversion and others come to Christ through a gradual conversion.

 How do you wake up? Some people can hear their alarm and jump out of bed. I’m not one of those persons. It takes me awhile to go from fully asleep to full awake.

 N.T. Wright wrote:

 Waking up offers one of the most basic pictures of what can happen when God takes a hand in someone’s life. There are classic alarm-clock stories, Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, blinded by a sudden light, stunned and speechless, discovered that the God he had worshipped had revealed himself in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. John Wesley found his heart becoming strangely warm and he never looked back. They and a few others are the famous ones, but there are millions more.

 And there are many stories, though they don’t hit the headlines in the same way, of the half-awake and half-asleep variety. Some people take months, years, maybe even decades, during which they aren’t sure whether they’re on the outside of Christian faith looking in, or on the inside looking around to see if it’s real.

 As with ordinary waking up, there are many people who are somewhere in between. But the point is that there’s such a thing as being asleep, and there’s such a thing as being awake. And it’s important to tell the difference, and to be sure you’re awake by the time you have to be up and ready for action, whatever that action may be.

 Have you awakened to the reality of who Jesus is? When we are awakened by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we are awakened to the saving grace of Jesus grace, there is something else to which we are awakened. Our heart is awakened to recognize and embrace truth. When we come to know Jesus, truth matters to us. We will embrace truth and reject error and falsehood.

 So far, we have seen that kingdom students use their eyes to look for spiritual truth. Next, kingdom students use their hearts to accept spiritual truth. The last thing I want to emphasize is . . .

1. **THE EARS OF KINGDOM STUDENTS DISCERN**

 **SPIRITUAL TRUTH.**

 Look at v. 15. The truth of the matter is that not everyone truly has ears to hear. They may have physical ears, but many people lack the ability to hear spiritually. They are deaf to the things of God. They cannot distinguish His voice. They lack the ability to understand what He is saying.

 Some people accuse God of being silent. The truth of the matter is that the problem does not lie with God. The problem is that some people lack the ability to hear God when He is speaking.

 In George Bernard Shaw’s play *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc is always hearing voices from God, and the king is angered by this. He complains to her, “Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don’t your voices come to me? I’m the king, not you.”

 Joan answers, “They do come, but you do not hear them. You’ve not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the [church bells announce the] Angelus . . . you cross yourself and have done with it. But if you prayed from your heart and listened to the trilling of the bells in the air after they stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do.”

 The fact that not everyone does not hear God does not mean God is not speaking. It is more likely that they lack the capacity to hear. After all, people who are spiritually dead to not respond to any kind of stimuli.

 Jesus’ encouragement is directed to those who can hear Him. If you can hear him, then listen closely to what He says. Make sure you understand what He is saying. Make sure you act on what He says.

 In Matthew 13 Jesus spoke to His disciples, His students, about the fact that there were many who lacked spiritual perception. Those people heard, but they didn’t understand. They saw, but the didn’t perceive the meaning of what they saw. On the other hand, the disciples did have the ability discern spiritual meaning. Look at 13:16-17.

 You have heard the saying, “Use the sense God gave you.” We need to use the spiritual senses God has given us. Don’t let the word of God go in one ear and out the other without it doing a work in your mind and heart.

 How many of you are dog owners? You know that dogs hear well, sometimes, too well. There is, however one sense a dog has that is even better than his hearing—the sense of smell. There is a physical reason for their keen sense of smell. In comparison, the sinuses of humans have about 6 million receptor cells that can sense the chemical odors afloat in the air. The average beagle, however, has more than 300 million receptor cells in its snout—that’s 50 times more cells for smells. The sense through you and I normally perceive our world is through eyesight, but the dominant sense through which dogs perceive their world is through their nose.

 You and I can walk down the sidewalk in the spring and maybe we will perceive a faint aroma of flowers upwind a few feet ahead. But a dog can walk the same sidewalk in the same place, and he will perceive the traces of every dog or animal that has been in that area.

 Just as dogs and humans have different levels of ability to perceive smells, people have differences in their ability to perceive other things. Some people hear much better than others. Some people have greater ability to perceive emotions that are present in a given situation. Some have greater ability intellectually to perceive ideas as they are presented.

 Most important of all, some people have a greater ability to perceive things spiritually and morally because they have devoted themselves to prayer, and to learning from the Bible, and applying it to their lives and their world. Others have greater spiritual discernment because of the spiritual gifts and callings that God has placed on them.

 We don’t all have the same ability to perceive. We need to work at it. As a student of Jesus, I urge you to look with your eyes, accept with your heart, and discern with your ears. Let Him teach you what He wants you to know and what He wants you to do.