

The King of the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Our Father, we thank you for your word, who is your Son. We thank you for his gospel, which is your word, which points toward him.

And we thank you for your word of scripture that points us toward the gospel and toward your Son. We pray today that as we examine it, we might be directed in this way. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, please sit down. Well, friends, 30 years had passed in relative obscurity for these two men. The two children who had inspired wonder had now grown into men.

One was a wilderness man. He ate like a wild man, that is locusts and honey. He was garbed like a prophet of old, camel's hair and a leather belt.

He was loud, aggressive, challenging to repentance. He called the religious people of his day broods of vipers. He pointed toward the second man.

[1 : 05] Then the second man came, filled with the Spirit, baptized with the Spirit, dependent upon the word of God, battling the evil one. And then he opened his mouth in the mountainside sermon.

That is, Jesus spoke the words of the Sermon on the Mount. And his words flowed like honey. And they were full of comfort, but replete with challenge as well.

It was a bit like, in my imagination, Moses on steroids. Words like, about God, like nothing that had ever been heard before. And then came the deeds afterwards, the miracles, the bold declarations of forgiveness, healings and resurrections and cleansings and blind men seeing.

And this second man, Jesus, was a walking question seeking for an answer. And finally, he puts it to the leader of his disciples. Who do you say that I am? Friends, that question, the question put to Jesus by Peter in Matthew 11, is surely the most resonant question in the New Testament.

It comes from the lips of Jesus himself, who is undisturbed, but really wants to disturb others. It's a question that draws this enormous kaleidoscope of answers throughout the ages.

[2 : 20] And it travels down to us today. You see, Jesus demands that that question, who do you say that I am, is a question that we have to answer as well. Now, the question from Matthew 16 is still a long way away from our reading for today.

Nevertheless, if you listen carefully to our reading, you would then perhaps have heard the question beginning to be posed. And it grows and grows in its need for an answer as Matthew goes on.

You see, the teaching and actions of Jesus are deliberately designed to raise questions. And in today's passage, those questions and some answers rise from the surface of the lips of a variety of people.

And Jesus interacts with them. And in doing so, he speaks to us in our age, which still has questions about Jesus. So what I want you to do is come with me as we look at this passage together and listen to the questions.

As I said, some raised by Jesus, some raised by others. But all of the responses to him, all our responses to him and his works.

[3 : 26] And every one of them will have echoes in the lives of someone sitting here today. And all of those echoes, all of those will have also echoes in the thoughts and questions of our friends and family.

So let's see what God has to teach us and perhaps those that we mix with from this passage this morning. So open your Bibles with me. Matthew chapter 11. Now, we have traveled a long way through Matthew.

We started with the Sermon on the Mount a couple of years ago. We went through Matthew 5 and 7 in a lot slower detail than we're doing now. In Matthew 8, we found Jesus descending from the mountain and large crowds following him.

We found him healing many, challenging them to consider the cost of being to his disciples. He calmed the storm, you might remember, demonstrated his authority to forgive sins. Many great deeds were done by him.

And then opposition began from the Pharisees. They declared that it was by the prince of demons that he drove out demons. Then you might remember last week, the mission of Jesus to Israel began in earnest.

[4 : 32] As we saw last week, Jesus conscripted 12 disciples to declare his kingdom among the people of Israel. That is 12 apostles, 12 sent ones going to the 12 tribes of Israel.

The mission to the Jews, as it were. At the end of chapter 10, he declared that as the disciples preached, those who welcomed his disciples would be welcoming him. And whoever welcomed him would be welcoming his father.

The words of chapter 10 indicated that in seeking, sending his disciples on this mission to Israel, Jesus is seeking a response. It might be welcome.

Or it might be resistance. It might be persecution. But he is seeking and wanting and expecting a response. In chapter 11, we see some sample responses.

They will go on through the rest of Matthew's gospel. But chapter 11 and chapter 12 have some sample responses. First, I want you to look at chapter 11, verse 1.

[5 : 33] It tells us that when Jesus had finished instructing the 12 disciples or the 12 apostles, he went on from there to himself preach and teach in the towns of Galilee. I think this is a summary of what he said in the previous chapter.

