

Matthew 11:1–15

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[0 : 00] So for those of you who don't know me, my name is Joel Strecker as it stands in the service sheet. I work part-time at St. John's doing community group type things and I have the tremendous privilege of preaching today.

So our portion of scripture is what was just read to us, Matthew 11, 1 to 15. If you have a pew Bible in front of you, it'll be helpful to turn to it. Then you can follow along with what I'm saying and you can keep me honest because we're all sitting under the authority of scripture together.

Now if you're new or if you've been away for a while, we're going through the gospel according to Matthew. We started with chapter 8 some weeks ago and that was when Jesus began his healing ministry.

The Sermon on the Mount was the teaching ministry. Now we're in the healing ministry. That goes to the end of chapter 9. Chapter 10, Jesus gathers his 12 disciples and sends them out on mission. With that memorable line, behold, I'm sending you out as sheep amidst wolves.

He promises both persecution from man and comfort from the Father. To be a follower of Jesus is to take up our cross. Now that mission-oriented section comes to an end with 11 verse 1 and the focus shifts back onto Jesus.

[1 : 16] And interestingly enough, there's no record of the disciples' mission or how it went. But Jesus is only mentioned teaching and preaching in the disciples' towns, where usually we get the list teaching, preaching, healing.

So maybe they are actually in a healing ministry. We don't really know. But the focus is on Jesus. And in our passage today, as Jesus goes about teaching and preaching, he says something very important about himself.

But if you aren't paying attention, it's easy to miss. That's why he finishes his teaching with the line, He who has ears, let him hear. So, the camera stays pointed on Jesus as the disciples maybe go out on mission.

And now we're in a new section of Matthew. No commentator totally agrees how to divide it up, what the themes are. But one way we can frame this next section is as responses to Jesus. Who do you think he is? The first responder is John the Baptist. What's John's response? He's uncertain. Verse 2.

[2 : 29] 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? Now, at first blush, John's confusion might seem a little bit confusing, right?

Isn't John the messenger who prepared the way for the Messiah? Didn't he see the spirit descend like a dove upon Jesus when he was baptized in the Jordan? Now, historically, many leaders in the church were uncomfortable with the idea of a doubting John.

So, in their sermons and commentaries, they conclude John wasn't actually in doubt. It was all a ruse John undertook for the sake of his disciples who needed to look more closely at Jesus.

So, he kind of has a little bit of subterfuge. I don't really know Jesus. You guys go find out what he's on about, right? And we already know the disciples of John are a little bit out of sync, right?

If you go back to Matthew 9, they ask some questions or they misunderstand what's going on. But the problem is the plain sense of the text portrays a doubting John. And if you go back to the Greek, it's even clearer than in English.

[3 : 36] John's disciples are going on John's behalf as his representatives in order that he, John, can have a conversation with the Christ while he's in prison. So, why is John doubting?

Now, we know John was a faithful servant of the Lord, set apart for a special task. An angel appeared to his father, Zechariah, to announce his birth in Luke. He was given the gift of the Holy

Spirit, even in the womb.

So that when Jesus passed by in utero, John leapt for joy in his mother's belly. John responded faithfully to God's call.

He accepted the ministry that was given to him. He went out into the wilderness to prepare the people for the arrival of their Lord. When he was confronted by a corrupt status quo, he didn't back down.

He rebuked the spiritual and political leaders. That's why he's in prison right now, because he spoke out against Herod. And John even gets to baptize Jesus in the Jordan. To fulfill all righteousness, so Jesus can begin his ministry.

[4 : 42] John is, with no exaggeration, a remarkable prophet of the Lord. And although Matthew doesn't explicitly tell us why John doubts that Jesus is the Messiah, there's probably two reasons why he's struggling with Jesus' ministry.

First, because he does not understand Jesus' power. Second, because he does not understand Jesus' love. So John seems to misunderstand the way Jesus is exercising power.

Because John was probably expecting Jesus to bring religious and political transformation. That was actually a really common expectation during Jesus' time.

The Messiah would come, he'd restore a kingship, temple, land. So, for example, at the end of Zephaniah, chapter 3, we get this. Behold, at that time I, that's the Lord, will deal with all your oppressors.

I will save the lame and gather the outcasts. I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. And how could a nation's fortunes be restored without purifying the land of false shepherds and Gentile oppressors?

