

Hard to Please

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. Over these next weeks in August, we are going to be looking at Matthew chapter 11 and 12 under the title, The Kingdom Advancing.

Jesus' ministry has begun. It's meeting with both acceptance and rejection, and the pattern of stories here really reflect that.

I want to read, though, to begin with from Matthew chapter 4. You don't need to turn it up. Which is, Jesus came into Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, the land of Zebulun, the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people living in darkness have seen a great light. From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

This is what Matthew's gospel is about, the preaching of the kingdom. And today we read chapter 11, verses 1 to 18.

[1 : 09] Or rather, verses 1 to 19. That's on page, let me see what page is it on, page 816.

Matthew 11, verse 1. When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there and began to teach and preach in their cities.

Now when John in prison heard about the deeds of the Christ, the Messiah, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, 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.

And blessed is the one who is not offended by me. As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see?

[2 : 12] A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. What then did you go out to see?

A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.

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.

From the days of John the Baptist until 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, if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

But to what shall I compare this generation? It's like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their playmates, We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

[3 : 18] We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. But John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he is a demon. 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. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Father, we pray indeed that your kingdom will come, and that your will be done on earth as is in heaven.

We also pray that in our lives we may anticipate that kingdom. We may live by kingdom values. We may live by the values of the world that is to come, rather than the values of the world around us.

We know how difficult this is. We know how hard and how hard the temptations are, and how many things pull us in the opposite direction. We pray for these moments, as we hear these words spoken long ago, but yet spoken to us.

We pray, Lord, that we will indeed be changed, that indeed, as the passage says, that we will have ears to hear, that we will indeed hear and obey.

[4 : 37] And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Oh, when we pray, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, it often seems very, very far distant, doesn't it?

We look at the news, we look into our hearts, we look around us, and we see very little evidence of that kingdom. Now, in the years immediately following the Second World War, preachers use an illustration, which has often been used since, that about the coming of the kingdom in Jesus, and the coming of the kingdom that is yet future.

You know how towards the end of the Second World War, there was the D-Day landing, but that didn't end the war. The war went on for another 18 months of bitter and savage fighting, until V-E-Day, when the war was over.

Now, they compare the first coming of Jesus into the world to D-Day, if you like. The kingdom has come. He has come preaching the kingdom.

Indeed, he's come embodying the kingdom. But, because he hasn't finally returned in glory, to reign in heaven and earth, there is still fighting, there is still struggle, and we still need to pray, your kingdom come, your will be done.

[6 : 00] In that sense, we're living between D-Day and V-E-Day. We're living between the comings. And Jesus has instructed the twelve, his twelve disciples.

He sent them out, and now the focus returns to his own ministry here, to the king, who he is, what he does, and what he says.

And this is all leading, we won't get to this, but in chapter 16, Peter's great confession, confession. You are the promised Messiah. You are the Christ. You are the one who is to come, the son of the living God.

And if he is who he says he is, then he must also be who John the Baptist said he was. So that's the kind of situation. So let's look then at this passage, and first of all, there is a genuine question.

This is not a trivial question. It's not the kind of question that's asked, just to try to be funny. This is a genuine question. John is in prison. John has pointed to Jesus, to the Messiah, and said, this is the one who is to come, and inevitably in prison.

[7 : 14] He begins to wonder if he got it wrong. And he sent word by his disciples, verse 2, and he said to him, are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

Are you the promised Messiah, or is there someone else still to come? Now, back in chapter 3, masses of people had flocked to hear John's message.

They'd been baptized by him, and now John is shut away in prison, as Jesus' Galilean ministry is developing. You see, this often happens to a lesser degree when people come to the Lord.

Come to the Lord, for a time it seems wonderful, and then things start to go wrong. The inevitable questions arise. Have I got it wrong? Have I been misled?

Can Christ actually deliver? What he says, he can deliver. And John's question is a genuine one. Are you the one who is to come?

[8 : 19] John, of course, believed that there was one to come. What he was beginning to wonder, is this the one, the Messiah, the one who is to come? It's unusual, actually, for Matthew to use the term Christ, Messiah.

Messiah. And he deliberately uses this in here, because the point is, the Old Testament had promised there would come a Messiah.

There would come someone who would do wonderful things, who would heal the sick, who would cause the lame to walk. Prophet Isaiah, for example, prophesies about all these things.

Now, that's why John needs to know, for certain, is he the promised Messiah? And as I say, in a lesser way, it often, and indeed, it can happen to us throughout our Christian lives.

