

Ministry of Grace

Matthew 11

Messengers from John the Baptist

Matthew 11:1-6

¹When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. ²Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Luke 7:18-23 – ¹⁸The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ²⁰And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" ²¹In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²²And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Notes:

John the Baptist was in prison because he had denounced the adulterous marriage of Herod Antipas to his brother's wife (Herodias) and because he had condemned Herod for all the evil things that he had done. Now that he's incarcerated, let's put ourselves in John's sandals for a minute. John had been comfortable in the open spaces of the desert wilderness, yet now he was confined in a prison cell. He had been an active person and was called to preach, yet while imprisoned he was rendered inactive and silenced. He had announced judgment against the religious leaders, yet judgment was not coming on them at the present time. Moreover, he had announced the coming of the Messianic kingdom, but heard only occasional reports of what Jesus was doing. It must have seemed to him that nothing was happening the way he had proclaimed it would. It is only natural that he would seem discouraged and confused. That's why he sent a couple of his disciples to ask Jesus directly if He was the Messiah.

Jesus' response helped them to see the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies. Specifically, the prophecies of Isaiah regarding the coming of the Messiah:

In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 29:18-19)

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; (Isaiah 35:5-6)

Jesus Testifies about John the Baptist

Matthew 11:7-11

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" ¹¹Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Luke 7:24-30 – ²⁴When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. ²⁶What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" ²⁸I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." ²⁹(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

Notes:

As the disciples were heading back to report to John, Jesus gave an amazing testimony regarding John's ministry. John the Baptist was a committed preacher who proclaimed the message that God gave him to proclaim. He was not like a reed, being pushed back and forth by the changing tide of religious politics and by every wind of doctrine, as Paul described it:

so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.
(Ephesians 4:14)

John the Baptist was also not swayed in his beliefs by pursuing creature comforts or efforts to gain the things desired by the world. Instead of looking for a comfortable life, John was singularly focused on pleasing God. John was not after the same "signs of success" as others, or what Luke expressed it in his gospel account:

... Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts.
(Luke 7:25)

In fact, John's lifestyle was that which was common to prophets. He wore clothes made out of camel's hair and he ate locusts and wild honey. He was a simple man. Not like so many preachers today who seem to water down the gospel message to attract larger crowds. Their objective is not to care for the sheep, but to provide the finer things of life for themselves. Instead, what we see in John's ministry is humble obedience to the voice of God. Let me say that

again. What Jesus commended in John's ministry was **his humble obedience to the voice of God**.

Jesus then proclaimed that John was greater than all the prophets who had come before (He said John was "**more than a prophet**"). The word translated "**more**" is *perrisos*, meaning "over and above" or "superior in quality." In other words, Jesus said that John the Baptist was greater than all the prophets who came before him. In fact, Jesus said that John was the greatest man ever born. But – Jesus also informed the people that anyone who attains entrance into the Kingdom is even greater than John the Baptist.

John's ministry was to prepare the nation of Israel to receive their Messiah. Had the people received John's testimony and accepted their Messiah, John would have literally fulfilled the prophecies about Elijah. Jesus explained this to his disciples (**Matthew 17:10-13**) when they asked him about Elijah coming first. John truly was a "type" of Elijah. But, will Elijah still come? Many end time scholars believe that Elijah will be one of the two witnesses described in **Revelation 11:1-19**, thus completely fulfilling the prophecies about Elijah.

The common people believed John's message and many of them repented and were baptized. The religious leaders, however, refused to believe him. As a result, they also refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah that John had predicted.

