

Matthew 11:1-19 – “What Have You Come To See?”

1. John The Baptist Doubts Jesus – 11:1-3

11:1 - *Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities.*

In Chapter 10 we saw Jesus commissioning His 12 disciples and giving them their marching orders. It was detailed with the kinds of things they were to do, and the kinds of things they would experience. Part of that was persecution – oh joy! But look at what we see happening next. After Jesus called and instructed His disciples, He goes out and sets the example.

- He doesn't sit back and relax now; He is modelling for them a life of servanthood and obedience.
- And notice His mission – **teach** and **preach** in their cities. Jesus could have gone on a huge healing campaign. He could have had a revival meeting filled with miracles. But the focus wasn't the supernatural, the focus was communicating the truth.
- I'm not against seeing the supernatural, but if it's not accompanied with the truth and the gospel, then people are going to be on an experiential high with nothing to ground them.
- So, Jesus went about teaching and preaching to the people.

11:2-3 - *And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples³ and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”*

Now this is intriguing. This is John the Baptist. Cousin of Jesus. They've grown up together. They've probably done all the fun adolescent stuff together, like cow-tipping, or tied guests sandals together in a big ball. John is the one that said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29). If anyone knows who Jesus is it should be John the Baptist. Yet we find him asking this question: **Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?** Like, I thought you had this worked out already John. What gives?

Well what gives is that John is sitting in prison at this moment. He's in prison for speaking out against Herod Antipas who took his brother's wife, Herodias and had an immoral relationship with her (we'll get the commentary for that in Matthew 14:3-5).

Now being in prison is one thing, but being in prison when your cousin is the expected Messiah is another thing altogether.

Because the Jewish expectation of the Messiah was that He was going to be a political leader, one with bravado and pomp. An insurrectionist. He was the one that was to overthrow all Roman oppression and bring the Jews back into the glory days of autonomy and freedom as a nation. Jesus even said in Luke 4:18, that He would *proclaim liberty to the captives...*

- So, John is inevitably thinking, *'I'm a captive! If You're the guy, then what are You waiting for, come and free me!! If You're the Messiah, the Coming One, then let's get on with Your mission here and let it start with me.'*
- John is wondering if he should perhaps start looking for another. If his hope is to stem from someone else, then he just wants to know where to direct that hope.

And notice how Jesus answers this...

2. Jesus' Words for John the Baptist – 11:4-6

11:4-6 - *Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: ⁵ The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."*

Jesus doesn't give them a direct answer. The easy answer would be to just say yes. But Jesus wants them to observe the things they themselves have seen and heard. All these things that Jesus has done were prophetic signs of the Messiah.

- **Isaiah 35:5–6,** *"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. ⁶ Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert."*

It's interesting that in Luke's retelling of this account, when Jesus is asked, *Are You the Coming One?*, it just says: *'And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight'* (Luke 7:21).

- It's as though Jesus was asked this question and then without a word just turned around and began to show them the answer. He's basically showing that the fruit speaks for itself. You can look it up in the Word, and you can look around in the world, and see enough evidence of who Jesus is.

It's sad that John seemed to be basing his conclusion of who Jesus was on his own experiences. He's in prison and he would obviously like the Messiah to set him free, but regardless of what was happening to him, he never needed to question who Jesus was.

- Do we do the same when things aren't going our way? Do we have unhealthy expectations of what we think Jesus should be doing for us?
- It's sad how often I've heard people walk away from Jesus because He didn't answer their prayer, or He didn't come through for them in a way they were hoping. But look around! How can we ever doubt God by what we see around us? And look it up! When we see what Jesus has already done for us, and our need for Him, we should be clinging to Him with everything we have.
- Any other conclusion is just because we've had a false expectation of who Jesus is.

The one that hangs on to Jesus and is not offended by Him is the one that is blessed. We're seeing the growing animosity towards Jesus, people (especially the religious leaders) were offended by Jesus. But as you put your faith in Him, you will experience His goodness and life-giving grace.

3. Jesus' Words About John the Baptist – 11:7-15

11:7 - *As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"*

Now this is quite fascinating to me because John's disciples are going to return to John with the report that Jesus is the Coming One. John is probably going to be kicking himself for questioning this and wondering if Jesus is going to cut him off. Yet Jesus is going to share some amazing things about John at this time. All without John's disciples hearing it and John not knowing about it.

- I say that to say, I'm sure we've all felt like we've blown it at times and wondered how God could ever accept us or stand with us.
- Yet, we read in **Jude 24**, *"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,"*

- We have One that is defending us in the heavens: **1 John 2:1**, *"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."*
- These are things we're not even aware of. But we can take confidence that Jesus is not dismissing us or casting us aside when we blow it, He is speaking on our behalf and representing us well. You are loved by a gracious Saviour today!

So Jesus asks referring to John, ***what did you go out to see?*** Were the crowds going to watch someone just vacillate with the whims of the people. Reeds were a common sight by the Jordan. They would just blow as the wind directed. But John wasn't like that. He spoke the truth no matter what feathers it ruffled. And this is the purpose of the church. To teach truth and equip and strengthen you not to be carried about by various winds of doctrine.

- **Ephesians 4:14**, *"that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,"*

11:8 - *But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.*

John wasn't trying to win the popularity vote. He wasn't attracting people with high fashion. No skinny jeans or \$500 sneakers for John here. And I like how it says ***soft clothing***. I think anyone wearing soft clothing is a little... soft! But not John. This man came in camels' skin. Eating locusts. This is a man's man. Takes a shower every few months probably. Maybe that's why he was always baptising people, gave him an excuse to clean up.

The point is that John was not trying to attract people by extravagance and comforts of this world.

