

Matthew 11:1–19

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[0 : 00] Matthew 11, verses 1 to 19. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk.

Lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor of good news preach to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see?

A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is he of whom it is written. Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. Truly I say to you, among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

[1 : 26] Yet, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, we played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. For John came, neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a demon. 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.

Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, let me add my welcome to you, especially those of you who are visiting with us today.

[2 : 34] We're glad that you're in town, and we're happy to have you here as we sit under God's word. And isn't it nice to know that the children of our church are so unlike the children of verse 16, those who sat in the marketplace and weren't singing when celebration was required and didn't know how to mourn when a weeping of soul was necessary.

We'll come back to that at the end, but let me just pray as we get underway. Our Heavenly Father, I pray now that the words of my mouth would fly like arrows to our minds in ways that would stir our hearts to fall in love with Jesus, for some to fall in love with him all over again, and for others to meet him this morning for the first time.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. When it comes to titling messages or sermons, pastors often don't want to put a label on it, seems to reduce the nature of it.

But the value of a title right out of the gates for you would be to have some sense of the theme or what this speaker intends to make from what they just heard read.

After all, 19 verses is a long run, and you're wondering what holds it together. In that light, I thought of two different titles that this message might be of help to us.

[4 : 34] One, what do you do with your doubts? Or second, where do you go with your questions? I mean, even a third grader's reading of the text, and I hope you have it open, you can put your eyes on it.

The entire reading today is framed by questions, and the first of which is related to someone's doubts.

I mean, take a look at it. It's right there, verse 3. And he said to him, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? A question, kind of anchoring the material.

But then a movement in it in verse 7. Jesus speaks to the crowds. What did you go out in the wilderness to see? A question, which moves the story along.

Or finally, that strong question in verse 16. But to what shall I compare this generation? Three questions. Thus, my title.

[5 : 48] Where do you go with your questions? It's nice to know that questioning Jesus can be okay. What do you do with your doubts?

Nice to know that one comes even with this opening question, doubting. I suppose the intriguing thing out of the gate is, who is doubting?

My Bible reads, verse 2, Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to him, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? This is the second time we run into John the Baptist in this book. Earlier we met up with him. He had a thundering voice that rattled the conscience of a nation. He literally captured the hearts of fathers and turned them back to their children.

[6 : 47] And all the while, he redirected the intensity of his own fame to this message that you are to now walk behind Jesus and be in his train.

I mean, when we met him the first time around, his faith was solid. He was a rock. His conviction that Jesus was the Christ was clear. And as a result, it was John the Baptist who was single-handedly responsible for that first generation's movement to Jesus in droves.

Well, that was then. This is now. Things have changed. John's behind bars. Josephus lets us know that he's in one of Herod's palaces on this mound that overlooks the Red Dead Sea and is well-fortified and isolated.

It's the place where John will actually remain until he dies. And so he's in jail and he's considering and visiting hours.

He sends word to those who came to see him behind the glass, get back to Jesus and I've just got to know, is he the one or do I look for another? Can you hear the measured moment of doubt and the question he asked his disciples to bring?

[8 : 19] Look at it again. Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another? And there I want to make this point of encouragement to you. Fascinatingly, even those who are closest to Jesus are at times prone to doubt.

I mean, if I can't get an amen from some of you that have known him for a while, evidently those that are closest to Jesus are at times prone to doubt.

It's a bit of unexpected good news. Wholehearted followers of Christ, men and women who are all in on Jesus are not immune to lingering doubts and the questions that come from it.

Considering the import, are we to receive Jesus as God's anointed king? Doubt then can come from the Christian and the non-Christian alike.

Doubt can lock some here today up who have grown with Jesus all along the way, as well as those of you who are just now exploring whether or not your questions might find sufficient answer to believe in the first place.

[9 : 41] And so we ask, where do you go with your doubts? It's worth exploring how Jesus will handle this question.

Let's look at that first unit then together. His question and Jesus' response through verse 6. Jesus, are you the one we are to follow?

It's a question of identity. In particular, John the Baptist wants to know whether Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises about a coming one.

