

The Game We Cannot Win

Matthew 11:16-19

Introduction: The No-Win Scenario

Good morning, everyone.

I want to start today by telling you about a time I completely trapped myself in a "no-win" situation. A few years ago, I volunteered to help organize a major community event. I wanted to make sure absolutely everyone felt included and happy.

On the first day of planning, one group came up to me and said, "Look, the last time we did this, it was way too formal. It felt like a corporate board meeting. Can we please make it casual, high-energy, and fun?" I nodded. Absolutely. I'm on it."

Ten minutes later, another group approached me. "Listen," they said, "last year was total chaos. It felt like a circus. We need something dignified, traditional, and serious this year."

I spent the next three weeks trying to design an event that was simultaneously a high-energy rock concert and a solemn, traditional ceremony. Can you guess what happened? I drove myself absolutely crazy. And when the day finally arrived, the first group thought it was too stiff, the second group thought it was too wild, and everybody left annoyed—mostly at me.

I had fallen into the trap of trying to dance to two completely different songs at the exact same time.

If you have ever felt the exhausting weight of trying to please people who cannot be pleased—if you've ever felt like no matter what choices you make in your family, your career, or your faith, someone is going to tell you you're doing it wrong—then you are going to understand exactly what Jesus is talking about in our scripture today.

Because long before social media algorithms and modern culture perfected the art of outrage, Jesus looked at the crowds surrounding Him and realized: They are playing a game that nobody can win.

The Children in the Marketplace

Let's look at Matthew 11:16-19. Jesus says:

How can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.

Jesus uses a brilliant, everyday illustration here. He points to children playing in the street. In the ancient world, kids didn't have smartphones or board games, so they

played "make-believe." They would watch adults and mimic them. Specifically, they loved to play two games: "Wedding" and "Funeral."

When they played "Wedding," someone would blow into a flute, and everyone was supposed to dance and feast. When they played "Funeral," someone would wail a sad song, and everyone was supposed to beat their chests and pretend to cry.

But Jesus says the people of His generation are acting like spoiled children who refuse to play along with either game. If the other kids play a happy tune, they sit on their hands and pout. If the kids start a sad song, they roll their eyes and walk away.

Nothing is good enough. They don't want to celebrate, and they don't want to grieve. They just want to complain.

Jesus then takes this childhood game and applies it directly to the religious culture of His day. He looks at how the critics treated the two most important spiritual figures of the era: John the Baptist and Himself.

Look at verse 18: For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon.

John the Baptist was the "dirge." He was the funeral song. He lived out in the harsh wilderness, wore scratchy camel's hair, ate locusts and wild honey, and preached an intense message of urgent repentance. He fasted constantly. He was dead serious. And how did the culture respond? They didn't say, "Wow, look at his incredible devotion." They said, "The guy is a fanatic. He's out of his mind. He has a demon."

So, the culture rejected the serious, aesthetic prophet.

But then look at verse 19: The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!

Jesus was the "pipe." He sang the wedding song. Jesus showed up and the first miracle He performed was turning water into high-quality wine at a wedding feast. He sat down at dinner tables. He laughed, He celebrated, and He accepted invitations from the most scandalous people in society—the outcasts, the tax collectors, the broken.

And what did the exact same critics say? Did they say, Wow, look how approachable and loving God is!? No. They whispered, Look at Him. He has no self-control. He's a glutton, a drunkard, and He hangs out with the wrong crowd.

The Modern Trap of Cynicism
Do you see the tragedy here?

If you are too intense, you're crazy. If you're too joyful, you're reckless. John was too holy to eat with them; Jesus was too loving to reject them. The critics constructed a cultural trap where truth could never win.

And let's be honest with ourselves today: We still live in the marketplace Jesus described.

We live in a culture deeply infected by cynicism. We are experts at finding the flaw in everything.

If a church focuses heavily on deep, complex theology, people say, They are cold, intellectual, and lack spirit. But if a church focuses on vibrant worship and emotion, people say, It's just an emotional show with no depth. If a person is passionate about social justice and feeding the poor, someone whispers, "They're just being political." If they focus quietly on personal prayer and evangelism, someone else says, "They don't care about the real world."

We live under the tyranny of impossible, conflicting expectations. And it does something terrible to our souls: it paralyzes us. It makes us afraid to move, afraid to commit, and afraid to step out in authentic faith because we know someone, somewhere, is going to critique the song we are dancing to.

But notice what Jesus *doesn't* do in this passage. He doesn't change His behavior to please the crowd. He doesn't go on a public relations campaign to prove He isn't a drunkard. He doesn't tell John the Baptist to leave the wilderness and put on nicer clothes.

Jesus completely ignores the petty, shifting demands of the marketplace. Why? Because He knows that human criticism is a moving target. If you live for the approval of the crowd, you will spend your life rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship. Wisdom is Proved Right Instead, Jesus ends this thought with a powerful, mic-drop statement at the end of verse 19:

"But wisdom is proved right by her deeds." What does that mean? Jesus is saying: **Stop listening to the noise in the marketplace and look at the fruit.** Don't look at what the critics are shouting; look at what the lives are producing.

Think about John the Baptist. The critics called him crazy, but what were his "deeds"? His raw, uncompromising truth broke through centuries of spiritual silence. His words shattered hard hearts, brought people to their knees in repentance, and prepared the entire nation for the arrival of the Messiah. His wisdom was proved right by the lives he changed.

And think about Jesus. They called Him a glutton and a friend of sinners. But what were His "deeds"?

When Jesus sat at the table with tax collectors like Zacchaeus, greed died and generosity was born. When He stood near broken women like Mary Magdalene, shame vanished and dignity took its place. His "wedding song" wasn't reckless indulgence; it was the wild, scandalous grace of a God who refuses to leave His children in the dark.

The critics sat in the marketplace doing nothing but talking. Meanwhile, Jesus and John were out in the world saving souls, healing bodies, and transforming reality.

Stepping Out of the Marketplace

My friends, as we close today, I want to ask you a very direct question: Whose song are you trying to dance to?

Are you exhausting yourself trying to satisfy the endless, conflicting demands of your critics, your culture, or even your own unrealistic expectations? Are you stuck sitting in the marketplace, paralyzed by cynicism, analyzing everyone else's faith while your own soul grows cold?

Jesus invites us to step out of the marketplace entirely.

He doesn't call us to a life of pleasing people. He calls us to a life of following Him. Some days, following Jesus will look like John the Baptist—it will require a "dirge." It will require quiet repentance, fasting, serious boundary-setting, and saying a hard "no" to the things of this world. Other days, following Jesus will look like a "pipe"—it will require stepping into deep joy, celebrating God's goodness, and eating at the table with people who look, think, and vote differently than you do, extending them radical grace.

Let the critics talk. Let the crowds complain.

Turn your ears away from the noise of the streets, and listen to the voice of the Savior. Walk in His wisdom. Love the people He loved. Live the life He has called you to live. Because at the end of the day, the noise of the marketplace will fade away into silence—but the fruit of a life lived in the wisdom of God will endure forever.

Amen.