

Introduction

Anyone curious about Jesus who picks up the NT for the first time will read about John the Baptist before he gets information about the ministry of Christ. The Gospel of Mark makes the starting point with John abundantly clear:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" ⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (1.1-8).

John is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus and thus Jesus directs our thoughts to him in a momentous way. As we shall see, the language in Matthew 11 is powerful even involving an extreme play on logic. It is so much like our Lord to stretch language in some figurative way that may be hard to categorize.

Because of this concentration on John, I did not preach on Matthew 11.7-15 last Sunday for communion, even though our pattern of preaching through the Gospel of Matthew brought us to this text last week. The reason I did not use this passage for communion should be obvious. In communion, we come to remember Jesus and in this text, Jesus directs us to remember John. Granted, we could consider *Jesus* who directs us to John and thus for communion we would remember Christ as our teacher (with our attention on how He used questions to stimulate thought in order to draw out a seeking faith). However, in terms of the flow of the passage, we should consider *John* to whom Jesus directs us. Therefore, the title for this message is "Remembering John the Baptist." There are three points to cover because Jesus asks three questions, each introduced by the leading question, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see (v. 7; slightly varied in vs. 8 & 9). Thus, we have the following questions. Is John a shaken reed? Is John a man dressed in fine clothing? Is John a prophet? These questions become three claims (two negatives and a positive): 1) John is not a reed shaken by the wind, 2) John is not a finely dressed royal attendant, and 3) John is a prophet and more than a prophet. From the three claims we get the outline of today's sermon.

1A. John is not a reed shaken by the wind

As John's disciples "went away" (11.7a) to report back to John in prison (cf. 11.1-6), Matthew tells us in 11.7 that "Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John," asking them the leading question, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" Because Jesus speaks this way to these people, we have to wonder if the content of their thinking is the main point. Is Jesus asking something like, "What did you go out intent on seeing? What was in your minds?" Does the thinking of these people give us the whole story or the main story? It seems to me that to ask these questions is to answer them. There is much more going on here than the various reasons the crowds may have had to go out to hear John preach. Surely, Jesus is building on what they thought about John, but He is going beyond that to what they should have thought and what we, as readers, should think about John. They went out into the wilderness to see John with high regard and respect, but also with incorrect thoughts. For example, some thought that He was the Messiah, or literally Elijah, or possibly the coming prophet (Jn 1.19-21; *the* prophet no doubt

being one like Moses, Deut 18.15-18). Now, here in Matthew, we have a context in which the crowds may again think incorrectly about John, but with low regard, because of his dress code, his imprisonment, and his questions from prison.

Misunderstanding about John seems to be the driving factor in the first question, “did you go out into the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind?” (11.7c & d combined). Presumably, the questioning of John, his doubt as to the identity of Christ, is the backdrop of this thought about wavering in the wind. At one time, John said of Jesus, “This is he of whom I spoke” (Jn 1.30); He is the Lamb of God (Jn 1.29) and the coming baptizer with the Spirit and fire (Mat 3.11). Then, at this time, we read his question, “Are you the one?” Some change occurred.

Thus, John’s apparent change from firm confidence to perplexing doubt might make people think that John wavers like a reed blowing in the wind. Is he such a reed?

The answer is no, he is not a wavering reed. The negative answer comes out implicitly in the flow of thought that becomes explicit in the “yes” of verse 9. In other words, the pattern is to this effect: “if he is not a shaken reed, then is he a man of fine clothing, and if not a man of fine clothing, then is he a prophet? Yes, he is a prophet. It is no to the shaken reed, no to the fine linen, but yes to the prophet.”

Back to the first question, it may be true that John is confused because of His telescoped perspective on the future, but Jesus tells us, “Nonetheless, he is strong and unwavering. He knows his calling by the Holy Spirit. He knows the coming one is at hand. He knows that he has in fact prepared the way for the king.” By asking, “Shall we look for another?” John in effect says, “The Messiah must be present and if you are not the Messiah, then tell us, and we shall look for Him elsewhere because the kingdom is unquestionably at hand.” Thus, John is strong and his message is firm.

2A. John is not a finely dressed royal attendant

In verse 8, we have another point. John is not a high official in the king’s court. He is not an important minister in the king’s cabinet administrating the affairs of the kingdom. John is a forerunner. He is one who runs before the king comes; he does not run “with” the king.