The Old Testament, Psalms even, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. The sense that God had indicated one is coming who will rule the world and rescue all from the domination of sin.

Jesus, is that you? Is that you? I started with you, but now I'm asking, is that you? I find Jesus' answer intriguing, don't you?

[10 : 50] I mean, before looking at it, I would have thought he would just say yes. I mean, just assert something. Yes or no, or even defensively appropriating, tell him of course.

That's not what he does. Look at how he answers the question. Verse 4, And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended by me.

It's not an assertion or a declaration, but he is providing some thing to look at, some evidence that he felt John could appropriate.

Literally, or literarily, these are three sets of couplets. Go and tell John, First, the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk.

[11:56] Second, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. Third, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. These wonderful, beautiful movements that go together.

What is he appealing to here? I've come to believe this week that John is doing, or Jesus is doing, more than simply saying, I got some miracles that ought to be enough for you.

No. Jesus' response wasn't one of mere assertion. He's bringing forth, by illusion, biblical material that he thinks John would have categories to apprehend.

So there's a character in the text, John the Baptist, who might have mentally been processing those three couplets in ways that you and I might not, depending upon our familiarity with the words that John would have had close to him.

John the Baptist was raised in a home where he was told by his parents in preschool that God had his hand on his life to prepare the way for something much later.

[13:14] John was schooled, not necessarily in the book of Acts and Agabus where we see, you know, the New Testament prophets before the Old Testament prophetic age closes down, but he would have been schooled in the big prophet, Isaiah.

He would have known this book. Did you know, let me read these to you, these couplets as they find their way in Isaiah. Isaiah 29, In that day, the deaf shall hear the words of a book and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

Isaiah 35, Say to those who have an anxious heart which John would have had, Be strong, fear not, behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God he will save you, then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped and the lame man shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

The lyrical couplets all in play. John 61, 1. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and open the prison to those who are bound. So when the word travels back to John, you can envision that he is not processing those words the way you and I do. I did some miracles. That ought to be enough. No, John is processing. What I see and what I hear is the fulfillment of the prophecies that were put down from the very book that my own ministry launched that said was going to prepare the way for him.

What is happening here? There's an insight here on how Jesus handles doubts for those of you who have long-standing Christian convictions. It's not an appeal solely to miracles, but miracles that accompany what was long ago written down in prophetic texts. Let me get it to you as simple as I can. Jesus is asking John to put away his doubts based upon promises written down that were fulfilled in his ministry. Scripture, not the miraculous signs, would get John forward. Now let me talk to you.

[15:31] The connections of the Bible are used here, these allusions to Isaiah, to help those who already believed but are now stumbling in belief to be reassured that it's still true. If you give yourself to reading again the promises of God that are then fulfilled in Christ, the coherence of that ministry will actually buoy your heart. It will enliven your soul. It will settle your discomfort. It might even make sense the promise of your sufferings. The Old Testament promises are in the New Testament revealed to be fulfilled in Christ.

Therefore, Jesus is worthy of your devotion even in the midst of your doubts because in him all of God's promises are true.

I don't know where you are today. Maybe you grew up with, grew up in the church. Maybe you followed Jesus. Maybe, maybe like John, you, you were all in and out front.

But today is different and you're wondering, is he the coming one? Am I banking my life on a lie? I have been comforted over the years by returning to a reading of the scriptures in ways that I wrestle with promises now fulfilled and it steadies me in the storm.

[17:24] There's some assurance given. But the text moves on. John drifts to the background, at least his question does, of Jesus and Jesus comes to the foreground with a question to the crowds about John.

Did you see that in verse 7? As they went away, that is, they're bringing, they're going back to, to get their, to make their phone call to be able to get into the prison to sit behind the glass to tell John what he said.

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out in the wilderness to see? This is an interesting question. Was John the Baptist the one God promised to prepare his way?

It's obvious that this is a rhetorical question. The answer is implied.

Let me show it to you. Look again at verse 7. There's actually three questions in a row. What did you go out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? Implication?

