

Blessed is the one not offended by Jesus.

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Date: 05 December 2021

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[0 : 00] So we're going to be reading Matthew 11, 1 to 19. When Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

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? And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see.

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

As they went away, Jesus began to speak up 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 king's houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

[1 : 09] 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.

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 unto 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 to? It is like children sitting in the marketplace 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.

[2 : 21] Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds. Well, good morning, everyone. Most would be familiar with the axiom, you can't see the forest for the trees.

It's an old saying. And basically what it means is that we often get lost in the details of a circumstance and lose the big picture. And sometimes when we do that, we get immobilized, because there's that much detail that we actually can't start the project or get into the circumstance. I think that will help us as we move into Matthew 11, chapter 11, 12, and 13, in fact. Jesus sort of digs into the growing opposition he's facing.

So he said he's the Lord of the harvest. He spoke about his mission as harvesting. He's the Lord of the harvest. He promised a bumper harvest. But this opposition is growing.

And it appears in 11, chapter 12, and 13 that Jesus is helping his disciples sort of step back from the details and refocus on the big picture again.

[3 : 37] See the forest, as it were, when they might have been overly focused on the trees, the huge trees in front of them, which, as we saw over the last few weeks, was the huge trees of opposition and persecution and rejection that Jesus is preparing his disciples for.

So let's just turn back to chapter 9, verse 35 to 37, just to see how all that plays out. Jesus describes his kingdom-building mission of teaching, proclaiming, and healing as harvesting.

As I said before, he declares himself to be the Lord of the harvest, promises a bumper harvest.

Then there's that long section over the last three weeks we've looked at where Jesus prepares his disciples for the opposition.

For the persecution, for the rejection that's going to come to them. Now, here's how it fits together, I think, that it's quite likely that the disciples wouldn't be feeling much excitement about being involved in the work of harvest after you work through all that stuff.

And so I think Jesus does then step back from the detail and put again, the big picture. The big picture of the ongoing harvest mission.

[4 : 52] And so what Jesus says in these first verses of chapter 11 is that he wants his disciples to remember, go back and focus again, remember that my harvesting or kingdom-building is totally and comfortably on track.

And we'll see that in the first 15 verses of chapter 11 we're going to look at this morning. So again, let me just make connections. I love making connections because structure is really important in the way Matthew's put together his account here of the life of Jesus.

If you go back to chapter 10, verse 5, it's almost identical in a sense to chapter 11, verse 1. And I think again, repeating myself, I think for the third time now, after detailing the huge challenges of harvest and the perspective needed to face those challenges, which is essentially chapter 10, Jesus now resumes the work of harvesting.

So he's back on track. It's almost as if there's been an aside. We'll talk about this really difficult subject, but no, let's get back on track. Chapter 1. Jesus finished instructing his 12 disciples who went out from there to teach and preach in their cities.

And he's very keen for the disciples that good news salvation is everywhere, but perhaps not as expected in verses 2 through to 6.

[6 : 18] Now John's disciples, John's locked up in prison, we'll say more about that in a minute, but John's disciples come to ask Jesus a question. Jesus, are you the one that was to come?

Are you the one that I announced? Or should we look for somebody else? Now, I don't know about you, but I just find that sometimes in the Christian life, things just don't add up.

Things just don't make sense. It's confusing. We just can't work out what God's doing in our life. Does God love me?

If God loves me, then why am I enduring this circumstance? Why are these things happening to me? I suspect, we're not actually told, but I suspect that may well have been how John the Baptist was feeling.

Remember John the Baptist is Jesus' cousin? He's been locked up now for the best part of a year, as best we can work out from the historical records. And for John, things just weren't happening as he expected them to happen.

[7 : 23] He obviously knew what Jesus was doing, but the things that Jesus was doing just didn't seem to add up. It wasn't what he expected of Messiah.

Now, flick back with me to chapter 3 of Matthew, where John actually is preaching, fiery preaching to introduce Jesus. Jesus. And remember, he was preaching repentance in preparation for Messiah, for God's King and Savior to come.

And when you look at chapter 3, verse 12, you get the sense that John was expecting a figure of judgment. Jesus was, the Messiah was going to come, and the idea of fire there is always God's judgment.

He would come with a winnowing fork. This is a sort of violent metaphor of God coming to bring judgment. He would gather in his people, his good people, and the ungodly would be destroyed, burned up like chaff.

Two years later, John's languaging in a dungeon, courtesy of Herod and Herodias' wife, he had dared to call out their immorality.

[8 : 37] Now, Herod was the leader of God's people. He should have been set on the model of godliness, but no, he defended his immorality, and John's now been in a dungeon for the best part of a year.