It's also a transition to our chapter for today. What he's saying is, what's being said by Matthew is, the teaching and preparation of the 12 is finished now. They've gone on.

Presumably, they get on with preaching throughout the cities of Israel. Jesus himself gets on with teaching just as he'd urged the disciples to do.

So there are the 12 out there preaching. Here is Jesus setting a good example himself. He's setting an example of what he wants them to do. And perhaps the responses he gets are symptomatic of the responses the disciples will get.

He himself, though, goes to the cities of Galilee. Now, let's look at verses 1 to 19. We're told in verses 1 to 19, the whole 19 verses or 2 to 19, that these are about Jesus and John the Baptist.

[6 : 35] And as I told you earlier on, these two men, you see, have been linked since birth. John is now in prison for preaching. Nevertheless, even from prison, we see him interacting with Jesus.

Now, the background to this interaction is that in his world, in John's world, in the world of Jesus, that world is a Jewish world.

And that Jewish world was a world full of messianic expectations. And John had spoken into that world in chapter 3. And in chapter 3, verses 7 to 12, he had spoken of God's coming wrath.

He mentioned that God had laid an axe that was being directed at the root of the tree of Israel. And trees that didn't produce fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire of judgment.

And God's hand, he said, would be filled with a winnowing fork. And he'd thresh the threshing floor and clear it. And he'd gather the wheat into the barn.

[7 : 36] And he'd burn up the chaff with an unquenchable fire. Now, those declarations by John the Baptist are ones of a final cataclysmic judgment and a severe judge.

It would be, in the words of John, a baptism of fire. Now, in prison, John is getting news about Jesus. And it appears that to him, the words and the works of Jesus don't look exactly like what he'd prophesied and was preaching.

They're simply teaching by Jesus and acts of mercy. I, the occasional opposition from religious authorities, but that's it. And that scene sets the scene, I think, for three questions that will be put.

First question comes from John, verse 2. We hear this. When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples. In other words, I think he hears about what Jesus is doing.

And he thinks, I've got some questions about this. And he sends them off to ask him. Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else? Do you hear the expression of slight doubt there and of caution?

[8 : 43] It is cautious. John the Baptist is a bit uncertain. He's a bit equivocal. He's somewhat hesitant. It appears as though he's not quite ready now to sign off on Jesus as the Messiah quite yet.

He's got a question to ask. Not only that, I think he thinks that the message of Jesus is not as strong as he is. You see, Jesus is not doing the things that John might have expected.

Perhaps John wonders whether he's speaking the things that he might have expected. You see, miracles were not high on the list of general messianic expectations. Jesus also didn't fast as John might have expected him to fast.

The company that Jesus kept wasn't always exemplary. Perhaps John thought Jesus might have been a bit soft. We don't know, but we know he had questions. And John's response of asking questions is not a bad response.

And Jesus doesn't have any problems with people asking questions. But it does appear that John's response is a bit cautious. Let's turn to the answer that Jesus gives John.

[9 : 51] Can you see it there? Verse 4. He responds appropriately. He answers from scripture. First, he urges the disciples of John to report back to John what they hear and see.

In other words, they're to go back to John and they're to tell him the preaching of Jesus and the deeds of Jesus. And then Jesus uses the language of Isaiah 29, Isaiah 35, Isaiah 61.

And he gives an answer to John. He says, tell John this. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cleansed.

The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And just as Isaiah said, the anointed one, the Christ, proclaims good news to the poor. And then Jesus gives the sting in the tail.

Look at verse 6. He says, Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. A more literal translation might read this way. Blessed is the one who doesn't trip up on account of me.

[10 : 52] Friends, what Jesus is saying is very important for us as well as for John. What Jesus is saying is that the works he does in themselves will not be enough to convince people. They need to be heard in the context of scripture.

You see, he's not just a miracle worker. He's the fulfiller of God's plans outlined in scripture, such as in Isaiah. And unless you hear his deeds in that context, you will not understand them.