There must be very few people here who haven't been troubled by doubt sometimes. What if we've got it wrong? What if it's not true? And these things happen.

[9 : 25] And they happen to John the Baptist. I think that's a very important thing. However strong a person's faith may be, there will be times when they will ask questions, serious questions like this.

So, we have a question, a genuine, honest question. And then in verses 4 to 15, we have an authoritative answer, an authoritative assessment.

By the way, it's important to realize that John probably had, was under what we might call house arrest. His disciples still had access to him and was able to send them.

Some have said it's unrealistic. He was in prison. How could he send his disciples? The point is, he is, if you read, if you read in some of the other Gospels, Herod, who had imprisoned him, had a very ambiguous attitude towards him.

He was nervous of him and frequently sent for him. And frequently, John would speak to him. Sadly, tragically, Herod eventually, eventually had John executed.

[10 : 31] But we've got to remember that Herod was genuinely interested. So, first of all then, the answer that Jesus gives is, uses the language of Isaiah 35 and 61.

He doesn't actually straightforwardly say, yes, go back and tell John that I am the Messiah. He says, go and tell John what you see and hear. The blind can see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have the good news preached them.

This is what Isaiah and other prophets said the Messiah would do. When he comes, these will be the signs that will mark his coming. The blessings of the new creation are anticipated.

So, he is the one who is doing all these things. The kingdom has already come. But he's not fully come. Three people were raised from the dead, but the cemeteries didn't empty.

Blind people got their sight, but not all blind people got their sight. And the point is, those three people raised from the dead would all die again. That is the point.

[11 : 46] But he was genuinely anticipating the kingdom. And he says, blessed is the one who is not offended by me. Jesus says, whoever is ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of him.

Now, John, there is no question of John being ashamed of Jesus. I think that's the point. The point is, John is wondering if Jesus is the Messiah. John is the Messiah. And when he, and when the disciples go back and tell, we're not told actually of this, almost certainly John would rejoice at hearing this.

See, it wasn't enough for Jesus to say, oh yes, go back and tell him I am the Christ and he ought to believe that. Jesus realizes, see, Jesus realizes John, in spite of being such a towering, powerful individual, is also a human being and he needs reassurance.

So he gives him that reassurance. So, who Jesus is? Jesus is the promised one. He is the one who will come to preach the kingdom, to embody the kingdom, and who will return on the last day in great power and majesty to judge the living and the dead.

But the point of these verses is not just to underline who Jesus is, but to underline who John is, to establish who he is. John had testified, authenticated Jesus.

[13 : 14] Jesus is now authenticating and testifying to John. That's so important to realize. Jesus began to speak to the crowds, verse 7, concerning, what did you go out into the wilderness to see?

And he gives them various, a reed shaken by the wind, somebody dressed in soft clothes, a prophet. The reed, the reed, the reed is the cane that grows in the Jordan Valley, plentiful, and John was not swayed by public opinion or his own circumstances.

John's question did not arise from weakness. It did arise from, as I say, his wondering if he had got it right. But notice what Jesus says in verse 9.

What did he end up to see? A prophet? Well, yes, he was, but more than a prophet. And Jesus means by that John was not only a prophet, he himself was the subject of prophecy.

Other prophets had prophesied about him. Malachi says, Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you. And that messenger is the Baptist himself.

[14 : 29] And also in Isaiah 40, the voice of one crying in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord. So, John is the one who particularly is referred to in these prophecies.

In verse 11, puzzling verse, I say to you among those born of women, there is arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Now that sounds a total contradiction, doesn't it? First of all, let's take the first part. There's no one greater than John the Baptist. Now notice how carefully Jesus chooses his words.

He's not saying the other prophets were not great. He's not saying that Moses and Elijah were not great. He's not saying Isaiah and Jeremiah were not great.

He says none of them, all these prophets you look back to and honor, none of them was greater than the Baptist. In what sense was he greater? Because he was the one who actually stood and pointed to the Messiah and says, this is him, he's here.

[15 : 42] For centuries, people had prophesied about him. But he's now actually come. He is the one who was privileged to be there at the moment for Christ, the Messiah, arrived.

And what about the who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he? Does that mean we are greater than John the Baptist? Christ? Now clearly, to say that would be a total devaluation of the Baptist place, wouldn't it?

I think what Jesus is saying is, those living after John live in the light of the full revelation. Jesus has died, Jesus has risen, Jesus has ascended to heaven and sent the Spirit.

not greater in the sense that we're more significant, not greater in the sense that we matter more, but greater in the sense that we have fuller revelation of who Jesus is, what Jesus has done and what Jesus will do.