[18:36] No. There was nothing unsteady about John. He wasn't drifting with whatever cultural thoughts were in play. I didn't go out there to hear a man who didn't know what he believed.

What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Ah, clothing of that sort, \$7,000 suits, those are reserved for the guys in the king's court. You went out to see John.

He was, he was a, a rugged man. He, he wasn't going to flatter you. There was nothing effeminate about him. He, he, he just said it.

And his diet was odd. Implication? You weren't messing around when you went out there.

You knew what you were getting into. You knew the man meant business and you knew that he believed what he said. And what he said he believed. He goes on, behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses.

[19:41] What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you in more than a prophet. This is what he's been leading to all along. If John is in prison undergoing a season where he's doubting whether I'm the one to follow, you need to know that John was legitimately engaged with God in all he said and God was actually active and working through him.

this word on a prophet. Notice what he does here. I think this next phrase in verse 10 is a great help to those in this room today who don't have the advantages that John the Baptist had.

You're more like those in the crowd than you are like the Christian who had all these preconceived convictions. You didn't grow up in Sunday school and learn the Bible. So these little allusions to Isaiah aren't going to cut it.

But John is done and Jesus says this is he of whom it is written. Look at this. This is a direct citation with one significant change.

This is he of whom it is written behold I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you. interestingly the doubting one on whether or not John was doing God's work is brought to solid faith in some measure by again looking to the scriptures.

[21:08] The scriptures that prophesied the coming of Jesus also prophesied the coming of John. again the Bible is an important instrument for those of us in our seasons of doubt.

I love the change though in the quotation it's the very last word there's no way we would have picked up on it. I read somebody on it who will prepare your way before you in Isaiah it's before me meaning God that you're going to prepare the way for God to come but now Jesus uses this almost in a self-referential way behold I'm sending one who will prepare the way before you that is me that is he so that what Jesus is actually doing here is shoring up their faith in the ministry of John without losing the fact that he's shoring up their faith in his own ministry as well.

Fascinating little play on words for Jesus but then he goes on and I think this might be helpful to those of you who are doubting who don't have a knowledge of the scriptures yet to just go oh wow that's going to capture me I love what he does in verses 11 and following truly I say to you among those born of women has there risen no one greater than John the Baptist yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force for all the prophets and law prophesied until John and if you are willing to accept it he's Elijah who is to come what's happening here he's not appealing to the Bible to overcome somebody's doubts about whether John was actually ministering on behalf of God he's appealing to John's own life and circumstances he's saying

John can be trusted John himself is a witness and in particular in his moment of imprisonment this is a difficult little phrase here where he says now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force I understand that to mean Jesus is saying when it comes to John you need to know that the kingdom of heaven has always been opposed and the violent people have always been trying to outdo it and outwit it so John who stands in the prophetic tradition is in the line

of the prophets who himself is persecuted John is suffering violence and the violent ones like Herod are trying to take it out and Jesus says his very sufferings his very circumstances the most difficult season of his life point to the truth that that's the way the kingdom of heaven has always worked nobody enters into the kingdom of heaven unattended by the handmaiden of suffering oh now get this for you if you're not convinced that Jesus is who he says he is or John is who he thought he was based on

Jesus' allusions to Isaiah or his quotation of Isaiah perhaps you just need to sit down over lunch today with someone who believes and yet whose life is a mess now let me put it to you that way the sufferings of life manifest the truth of the kingdom that are true all the way through time let me put it to you this way sometimes your friends or your family can get you through a season of doubt believe them trust them when someone sits down next to you and says my life is a mess and you know the condition of my body and I'm not here for long and I believe Jesus that's a testimony to you that's like John the Baptist sitting in prison of which he'll never get out when someone sits down next to you and says

[25 : 40] I've lost everything or I'm on the cusp of losing everything and I believe in the prophetic witness that brings me to Jesus that is a testimony to you Jesus is not only introducing the Bible as a means of dealing with your doubt he's introducing your friends who are in the midst of the mess of their life well but he doesn't get away from the Bible for long does it look at verse 13 or 14 if you're willing to accept it it's Elijah who is to come this is a play on the last prophet speak before John this is a reference to the book of Malachi this is a reference to God saying before the kingdom of heaven arrives I'm going to send a messenger beforehand and he named Elijah and what