Now, I can well imagine John thinking, how is this working? How is this happening? It doesn't make sense that just when my part of the ministry was getting underway, just as people were coming in their hordes in repentance to be baptized in preparation for the coming Messiah, just then when I introduced Messiah, everything seemed to be charging forward, suddenly stopped, and here I am stuck in a dungeon.

What's happening? What's going on? It doesn't make sense. And perhaps it didn't make sense about Jesus either. He was confused about Jesus too. He hears a lot about compassion and mercy

and restoration and healing and teaching.

Well, if Jesus really was God's king and savior coming into the world to reestablish God's kingdom or rule, where was the judgment that was supposed to come with that?

And why am I still in prison? There's Herod and Herodias. They just flagrantly turn a blind eye to God's law and do the exact opposite and they're enjoying the good life and here I am having preached faithfulness and repentance.

[10:04] Here I am stuck in prison. You can well imagine John being confused. Just doesn't seem to be adding up. Well, verse four, Jesus is really quick.

to assure John that he did have it right. I am Messiah, says Jesus. My mission is on track.

And he does that by referring John back to Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah. And there's numerous references there back in chapter 35 and chapter 61 and possibly chapter 26 and 29.

They're written on the sermon outline there. So he pushes John back to Isaiah and he says, here's the confirmation. Isaiah said, this is what Messiah would be doing and this is what I'm doing.

It's happening as it was forecast, prophesied to happen. But there's another thing that Jesus is doing by pushing John back to Isaiah.

[11:14] Because when you go back and read those prophecies, Isaiah is very clear that Messiah would be known as much for the day of mercy as well as the day of judgment.

The two are inseparable. But when you go back and read those prophecies, Isaiah said, this is what you'd see of Messiah first. exactly as Jesus quotes there.

There would be a day of mercy, a day of grace, a day of deliverance from the effects of sin, a day of renewal into God's character for God's people in the context of a bigger day of judgment.

judgment. And with that then, Jesus, in a sense, concludes this first interaction with a wisdom statement, verse 6.

Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. That of itself is probably an allusion back to Isaiah chapter 8, verses 13 and 14.

[12:24] And in that context, it's a warning not to reject God's work among his people. Why? Because it might be unexpected in the way it's delivered.

And if you go back and read chapter 8, that's exactly what was happening for God's people. They were looking at an invasion by Assyria. And they were scratching their head. Could this possibly be God's hand?

And God says, yeah, absolutely right. It is my hand. This is my way of purifying my people. So come back into Matthew 11.

Jesus is gently saying to John, don't trip over me because I'm not delivering Messiah's promise as you might have expected.

I just want to pause there briefly and say that's a wonderful perspective for us in our work of harvesting continuing today. It was a wonderful perspective for John's disciples, for Jesus' disciples, and it comes right down to us.

[13:37] In spite of growing opposition and unbelief, in spite of the huge personal cost that was detailed in chapter 10, in spite of the huge challenges as harvest workers, God's good news salvation is happening everywhere.

And it's still happening in our world. People are still being confronted by Jesus through his word and they're still being radically changed, radically renewed.

Yes, massive opposition, growing opposition in our Australian culture, but nothing ever has and ever will stop the work of harvest.

because the Lord of the harvest is busy in his harvest field. And then secondly, the perspective is good, is that we don't always experience God's salvation and renewing as we might expect.

The whole letter to Hebrews is about Christians who thought that, well, once we become Christians, then life will get easier. Our sins are forgiven and God will give us this and this and this and this and they find out that their expectations were quite wrong.

[14:56] And we experience that, don't we? That sometimes we realize that being a Christian is actually harder. It puts us at odds with our families. It puts us at odds with our neighbors.

And yet, the Lord will use those situations of conflicts to be our maturing, our growing. so again, like God's people experience in the Old Testament, sometimes the greatest periods of growth or most times the greatest period of growth comes from really unexpected circumstances, sometimes even left field intersections in our lives that just shake us out of our tree and we fall flat on our face and

suddenly we realize that, boy, we've been looking here depending on that and we need to come back and trust the Lord.

It's not what we expected, is it? And yet, these things are good things and evidence of God's kindness to us. So, God's good news salvation is happening everywhere, not quite as expected and then Jesus goes on then in the next verses to affirm specifically John's harvest work and I think I want to add in there that he's picking up a theme here that doubt is not unbelief.

We'll pick that up in a minute. So, in verse 7, as soon as John's disciples leave, Jesus then uses the opportunity to address the crowd and he speaks to the crowd specifically about John and it's a very positive, affirming statement.