[5 : 46] Now, we get a sense John is expecting something like this from the Messiah. Because in his sermon to the Pharisees and Sadducees back in Matthew 3, he says this, I baptize you with water, but he who is coming after me is mightier.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Now, that is stern, uncompromising stuff. John is speaking about a final reckoning, which comes when the one coming after John comes.

And this doesn't seem to be happening in Jesus' ministry. So John asks Jesus, are you the one who is to come? But there's a second way that John struggles with Jesus' identity, I think, and it's more personal.

So we read in Isaiah 42, for example, about the servant of the Lord who will bring salvation. And the Lord says this, I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoner from the dungeon.

[7 : 01] And where's John? He's in prison, right? So when John hears about the remarkable deeds of Jesus, it's easy to see why he would wonder.

He hears all these wonderful things and asks, Jesus, if you are the one who is to come, why am I still here? Can't you deliver me?

Don't you care? And Jesus responds to John's questions with a record of his deeds and words. Verse 4.

Jesus answered, go and tell John what you hear and see. And that's kind of interesting too.

Because Jesus could have said, yes, I am the one who is to come, and gone about his day.

But in this, the heart Jesus has for John is revealed. He's gently reminding John about what John has already heard and seen. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear.

[8 : 12] This is exactly what God promised. And Jesus goes even further than that. The dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them.

I don't know if you've thought about this before, but isn't it beautiful how Jesus wraps up his bonafides here? He's done all these things, even raised the dead, not only that, he finishes, the poor have good news preached to them.

That's wonderful stuff. What a savior. So, Jesus reminds John of all that he's been doing in his ministry.

And he finishes in verse 6 with a line of tremendous encouragement. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. Now what does it mean to be offended?

It's a gut reaction. When you encounter something contrary to your own desires or your sense of propriety. You could also translate the verse, blessed is the one who is not repelled by me.

[9 : 19] Blessed is the one who is not repulsed by me. Jesus knows how hard this is for John. Knows how difficult the path John is on has been.

Knows how difficult it is for human nature to embrace him and his gospel. And so all he asks of John is that he not be offended by the way in which he is liberating the world and fulfilling all of God's promises.

Anyone who can embrace such a Lord and trust in his power and his care will be blessed. Now I think it needs to be said that Jesus is not apologizing for his Lordship here.

His Lordship needs no defense. But in his tender compassion, Jesus is stooping down to gather in a little child who is struggling with a moment of doubt.

Blessed is the one who in the midst of confusion and doubt does not turn from me. And I don't know about you, but hearing about John struggling, this titan of faith, is tremendously encouraging.

[10 : 32] And the relevance it has for our own lives is quite clear. Because God's ways are not our ways, because we don't always see the justice that we yearn for, don't always see the liberation that we hope for, it can be difficult to stand confidently in the truth of the gospel.

Jesus warned his followers in Matthew 10, it's going to be very difficult. I am sending you out as sheep amongst wolves. People are going to hate you. Families are going to divide. And the story of John the Baptist raises some very pointed questions.

What do we do when Jesus' liberation does not come as we want it, but as he wills it? What does true power look like? What does true love look like?

And if we struggle like John, in circumstances where we long for deliverance from oppression, just like John, we need to look to the words and the deeds of Christ.

Need to remind ourselves of what was seen and heard. And trust not only that Jesus has the power, but that he cares, and that he wants to bless us. He is ready to bless, even when we struggle to embrace his gospel.

[11 : 43] So John's disciples leave to give this gospel message to their leader. And as they go, Jesus transitions into a sneaky little sermon on John's identity.

One might say he's being as wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. Wise because he knows what's in our hearts. He's innocent because although he knows, he does not despise us.

And instead, desires to draw us in. And in this short, but very important instruction, Jesus begins by contrasting John with two images.

A shaking reed and comfy nobility. Now both images highlight the fact John has come to prepare the hearts of the people for the arrival of the Lord. He was not sent to make people feel good about themselves.

That's the reed shaking in the wind. He wasn't sent to rub elbows with the rich and famous or to curry favor. He came preaching, repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

[12 : 49] And we've already discussed some of the remarkable aspects of John's ministry. Here, Jesus draws the crowd's attention to the fact John is a prophet fulfilling a prophecy. Specifically, the final prophecy from the final Old Testament prophet, Malachi, which is who Jesus quotes in verse 10.

Except, Jesus is doing something really unique here. If we flip back to Malachi 3, we read, Behold, I, that's the Lord, send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. But in Matthew, Jesus says, Behold, I send my messenger before your face. Who will prepare your way before you?

