

# More than the greatest prophet

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, when I was growing up, me and my brother would approach our meals very differently. So say we serve a meal that looks something like this on the next slide.

Actually, that can't be right. We never had MasterChef growing up. So let's try another one. Yep, yep. Classic meat and three veg. Actually, that's still not right because my mom's Asian.

So let's try one more. Yeah, that's more like it. Meat and three veg, Asian style. Anyway, my approach was to eat the favorite bits of this dish first, which was the beef.

And once I was done, then to pick my way through the boring or bad bits, namely the veggies. And I would hope that perhaps I wouldn't have to finish them all.

Now, my brother, on the other hand, would do the opposite. And it's not because he hates meat. In fact, he loves his meat more than I do. But he would eat the bad bits first, the carrots, the greens and the mushrooms, because what he wanted to do was save the best for last, to really savor the meat.

[ 1 : 20 ] I don't know whether any of you are like that. But this happens with news as well, doesn't it? And we've just talked about that question earlier. Just quick show of hand, who prefers bad news first?

Hands up. Ooh, that's a lot. And who prefers the good news first? Oh, not many. So you want to save the best for last, is that right? Yeah, that's right. So you're like my brother.

Well, in our passage tonight, we'll discover actually there is actually a group of people that didn't want either. That is, they didn't want the good news or the bad news. They rejected them both.

And this news was actually coming from God. Which actually, it's all bizarre, isn't it? Because with bad news, we can understand why people don't want them. But whoever rejects the good news as well?

Well, we're going to look at our passage and hopefully we'll find out, won't we? But first, recall what happened last week. Jesus, at the start of this chapter, was healing the dying and raising the dead.

[ 2 : 18 ] And so verse 17, if you look there, just before our passage, news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. This news reached John the Baptist too, via his disciples.

And by this time, John was already in prison because he was insulting or rebuking King Herod. But John, having heard this news, is keen to discover whether Jesus was truly who he said he was.

So in verse 18, we read that John's disciples told him about these things. And calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, Are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?

When the man came to Jesus, they said, John the Baptist sent us to ask you, Are you the one who is to come and should we expect someone else?

Or should we expect someone else? And what John wants to know, although he doesn't use the word, is whether Jesus is the Messiah. Is he the one who will come and restore the kingdom to Israel?

[ 3 : 18 ] And some of you may wonder why this was needed. Because if you recall, John actually baptized Jesus and saw the Spirit descend on him in the River Jordan.

Wasn't that confirmation enough? Why did he have to ask? Well, I think for a start, we need to remember that there were no TVs or selfies. So John would have only heard of what Jesus was doing.

He wouldn't have actually got a photo to actually see that this was the same Jesus that he's baptized. And so he may have needed confirmation of that. But secondly, I think Jesus' actions didn't fit with the popular expectations of a Messiah.

Or the Messiah. The Messiah was meant to come and overthrow the Romans. And yet, Jesus was doing none of that. He was not a political figure as such.

In fact, in the last week, we just saw Jesus help a centurion, didn't he? A Roman centurion heal his servant. Well, Jesus' answer to John then is found in verse 21 and onwards.

[ 4 : 27 ] At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard.

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

And I think he's saying, Don't stumble because what I'm doing doesn't fit the popular expectations. Because what I'm doing is in line with what the Old Testament has prophesied.

And last year, we looked at chapter 4. But if you look back at chapter 4, this was actually the very same thing he said when he stood up in his hometown synagogue and he quoted from Isaiah 61. These very words that he said are similar to Isaiah 61. Last week, you recall, I said that his miracle showed the power of Jesus' words.

[ 5 : 32 ] Right? I said that Jesus was more than a healer. That he was a great prophet as well. But today, we see that Jesus is more than even a great prophet.

And more than the greatest of all prophets. Because he's the Messiah. He's not just the messenger. He's the one to come, which is what John was asking all about.

Jesus is the one, my first point, who will usher in the long-awaited kingdom. He's not just going to announce his coming. He's going to bring it about by his own coming.

And the miracles that he's been doing are a glimpse of what this kingdom looks like. Where death and disease will be forever eliminated. And in his preaching or proclaiming of the good news, he's inviting people into this kingdom.