Think about his clothes for a moment along with his diet. **Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey (Mk 1.6).** His very clothes embodied his vocation. How he was dressed and the food he consumed pictured his message. That is, he dressed and ate like a man who was about to see an awful judgment fall on the sons of men. Thus, he fasted much and when he ate, he ate locusts and wild honey because the time of impending judgment is not a time for feasting. Thus, John is not a man of fine clothing who enjoys all the delicacies of a king’s house. He runs ahead of the king; he is not a member of the king’s household. Thus, John’s firm message includes the certainty of judgment.

3A. John is a prophet and more

On the positive side, Jesus emphasizes who John is (v. 9). He is a prophet and more than a prophet.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, " Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." ¹¹ Truly, 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. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come (Mat 11.10-14).

To say that he is more than a prophet is to say that he is bigger than life. He is a prophet of superior ranking.

Now if we look carefully at verses 10-14, then we will find a number of reasons that support the point that John is a prophet and more. We can present each reason with the same opening phrase: "John is more than a prophet (he is a prophet *par excellence*) because..."

1B. John is more than a prophet (he is a prophet *par excellence*) because he is the forerunner of Jesus. He is the promised forerunner (11.10): **This is he of whom it is written, "' Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'** The quote is from Malachi 3.1, **Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.** Do you notice anything different between our Lord's quotation of Malachi and Malachi itself? The key change to notice is the change from "before me" in Malachi to "before you" in Matthew. There seems to be only one explanation for this change, namely, Jesus applies the prophecy to John and to Himself. Per fulfillment, Jesus takes the words of Malachi as addressed to Him (you) and thus John is a prophet *par excellence* because of a number of things: 1) He someone that other prophets spoke about. John is not just another prophet who prophesies about future events and persons. His coming is a future event and He is a future person that is the subject of OT prophecy. 2) He is the way preparer of the Lord at the same time that he is the way preparer for Jesus because the words about John were spoken to Jesus (they speak to Him in realization of what was promised). Thus, John is a unique prophet, Jesus says, because he is my messenger who goes ahead of me and prepares the way before me. Immediately, per the amazing self-consciousness of Christ, we know who Jesus is if we know who John is. We know that Jesus is the covenant Lord, the covenant keeping God who has come to fulfill His appointed role as Messiah.

2B. John is more than a prophet (he is a prophet *par excellence*) because he is the greatest person ever born and yet others are greater than he is. The point here has to take in both sentences of the verse: **Truly, 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** (11.11). Here is an example of a play on logic by our Lord. If you take these words literally, then there is blatant self-contradiction (cf. he is the greatest at the same time that others are greater than he is). The language is self-contradictory if you think about greatness throughout the verse in the same way or in the same sense. It is logically impossible for John to be greater than others are at the same time and in the same way that others are greater than he is.

What we have then is a play on words in some figurative way. John is the greatest in one sense and others are greater than he is in another sense. Thus, we need to specify the two meanings of greatness that are not contradictory to one another. Both meanings relate to the kingdom because those greater than John are "least in the kingdom of heaven." It is being *in* the kingdom that gives them their greatness and makes it superior to John's greatness.

To pin this down, we should ask this question, "in relation to the kingdom, how can John be the greatest person born of women and yet it be the case that those least *in the kingdom* are greater than he is?" Surely, the answer has to be that John is not in the kingdom, but he directly paved the way for it. In other words, no one was greater than John was in the time of the promise of the kingdom, but those in the time of fulfillment are greater than John is because fulfillment is greater than promise. In a comparable way, my wife will remind me of this relation of promise and fulfillment when she says, "promises, promises, fulfillment is greater than promise." She is right and how much more so for the promises of the OT in relation to the fulfillment of those promises in the NT. Fulfillment is greater than promise so the greatest person in the time of promise is lower in greatness in principle than the lowest person in the time of fulfillment. Perhaps, we can illustrate this point by referring to a two-story building. The person that is highest on a stairway to the upper floor is in a lower position than everyone on the upper floor. We can simply think of the lower floor as promise and the upper floor as fulfillment.

