

John the Baptist
Matthew 11:1-19
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 11 begins with a transitory summary of chapter 10 as is the pattern of this Gospel in conclusion of each of the five lengthy discourses. The phrase “*when Jesus had finished*” is the characteristic phrase that moves the narrative from the teaching of Jesus to the next section of events (cf. 7:28; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Jesus is described as leaving after giving the disciples their instructions to teach and preach in Galilee. There is no record of what happened when the disciples went out on their mission for which Jesus had commissioned them. Rather the focus will remain on the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus’ ministry of teaching and preaching was described earlier in Matthew 4:35 and 9:35. This was the continuation of this same ministry. The Jews were taught in their synagogues and Jesus went out to the people to preach the gospel of the kingdom in the cities.

John the Baptist confirmed (11:2-6)

John had been imprisoned since the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. “*Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee*” (Matthew 4:12). According to the historian Josephus, this was the fortress of Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea. He would be killed while in prison (Matthew 14:1-12).

The essence of John’s question surrounded whether Jesus was the Messiah. This is the only time Matthew’s Gospel uses Jesus’ Greek title, “Christ,” by itself, emphasizing His position as Messiah. The term “Expected One” or “one who is to come” (ESV), also points to the Messiah.

The reason that John desired confirmation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah was because he expected the Messiah would come with power and judgment. This understanding can be seen in John’s words from Matthew 3:12, “*His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*” Not only was Jesus not exercising judgment, but His herald John was imprisoned. This expectation of judgment will be met, but the timing must wait until this second coming of Christ.

This delay is because of the rejection of the kingdom of heaven that has begun to unfold in Matthew's narrative. Jesus will emphasize this a few verses later, "*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force*" (Matthew 11:12). John was looking to Jesus as the Christ but needed clarification by means of John's disciples. That the term "disciple" is used to describe the followers of John is evidence that this word is not necessarily referring to true believer in Christ, but means simply one who is a follower.

Jesus provided six proofs that He was indeed the Expected One:

- The blind receive sight (9:27-28; 12:22; 20:30; 21:14)
- The lame walk (15:30-31; 21:14)
- The lepers are cleansed (8:2; 10:8)
- The deaf hear (9:32-33; 12:22; 15:30-31)
- The dead are raised up (9:18-26; 10:8)
- The poor have the gospel preached to them (4:14-17, 23)

This evidence that Jesus speaks of is found in Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1 (cf. 26:19; 29:18-19). Isaiah 35:6 also references the mute speaking, which occurred in Matthew 9:32 but is not listed by Jesus, likely due to its close association with the deaf hearing. The one proof not found in the Old Testament prophecies was the statement about lepers being cleansed.

The immediate context of Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1 includes the Lord coming with vengeance. "*Behold, you God will come with vengeance*" (Isaiah 35:4) and "*To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God*" (Isaiah 61:2). Thus, the judgment that John anticipated is included in the context of these proofs. In other words, Jesus did not correct John's understanding of the kingdom including judgment, He simply noted that He did the works of the Messiah.

Importantly, five of these six facts involve what is purely physical in nature. Only one, the preaching of the gospel, involves the spiritual aspect of the kingdom, and even this point has a social aspect, in that the audience are the poor. This validates what John the Baptist already knew, that the kingdom of heaven would be established physically, literally, as promised in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 37:21-28). It will of course also be spiritual, bringing salvation by His grace to mankind (Isaiah 52:7-10; Zechariah 12:10). But the kingdom will also be physical, on earth when Jesus returns in the same way He departed at the Ascension (Acts 1:9-11).

The statement, *"blessed is he who does not take offense at Me"* (11:6) is likely meant for the disciples of John. They must accept what John has enquired about, that Jesus is the Messiah. His proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness (Matthew 4:23; 9:35) testified to who Jesus was. This cannot be rejected.

John was concerned that the promised judgment was not occurring. This issue of delayed judgment has perplexed mankind forever. If God is just and all-powerful, where is the judgment of evil? God's judgment awaits His perfect timing, which will arrive just as He promised. In faith, we trust God for His ultimate deliverance from evil. In the last words of Jesus, *"It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority"* (Acts 1:7).