So this is the good news that John's disciples then can take back to John. This is indeed truly the kingdom that John and his disciples have been waiting for.

[ 6 : 37 ] Or in the words of Isaiah 61 itself, which I've put on the slide, the Spirit of the Lord is on Jesus. He's been sent to proclaim the good news, to bind up the brokenhearted, to set the captives free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

If you've been through it, it's like waking up on the day of your wedding. Or getting the keys to your first car. The joy of finally experiencing what you've been waiting for, for such a long time.

Now as his disciples, John's disciples depart, Jesus then turns the crowd's attention to John. He's almost using the opportunity of John's disciples' visit to now tell the crowd that John too played an important role in the coming of this kingdom.

And so at point 2, and from verses 24 to 28, Jesus commends the work that John has done to prepare the way for the kingdom. And so we read in verse 24 that after John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John.

And he said this, What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?

[ 7 : 56 ] No. Those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet. Yes, and I tell you, more than a prophet.

Jesus here, I think, is simply confirming what the people knew about John, that he actually was a prophet. Because what he did, where he was, perfectly fitted the image of a prophet.

It's just like if I mentioned the word lifesaver. What sort of picture would you have in your mind? Something like this, right? Maybe not so glamorous, but anyway.

Or if I said mad professor, then it would be something like this. Einstein, Albert Einstein type-like figure. And if I said, you've passed her, there would be someone like this.

And so, I think it was with John, that when they saw John, this was a perfect picture of what you would expect of a prophet. Out living in the desert alone, living simply, without any fancy clothes.

[ 9 : 04 ] And they would know then, as well, what to expect from him in what he said. Someone that was going to speak the truth bluntly, honestly, but bluntly, without so much as having regard for your feelings.

And so, if you turn back to chapter 3 for a moment, because that's where he was preaching. Just turn back, about three pages or so. You see, for instance, that in verse 4, John was preaching,

verse 3, sorry, John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

John was giving them the plain truth about their spiritual condition. They had stuffed up big time, and the only way back to God was to repent and change their ways. And then, if you go down to verse 7, you see the kind of language he was using.

He calls them a brood of vipers. Who told you to flee the wrath to come? He was chiding them to produce the fruit of repentance.

Otherwise, he says, you'll be cut down like a barren tree and thrown into the fire. And then, he goes on in verse 11 to 14 to give them really stark examples of what it means to bear the fruit of repentance.

[10:25] Now, for those who heeded his words, then, John also preached the good news, it says in verse 18. And what he was doing was laying the groundwork for Jesus to come along. And so, come back now to chapter 7 and verse 27.

Jesus now says that John was the messenger. That was why his role was so important, why he was greater than all the prophets, because he and he alone was preparing the way for the one and only Messiah, that of Jesus.

And yet, if you look at verse 28, the wonderful thing about this kingdom is the least, the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John.

And you know how real estate agents always say it's best to buy the worst house on the best street rather than the best house on the worst. Or given it's tennis season now, it's best to have the worst seat at the Australian Open final where perhaps you get to see rougher and federal play rather than have the best tickets done in our tennis courts where you can see Andrew and I take each other on. And in which case, I think we have to pay you to come and see us. Well, this is what Jesus is saying with regards to the kingdom. Every person, no matter how insignificant they are, is actually in a better position in the kingdom than even the greatest prophet that is John in the age that has just passed.

[11:58] That's how great this kingdom is. You don't even have to have a position in the kingdom. Just belong to it and you're doing much better than John was in the old. And so when we belong to this kingdom, there is really nothing better to look forward to.

We've arrived. This is it. In this kingdom, we get to know God in the flesh, in the person of Jesus. In this kingdom, as Isaiah 61 promises, we are truly free, not just from mere physical bondage, but spiritual bondage, bondage that is caused by our sin and the sin of others.

So, for instance, is there a certain fear that is controlling your life? Is there something in your past that is still haunting you?

Well, the promise is that there is freedom to be found in God's kingdom. Now, I don't mean by that that suddenly, magically, your fears would disappear at once. No. But what I'm saying is that when we belong to the kingdom, God's spirit is powerful enough to transform us by his word so that we no longer need to be mastered by our past or by our fears.

Guilt, shame, despair about the future, all these need not control us when we belong to Jesus. That's how amazing his kingdom is.