11:9-10 - *But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.'*

John came as a prophet, but not an ordinary prophet, he came as ***the*** prophet, the one that would herald the arrival of the Messiah. He was not greater than others because he was more gifted or eloquent. He was greater because of the position he held over other prophets. Other prophets prophesied of the coming Messiah, but John got to actually proclaim His arrival.

He was the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1 which spoke of a prophet who would prepare the way of the Messiah. It's been well said, John opened the way for Christ, and then got out of the way for Christ.

11:11 - *“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*”

This is an amazing statement Jesus is making. He's stating that there has not been anyone who is greater than John the Baptist. Not Abraham, not Moses, not David, not Isaiah. Again, it's not that John was a better person than any of these, but he had a greater privilege; he got to announce the arrival of King Jesus. In other words, your proximity to Jesus is what makes you great in the Lord's eyes.

But then Jesus says something even more remarkable. As great as John the Baptist is, we hold an even greater place of honor than him because of our proximity to Jesus. We've been given great privileges. We have experienced the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have witnessed a changed life through His salvation.

John never saw the fulfillment to the kingdom Jesus came to establish. We have seen the finished work of Jesus. And we get to proclaim this finished work of Jesus to others. We get to tell people that their sins can be forgiven, we can be reconciled to God, we can receive the gift of eternal life.

“D. A. Carson writes about our privilege:

So often Christians want to establish their “greatness” with reference to their work, their giving, their intelligence, their preaching, their gifts, their courage, their discernment. But Jesus unhesitatingly affirmed that even the least believer is greater than Moses or John the Baptist, simply because of his or her ability, living on this side of the coming of Jesus the Messiah, to point him out with greater clarity and understanding than all his forerunners ever could. If we really believe this truth, it will dissipate all cheap vying for position [in this world] and force us to recognize that our true significance lies [simply] in our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Carson, *God with Us*, 65) ¹

11:12 - *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*

¹ Platt, D. (2013). *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (D. L. Akin, D. Platt, & T. Merida, Eds.; pp. 148–149). Holman Reference.

This has been a very difficult passage to interpret for many people.

One way to interpret it is to see that Jesus is saying there are many that violently oppose the things of God. We're seeing this growing opposition in our study through Matthew. We see the opposition to the things of God in the world today. The New Living Translation translates this verse this way:

“And from the time John the Baptist began preaching until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing,* and violent people are attacking it” (NLT).²

But also, the Kingdom is not for those that are unsure of their commitment. There can be no half-hearted decisions made. “Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life” (Matthew 7:14). Families will be divided (10:34-39). We need to be aggressive in this commitment to God. We need to be ready to go hard to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has laid hold of us.

- This word violence is translated as ‘pressing’ in **Luke 16:16**, “*The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.*”

11:13-15 - *For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.¹⁴ And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*

John spoke the message and presented the One that all the prophets and the law were pointing to. Jesus is saying it's an end of an era.

And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.

Now there was a time when the religious leaders came to John and asked, *Are you Elijah* (John 1:21), and John answered no. How can Jesus then say he is? Many were anticipating Elijah to come back again preceding the coming of the Lord. **Malachi 4:5** says, “*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.*” Many Jews to this day will leave one empty seat at the table during the feast of Passover for Elijah, in expectation of his return as prophesied in Malachi. John was in a sense a partial fulfillment of this verse. John did come in a similar ministry as Elijah, and his dad Zacharias was told by the angel that he would “*go before Jesus in the spirit and*

* **11:12** Or *the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered from violence.*

² Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Mt 11:12). Tyndale House Publishers.

power of Elijah...” (Luke 1:17). This is why Jesus says, “*if you are willing to receive it.*”

- Elijah will in fact show up alongside Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17, but many believe that Elijah will come again as one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 before the second coming of Jesus. This is what many perceive as the actual fulfillment of Malachi 4:5.

4. Jesus' Words to the Crowd – 11:16-19

11:16-17 - *But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, ¹⁷ and saying: 'We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not lament.'*

Jesus likened that generation (speaking of the Jews and primarily the religious leaders) to a group of children who go from one extreme to the other, they can be laughing one second and screaming the next. And it's all centered on them! They're selfish people. If things aren't going a child's way, you'll hear about it. For these religious leaders, if you didn't dance, they were upset. If you did not mourn, they weren't happy. They wanted you to do just what they wanted and to be in full cooperation with their desires.

- And Jesus is showing that He did not come in the way the religious leaders were expecting Him, and so they're whining and complaining and going to extremes to get rid of Jesus.

11:18-19 - *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'* ¹⁹ *The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children.*

John came as a full-on ascetic – not eating or drinking. And yet people had reason to complain and reject him. They claimed he must have a demon.

Jesus came in an opposite way – He was all about eating and drinking and doing so with sinners! The religious leaders claimed He was just a glutton and drunk and enjoying this liberty with the lowlifes of society. They questioned how He could ever be a spiritual leader, let alone the Son of God.

But one thing you could not question is the fruit that came from the lives of John and Jesus. Lives have been changed; people have been set free. The wisdom of God is vindicated by the works and fruit that resulted in their ministry.

What kind of fruit is being produced in your life? You have a wonderful opportunity to be a witness of the great things of God by a changed life.

Maybe you're one that has been rejecting Jesus and expecting Him to fit a certain expectation that you've had. But your rejection of Him is not because He's failed you or let you down, it's because you've failed to accept the obvious evidence of His good work all around you. He is good and has done the work to save you by dying on a cross to forgive you of your sin. Receive Him today as your Lord and Saviour by faith. Accept His free gift of eternal life. Then you will see even more clearly that the wisdom of God is justified by His children.