John the Baptist commended (11:7-11)

John the Baptist had borne testimony to Jesus and now Jesus will bear testimony to John before the crowds, as the disciples of John depart. Jesus does so with a series of three rhetorical questions of *"what did you go out to see."* The first two expect a negative response and the last a positive response.

The large crowds that John drew obviously included some who were listening to Jesus speak. These people would have had to go to the Jordan River to hear John (Matthew 3:5). In this wilderness area they encountered reeds, that is, canes growing by the Jordan River. A reed shaken by the wind represents someone who is easily affected by the opinion of others. This was certainly not John the Baptist, whose beliefs led him to be imprisoned.

When they saw John in the wilderness, he *"had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey"* (Matthew 3:4). He did not wear soft clothing or eat fine food as those in the king's palaces. This is a reference to Herod, who had imprisoned John (Matthew 14:1-12). John was not a weak person. His question came from a strong understanding of the Old Testament, not from a weak, confused perspective. Thus Jesus defended John before the crowds.

The last question answers what they went to the wilderness to see, namely a prophet of God. But John the Baptist was more than a prophet of God, for his role was to speak forth from God the words that heralded the Messiah. And he was the first prophet the nation had seen for over four hundred years.

The reason John was more than a prophet was because he himself was also the fulfillment of prophecy. In Matthew 11:10, Jesus quoted Malachi 3:1, "*BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.*" But the actual text of Malachi 3:1 ends with the first person singular pronoun, "*and he will clear the way before Me.*" This change results in God addressing the Messiah, furthering Jesus' claim to indeed be the Messiah.

Thus John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy about him from Malachi 3:1 as declared by Jesus ("*this is the one about whom it is written*") by preparing the nation for the coming of the Lord Jesus. John would do so as a prophet of God and by fulfilling the prophecy by God. This leads to Jesus' statement about John's greatness, "*among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.*"

There is some debate about how one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. Certainly it does not mean that John will not be in the kingdom. Some interpret "least" as meaning "younger," thus making this a reference to Jesus, who though younger than John, was greater than John. Yet this is an unusual translation and an awkward way to make this point. Others view that the one least in the kingdom of heaven will bear testimony of Jesus even better than John.

The best understanding of Jesus' words about the least in the kingdom being greater than John is to understand the privileged place that one in the kingdom of heaven will enjoy. Even the least in the kingdom will enjoy a great position, beyond even the greatest person on earth. John will certainly have a notable place in the kingdom of heaven, but John's greatness on earth will pale in comparison to the greatness enjoyed by the inhabitants of God's kingdom.

John the Baptist characterized (11:12-15)

From the beginning of John's announcement of the Messiah to the time Jesus spoke, there had been resistance to the kingdom of heaven. John and Jesus were popular, but those with power in the society were in opposition to both of them. This was never more true with John the Baptist as it was when Jesus spoke, with John languishing in prison, being arrested by Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:3).

Jesus was also being opposed, but by the religious leaders. "*But the Pharisees were saying, 'He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons'*" (Matthew 9:34).

This rejection of the kingdom by the people of Israel is described by Jesus by the word "violence." The kingdom suffers violence as its herald was imprisoned. The kingdom will continue to suffer violence as its King will be crucified. Matthew 10 detailed the persecution that awaited those who will inherit the kingdom, the followers of Jesus. The kingdom will suffer violence until the second coming of Christ.

Furthermore, "*Violent men take it by force.*" This refers not only to those opposing God but to those who oppose God by falsely teaching that we can force our way into the kingdom. No one can work their way into God's kingdom, for it comes by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus accused the Pharisees of using their power to seize control to prevent people from entering the kingdom, "*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in*" (Matthew 23:13). The religion of human effort is opposed to the grace of God.

The kingdom of heaven will come at a time fixed by the authority of God (Acts 1:7). The judgment of man awaits the coming kingdom. Until the Lord returns, the kingdom will suffer from the force of those who oppress Christ's followers. Thus His people say "*come, Lord Jesus*" (Revelation 22:20).

The phrasing of Matthew 11:13 is unusual in that it switches the usual order of the Law and the prophets and it also states that the Law prophesied. Perhaps the order is switched to "*all the prophets and the Law*" in order to highlight the climax of God's revelation in John, the final prophet before the Messiah. The Law actually included prophecy about the Messiah (cf. Luke 24:44).