[13:26] I'm not saying again that there's no suffering, there's no pain, that everything will go away, but what I'm saying is that when we belong to God and we are in his kingdom, we have this great hope and great certainty of a glorious future.

Okay, I'm going to actually pause now and I'm going to get you to do some work a bit like last week before we get to our last point. You see in the box there I've got a question.

I guess to set it up, what I'm saying is that it may seem up to now that the picture we get is one of John bringing the bad news whereas Jesus brings the good news.

It may be that you've just read this passage and you think that Jesus' message is purely a positive one. There's no judgment, only love, no sin, only blessing.

But I want you to take a look at the three passages that I've got on the outline and see if that's the case or not. So perhaps just gather into your groups, the people you're chatting with earlier, maybe four or five people and work out if there is what judgment or bad news, whether it's explicit or implicit, Jesus has pronounced on the people in each of those passages.

[14:42] Okay, I'll give you about five minutes or so to do that. Now, I hope you see the point I'm making but actually both John and Jesus had the same message, didn't they?

I mean, John came out and said they needed to repent. Jesus did it a bit differently. He actually, in one sense, allowed them to accept or reject his message but when they started to reject his message, then what he did was to pronounce or diagnose what was wrong with them and essentially what was wrong with them was what John was saying was wrong with them in the first place, that they needed to repent.

And so both John and Jesus were doing the same thing and in one sense that all makes sense, doesn't it? Because what is the good news of salvation for if you don't think you need a savior? If you don't think you're a sinner then obviously you will not look to the news or to the message that Jesus was proclaiming as good news. And so as we come to our third and final point, where we see, what we see is that the people's responses actually fall into these two camps and they fall into those camps primarily based on whether they see themselves as sinners or not.

So in verse 29 we read, all the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right because they had been baptized by John.

[16:16] But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for them because they had not been baptized by John. And so, can you see the dividing line?

Those who accepted John's baptism, that is, those who believed in his preaching on repentance, that is, they needed to repent because they were sinners, welcomed the good news of Jesus. They acknowledged Jesus' words as God's right way for them. But the Pharisees and the experts of the law who thought they were righteous and so, therefore, didn't submit themselves to John's baptism, well, they naturally found Jesus' words offensive.

They rejected God's purpose, that is, his plan of salvation for them, and refused Jesus' invitation to enter the kingdom. And the irony of it all is that of all the people, the Pharisees and the experts of the law were actually the ones that were most dedicated to this quest.

They had been preparing their whole lives for the kingdom. That's why they studied the law, that's why they tried to be so religious, all because they actually desired to enter the kingdom of God.

[17:33] And yet, when it finally comes in the person of Jesus, they miss it. They miss it because they failed to see what was needed to enter into it, was to recognize that they too were sinful.

You see, they thought that they could enter the kingdom on their own terms rather than on God's. It's a great shame, isn't it?

Such folly, and all because of their pride. And that's the last thing that Jesus now exposes them to or with by giving them a comparison in verses 31 to 35.

So, look there with me where Jesus says, to what then can I compare the people of this generation? And here I think people mean the Pharisees and those who reject Jesus.

What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other. We played the pipe for you and you did not dance. We sang a dirge which is like a really, you know, mournful tune and you did not cry.

[18:40] Now, we all remember, don't we, maybe a long time ago that back in the days of our school there was always that popular group in the schoolyard. You know, the ones with all the interesting games at recess and everyone would try and gather around to join in except that we can't because we're not the cool kids.

And then from time to time you may get one brave soul that tries and he would ask or she would ask and what they would come up with that cool group is then a set of requirements.

You know, things they must do first like bring us chocolate for a whole week and you can be in the group. Except that once that's done they would then say oh, but no, no, no, you can't just join yet because you also have to carry our school bags for a week or something like that or do our homework.

But then when that is achieved then they'll keep coming up with yet another requirement. There's always that one more thing to be done because the truth is they're just not going to, you know, they don't really want to have let the poor kid into their group.

Well, this is sort of the situation that Jesus is describing of the children in the marketplace. They're always wanting to dictate the terms of what others have to do to play with them.

