

The Growing Opposition to Jesus

by John F. Walvoord

Jesus commends John the Baptist for his fearless witness and prophetic ministry, while criticizing the Jews' unbelief and inviting people to come to Him for rest and easy yoke.

Scripture: Matthew 11:5

Topics: "Faith And Doubt", "Divine Judgment"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the discourse on John the Baptist in Matthew 11:1-15, where John, imprisoned for his bold stance against immorality, sends disciples to Jesus to confirm His identity as the Messiah. Jesus, in response, highlights John's prophetic role and reassures him of his significance in preparing the way for the Messiah. Despite John's doubts about the delay in divine judgment, Jesus commends his unwavering faith and courage, emphasizing the importance of trusting in God's timing and ultimate triumph. Furthermore, Jesus addresses the unreasonableness of unbelief, contrasting John's resolute faith with the vacillating attitude of the unbelieving generation, and warns of judgment on the unrepentant cities of Galilee, offering an invitation to personal discipleship and rest in Him.

Transcript

Discourse on John the Baptist, 11:1-15

Having sent forth the twelve with instructions to preach the kingdom of heaven and having given them authority to perform miracles (Mt 10:7-8), Jesus departed alone to teach and preach in the cities of Galilee. During His tour, John the Baptist, earlier announced as being in prison (Mt 4:12), sent two of his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (11:3). Lenski points out that the expression, "he that should come," "signifies the Messiah and is used in that specific sense especially also by the Baptist, 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16; John 1:27. This designation was derived from Ps. 118:26 and Ps. 40:7."55

John had been imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus, the royal house of Herod, facing the Dead Sea, because of his fearless attack upon the immorality of Herod, who was living in adultery with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife (Mt 14:3-4). Significantly, the Jewish leaders had been silent concerning this public scandal.

The question that the disciples of John communicated to Jesus has been interpreted by some as indicating a wavering faith in Christ on the part of John the Baptist, and others, who have come to John's

defense, regard John as asking a natural question. Undoubtedly, John had anticipated that Jesus would not only be "the Lamb of God, [who] taketh away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), but would be one who also would judge sin. John had declared, according to Matthew 3:10, "The axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." He had also predicted that Christ would baptize with fire (v. 11) and that He would "gather his wheat into the garner," but would "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (v. 12). John, languishing in prison, did not sense any divine deliverance from a wicked world. Instead of God triumphing, it seemed that Herod, in spite of his wickedness, was still in power.

Accordingly, John needed reassurance and clarification. In the background was the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies, which offered the puzzle of a suffering Messiah who would also be a glorious ruler (cf. 1 Pe 1:10-12). While John should not be represented as questioning the validity of the revelation that came to him, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah who would save Israel from their sins, the question had been raised in his mind whether he should look for still another to bring the judgment of God upon a wicked world, and fulfill the predictions of the glorious reign of the Messiah.

The same questions of the ultimate triumph of God undoubtedly face everyone in suffering for Christ's sake. If our God is omnipotent, why does He permit the righteous to suffer? The answer, of course, is that the time of God's judgment has not yet come but that the final triumph is certain. The genuineness of John's perplexity should not be questioned, as he attempted to reconcile his concept of a triumphing Messiah with his own situation in prison and the reports that came to him of the works of Christ, which were acts of mercy rather than acts of divine judgment. Understandably, John needed reassurance and further information.

In answer, Jesus told the disciples of John to tell him what they heard and saw. As stated in Matthew 11:5, His works were many: "The blind receive their sight, 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." It is most significant that Jesus did not attempt to answer the real question of John, of why judgment on the wicked was not being inflicted and why the people of Israel had not yet been delivered. Instead, Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who would not be offended by the apparent delay in fulfilling predictions of divine judgment. Interestingly, later in this chapter He delivered a message of judgment on the cities of Galilee, but first Jesus called attention to the unique role of John as the prophesied messenger which would come before the Messiah.

Lest there should be any inference from His remarks that John was weak or vacillating, He appealed to the fearless witness of John which had led to his imprisonment. Those who had gone out in the wilderness to hear John had not gone because he was a weak reed, shaken by every wind. Instead, they found a man who thundered demands for repentance. They did not find a man clothed in soft raiment. John, in prison in Herod's house, was undoubtedly still clad in the rough garments of the wilderness. Was John a prophet? Jesus answered yes. John was not only a prophet but the prophesied messenger of the Messiah. In verse 10, Jesus quoted Malachi 3:1, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me." The quotation in Matthew, similar to the quotation in Luke 7:27, changes the phrase "before me" in Malachi to "before thee," and therefore interprets the Malachi prophecy as referring, first, to John the Baptist as the messenger, and second, to the Lord as "messenger of the covenant." There is allusion also to Isaiah 40:3, a specific reference to John the Baptist, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Mark combines the two Old Testament references in describing the ministry of John (Mk 1:2-3). Among the

prophets before Jesus, there were none greater than John the Baptist, but Jesus declared that in the future kingdom of heaven on earth, the least of God's servants would have even a greater privilege.

