

## Introduction

The context before us this morning, Matthew 11, points us to John the Baptist, and it does so in a particular way. It points us to John the Baptist and the kingdom: **from the days of John the Baptist unto now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John** (Mat 11.12-13). In some way or another, John is a reference point in the coming of the kingdom promised by the prophets. John preached the coming of the kingdom just as Jesus did *in the same language* (**Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**, John-Mat 3.2; Jesus-Mat 4.17; and the apostles-Mat 10.7). Thus, there is a connection between the arrest of John that ended his preaching and the beginning of Jesus' preaching (**[Jesus] heard that John had been arrested...from that time Jesus began to preach...the kingdom**, Mat 4.12 w/ 4.17a). Actually, the book of Matthew presents a relationship between John and Jesus that can serve as an outline of the book:

The life of Jesus before John's imprisonment, chapters 1-3

The preaching of Jesus with John in prison, chapters 4-13 (precisely, 4.12-13.58)

The work of Jesus after the death of John, chapters 14-28

Since Matthew structures his witness to Christ this way, the relationship between John and Jesus must be critical to understanding the long anticipated coming of Messiah and the coming of the kingdom. Thus, the preaching of the gospel in the mission of Jesus, the apostles, and us is kingdom preaching. A kingdom-less gospel is a truncated gospel.

Therefore, it is important to hear what Jesus has to say about John and the Messiah in the passage before us today (Mat 11.1-6). My title is "The Baptist and the Messiah" and I will subdivide the material of this text into two points: 1) The question of John, and 2) The reply to John.

### 1A. The question of John

In prison, John hears "**about the deeds of the Christ**" (11.2). A better translation of these words is "what the Christ was doing" (Ridderbos, Matthew, 211). Here is a place where the narrator's perspective, usually implicit, becomes explicit. Matthew refers to Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. By doing this, Matthew pinpoints and emphasizes the fact that what Jesus was doing deeply troubled John as to whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. Hearing about the actions and doings of Jesus caused John to send his disciples to Jesus with this question, "**Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**" (11.3). Whatever other things may have bothered him, like being in prison, unable to preach, and under the threat of death, John wants an answer to this question, "**are you the one?**" Therefore, he sent word to Jesus through his disciples who could visit him in the prison and freely take messages from him to those outside.

There is a problem here and before we go any further, we should discuss what the problem is and offer an explanation.

1) The problem arises from John's own words about Christ. He spoke about the coming one who is "**mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry**" (Mat 3.11). From the Gospel of John (1.29-36), we know that John the Baptist specifically identified Jesus as the person "**of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me.'**" In effect John said, "My rank is so low by comparison with Him that I am not even worthy to carry His sandals; my rank is that far back, He is that far before me, He is my superior in a way I cannot overstate" (Jn 1.27, I am not even worthy to untie His sandals! In relation to Jesus, I am lower than a lowly servant is).

Thus, he saw Jesus on two separate days and said of Him, **“this is he”** and **“Behold, the Lamb of God”** (vs. 29-30, 36). Moreover, John viewed himself as the friend of the bridegroom who must joyfully fade away when the groom takes His bride: <sup>28</sup> **You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’** <sup>29</sup> **The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.** <sup>30</sup> **He must increase, but I must decrease”** (Jn 3.29-30). Thus, John is thoroughly committed to the fact that Jesus is the coming Messiah before whom he bows in happy self-abasement (at the baptism of Jesus, John said, **“I need to be baptized by you,”** Mat 3.14). As far as John is concerned, his entire life’s work is over when Jesus steps forth to do His work. This view of his work comes out in the well-known passage about Jesus increasing and John decreasing.

The “increase and decrease” point applies in a specific historical-redemptive way. That is, John’s work will decrease and disappear when the Messiah comes and takes up His work. Their labors do overlap but as the Messiah’s work takes hold, John’s work will fade away. Actually, John will fade away, for he says, **I must decrease**. John is saying a mouthful! Just consider the fact that he never left prison until his execution (Mat 14.1-12).

Consequently, it is problematic to hear these words of John from prison, **“are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?”** (Mat 11.3). He is looking at the deeds of the Christ (the Messiah, 11.3), and these deeds must refer to how Jesus preached the gospel by teaching, preaching, and healing (11.1; 9.35). The problem for John is not so much what he sees Jesus doing, but what he sees Jesus failing to do. In other words, how can Jesus be the coming messianic baptizer who will grant salvation by the Spirit and judgment by fire:

**He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.** <sup>12</sup> **His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** (Mat 3.11b-12).

John’s question is confusing because John is apparently confused. Thus we have to ask, “How can he, on one hand, definitively and emphatically declare that Jesus is the coming one (Jn 3.29-30, 36), but on the other hand, perplexingly ask, “Is Jesus the **one who is to come?**” (11.3)? How can this prophet be so distressed and plagued with doubt?