John the Baptist is Elijah

Matthew 11:12-15

¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Notes:

Verses 12 is easily misunderstood. In this verse the words "**suffered violence**" are translated from the Greek word *biadzō*, which, in the passive voice can mean "to experience violence," but in the middle voice (as it seems to be here) it means, "to seek something with eagerness and haste." Based on context, this is a more reasonable translation. The second half of the verse supports this interpretation. Jesus was saying that the throngs who crowded around Him were so eager to have the kingdom come that they were willing to take it by force. We know, in fact, that this was true, because in the Apostle John's gospel account, after the feeding of the 5,000, he tells us:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Perceiving then that **they were about to come and take him by force to make him king**, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.
(**John 6:14-15**)

Jesus told the people that all the prophets and the Law spoke of the coming of the Messiah and especially the prophet Elijah, who was to announce His arrival. This prophecy had been fulfilled in John the Baptist. This is why Jesus said, "**if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.**"

The people were willing to accept the coming of the kingdom, but only if it meant that the Messiah was going to heal all their sicknesses, defeat the Romans, and usher in a time of peace and prosperity. However, the people (and especially the religious leaders) were not willing to

accept Jesus as their Messiah on any other terms. They wanted the kingdom to come the way they wanted it. They wanted the Messiah to be the type of leader they wanted Him to be. They wanted the kingdom to be right now, no more waiting!

They were acting like spoiled children.

Jesus' response to this was, in effect, "If you will accept me as the Messiah on my terms, then John is, indeed, fulfilling the requirements of the prophecies about Elijah and the Kingdom of Heaven is, indeed, here.

But since the people refused to listen to Him, Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" This is an expression often used by our Lord (**Matthew 13:9**; **Mark 4:12**; **Luke 14:35**; etc.). It is also a common expression in the book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 as part of the letters to the seven churches of Asia. It basically means, "If you really want to learn truth then pay attention to what I say."

Chastening for Rejecting the Message

Matthew 11:16-19

¹⁶"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

Luke 7:31-35 –³¹"To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³²They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' ³³For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' ³⁴The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' ³⁵Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

Notes:

Having told the people to "listen up," Jesus now gives them some polite chastening. The parable of children in the marketplace is directed at those who are "listening" to his message but not receiving it. He refers to them as "this generation." Jesus tells the people that they are like children who refuse to listen to anyone else.

He says, in effect, "you people heard the words of John the Baptist and you have heard my words. You even understand the message we've been giving you, but you rejected it. Both of us delivered truth to you but you were so dead set against the messages that you looked for any excuse you could find to reject them. In John's case, you claimed he has a demon because his eating habits are not the same as yours. In my case, you accused me of gluttony because you do not like the people that I eat with."

Woe to Unrepentant Cities

Matthew 11:20-24

²⁰Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long

ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

Luke 10:13-16 – ¹³"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ¹⁵And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. ¹⁶"The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

Notes:

Now that he has politely chastened the people listening to Him, Jesus levels harsher criticism on the entire region where he has been ministering. The cities that Jesus condemns, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum are all on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. They have all witnessed the identifying works of their Messiah. John proclaimed the coming of the kingdom and their Messiah. Then, Jesus, as the announced Messiah, performed many miracles that fulfill Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament. He has healed everyone who has come to Him for healing, but they still don't recognize who He is, nor do they receive His message.

To hear the Son of God proclaim "woe" to anyone should put fear in their hearts, yet the people even rejected this message of warning from their Messiah. Tyre and Sidon are ancient cities on the Mediterranean shore, long known for their wealth and prosperity. They were most famous (infamous, really) for their decadence and moral degeneracy. Repeatedly, God had pronounced judgment against them and had them overthrown, only to be rebuilt and flourish again. Likewise, Sodom was harshly judged for their licentious sinfulness. Everyone understood why God condemned these three cities. For the cities of Galilee to be declared worse than these wicked and godless cities should have put them on notice.

They did not hear, or even listen to Jesus' warning!

Jesus' Prayer of Confession

Matthew 11:25-27

²⁵At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Luke 10:21-24 – ²¹In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²²All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." ²³Then turning to the disciples he said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

Notes:

Jesus has just proclaimed woe to those who reject His message. Remember, that it is not the lack of God's love that sends these cities, and all who reject Him, to Hell. It is mankind's own sinfulness that condemns them to eternal punishment. It is the love of God that reveals the words of truth to us so that we can recognize the Son of God and accept His gracious gift. Now He offers a prayer to God the Father.