But Jesus is also saying more. He's saying there is something in him that makes tripping up over him a real possibility. You see, Jesus will always be provocative. He will always upset expectations. People will always have a tendency to misunderstand and trip up over him. You see, he's not easily tied down as Jesus, except by a thorough knowledge of God's plans laid out in the Old Testament. And our temptation will be to take out the troublesome bits of Jesus and make him palatable, won't it? Jesus won't allow that. Blessed is the one, he says, who doesn't trip up over him.

[11 : 56] Friends, this little scenario tells us a lot about a proper response to Jesus, doesn't it? See, Jesus' response, John's response is the response of one where he has pre-existing expectations of Jesus, formed by scripture undoubtedly.

Jesus fails to meet some of the expectations he has. Jesus is a bit unexpected even to John the Baptist. He doesn't sort of fit very neatly. His words or his deeds offend some sensibilities that John has.

He's just got a few more questions, follow-up questions. I wonder, friends, how many of you are like that here? Or perhaps you have friends like it. That is, Jesus doesn't measure up, match up with what they want or what they expect.

And as a result, they're a little put off by Jesus. They're dissatisfied with the Jesus presented to us in scripture. Well, Jesus is offering a warning here to such people as we read the text.

He says, blessing comes with not tripping up on account of me. By implication, curse does come with tripping up on account of him. You see, Jesus is clear.

[13 : 06] Everything hangs on how you understand him. Make sure you get him right. And the best way to get him right is to listen to scripture on him.

Eternal blessing or curse hangs on getting it right. Don't trip up over him. But let's get back to our next section. First, John asked a question about Jesus. Jesus answered the question.

Now, Jesus has a question about John. Can you see it? Verse 7. He turns to the crowd. The disciples of John are wandering away. Going back to John to report back, presumably.

Jesus turns to the crowd. And look at what he says to them. Verse 7. He poses three questions. Each of them, or the first two expect a no. And some have a pointed barb toward King Herod.

First, he asks. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Now, the word reed was an...

[14:08] The symbol of a reed was an emblem for Herod Antipas, the king of the time. It occurred on his coins. In other words, why don't I think Jesus is asking something like this?

So what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A weak, pliable, wavering, vacillating person like Herod? Implied answer?

No, not on your life. John is made of something else. And second, Jesus asks. And if not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?

No, those who wear clothes, who wear fine clothes, are in king's palaces. Again, an implied barb toward Herod the king. In other words, Jesus, I think he's saying. So what did you go out to see? Someone that you'd invite to your next social dinner? An elegantly clothed but vacuous and vacillating dandy like Herod? And the implied answer?

[15:06] No, of course not. John is made of something else. You see, he was worth going out into the wilderness to see. Not a weak reed falling over all the time. Not someone dressed up in nines but, you know, vacillating.

No, he's very different to the man who imprisoned him. Then the third question. So what did you go out to see? If it wasn't either of those things. A prophet?

And this time there's no implied answer. John is cautious about Jesus or was cautious about Jesus. Jesus gives him an explicit answer. But Jesus is not cautious about John.

Look at what he says, verse 9. Yes. And I tell you one more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written. I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare the way before you.

Truly I tell you, amongst those born of women, there has never, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

[16:11] From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence. Violent people have been raiding it. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

And if you're willing to accept it, he's the Elijah who is to come. Whoever has ears, let him hear. Now what I think Jesus is saying in verse 10 is this.

One. John is indeed a prophet. A messenger of God. A herald of God's Messiah. Two. He is the messenger.

Prophesied in Malachi 3 verse 1. Who precedes the coming of the Lord himself. Verse 11 is just a little trickier. But I think what Jesus is saying is something like this.

He's saying that those who preceded him and proclaimed him have a pinnacle. And that is John the Baptist.

[17:10] John is the greatest of those who came before Jesus. But with the coming of Jesus, that old order has passed away. And a whole new age has dawned.

And as the proclaimer and introducer to Jesus, John was the greatest. He was there at the moment. He introduced the Lord himself. He was the messenger who went before the Lord.