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that those in His kingdom who own Him as their king “now see and hear all that the prophets desired to see and hear” (Mat 13.17). What the people of the OT longed to see, we see. What they longed to hear, we hear. We have this marvelous privilege because the kingdom promised in the OT has now arrived.

One more thought should go into this mix of ideas. That is, we should end up with the distinct impression that John’s greatness as a prophet, that he is a prophet bigger than life, shines brighter still and undiminished *by the very fact that others are greater than he is*. It is interesting to say that the fact that others surpass John enhances, proves, and explains his superior greatness for all time. The greatness that others have over John is theirs because of John, because of the office that God gave him as the way-preparing prophet and messenger of Jesus.

Truly, our Lord demands of us that we think carefully about John and learn a number of truths at the same time and in careful balance. For example, he is the greatest person with others greater than he is, and his greatness is undiminished by the fact that others surpass him!

3B. John is more than a prophet (he is a prophet *par excellence*) because he introduced the kingdom and its power. That is, he is great because of what he introduced, and what he introduced is nothing less than the powerful arrival of kingdom salvation.

To see how this point is made we need to do some work on the translation because it seems clear to me that our translations are misleading when they give a dominantly negative cast to Matthew 11.12, “the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” The last phrase (the violent take it by force) depends on the first phrase (the kingdom...has suffered violence). However, the first phrase could have a positive meaning, namely, “the kingdom of heaven has forcibly arrived” or “the kingdom has arrived with great power.” Then we have a very positive idea that affects how we should read the last phrase, which becomes, “people forcefully take hold of it” or “determined men seize it.”

We can say more, but briefly, the idea of the kingdom suffering violence goes too far, it implies too much, and it is without contextual support here in Matthew 11. On the other hand, the idea of the kingdom coming with force and power does not go too far, implies just enough, and has contextual support. Primarily, in context, the answer of Jesus to John revealed the powerful coming of the kingdom that prophets of old longed to hear and see. **“Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the 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. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Mat 11.4-6).**

The very idea of the kingdom includes three basic things: authority to rule or regal power (cf. a nobleman received a kingdom), the benefits of a king’s reign (cf. the Beatitudes of the kingdom and the kingdom is righteousness, peace, and joy, Rom 14.17), and a people who receive those benefits (cf. you are a kingdom of priests). Therefore, Jesus-Messiah is exercising royal authority in bringing restoration from all the devastating effects of the fall (11.12a) to people who seize the kingdom as a prize (11.12b). In Luke, forcibly seizing the kingdom means pressing into it by taking hold of kingdom gospel preaching (Lk 16.16, **The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it**).

The principle here is that Christ (Messiah) is exercising His kingship and manifesting the blessings of the kingdom by giving us the gospel in word and deed. This means that His kingdom includes the restoration of man and the restoration of the creation from all the effects of the fall.

4B. John is more than a prophet (he is a prophet *par excellence*) because he is the last prophet, the sum of all prophets. Thus, Jesus says, **“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John”** (Mat 11.13). This does not mean “up to but excluding John.” It means “up to and including John.” In other words, John is the last of the OT prophets and he not only prophesied as they prophesied, he also brought all their prophecies (and his) to realization. They all pointed to a great door into the future, and so did John, but John was the one who opened it!

5B. John is more than a prophet (he is a prophet *par excellence*) because he is Elijah the prophet. He is Elijah not literally but figuratively in spirit and power (cf. Lk 1.17). Like Elijah, John preached boldly to a disobedient people calling for repentance in the face of judgment. For example, the boldness of John before Herod is comparable with the boldness of Elijah before Ahab (1 Kgs 18.18 & Mat 14.4). He dressed in ways similar to Elijah and thus like the prophet of old, he embodied his message of coming judgment.

Remarkably then, what John does as an individual is important because of what he does in the history of redemption. He is a historical-redemptive figure of huge proportions. He is Elijah who cast his mantle onto Elisha, that is, onto Jesus.

Conclusion

We have a concluding application in Matthew 11.15 where Jesus ends the discussion about John by using an idiomatic and proverbial expression: “**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**” This expression gives a “solemn and emphatic warning” that the way we think about John and what we do about it is “of the most momentous import and entitled to most serious attention” (Alexander, *Matthew*, 311). There is both rebuke as well as exhortation in these words. The exhortation to hear involves a number of things.

