

The Lord Commends John the Baptist

Matthew 11:1-19

Matthew 11:1-19 - *"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. ² And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples ³ and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" ⁴ 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."*

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? 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. ⁹ 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.' 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. ¹² And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers 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 receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear! ¹⁶ "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.' ¹⁸ 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."

Background Notes

In Matthew 10 the Lord sent His disciples out to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. They were to carry this message to the cities of Israel. In the meantime, King Herod had arrested and imprisoned John the Baptist, and John was still in prison. So John the Baptist sent two of his own disciples to the Lord with the question, *"Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"* (v3). We can understand why John would have questions. After all, he had announced the Lord as the Messiah! John had expected that the Lord would set up His earthly kingdom at that time, but that didn't seem to be happening. And John was in prison. What was going on? We can understand why John had doubts.

What answer did the Lord sent back to John? He didn't tell John that he should be ashamed of himself for having questions. No. He told John's disciples to go back and tell John what they were hearing and what they were seeing.

“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. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

The Lord quoted prophetic passages about the Messiah from the prophet Isaiah. 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.”* And Isaiah 61:1: *“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound...”*

Apparently the Word of God was all the answer John needed to reassure him. Jesus was indeed the Messiah! We don't read of John ever again having further doubts or questions, even though he was never released from prison. In fact, as you know, John died in prison as a martyr.

After John's disciples departed with their message, the Lord Jesus began to speak to the people about the prophet, John the Baptist.

Doctrinal Points

1. John the Baptist was the greatest Old Testament prophet.

Notice that the Lord praised and commended John the Baptist. John the Baptist was not some sort of weak vacillating creature, swayed by every wind of human opinion (v7). And John was not a rich evangelist living in luxury (v8). John was a prophet of God who had come in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah. In fact, John the Baptist was **more** than a prophet because he was the forerunner of the Messiah - the forerunner who was predicted by both Isaiah and Malachi. The Lord quoted from the prophet Malachi, and said that this prophecy was speaking of John the Baptist (v10).

Notice, too, what the Lord said of John the Baptist: *“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”* (v11). In what way was John the Baptist the greatest of the Old Testament prophets? He certainly wasn't the greatest prophet because of his miracles. He wasn't the greatest because of the crowds, or his eloquence, or his charisma! He was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets because of his **mission**. He was the forerunner of the Messiah.

Now notice what the Lord said: *“...but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”* (v11). The person who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist? What did our Lord mean? Answer: that person is not greater in character or mission, but greater in **position and privilege!**

John the Baptist announced the kingdom as being at hand, but believers today have the greater position and privilege of being **citizens of the kingdom!** All believers today are **members of the Church, the Body and Bride of Christ.** And, unlike John the Baptist, **the Holy Spirit indwells all believers** today. So a person who is least in the kingdom of heaven today is greater than John the Baptist in position and privilege.

What did the Lord mean when He said, *“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (v12)?* The leaders of the nation had not received the message of the kingdom of heaven that John had announced to the Jewish people. In fact, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the chief priests and scribes, the leaders in the nation were doing their best to keep the people from entering the kingdom! They were even willing to use violence.

Listen to what the Lord said of those religious leaders in Matthew 23:13. *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”* The Lord likened that generation of unbelieving religious leaders to sulking, dissatisfied, and even hostile children in the market place. They wouldn’t dance to flute music, and they wouldn’t mourn for dirge music. In the same way, the religious leaders of Israel said that John was too ascetic (v18), and the Lord was too easy-going (v19). The Lord, of course, was not a glutton or a drunkard, but He was friendly with tax gatherers and sinners. (Aren’t you glad about that?) The wise approach of both John and our Lord Jesus would be vindicated and proved right by the results.

So the religious leaders of that day, like many religious leaders today, would not receive the good news of the Messiah and His kingdom as announced by John the Baptist. However, the Lord Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest Old Testament prophet!

2. John the Baptist was the subject of Old Testament prophecy.

“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (v13-15).

Malachi 3:1 predicts the coming of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Lord. Malachi 4:5 is a prophecy predicting the return of Elijah before the coming Day of the Lord. Question: Were these prophecies fulfilled in John the Baptist, who came in the spirit of Elijah? Answer: Yes and no! No, in the sense that John the Baptist clearly said that he was not Elijah (John 1:21). But yes, in view of what the Lord said in Matthew 17:10-13: *“And His disciples asked Him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.”*

How do we resolve this apparent “double talk”? The Lord said that Elijah is coming, and yet He said that Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist! It’s resolved right here in Matthew 11:13-14: *“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.”*

The “it” here is the message and offer of the Kingdom. If the Jews had received the King and His Kingdom when it was offered to them at the first coming of Christ, then John the Baptist would have completely fulfilled the Elijah prophecy of Malachi 4. But as we know, the King and His Kingdom were rejected by the nation of Israel. They didn’t have hearing ears (v15). So therefore Elijah is still coming. His coming will precede the Second Coming of Christ. Possibly one of the two “witnesses” of Revelation 11 will be Elijah. The Malachi 4 prophecy about the coming of Elijah will be completely fulfilled when the Lord returns. But certainly John the Baptist was the subject of Old Testament prophecy.

Practical Application

When you’re discouraged and have doubts, turn to the Word!

From time to time we all have doubts, and sometimes we become discouraged. Even John the Baptist was discouraged. He had some questions and concerns. He probably wondered, “Why was my ministry cut off so suddenly? Why am I wasting away in prison?” John the Baptist had not expected this turn of events!

How did the Lord clear up John the Baptist’s doubts? He directed John’s thoughts to the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah – **and the Scriptures cleared up John’s doubts!** This can be true in our lives, too. If we turn to the Lord in times of doubt or discouragement, the Lord will often use His Word to give us answers and encouragement and exhortation and challenge.

At a time in the past I was discouraged - and even feeling a little sorry for myself! Life was discouraging, and things weren’t going the way I had expected. And it was at that time I read again the story of Joseph, and all the disastrous and discouraging life events he went through. As a result, I was convicted! And I was encouraged and challenged - all at the same time! I turned to the Word, and the Lord cleared up my discouragement and questions.

When you’re discouraged and have doubts -- turn to the Word!