We need to understand what is going on here, and Matthew 3.11b-12 helps us do so. It helps us by showing that John looked to the future in the perspective of a prophet (we have talked about this before and it bears repeating). He saw the giving of the Spirit and the execution of final judgment as a single unit. He could not distinguish between the day of Pentecost and Judgment Day. Understandably, he would have great difficulty acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah when Jesus does not do what the Messiah will do, come with fiery judgment. The words and deeds of Jesus, what He was doing, did not announce impending judgment on the nations. Instead, they were deeds of gospel proclamation by preaching, teaching, and healing. Jesus preached good news.

It might strike us as a bit odd that a prophet of God could be so confused and so full of doubt. However, prophets did not always understand their own message or their own work. For example, John did not fully understand why he should baptize Jesus (Mat 3.13-17). The truth of the prophet’s message is in the work of the Spirit who gives it. John’s case is somewhat similar to the apostle Peter preaching infallible truth and yet being rebuked by Paul because of his confusion regarding conduct among the Gentiles (cf. Gal 1). Prophets and apostles are fallible sinners who give infallible truth by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the end, the question of John reflects his outlook, which we call prophetic perspective. Because of his perspective, he wants to know if Jesus is the Christ. He wants to know if perhaps he has misidentified Jesus.

## 2A. The reply to John

Notably, Jesus points John to the very things that troubled him. In reply, Jesus sends word back to John that he should consider the evidence again, consider the things he already knows, the very things that cause him to doubt. He tells John's disciples to go back to John and tell him what they hear and see regarding His "doings." We can discuss what they see first, and then we can comment on what they hear.

1) "Tell him what you see"

Jesus points John's disciples and John (and us) to a catalogue of His miracles: **Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up (Mat 11.4-5).** These are the deeds that Jesus has been doing, many of which are on record for us in Matthew 8-9. What a joy to see the works of Christ as they occurred and as they come before our eyes here in the Gospel of Matthew and in all the Gospels. Jesus is the prophet like Moses who would come performing signs (Deut 18). He is the Messiah anticipated by Isaiah:

**Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."<sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> 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 (35.4-6).**

True to prophetic perspective, the promise is that salvation will come through vengeance and it will involve the coming of God to save through miracles on behalf of the blind, deaf, lame, and mute. John is to meditate on these things more fully and draw from them his own conclusion; that conclusion is the answer to his question (cf. our Lord's use of logic). He should be able to praise God as the people did at the seaside (Mat 15.30-31).

2) "Tell him what you hear"

What did the disciples hear? What did all the followers of Jesus hear? a) Jesus connects the preaching of the gospel to His miracles: **and the poor have good news preached to them (5b).** His deeds include preaching; there is a bond between His preaching and His works (**what you hear and see**). Gospel and miracle are united in such a way that the gospel is elevated above the miracles. We have a ranking of things in which there is movement higher and higher from healings of various ailments of the body to resurrection of the entire body (from parts to the whole). Then there is the final move even higher to the preaching of the gospel to the poor. It all comes together in the good news. Healing the blind, the lame, the leprous, the deaf, and the dead by resurrection is astounding good news that Jesus proclaims. That is what the miracles are all about; they define the gospel of the kingdom. The person and the work of Jesus embody the promise of life that the gospel guarantees. Jesus fleshes it out before our eyes.

Thus, Jesus says to John, "look and listen to the work that I am doing and there you have the assurance that I am the Messiah that the OT prophets promised would come. I am the one greater than Moses who brings a word from God while performing many signs like Moses performed (Deut 18). I am the anointed one that Isaiah spoke about: **The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn (61.1-2).** There is an interesting convergence of material here. Notice that the coming Messiah will not only bring good news to the poor, but He will also proclaim "**the day of vengeance of our God**" (61.2). Jesus gives us most of the information that we have about eternal judgment, and part of the good news is that Judgment Day is not now; it is not yet. Gospel mission of the apostles and us (then and now) comes before He returns to judge the living and the dead. The gospel will go to the cities of Israel and the nations before the Son of man comes on the clouds of glory as final judge (Mat 10.23; 25.31-46; 26.64; you will see Him

coming on the clouds of glory, thus, He is the coming one promised by Daniel 7.14). Luke cites the remarkable account in which Jesus read from Isaiah 61, and then He said, **“Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”** (Lk 4.21; it is worth noting that He ended the reading before the section on judgment). Therefore, Jesus is the Messiah despite the fact that He does not execute divine justice or even announce its beginning. Nevertheless, He is the one the OT promised would come. Yes, John, He is the one.

b) There is one more thing that the disciples of John hear and are to report to John. They hear this promise of Jesus: **Blessed is the one who is not offended by me** (Mat 11.6). What does He mean? These words convey a promise of blessing (with a warning buried in the background). They go beyond answering his question to a duty housed in a promise. That is, Jesus promises kingdom joy to John and anyone (the one) who does not take offense *at how He brings in the kingdom*, at how He opens the telescope of prophetic perspective, at how He conducts Himself as the Messiah.