A new age has dawned. But the era of the Messiah is a new era. And to be just in the kingdom of God. In fact, to be in the kingdom of God as the least is to be greater than John.

If you're in the kingdom of God, then you're at the center of the plan and purpose of God. But, but says Jesus, since the days of John the Baptist until now, that kingdom, that kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and violent people are taking it or raiding it.

What I think Jesus is saying is that John the Baptist illustrates how life will be from now on. He's an overlapping person. And he's seen out the old era. He's brought in the new. But he's demonstrated what life in the new will be like.

[18:21] After all, there are those like Herod who oppose God's purposes. And what they do is they oppose it with violence, such as arresting its herald, John. And such things will continue.

John's a foretaste of the violence that will come. The gospel, you see, is like a profound force. And it will provoke violent reactions by those who can't handle it.

Friends, we've seen those violent reactions even in this last week or two, haven't we? Let's see if we can summarize. First, let's think about John again. John's an example of one response to the person of Jesus.

John is both profoundly right and profoundly wrong at the same time. He's the greatest prophet of his era.

But even he does not fully recognize what God is doing in his son. He's just got a question or two about it. His greatness doesn't spare him from misapprehension.

[19 : 21] It doesn't diminish his greatness at all. However, it's a greatness that fades into insignificance beside those who truly apprehend Jesus. Second, let's think about Herod and his ilk.

Friends, some people who are confronted by Jesus, by the truth of Jesus, will react like Herod. They will hear God speak through his messengers, but they will oppose it.

And they will oppose it with vigor, with persecution, with brutality, and even with the death of the messengers. They will stumble big time over Jesus.

There is no hope for such people unless they turn. For the other side of blessing is curse and judgment. You see, in our age, just as in the time of John and Jesus, there will be those, there are those, who violently and aggressively oppose God's work through Jesus, the Son.

And some of them, God will turn to himself. Just as he did with Paul the Apostle, the great opponent of God in his Son. But others will push on with their violence unabated.

[20 : 36] And in the end, they'll be confronted by Jesus, the Judge. And he will be all that John had prophesied. He will judge them. Let's turn to the final interaction between John and Jesus.

Look at verses 16 to 19. Jesus speaks of the generation of his own day. And he uses an illustration taken from the world of children and their play. He pictures children, you know, sitting on the edge of a wedding, perhaps.

And there are the games you might play at a wedding. Full of fun and pipes and kids singing while everyone's celebrating. Having a good time. Then there's a different scenario, a funeral.

Full of dirges and wailing and mourning. And perhaps kids joining in with that as well. And Jesus represents the first group. You see, he comes into the world with a promise and with joyfulness of a wedding.

John, though, he came into the world with a wailing call for repentance before the judgment of God. And the generation that both came to have problems with both. They grumble because John, well, he comes not eating or drinking.

[21 : 44] And then they whinge because they perceive Jesus as being a glutton and a drunkard. That is, he eats too much and drinks too much. He's a friend of sinners and tax collectors. And basically they're saying, Jesus is saying of that generation and of nearly everyone that has followed them, I think.

That what they want is a God and saviour in their own mould. They're not happy with the one God sends. Friends, this is not like many in our own generation.

They hear of Jesus and they whinge and complain. He's either too soft or too hard. Or Paul who appointed him has corrupted him. Sorry, or the one he appointed Paul has corrupted him.

Friends, everything people are saying, when they won't accept the God who's presented for us in the scriptures, is the mark of idolaters. They cannot accept God as he's defined himself.

And so they crafted God in their own image according to their own likeness. I say, I like to think of God as this, really. I like to think of Jesus as that.

[22 : 58] Well, friends, to do this is to damn yourself to an existence without the real God. Because God defines himself. He's not defined by us. Now let's move to verses 20 to 24.

Jesus now turns to the cities to which he has preached. I need to tell you that from what we can tell, the reaction toward Jesus in those cities, has not been aggressive like Herod's violence.

No, it's largely been indifferent as far as we can tell. I suspect it's been, it's like many of Australians in our generation. That is the generation of most of us sitting here. I think it'll change in the next generation, which is much more aggressive towards Jesus.