Jesus is saying is if you're willing to believe it John the Baptist is Elijah so again the scriptures the usefulness of the scriptures but I notice it says willing to believe it willing to receive it literally to receive it I don't know where your doubts are today I don't know that a full citation of the scripture will be sufficient to bring you along the way I don't know that the testimony of those who are undergoing violence and suffering would lead you to a belief that this is legitimate but isn't it odd that these Old Testament things are finding their place in the New Testament ministry of both John and Jesus and I would simply ask you why would you not be willing to receive that or then what do you make of all this if it's not true well let me rush to you and to me the question that John's disciples asked to

Jesus on his identity gave way to the question Jesus asks the crowds on John's identity which gives way to a question that Jesus will ask of his own generation but to what shall I compare this generation question it's like children in the marketplace calling to their playmates we played the flute for you and you did not dance we sang a dirge and you did not mourn for John came neither singing eating or drinking and they said he's got a demon and the son of man came eating and drinking and they said look a glutton and a drunkard a friend of tax collectors and sinners while it comes in the form of a question this really is not a question this is a devastating assertion about an entire generation what Jesus is saying is well I know you got questions about me and I know you probably got questions about John but we live in a day where people don't believe

John or me they don't want Jesus or John they're like child's play not not the children of this church but the obstinate uncooperative child who is not responding as the circumstances demand I don't know where this little line comes from in verse 17 but I know what it means and I know how it's related to the ministry of John and Jesus Jesus is saying in a sense look I came playing a flute for you I stood on the platform and was ready to dance for you but you would not dance I told you repent for the kingdom of God is at hand I told you son your sins are forgiven I told you salvation is now here for you

I told you that you can be restored into a right relationship with God and that just fell flat upon your ears and for John well John came with all the hard news John came telling you to mourn your sin you wouldn't have that either this is a devastating critique what Jesus is saying is my generation is like the child in the grocery store that melts down at the wrong time or he's like the kid in the schoolyard who's got the ball and we all should be playing and he decides to pout and go home it's like the children that we're all going to do this but they go off and do that ever see that happen in a child it's worse when you see it in adults these are the ones that go off in a huff when they ought to be smiling and they storm off self-satisfied when they ought to be weeping and the point that Jesus is making is devastating in regard to what his generation did with

[31 : 30] Jesus and John they weren't ready he said for a wedding or a funeral no mourning or dancing no repentance or rejoicing no celebrating the forgiveness of sins and no taking of sins seriously wow to what would he compare this generation we got some of the silent generation here today pre 46 we got some baby boomers I'll button my coat on that one back up through 64 we got generation X and the millennials and Gen Z and you can see I'm reading this now because I don't know what all these are you got alpha did you know that all the data sets indicate that fewer and fewer from generation to generation in this land believe in John or Jesus or would he look at our generation and say wow something unique happened all of a sudden children are dancing their way into my presence like they do into their parents arms and to their family's delight wow

I've got a generation of men and women who are like children who actually know when something is wrong and their hearts begin to lament and they're not quite sure where to find words we should be celebrating the forgiveness Jesus offers us and taking seriously the sin John spoke to us about that's what it ends wisdom is justified by her deeds this is the this is how you'll know how are you responding let me put it this way you may be reading the Bible today we may be reading the Bible today but the Bible has been reading you you got your questions of Jesus he's got a couple for you of what shall I compare you how you respond to Jesus approach to questions and doubts will reveal whether you consider him to be worthy of your devotion even in a season of doubt our heavenly father we see in the text the coming one are you the coming one

Jesus would say yes he is we see in the text Jesus reference that John himself was the one to come but we are left with this question oh Lord will we come and behold him will we come and worship a holy God will we sing what our children have sang in our midst this morning Jesus said that I should come and I come to him Lord save and secure each one here in Jesus name amen