### Conclusion

When we consider a passage in Scripture like Matthew 11.1-6, we might wonder about its significance for us today. We might wonder if it significant. We might wonder how it can bear on our lives since the words of Jesus go specifically to John the Baptist.

The text is directly applicable to us because of its historical-redemptive context. Note how the opening verse (11.1) subtly but powerfully locks us into the time between the comings of Christ because He went out **“to teach and preach in their cities.”** We should not miss what Jesus does in His own work and ministry. He preaches and teaches in the Israelite towns. There is a bond of unity between His preaching, the preaching of the apostles, and preaching today because gospel preaching is kingdom preaching (by John, Mat 3.2; by Jesus Mat. 4.17; by the twelve apostles, Mat 10.7; and by preachers today in the Israelite towns until Jesus comes again, Mat 10.23).

Therefore, the word to John is a word to all followers of Christ living in the time between His comings. Accordingly, these words to John imply at least three responses or duties (for John and us) related to the gospel of the kingdom.

#### 1) First, heed the warning of the gospel

A warning underlies the promise of blessing to those who do not stumble over Christ (who do not take offense at how He brings in the kingdom, 11.6). The warning is that the Messianic kingdom comes in a way unexpected and that unexpectedness is a pitfall if we do not brace ourselves for it. In the context of Matthew 10, we fall into this pit when we fail to see that the kingdom promised in the OT is present now in ways difficult to untangle but sufficiently clear. Consider that fact that God promised Abraham a land, posterity, and a blessing in Genesis 12-17. The promise of the land to Abraham comes to fulfillment in the cities of the world where the **waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert (35.6)**. The promise of a people comes to fulfillment in the new Israel first constituted by the twelve apostles (the new twelve tribes in nucleus), and the blessing comes to fulfillment in the inclusion of the Gentiles with Israelites in the new covenant community, the new Israel.

Furthermore, the unexpectedness of the kingdom serves as a reality check. The kingdom has come but not in its fullness, not yet. The kingdom comes and John remains in prison; he remains there until his death. As Matthew 10 indicates, the kingdom comes to the cities of Israel that are cites of those the Lord calls, **“not my people”** (Hosea 2). From those who are not my people, the Lord says He will call out a new people of God (Rom 9.25-26). Thus, Jesus did not come to bring peace to the earth but a sword of election that exposes the hearts of men and arouses such opposition that **“a person’s enemies will be those of his own household”** (10.36).

Heed the warning lest you misunderstand how the kingdom comes. The kingdom does not come by the sword of divine vengeance but by the sword of divine election. Thus, Jesus says, you are a blessed person if you do not take offense and stumble at how I bring in the kingdom. You can think rightly about the kingdom if you consider whom Jesus is and what He does as the Messiah who preaches the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. He preaches the gospel to the end of the age; He does so through the apostolic gospel that we preach today.

### 2) Embrace the promise of the gospel

Truly, John had certain expectations and Jesus did not match those expectations. God's thoughts, ways, and actions more often than not are strikingly different from what we think His thoughts, ways, and actions ought to be. However, the promise is that in humble submission to Jesus in His person and His work, a man, a human being has blessings untold.

Therefore, Jesus tells us to embrace the promise of the good news of kingdom salvation that guarantees our salvation from every effect of the fall into sin and death. Those who believe in Christ have the kingdom promises both now and not yet. To the poor in spirit, to those who acknowledge their spiritual poverty and need of Christ, Jesus says, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

On one hand, the Beatitudes define these blessings (the earth is our inheritance, seeing God, knowing God, joy, comfort, mercy, and peace). On the other hand, though subject to dying and death, the subjects of Christ's kingdom have the gospel good news embodied before their eyes and ringing in their ears in the miracles that flesh out the gospel. He tells us to embrace the promise of salvation of our entire existence from all the devastating effects of sin on the human body. He tells us to fix our hope on the Lord Jesus who will deliver us from being physically blind, deaf, lame, mute, paralyzed, and even dead.

For short, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Lord of life, death, and resurrection, and you will never die. The gospel defining miracles tell us the same thing that Jesus said to Martha, **"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world"** (Jn 11.25-27).

### 3) Embody the message of the gospel

Be what you are in Christ. Live as those who are alive from the dead and who sit with Christ in heavenly places. If you were once spiritually deaf, blind, paralyzed, and mute but now you have been set free by the work of Christ, then now is the time to hear the gospel, absorb it into your being. It is time to wake up because your salvation is nearer than when you first believed and to walk about with freed feet to serve the Lord wherever your feet take you in life. It is time to confess with your mouth a good confession and with loosened tongue to praise and glorify God.

**To the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, be the glory voiced by loosened tongues forever, Amen.**