A quick note: the word translated "I thank you" is not the typical Greek word for thanksgiving. Some translations have this as "I praise you." But this is also incorrect. The Greek word is *exomologeō*, which is most often translated as "confess." It means "to be in complete agreement with." The first part of verse twenty-five could be translated as:

I am in agreement with you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you hid these things from the wise and intelligent ones ...

For those who reject the idea of God's sovereign election this is a difficult passage. They have to go to great lengths to say that God has not hidden any truth from anyone. And yet – that is exactly what Christ is proclaiming here. Notice that God's criteria for choosing who to reveal truth to have nothing to do with worldly wisdom and acquired knowledge. Rather, he chooses the humble and lowly, those who are despised and rejected by the world. Here's how Paul put it in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Jesus clearly declares that no one knows the Father except those whom the Son of God chooses to reveal Him to. That is sovereign election!

Rest for the Weary

Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Notes:

Jesus has just proclaimed a difficult truth for those who refuse to believe in election. Many of the deniers of election claim that these verses prove that anyone can believe, elect or not. Otherwise, why would Jesus say, "Come to me, all ..." And yet, **Isaiah 6:9-10** says:

... "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." (Isaiah 6:9-10)

God's choice is God's choice, with or without man's approval. God is sovereign and will do as He has purposed. Even though God chooses those who will believe His message, He still has to

invite all to respond. He gives this invitation to everyone so that those who refuse His invitation will have no excuse.

Keep in mind that the blinding is not God's doing, it is Satan's, as Paul explained to the Corinthians:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

(2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

So, Jesus' message is:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

The word translated "labor" is *kopiaō*, which means "to feel fatigue as a result of heavy labor." And the word translated "heavy laden" is *phortidzō*, which means "to be overly loaded," like a ship with too much cargo or a beast of burden with too much tied to its back. We could paraphrase this as, "You, who are worn out, and who feel like you are overloaded with cares, come to me and I will give you rest."

God's gracious offer is to those who know they need help. As Jesus said in the previous chapter,

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (Matthew 9:12b)

For a person to receive help from God, he or she has to recognize his or her need and humbly seek God's help. For years I've heard unsaved people proclaim that Christianity is nothing more than a crutch for those who can't make it on their own. I used to bristle at that comment because we are being accused of being too weak. But, the more I've grown in my faith, the more I realize that they are absolutely correct. Jesus is a crutch. He's the one we have to lean on day-by-day. Those who think they can make it on their own are walking down the wrong path, they're aiming at the wrong target. They may eventually hit their target, they may achieve the objective they set out to achieve, but it will not satisfy the need in their soul. It will only get them a free pass to the Lake of Fire.

Are you tired from the daily grind of life? Do you feel like you are carrying the burdens of the entire world? Jesus tells us that the answer is to come to Him and take on his yoke.

The word translated "yoke" is *zugos*, which refers to a device that joins two animals together. In the agrarian society of the first century Israel, everyone knew what a yoke was. Our 21st century misconception of a yoke is that it allows two animals to work in tandem, distributing the load between them. That's not the case. The purpose of a yoke is to allow the stronger, more experienced animal to "train" the weaker animal. The stronger animal knows what his master's commands mean and he responds to them immediately. Most of the load is born by the stronger animal. The weaker animal is just, "going along for the ride," learning the process. As the master gives the commands, the weaker animal "learns" what they mean by going along with the stronger animal. In fact, the yoke is designed to prevent the weaker animal from having very much control. In this fashion, the weaker, less experienced animal has to learn to submit to the will of the stronger animal and ultimately to the will of the master.