1) All that have ears for hearing are now called upon to use them to the most important use to which they can possibly put them.

2) We all have ears so Jesus accents the universal importance of His words.

3) There is also another nuance here regarding the ability to use one’s ears, namely, the fact is that there are people who have ears designed for hearing but who are deaf to the things of God (cf. the deaf, blind and mute regarding kingdom truth in Mat 9-10). If by the grace of God, you have ears to hear the things of God, then your ears must be used most emphatically, earnestly, and diligently to hear the things of the kingdom. a) You must use your ears to understand kingdom truth by attending eagerly to the word of God. b) You must take in what you hear in order to obey it.

4) The proverb conveys urgency and warning to this effect as stated by Alexander, “Why should you have the sense of hearing, if you do not use it now? To what advantage can you ever listen, if you turn a deaf ear to these admonitions? Now, now, if ever, he who can hear must hear, or incur the penalty of inattention” (Ibid).

Now we have to ask, “How does this strong exhortation actually work out in relation to the things about John in 7-15?”

These teachings about John are things we are to know. It is imperative that we know them (this is a discipleship imperative). Thus, even if we cannot exactly place the value we should on these teachings of Jesus, they are vital and essential for us to understand. Therefore, we should prayerfully and diligently, even painstakingly, work at grasping them in all the richness they possess (time has to be set aside for meditation and prayer for understanding).

Then we must ask the question of obedience, of hearing in the sense of harkening. How do we obey the things here we are to understand?

We are to understand who John is and is not. We are to understand that he was neither a waving reed nor a courtesan, but that he was a prophet and more than a prophet. We are to understand that he is more than a prophet for number of reasons. He is a subject of prophecy and not just a prophet. He is the forerunner of Jesus, the Messianic Lord of the covenant. He is greatest and lesser at the same time. He introduced the kingdom and its power. He is the last of the prophets and summary of all prophecy on the eve of fulfillment, and he is Elijah in his bold message that initiated the formation of the new Israel in his repentance-baptism. Jesus

emphatically exhorts us to understand these things about John in relation to the kingdom and king.

However, understanding is not sufficient. It is vitally important to note that these things call for obedience as well as understanding; they call for hearing in the sense of harkening. In a way, this is difficult because there are no commands in 11.7-15 for us to obey. Still, Jesus tells us to obey in the proverb about having ears for hearing. Thus, He tells us to think about these truths, to think about John and the kingdom. He tells us to mediate, think, compare, and learn in order to find the sure path of obedience in His kingdom and under His authority.

If we go back over the words of 11.7-15, we must finally (at least) fix our attention on the end of verse 12. There Jesus states the fact that determined people (disciples, subjects of His kingdom, those who make up the new Israel beginning with John's baptism) seize the kingdom for what it is as something of great value. By His proverb about hearing and harkening, Jesus translates this fact about determined people into a duty. Therefore, He most solemnly exhorts and commands that all who have ears use them in the way they should, namely, to lay hold of, understand, and obey the gospel of Jesus, the messianic king of glory.

Thus, what Jesus calls us to do is to set our minds on the things of the kingdom and to fix our hearts on the king. He tells us to seize the kingdom as a prize because it powerfully manifests the good news of salvation secured by the Messiah. There is nothing passive here.

If you know who John is, then you will present yourself, your mind, your body, your possessions, and all that you are and hope to be to Jesus as your covenant Lord. You will seek the kingdom of God first. Per the message of Hosea, you will not prostitute yourself in the worship and service of the creature (money, possessions, careers, etc.). You will strive to live under the authority of the word of Jesus your king.

You will desire His kingdom above all else. You will seek Him and it. Like David, you will say, "one thing I have asked...that I might dwell in the house of the Lord to behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in his temple" (Ps 27.4). Thus, the mark of a Christian, a disciple of Christ, is this desire that translates into determined effort. What Jesus commands here is that you resolve to do everything that is required of you, that lies in your power to do and to continue in it under Christ as your king (cf. Edwards on Lk 16.16). Then you will say in the depths of your soul, "when the Lord said, seek my face, my heart said, your face O Lord will I seek" (Ps 27.8).

Thus, I solemnly, briefly, and powerfully conclude with these words: **He that has ears to hear, let him hear.**