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February 8, 2026

CONFRONTING DOUBTS: MATT 11:1-6, 16-24

Introductory Activity

Ask the group to think about stories from the Bible and come up with a list of people who doubted God or God's promises.

Explain: "The list of doubters in the Bible is long. The serpent spread doubt to Adam and Eve: 'Did God really say...' (Gen 3:1). Abraham doubted (chap. 15), and Sarah laughed when the Lord said Sarah would give birth to a son (18:10-15). Moses doubted whether he could become the spokesperson God wanted him to be (Ex 3:11). God gave Aaron to Moses as a spokesperson." (ETBC, 106)

Summarize Transition: In today's lesson, we will see another doubter added to this list. While Jesus is preaching, teaching, and healing, John the Baptist is in prison. He heard what Jesus was doing and sent a message to Jesus expressing his concern and even doubt about Jesus' role as Messiah. "By examining what Matthew had to say about Jesus and His response to skepticism and doubt, we can learn how to respond to our own doubts—and the doubts of those around us." (ETB LG, 119)

1. INCERTAINTY (MATT. 11:1-6)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 11:1-6.

Explain: The actions described in this passage are pretty straightforward. First, Jesus did not go on holiday after sending the 12 on the mission we discussed last week. Second, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus a question, and they do so. Third, Jesus answers their questions. Some have asserted that it was John's disciples who doubted Jesus and not John. This line of reasoning claims that John asked the question for their benefit. However, most modern scholars read the text literally and assert that John himself was doubting his own words in John 1:29 and following. To help us understand John's doubt and our own, Platt offers us what he calls "The Anatomy of Doubt."

Discuss: Before we examine what the scholars say, let's answer the question ourselves: What causes people to express doubt in the Lord or the Lord's Word (the Bible)? (Allow time for answers and then discuss the following content.)

Explain: Before we analyze John's doubt and ours, let's consider the question and John's decision to ask the question. This is not the first time John's disciples have come to question Jesus. In response to the party at Matthew's house, they asked Jesus about fasting (Matt. 9:14-17). In that chapter, the religious leaders had *criticized* Jesus and asked Him *accusatory* questions. John's disciples, on the other hand, had *critiqued* Jesus and asked Him *honest* questions. We might view John's question in Matthew

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1-13* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

John 1:29

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

11 in the same way. As we are going to see in the anatomy of doubt, there was a lot going on in John's life and mind. He was wrestling with many thoughts and emotions. John's question is "a question that shows John's honest confusion and reservations... [Like Elijah (I Kings 19:4) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14-18) before him,] John, the 'super-prophet,' has a kryptonite moment, a moment of misery and misunderstanding that has led to honest misgivings." (Preaching, 293) Instead of losing faith and relying on his emotions and thoughts, he takes his questions to Jesus. Likewise, if we doubt the Lord we should have "a faithful doubt, an I'll-give-Jesus-the-benefit-of-the-doubt doubt." (Preaching, 294) So, let's look at what might be causing John to doubt and see how the same things can cause us to doubt.

The Anatomy of Doubt

Explain: "First, **doubt often arises during difficult situations.**" (Exalting, 145) The text tells us that John was in prison. Matthew 14:3-5 tells us that John had been imprisoned for speaking against the sinfulness of governing leaders. In this, he was acting like the prophets of old. Like those ancient prophets, his words had drawn the ire of those leaders. "As a result of his bold and faithful proclamations, John was experiencing shame, hunger, physical torment, and emotional struggle as he sat there alone in prison." (Exalting, 145) John was in a difficult situation, and this situation might have been the reason he doubted the truth about Jesus.

When we face difficult situations like illness, financial problems, a disastrous loss of a home, or the devastating loss of a loved one, we might express doubt in the Lord. We are going to discuss how to address our doubt in a moment, but let us realize that when doubt comes as a result of difficult situations, we are not alone in our experience.

Second, **doubt arises when we have "unmet expectations."** (Exalting, 145) There might have been two ways in which John's expectations were unmet. First, he, like many Jews of his time, might have expected the Messiah to overthrow the oppressive Roman rulers. Instead, Jesus was healing the servant of a Roman Centurion and preaching and healing Gentiles and outcasts. All the while, John suffered at the hands of Rome. Second, John expected the Messiah to bring judgment on sin. "John [was] a preacher of fire and brimstone." (Preaching, 292) In Matthew 3, he railed against the religious authorities for their hypocrisy. In verse 10, he exclaimed, "The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." When John preached, he *brought the heat*, and he might have "expected that same heat from our Lord." (Preaching, 292) Instead, Jesus is talking about forgiveness to "tax collectors and sinners."