So you see, this statement, it's not about the relative importance of individuals. after all, the ground at the foot of the cross is totally level.

[17 : 04] The ground before the throne of God in heaven is also totally level. It's not that some people are there because they're hugely significant and have done wonderful things, although that's not to be downplayed.

Everyone is there by grace. So you see, Jesus is really saying two things. First of all, John the Baptist has a unique place in salvation history. He is the one who actually pointed to Christ when he came.

And yet, he's not more significant than the humblest believer who takes her stand on grace. And then, in fact, the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.

Now, the title of this series is The Kingdom Advancing. But as the kingdom advances, it's continually opposed. Until now, that means including now, I suppose, rather than as the Americans say, through meaning including, you know, Monday through Friday also includes Friday.

until John the Baptist includes John. And of course, there had been enormous opposition, not least from the Herod family, who had, in a sense, tried to take the kingdom of heaven.

[18 : 33] Well, not in a sense, tried to take the kingdom by violence. John, like Elijah, before him, was called to difficult and dangerous times. Just as Elijah in the Old Testament had stood against the establishment and proclaimed the kingdom of God.

So John now does that as well. That's why he says, if you're willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Not, of course, a reincarnation of Elijah, but a prophet of the caliber of the stature of Elijah.

Yet it's often in the Bible that you get people in later generations who replay other people, the better kings of Israel and Judah are described as being like David, for example.

And so it is here. And the whole of the Old Testament, the prophets and the law is shorthand for the whole of the Old Testament. The whole of the Old Testament points to the coming of the kingdom and that's only discerned by faith.

So, we have a genuine question. Are you the one who is to come? We have an authoritative assessment. Well, look, look what the prophets say. Look at what's happening.

[19 : 50] And finally, in verses 16 to 18, we have an unsatisfied generation. To what shall I compare this generation? Now, generation is often used in the New Testament between the people of the time, regardless of age.

It's not the young generation, the middle aged or the old. It's the entire number of people around at that time to whom the message comes. The problem is these people think they are wise.

They think they are discerning, but they are like children playing games. Played the flute for you, did not dance, we sang a dirge, and did not mourn happy games and sad games.

Hard to please. People are very hard to please whether the game is happy or sad. Neither John shunning company and living in the desert, nor Jesus eating and drinking with sinners pleased them.

So often today people use this as an excuse to reject the gospel because they don't like the style in which it's presented. Now, of course, the gospel is unchanging, but there are different ways in which it's presented in different cultures.

[21 : 00] In Africa, for example, the gospel is not generally presented in the same way as it is in Stornoway, for example. There are different styles, and there are different ways perhaps of talking different age groups and so on.

We don't talk to the small children and say, now children, today we are going to start our study of the book of Leviticus. It doesn't mean we don't teach them the truth of Leviticus, but we do it in different ways.

And what Jesus is saying is, some people are hard to please. They use their dislike of the style in which the gospel comes or the individual who presents it to reject the message itself.

That is why throughout Scripture, both in the Old and in the New Testaments, the emphasis is always on the message, not on the messenger. Always on the prophecy, not on the prophet.

Always on the preaching, not on the preacher. That is the point. It's the message itself which offends. It's not the style in which it's presented.

[22 : 08] So, and Jesus is saying, look, if you had believed John, you would have believed me. You would have seen beyond the superficial differences and seen we were actually saying the same thing, presenting the same message.

That's the point. And yet, notice what he says at the end. Wisdom is justified by her deeds. In other words, those who believe John, those who believe me, their lifestyle will prove that.

those who reject John, those who reject me, their lifestyle will prove that. Later on in chapter 12, in a few weeks' time, we're going to see, make a good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit.

So, you see, as the kingdom advances, people are hard to please. There's the genuine question, there's also silly question. You see, the genuine question of John is a real question, and he gets a real answer, but many remain unsatisfied, and many remain unsatisfied today, and yet, the kingdom advances, and the kingdom cannot be stopped from advancing.

One day, the kingdom will come, and God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we praise you for the coming of the kingdom.

[23 : 33] We pray for people who have genuine questions, people who are searching, and pray that we'll be gentle, and kind, and understanding, as we try to lead them to Christ.

We pray, too, for those who reject and pray that in your own way, by your Holy Spirit, you will lead them to the Christ who can change them.

We ask this in his name. Amen.