So, John's just come with a question that might reflect confusion or doubt or maybe even a touch of anger and stern correction of Jesus. Why am I still in prison? But Jesus doesn't get put off track with that.

[16:49] He warmly affirms John's ministry, John's harvesting and he spells out the significance of John's ministry to the crowds who probably by now have dismissed him.

He's out of sight for more than a year. Out of mind probably. Or perhaps the crowds Jesus feared, the crowds might have taken John's doubting question or confused question as, like we do today, some sort of political backflip.

You know, there was John 12 months ago, he's this fiery preacher for repentance, he was convinced that this was the Messiah and now we've got this pathetic John just asking this wimpy question.

Whatever the reason, Jesus uses the opportunity to affirm the ministry of John to the crowds. The language is a bit strange, but the point is clear.

Jesus puts a couple of options to the crowds. So, what do you have in mind when you think of John the Baptist, that guy you went out to see in the wilderness? Well, Jesus is really saying, you're not to think of John as a reed on the river bank.

[18:01] In other words, somebody who's fickle, who's lacking conviction, who's sort of blown about by the political breeze. He came, made a big splash, and now he's gone again. Blown away by political public opinion or perhaps personal circumstances, maybe even he's rejecting Jesus now.

No, says Jesus, do not think of John like that. Nor, were you to think of him at the other end of the extreme, someone who just craved the easy, ostentatious life and reputation of some sort of powerful government official.

And if this was a reference to Herod and Herodias, probably in the day, powerful government officials were also powerful and enjoying the good life because of corruption, an extortion of their people.

So, Jesus has given the crowds two pretty obviously silly extremes. He's not this, and he's not that. So, what is he?

And Jesus then goes on to say, he's a prophet. Not just a prophet, not just any prophet, but the greatest prophet. John was a special messenger or worker of God.

[19:14] Why was he so special? Why was he in a category by himself? Because he himself was the subject of a prophecy. He was, as Malachi said, he was the one who would be like the new Elijah, who would have the privilege of preparing and announcing God's long promised king and savior.

And Jesus is very clear here. Nobody spoke as clearly about Jesus as did John the Baptist. Yet, end of verse 11, yet, because John died before the death and resurrection of Jesus, his understanding of Jesus and how his people would experience salvation in God's kingdom was very limited.

And exceptionally limited compared to our understanding, because we live in this side of the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus. So John was the greatest prophet.

He spoke the most clearly of Jesus at that point in time, but even his testimony to Jesus is dwarfed by what just an ordinary Christian like you and I can do. Now, again, I just want to pause because Jesus' affirmation of John indirectly also affirms us in our harvest work.

And the first thing, coming back to it, is that Jesus doesn't put John's doubts or confusion in the category of unbelief. Jesus goes on to speak about unbelief in verse 16, and he's very open and clear about it, but he obviously doesn't put John's doubts and question and confusion in that category.

[20 : 57] Why not? What's the difference? Because John was searching for truth. John was trying to understand Jesus, and ultimately he gets the affirmation in verse 6 from Jesus that he is the blessed, one of the blessed of verse 6, because of what he did with his doubts.

He brought his doubts to Jesus. He was determined to discover the truth from the lips of the one who could give him the truth. Then he was determined to align his life and experience and circumstance and hope with what Jesus said to him, rather than his own thinking and expectations. We'll see a little bit more of that when we come to look at verses 16 to 19. The second thing is that I just want us to note in passing here that Jesus had such a warm testimony to John.

This is an important point because I'm going to take us back into chapter 10 for this, especially verses 32 and 33 of chapter 10. See, back then Jesus said, look, if you stand with me, I will never abandon you.

And there's a sense here in which Jesus is actually doing publicly that which he said back in chapter 10 verses 32 and 33. He's not ashamed to stand with his cousin, even though his cousin is now shamed by being imprisoned.

[22 : 31] He's not embarrassed by John's persona. And remember, John was a pretty weird looking guy. He affirms John's harvest work, even though John's period of harvesting was relatively short and actually cut short by his circumstance.

And I think that might also then be an outworking of verses 41 and 42 of chapter 10. I said last week that it was a bit hard to understand exactly what that was, but I think this could be an outworking of it.

In other words, Jesus is saying, here's John, he's a good example. I said that different people had different points of engagement in the harvest, different levels of involvement in the harvest.

People were doing different sorts of things. Is one better than the other? No. They're all equal. It's all part of the family business, the harvesting. John had his part. Yes, he was an outstanding prophet.

Short period of time, yes. Truncated out of the blue, yes. But he did his work of harvesting for the great king.