But I think our generation is largely indifferent. Some things about Jesus are liked, aren't they?

Others are disliked. But largely, the people of our age, 10 years either side, are just largely indifferent to Jesus.

Life goes on as though Jesus didn't exist. But look at what Jesus says to these cities of indifference that do not repent. He says to them, what I think he will say to many of our own day who simply treat Jesus with indifference.

[24 : 09] He says to you, woe to you, Chorazin. Woe to you, Bethsaida. Woe to you, cities of Australia. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the heavens? No, you'll go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this

day.

But I tell you, it'll be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you. You see, a greater revelation has come to our world. And it's in the public domain. It's the revelation of Jesus. And indifference to it is no excuse. Hearing and welcoming Jesus will be met with blessing. But indifference to him amounts to the same thing as opposition. And it will be met with judgment. We've made lots of responses so far, haven't we, in this chapter? There's been the cautious John. There's been the violent Herod and his spiritual successors.

[25 : 18] There's been the indifferent cities. No reaction has really been inadequate, hasn't it? But look at verses 25 to 30. On the home stretch now.

Jesus speaks of a proper response to Jesus. And let me tell you what it's not. It's not the response of those in palaces. It's not the intellectual elite.

It's not those in power. It's not the response of the wise and the learned. No. It's the response of babes. Of little children.

But do you notice where the response comes from? Do you notice the origin of the response? Look at there. Look at verse 25 to 26. It is God the Father who has been pleased to reveal himself to these spiritual little children.

And how does he do it? Well, friends, look at verse 27. Look carefully at it. Jesus says, All things have been committed to me by my Father.

[26 : 25] No one knows the Son except the Father. And no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Jesus is very clear. The Father and the Son are bound together. They mutually cohere. They share knowledge of each other and they give access to each other.

And friends, this verse is crystal clear. It is uniquely Christian. It tells us the only way to God the Father is through the Son. Later on, it will be put much more, or in another Gospel, it's put much more clearly, isn't it?

I'm the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me. The only access to the true God is through the Son. And the Son then goes on in verse 8 to describe how you access him.

You access him by being children, through being humble, through acknowledging your weariness, and your lives full of burden, and by coming meekly to him and dependently to him and finding rest in him.

[27 : 37] And then Jesus tells us about the yoke that you take on. You see, when you come to Jesus, it's like you're in tandem with him. You have a yoke over your shoulders, but it's a yoke that's co-born by him.

It's a yoke that he describes as one that comes from one gentle and humble in heart. It's a yoke that is easy, and it's a burden that is light. Friends, that doesn't mean for a moment that there are no demands from Jesus.

Because if you thought that, then you haven't been listening to Matthew up until this point, have you? Because he's been full of demand. He's already made clear that he demands a righteousness that exceeds anything of anyone who preceded him.

That his way is a way of the cross, a narrow way and a hard way, complete with a cross that will divide even us from our families. It's a yoke that binds us together with one who is gentle and humble of heart.

So as we think about today's passage, I wonder which reaction of all of the reactions matches your reaction to Jesus. Is it that of a cautious John saying, yeah, I'm just a bit hesitant about this.

[28 : 52] I like Jesus, just a bit cautious. Or is it the reaction of violent Herod who wants nothing to do with the proclaimer of Jesus and apparently nothing to do with Jesus?

Or is it the reaction of the wise and the learned? Or is it the reaction of those who would make God in their own image and can't countenance anything or anyone who's not? Is it the reaction of violence toward Jesus and aggression toward him?

Or is it that of a child who simply comes to the Father through the Son? Is it that of simply the one who simply binds himself to the humble and gentle Jesus and takes on the easy yoke and the light burden and shares it with him?

See, only the last is the non-stumbling one, friends. Only the last is the non-stumbling one. And only the last is the one which will result in blessing.

For it's only that one that brings us to the Father. There's only one way to the Father and that is through the Son. There's only one Son and it's this one.

[30 : 05] The one who's humble, contrite of heart, meek, only through him and only by taking on his yoke.

Let's pray. Amen.