[19:53] And the Pharisees are like the children except Jesus and John refuse to play by their rules. And so what they do in turn is decide from the outset to reject John and Jesus.

they've decided because they don't want to submit to their terms that these can't be God's prophets. And nothing John or Jesus said or did would ever be enough for them, would satisfy them.

Instead, anything, they would find anything to criticize John and Jesus for, which is exactly what they did. So much so that Jesus now points out they would do it even if they ended up contradicting themselves.

For John, for Jesus says, John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say he has a demon. But the Son of Man, Jesus, came eating and drinking, and you say he's a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

But wisdom is proved right by all her children. Now friends, it's easy for us to find fault with the Pharisees, but often I think we can fall into the same mistake as well.

[ 20 : 59 ] That is, we often try to encounter God on our terms rather than his. We're so set in our ways that we make God conform to our views rather than subject our views to his.

And so we might say things like this, how can God be loving if he sends people to hell? Why would God object as long as two people love each other?

Or, if God really wants us to believe in him, then he must surely prove himself to us. There are more examples, but can you see in each case what's happening?

We are putting our own reason, our own feelings, our own judgment, our own definition of love even, over that of God's, aren't we? We're forcing God into our mode rather than submitting to his standards.

And, even for those of us who are committed Christians, we can fall into that trap as well. What we do is we tune out the parts of the Bible that challenge our blind spots.

[ 22 : 09 ] So for me, I have to say that it's the teachings about money and riches. You see, I like the quote that Paul gives that it's the love of money that's the root of all evil, not money itself.

But whenever I hear Jesus speak of the dangers of being rich, you know, I'll just try and rationalize it away. Now, I wonder which of God's teachings you find challenging for yourself.

But if you think about it for a minute, that way of thinking just doesn't make sense, does it? Because if God is truly who he is, then how can we conform him to our views?

This is God we're talking about. Surely, if God ever would dance to our tune, then he's not a God worth worshipping at all, is he? No, if God is God, then we need to treat him like God.

We must submit to him. It's us that have to hear him on his terms and not on ours. And the truth is, if we never found God and his words challenging, that is, whenever we read the Bible or whenever we think we hear from God, he's always confirming what we already believe, what is always comfortable to us, then it's really likely that we're a bit like the Pharisees, aren't we?

[ 23 : 37 ] We're unwilling to accept the uncomfortable truth about us. But friends, even though the truth that God gives to us can be challenging at times, let us not resent God for it.

Because after we're willing to accept the bad news, as it were, what awaits us is the good news of God. Whenever we repent of our sin, then what follows is God's promise of forgiveness, made possible because he sent his son Jesus to die for us and to usher in his kingdom.

It's a bit like that first reading tonight where the prophet Ezekiel was given a scroll, wasn't he, containing God's laments and mourning for the sins of Israel. And then God asked Ezekiel to eat it. I wonder if that's where the Ethiopian king got the idea from. But God asked Ezekiel to eat it as a symbol of first accepting the truth before he would proclaim it to the nation of Israel.

And to our surprise when he does, it doesn't taste bitter or horrible. That's what I would have expected. But rather, if we read in Ezekiel chapter 3 and verse 3, it says on the verse, it tasted as sweet as honey in his mouth.

[ 24 : 58 ] Yes, they are laments, yes, they are mourning, but when we've accepted it and received it, they become as sweet as honey to Ezekiel. Brothers and sisters, when we hear God on his terms, without trying to bring our own bias and preconceptions in, it will often be challenging and confronting to us.

We will hear, it would sound like John preaching, you brood of vipers, flee from the wrath to come. But yet, Jesus' challenge to us in verse 35 is that we are to be true children of wisdom.

That is, if we are to be wise, then let us listen, let us be humble enough to receive God's truth, no matter how unpleasant it may be at first. Because when we do, the rewards of the kingdom await us.

Jesus awaits us, and we will savor the sweet taste of forgiveness and the joy of living in his kingdom. Well, let me pray that God will help us to do that.

Father, give us the humility to hear your words and receive your son, Jesus, on your terms rather than ours. Open our eyes to our blind spots in life and to the times when we have been blinded by our own error and prejudices.

[ 26 : 14 ] give us the courage to repent and change so that we may enjoy the true blessings of your kingdom in Christ Jesus. We pray and ask this in his name.

Amen. Amen.