Now, we know from the context of Malachi that the I and the prophecy is God the Father. And we can gather from the context of Matthew that the messenger preparing the way in the wilderness is John the Baptist.

But who is this you the Father is speaking to? Jesus doesn't give the crowd any clue. He keeps clipping along. Instead, moving on to say that among all who have been born up to this point, none are greater than John.

[14 : 04] And John is the greatest not because he in and of himself possesses special qualities, but because he is the one chosen to announce the very arrival of God to Israel. God's dynamic rule, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And then we get to this thorny verse, verse 12, where the main difficulty is one of translation. Now, I won't belabor the Greek, but you'll notice a little footnote if you have a pew Bible on verse 12 after the word violence as a superscripted four.

If you go to the bottom of the page on that, it gives you an alternative translation. We could translate the verse as the kingdom of heaven has been coming violently, not violent in the sense of bloody, but in the sense of forceful, with power.

Now, personally, I think Jesus is playing on words here. For the violence of the kingdom of heaven is nothing like the power of the violent ones who seek to oppose it. And if you are willing to accept this translation, what Jesus is saying is from the days of John the Baptist until Jesus' ministry, the kingdom of heaven has been coming forcefully, with power.

This fits well with what we've seen of them. The kingdom of heaven has been advancing forcefully, and the violent house sought to take it by force. First, they imprison John. Soon, they will imprison and crucify the Messiah.

[15:26] So then, the logic of these verses, 11 to 14, is this. The kingdom of heaven is not only near, but powerfully so. That's why John is the greatest. He heralds the end of an age.

The law and the prophets prophesied up until John. They were pointing to someone. Now their function has been complete. John marks the end. That's also why the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John, because God is accomplishing something utterly new, something coming after John.

And this new thing comes after John because John is Elijah. And if you are willing to accept that John is Elijah, the day of the Lord has come, just as Malachi announced it would.

So he who has ears, let him hear. Now Jesus has just offered a profoundly dense argument. On the first read through the passage, you might well have been thinking, wait, what?

And then had to go back through a second or a third or a fourth time. And the crowds to which Jesus spoke were probably in a similar boat. Even if they were familiar with the prophets, they probably were, it's not immediately apparent what Jesus is driving at here.

[16:41] But there's one last piece of the puzzle that will hopefully bring everything into focus. And that's the phrase Jesus uses in verse 15. Whoever has ears, let him hear. Now the importance of hearing and seeing in response to revelation that occurs a few times in the Old Testament, we get it in Ezekiel chapter 12, in Isaiah chapter 6, which Jesus himself will quote in a few chapters.

In Jeremiah 5, witnessing Israel's rebellion, the Lord proclaims, Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not.

Do you not fear me? The danger which the Lord warns of through the prophets is the danger of hardening their hearts. The danger that arises when a person beholds the revelation of the Lord, but turns a blind eye, hears his words, and does not attend to them.

Jesus' conclusion is both an invitation and a warning. An invitation to receive and a warning not to ignore. And here I think it's helpful to go back to verse 10 that Jesus passed over so quickly, where he quotes Malachi 3.

Because if the kingdom of heaven is at hand, if John is Elijah, the one who comes before the Lord, then Jesus' quotation is a remarkable moment of revelation, where the Father speaks to the Son, both of whom are God.

[18:14] This is history defining. And that's what makes Jesus' teaching here so striking. He's hiding in plain sight, telling the crowds precisely who he is, and yet concealing it just enough that you can miss the point.

telling them he is the Lord coming in power to claim his throne, and not telling them. But once you've heard it, you're on the hook, forced into a confrontation with the Lord of the universe.

And when the gospel comes to us, when we encounter Jesus in the scriptures, that which the apostles heard and saw, that which the disciples of John the Baptist heard and saw, when we are confronted by this, God in the flesh, a response is required of us.

We cannot pretend we haven't heard. We must either embrace him or harden our hearts. Do we acknowledge Jesus' Lordship or do we not? Do we trust his power and his love or do we not? In what areas of our life do we doubt him? And Jesus knows this is no easy thing to embrace. He knows our sinful nature has a positively allergic reaction to his presence.

[19:34] Knows we want to be little gods of our own little kingdoms. Knows we doubt him when trials come. And just as he said to John the Baptist, he says to all of us, blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Amen.