[23 : 46] And the third thing I want to just draw your attention to here is that any believer is better able to witness or speak about Jesus than John the Baptist. That's quite a remarkable thought.

We just loathe it. I think we go too fast over it. You're a Christian here this morning. You've got a vastly greater understanding of Jesus than even John the Baptist had.

Because you're this side of his death and resurrection. John could only begin to picture how Jesus would bring salvation and what it would mean to be in his kingdom and what his kingdom would look like.

We can see that in a detail that John could never even have imagined. We've experienced it. We experience it daily. So it seems strange to me that I keep hearing Christians saying I don't know what to say.

I don't know how to testify to Jesus. Well, moving on.

[25 : 03] The third thing as Jesus harvesting works on track, Jesus does say expect people constantly to attempt to redefine salvation and God's kingdom.

Now we're going to look at some of the difficult verses here, 12, 13, 14, 15. And they are difficult verses. Verse 12 particularly has been argued over by scholars for generations. Many commentators and commentaries dig into that verse in depth and I'm not going to do that this morning.

I'm just going to offer you what I think is a reasonable alternative for that verse. Recognizing it is a difficult verse. And I think the context is really important. Given, oh better read the verse.

So what does it mean then when Jesus says from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.

It's a strange verse, isn't it? I think that given that Jesus is explaining to the crowd the significance of John's ministry in relation to his own, then the phrase from the day of John the Baptist until now describes Jesus' mission of reestablishing the kingdom of God from the time it began in the context of John's ministry.

[26 : 26] So Jesus is now about to make a comment that sort of sums up and reflects his period of kingdom building or harvesting work. The first phrase that the ESV has in here, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, can also be translated properly and I think better.

The kingdom of heaven has been coming forcefully or has been forcefully advancing. Now that makes sense when we understand chapter 8 and 9 and Jesus' teaching ministry. It is where each miracle was Jesus seizing back his kingdom from Satan and the kingdom of this world or the kingdom of evil.

Each time a person's life was renewed, it was a forceful transition, a forceful battle, excursion into the world of evil and an extraction and a renewal.

It's a picture language in other words. It's a metaphor. And it speaks of the ongoing work of the gospel.

[27 : 42] The kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God has been forcefully advancing. The violent take it by force? Well I think that accurately reflects the experience of Jesus.

Throughout the ministry of Jesus, and we've seen that already in these chapters up to this point, chapter 11, 12, and 13 digs into this even more. The opposition and the rejection and the challenges that Jesus faced, especially from the Jewish religious establishment.

His own experience has been all sorts of people are trying to capture the kingdom of heaven for their own agenda. Israel. They're trying to hijack it and make it what they want rather than what they hear Jesus saying it's going to be.

The Jewish leaders, they wanted political deliverance. They wanted to enjoy a period of dominance as the leaders of a new world empire.

That's what they wanted the kingdom of heaven to be when it wouldn't just be deliverance of Israel, but it would be dominance over all other nations. Crowds looked at some of the Old Testament stuff and thought, well, when Messiah comes, he's going to bring a time of unprecedented prosperity.

[29 : 04] We're going to really enjoy the good life. We're going to have money to burn and all sorts of good toys to play with. Others in the crowd wanted to make God's salvation and kingdom about physical healing.

restoration in this life. So I just want all my eggs and pains fixed. I don't really want any notion of spiritual renewal or spiritual commitment.

I just want to be able to enjoy life as I know it now, but without the eggs and pains. So Jesus is useful as a Mr. Fix-It, but let's not get carried away.

And so on and so forth. But ultimately the point sits easily with this passage and fits easily with Jesus' ministry. From the very start of Jesus' mission, the kingdom of heaven has been advancing exactly as planned, and yes, that is a spiritual battle.

It doesn't happen easily. And yes, it has not been and will not be without opposition. opposition. And it won't be without unbelief in many different forms.

[30 : 23] And friends, I think this is the point that John missed in the original question that he sent to Jesus. This is the perspective that explains why he's in prison. And this is the perspective that we need to remember until Christ returns.

The harvest will happen as planned, but it will never be free from opposition, from a whole range of people, some who will surprise us. And verse 14 and 15, the challenge is to respond to Jesus as he is, as he was spoken about, not as they want him to be or demand him to be.

But you see, that's verse, end of verse 15, he who is the ears to hear.

In other words, Jesus said, look, this perspective of understanding that the kingdom will advance in the midst of opposition, that requires spiritual insight.

And I think that then links us into verses 16 to 19, where Jesus then says, looks around him at the crowds and said, well, actually, we're talking about spiritual insight, that's one thing this generation, in other words, people at large are seriously lacking him.