In the first century in Israel, the Scribes and Pharisees tried to place a yoke on the people that involved learning and obeying an impossible number of rules. This yoke of legalism was far heavier on the common people than it was on the Scribes and Pharisees. As a result, no one had learned to submit to the master. None of them was of any service to God.

This even began to happen in the early church. In the book of Acts, when the Legalizers began teaching the newly converted Gentile Christians that they had to keep all the requirements of the Law in order to be truly saved, Paul and Barnabas stood firm against them. After the apostles and elders had gathered together and argued this point at length, Peter stood up and argued that it was not necessary to keep the law. He finished his argument with:

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? (Acts 15:10)

We are not to be yoked to the requirements of the Law, but we are invited to be yoked directly with our Lord and to learn directly from Him. But, in order to be yoked with Him and to learn from Him, we have to have a humble, submissive attitude and a desire to be what He wants us to be.

So What?

While John the Baptist was in prison, he was discouraged because God had not done things the way John had expected. He had been faithful and obedient in announcing the coming of the Kingdom and its Messiah, and yet he found himself in a Roman prison. He knew that Jesus was to increase in importance and he was to decrease (see John 3:30), but he didn't expect to be in prison! Are you discouraged right now because God has not answered your prayers the way you expected? Does it seem like He is not being faithful in taking care of you the way He promised. Well, the first question we have to ask ourselves is, "Am I being faithfully obedient to God, and am I seeking His will, or my own?" "Am I joining myself to Him as a student, trying to learn all that I can, or am I trying to control the yoke?"

Jesus commended John for his "humble obedience to the voice of God." That's what we need to focus on. First, humbling ourselves before God and listening to His voice. Then being obedient to what He tells us.

The people of Israel were waiting for the Messiah to come. But, they wanted the Messiah to come in the manner they were expecting, and to be the kind of Messiah they wanted Him to be. And - they wanted the kingdom right away, no more waiting! Are we impatient with God because He is not blessing us the way He promised to in His Word? Again, we have to ask ourselves, "Am I being humbly and faithfully obedient to God, and am I seeking His will, or my own?"

Jesus was offering Himself and the Kingdom to the people, but they wouldn't listen, so His response was, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Most of us spend regular time reading the Word and praying. If you aren't, you need to! But, are we doing this with our ears open? What do I mean? I mean, as we read His Word, are we expecting Him to talk to us? As we pray, are we so busy asking for Him to do stuff for us that we fail to hear Him calling us to get our attention? This week, before you read your Bible and before you pray, I urge you to say the same thing to God that Samuel did when God tried to get his attention:

... And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10) [NASB]

Over the past six months we have clearly seen God at work in our church here. We have been praying regularly that He would lead us and provide for us according to His will. Do you think it was coincidence that He provided us a barn to meet in just before it started raining? Was it coincidence that Conie's brother-in-law called me and asked if we needed a place to meet? Was it just chance that when we voted on a name for our church that it ended up as a tie, twice!?

Some of you have asked me to pray for you because you want to work on being more faithful to Him. We had someone else say that they have begun tithing in obedience to God even though they don't know how they will be able to afford it. My friends, we are seeing God working in our midst, providing for us and working in the hearts of His people to develop humble obedience.

I am reminded of what happened when Solomon dedicated the Temple that he built for the Lord. As he prayed, he humbled himself before Almighty God and pleaded with Him to forgive the people of their sins and to answer their prayers.

Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:12-14)

God does not change. If He honored Solomon's humble prayer, He will also answer us when we come to him with a humble spirit seeking His will for our lives and our church.

Jesus said,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

The Greek word translated "easy" is *chrēstos*, which means "well fitting" or "profitable." Are you ready to take on the yoke? It **won't** be easy. But if you take it on, it will fit you and your situation. It's a yoke that is made just for you in your service of the Lord. It probably won't be what you expect it to be, but it will be what He wants it to be. Let's all commit right now to humbling ourselves before God, taking on the yoke He has prepared for us. And when you do prepare yourselves to be amazed.

Let's pray.

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