How can we explain this contrast? The key may be found in that John is described as one "born of women," probably referring to the sinful descent of men from Eve (cf. Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4; Ps 51:5). Because of his great mission in preparing the way for Christ, John is declared to be greater than the prophets who had predicted Christ. The privilege of God's servants who will live in the presence of Christ in the millennial kingdom, however, is even greater, as this will be the complete fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. The question of John why God permits the wicked to triumph in their violence was recognized by Jesus when He stated, "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Mt 11:12) pointed out that Jesus, until now, the prophets prophesied the future triumph but did not realize it (v. 13). Both John the Baptist and Jesus were to suffer at the hands of wicked men and die; this is the main import of what Jesus said. The interpretation that He called here for resolute courage on the part of the disciples is not the main point. In closing His comment on John the Baptist, Jesus added, "And if [you] will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come" (v. 14). This must be interpreted in the light of Matthew 17:10-13, where John the Baptist is again related to fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6, that Elijah the prophet would come before the day of the Lord. Some expositors find complete fulfillment of the prophecy about the coming of Elijah in John the Baptist. Others identify one of the two witnesses in Revelation 22 as Elijah sent back to earth. In the light of Christ's explanation in Matthew 17:10-13, it is questionable whether any future appearance of Elijah is necessary. Jesus closed His commendation of John the Baptist with the exhortation, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (11:15). The test of faith that comes as we await God's future triumph is common to all believers.

Unreasonableness of Unbelief, 11:16-19

In contrast to His commendation of John for his resolute faith and courage, Jesus commented on the Jews' vacillating and unreasonable attitude of unbelief. Morgan points out that there are four classes of unbelief in this chapter: (1) John's perplexity (11:1-15); (2) the unreasonable unbelief of Christ's generation (11:16-19); (3) the impenitent unbelief of the cities of Galilee (11:20-24); (4) the unbelief of the wise as compared to the faith of babes (11:25-30).⁵⁶

Jesus likened the generation who heard His message to children playing in the marketplace, acting out a make-believe wedding. When they were unable to attract other children to join them, they changed to a make-believe funeral with no better result. They then complained, "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented" (v. 17). In like manner, Jesus said, John came as a prophet of the judgment of God, neither feasting with them nor drinking. The reaction of the multitude was, "He hath a devil" (v. 18). By contrast Jesus came and freely ate with them at their dinners, and they objected to this, saying, "Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" (v. 19). Unbelief can always find excuses and can justify criticism of servants of God.

Judgment on the Unrepentant Cities of Galilee, 11:20-24

In anticipation of God's ultimate judgment upon wicked unbelief, Jesus declared a solemn judgment on the cities of Galilee in which He had done so many mighty works. He pronounced a woe on Chorazin and Bethsaida, cities which eventually went into ruin. He declared that if the mighty miracles done in Galilee

had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have been brought to repentance in sackcloth and ashes. Accordingly, although Tyre and Sidon would be judged by God in the day of judgment, the judgment on the cities of Galilee would be more severe.

His most biting words were for Capernaum, which He described as "exalted unto heaven," but which "shalt be brought down to hell" (v. 23). He declared, in connection with Capernaum, that if the miracles He had performed there had been done in Sodom, it would have been brought to repentance and would have been preserved instead of destroyed. Anyone who visits the ruins of Capernaum today and sees the pitiful remains of what was once a beautiful city, can realize the literalness with which this prophecy has been fulfilled. Significantly, Tiberias, not far away, was not condemned and is not in ruins.

Invitation to Personal Discipleship, 11:25-30

In commenting on the unreasonableness of unbelief, Jesus thanked God that those who come in childlike faith are also recipients of divine revelation concerning the Son. This is not to support the concept that the Christian faith is unreasonable, but rather that unbelief is not intelligent in the light of revelation concerning God and His Son.

It is a profound truth that God has revealed His divine wisdom to those who have trusted Him and has hidden His divine wisdom from those who are wise in the knowledge of this world. It is part of God's gracious provision for those willing to trust Him and receive His Son as Saviour.

This great truth, however, is eclipsed by the profound statement of verse 27, sometimes referred to as a great Christological passage. Here, Christ declared that all things had been committed unto Him by God the Father. In keeping with this truth and the infinity of divine wisdom, no one really knows the Son as does the Father, and no one knows the Father in the way that the Son knows Him. But to some extent, this can be revealed by the Son to man in spite of his limitations. The infinity of the knowledge of God and the infinity of the authority of Christ over all things, whether in heaven or hell, whether angels, devils, or men, time, or eternity, is a comprehensive statement of the deity of Christ and the background of His gracious invitation that follows in verse 28.

In the verses which follow, Jesus, having turned from the general unbelief which characterized the cities of Galilee, extended a personal invitation to the individuals among them who would find in Christ rest of heart and soul. In verse 28, He invited all who labor and are heavy laden to come to Him, and to those who do, He promised to give rest. Whether their load is the burden of guilt of sin or the sorrows that are natural to life but which are too great for human strength to bear, Jesus urged needy souls to come to Himself.

Jesus extended the invitation, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (vv. 29-30). In exhorting them to take His "yoke," Jesus was inviting them to discipleship. A pupil enrolling for instruction under a teacher is considered as coming under a "yoke." Instead of exchanging one burden for another, however, it is exchanging one which is onerous and crushing for one which is light and rewarding. There is an inner satisfaction and rest of soul in being a disciple of Christ which is unknown by the child of the world, who attempts to bear his own burden.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,

"Come unto me and rest;

Lay down, thou weary one, lay down

Thy head upon my breast."

I came to Jesus as I was,

Weary and worn and sad;

I found in Him a resting place,

And He has made me glad.

Horatius Bonar

55 R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, p. 425.

56 G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Matthew, p. 111.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/the-growing-opposition-to-jesus/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net