[31 : 43] They just don't have the spiritual insight to see Jesus as they ought to see him. And that leaves the only option therefore as unbelief.

And Jesus speaks about unbelief here, and the heading I want to use is, unbelief wants a saviour, but doesn't want God, ultimately. Jesus likens the attitude of people to children playing.

And I don't know, I can remember from my own days when the family got together, I'm talking about whenever I was a child, there was always one of the mob, and there was a mob, but there was always one who wanted to control things, or several that wanted to control things, and that would just set up a big fight.

And we'd end up not playing anything because nobody would agree to, you know, back off and let it happen. I think that's what Jesus is saying here. Whatever happens, people aren't happy.

They're not satisfied. And John and Jesus refused to play that game. So as if John, Jesus is still affirming John by saying John wasn't the one who's fickle, the fickle ones were the crowds.

[32 : 57] Fickle ones are the people who hear Jesus teaching initially with excitement, hear John's teaching initially with excitement, but then rejected him. At first they rejected John because he was embarrassing, he was not attractive, he was not cultured, he was not the sort of person God would use to announce the coming of Messiah.

But then afterwards, when they understood his message of repentance, they rejected him because he was too harsh, too demanding. He challenged the religious lifestyle and the belief that they were acceptable to God because they were Jews, because they were good people.

And any preaching about repentance just crashed through that. And so John had to go, his teaching had to go. And likewise the nature of unbelief caused people to reject Jesus.

He was the other extreme. He came with the idea of celebration. He came engaging with the down and outs of society.

So what did they say about Jesus? Well, actually, Jesus, you're too much like the people you say you're here to save. We can't have you saying that we will be going into God's kingdom hand in hand with prostitutes and the down and outs and the riffraff of society, the people, the tax collectors, the people you seem to love hanging out with Jesus.

[34 : 20] That's not going to work either. That's an outrage. That's an embarrassment. That's an affront to us good Jewish people. So they weren't happy with Jesus either. Lacking spiritual insight, people fail to see the significance of either John or Jesus.

And in their ignorance and unbelief, they reject both. John, because his call to repentance was too harsh, threatened their sense of inherent goodness before God.

And Jesus, because his offer of grace was too generous and too widely offered. They instinctively knew they needed a savior.

They weren't rejecting the concept of savior. What they were rejecting was God. Their unbelief meant they backed their own sense of sovereignty and their own inherent sense of goodness.

And they thought, well, I don't need to repent, but nor am I willing to accept that the riffraff of society will also join me in heaven on the same basis of grace.

[35 : 47] I'm looking for a savior that will fit in with my ideas, will fit in with my sovereignty, that will be acceptable to me. In verse 16, no, the end of verse 19, sorry, it is, wisdom is justified by our deeds.

Again, against persistent unbelief, the truth and reality of the gospel is demonstrated in changed lives. lives, changed lives that begin with a recognition of sin, then repentance, and then leads to the Lord Jesus for complete renewal and acceptance with God and a place in heaven with him forever.

There's the mark of the gospel. There's the context of the gospel. The good news gospel is happening, it is changing lives and there will always be opposition trying to knock it down or redefine what the gospel is and what the kingdom of heaven looks like.

That's our reality. Now, just want to finish with a very, very quick challenge. So, there are many, many categories by which we can divide people in our world, and we do all the time, we have to for various reasons.

Essentially, Jesus only uses two categories to divide people. There's belief and there's unbelief. So, the challenge this morning for any and all of you here is which category are you in?

[37 : 32] So, speaking specifically to those who might be caught in unbelief, is your unbelief hidden behind a veneer of searching for more truth?

Well, if only I could understand things better, then Jesus would be acceptable. Well, we've got the good news gospel spelled out very clearly.

We've got it confirmed. We've got it written as a record in the Bible. We've got it confirmed by eyewitnesses in the Bible. We've got the testimony of countless tens of thousands of millions down through the generations.

How much more proof do you want or need? Or is it, in fact, just another form of unbelief? Just throwing a handful of dust in the air?

Because ultimately you don't want the salvation that Jesus offers. Either because you think you don't need it, or because you think, well, I do need it, but I want to modify it to suit me.

[38 : 37] I want to take on the bits I like and, you know, cut off the bits I don't like. Which would mean then that the ultimate reason for your unbelief would be that you refuse to give up your own sovereignty.

And that can only mean, if you refuse to give up your own sovereignty, then that can only mean that you continue to believe you're competent to earn your salvation, and that God will have to ultimately give you a place in heaven because you have earned it.

you are worthy of it in your own right. You are worthy of it in your own right.