The prophets and the Law foretold the coming Messiah and His kingdom. With John, this revelation peaked with John's announcement to "*repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 3:2). This offer of the kingdom was presented first by John to prepare them to receive their Messiah, who initiated His public ministry with these same words (Matthew 4:17).

However, this offer of the kingdom would be dependent upon its reception. This is why Jesus gives a conditional promise, "*And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come*" (Matthew 11:14). If the Jews would accept the kingdom, then John would indeed fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 of being Elijah the prophet.

Of course, we know that the Jews opposed this opportunity to receive Elijah and the Messiah. Therefore, there is a delay to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6, "*Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.*" Because of this rejection, the hearts of the fathers and the children were not restored, as Jesus noted in Matthew 10:35, "*For I came to set a man against his father.*"

Because of their rejection of the Messiah, Malachi 4:5-6 awaits fulfillment. John fulfilled Malachi 3:1 as the forerunner of Christ, but not the turning of the hearts of the nation toward God for the "*great and terrible day of the Lord*" is yet to come. John would only be Elijah if they were willing to accept it.

Obviously, John was not actually Elijah so we should not expect Malachi 4:5-6 to be fulfilled by Elijah, but by a prophet coming in the role and characteristic of Elijah, similar to John. This will occur during the tribulation period, the seven years before Christ's return with the kingdom. Perhaps this is fulfilled by one of the two witnesses who prepare Israel for the second coming (Revelation 11:1-14).

The understanding that John was only potentially Elijah, but not actually fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi because of Christ's rejection, explains what has confused many, that John denied being Elijah, "*They asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' And he said, 'I am not'*" (John 1:21).

John the Baptist criticized (11:16-19)

Matthew 11:16-19 concludes the words of Jesus to the crowd about John the Baptist with an analogy of children sitting in the market places who are bullying other children to do their wishes. The purpose of this analogy is to unite John together with Jesus in the rejection of God's messengers by the nation of Israel. The target of these words is "*this generation*," that is the Jews who experienced the opportunity to personally hear and receive the offer of the kingdom of heaven.

The analogy of the children sitting in the market places is compared to the contemporaries of Jesus. The Jews of His day were like these childish kids who were demanding others to dance when they played a flute and to mourn when they sang a dirge. They wanted others to respond to their desires and complained when they did not get their way.

The dancing and mourning refer to the moods of a wedding and of a funeral. There is a chiasm in this passage, as the children who were supposed to dance are connected with Jesus who came eating and drinking, while the children who were supposed to mourn are compared to John who did not come eating and drinking. Yet both were criticized unjustly by the childish generation of Jews.

The Jews criticized John and Jesus for not functioning according to their desires. John came in an austere manner, with the asceticism of some prophets before him. He did not eat as at a feast (Matthew 3:4) or drink wine (Luke 1:15), yet he was accused of being demon-possessed because he was so different. Jesus was likewise criticized for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners (cf. Matthew 9:9-13). Jesus also did not adhere to their customs of fasting (cf. Matthew 9:14-17), resulting in being falsely accused of gluttony and being a drunk.

Whether John and Jesus ate and drank or did not eat and drink, they both failed to be and to do what the Jewish people wanted. Rather than humbly accepting God's truth, they demanded that it conform to their preconceptions. Regardless of what Jesus or John did, they would be criticized. If they would have accepted John, they would have accepted Jesus.

This is the quintessential problem of mankind. People demand that God and His representatives function according to their wishes. The issue is one of control. People want what they consider best serves themselves and refuse to accept God's revelation when it does not serve their interests and plans (cf. Matthew 10:39).

This section on John the Baptist concludes with the proverb, "*yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.*" Wisdom in the Old Testament is used essentially as God Himself (cf. Proverbs 1-9). Here, God's messengers are vindicated, or proven right, by what they do. The character and good works of John and Jesus testifies to them as the true representatives of God to the Jewish people. They were rejected wrongly and in the end, this sinful rejection will be apparent to everyone.

Conclusion

John's inquiry via His disciples to confirm that Jesus was indeed the Expected One was confirmed by Jesus' reference to His works, as prophesied in the Old Testament. John was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Yet the Jews rejected both the messenger and the Messiah. The judgment of God upon this generation will unfold throughout the remainder of Matthew's Gospel.