Our expectations might land in a different category than John's, but when those expectations are not met, we can veer toward doubt. We might expect God to care for us in a specific manner, but He chooses to care for

John's doubt might have emerged from his "experience in Herod's prison...or perhaps John was beginning to become impatient." (ETBC, 108)

"In fact, Jesus' 'messiahship' little resembled the political and military program of liberation many Jews anticipated (cf. John 6:15)." (NAC, 185)

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us differently. We might expect God to deal with our enemies or those who treat us unjustly in one way, but God chooses to act contrary to our expectations. We might expect certain outcomes related to our children, but things turn out differently. Regardless of the specific circumstances, unmet expectations can tempt us to doubt the Lord and His Word.

Both of the above causes of doubt, difficult situations and unmet expectations, can be summed up in the third reason for doubt: “**limited perception.**” (Exalting, 146) John was likely “perplexed regarding the timing of it all. Wasn’t the Messiah supposed to bring imminent blessing and judgment? When would this kingdom come? John’s perspective was limited.” (Exalting, 146) Like John, we all have a limited perspective. We can’t see the sanctifying outcome of our difficult situation. Our expectations don’t line up with God’s long-term plan. We also sometimes focus too much on the temporal nature of our lives. We can’t truly perceive the spiritual realm and the spiritual implications of God’s actions.

Discuss: When we face doubt because of difficult situations, misplaced expectations, or limited perception, what should we do in order to remain faithful? (Allow time for discussion.)

Reread verses 4-6. (See Notes Box.)

Explain: In verses 4-6, Jesus gives us two “**Answers to Doubt.**” (Exalting, 147) In verse 4, Jesus tells John’s disciples to report back what they “hear and see.” Now, Jesus could be instructing them to witness His ministry or investigate His ministry. In other words, observe what is going on and go tell John. The proof is in the pudding, you might say. However, there is more going on here. You see, John had already heard about Jesus’ ministry. Verse 1 tells us that “John heard in prison what the Christ was doing.” As one preacher put it, “Prison walls cannot shut out the news of Jesus.” (Spurgeon, 135) Instead of telling them to observe and investigate, “here Jesus speaks insider Bible-talk...He asks John to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ what the Word says about the Messiah and then, based on the word, to change his expectations.” (Preaching, 293) To understand this, we need to examine Jesus’ words to John’s disciples.

In his answer, Jesus is referencing the prophet Isaiah. He is telling John, who knew well the Scriptures, that the first answer to doubt is **Biblical Revelation.**

Have someone read Isaiah 29:18–19; 35:4-6; 61:1-2. (See Notes Box.)

Explain: The prophet Isaiah described the Messiah. When Jesus calls attention to the prophet and connects His actions to the words of the prophet, He is telling John to rely on his knowledge of Jesus’ ministry and the Biblical Revelation to calm his doubt. Similarly, we are to compare our situation, expectations, and limited perspective to the words of Scripture. Truly understanding what the Bible says and teaches will clear up many of our doubts.

Notes:

Matthew 11:4-6

⁴ Jesus replied to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news, ⁶ and blessed is the one who isn’t offended by me.”

Isaiah 29:18–19

¹⁸ On that day the deaf will hear the words of a document, and out of a deep darkness the eyes of the blind will see. ¹⁹ The humble will have joy after joy in the Lord, and the poor people will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 35:4-64

Say to the cowardly: “Be strong; do not fear! Here is your God; vengeance is coming. God’s retribution is coming; he will save you.” ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy, for water will gush in the wilderness, and streams in the desert

Isaiah 61:1-2

The Spirit of the Lord God is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of our God’s vengeance; to comfort all who mourn,

The Second answer to doubt given by Jesus comes in verse 6. This verse says, “blessed is the one who isn’t offended by me.” This might be a little confusing as an answer to John. When I read the word “offended,” I think of my emotions after someone insults my outfit. The Explore the Bible Leader Guide explains: “The term ‘offended’ also can be rendered ‘scandalized’ or ‘embarrassed.’ Rather than being disappointed by Him, happy (blessed) individuals see in Jesus the fulfillment of their hopes for the Messiah.” (ETBC LG, 120) The second answer to doubt is **“Joyful Submission... To not be offended because of Jesus is essentially to trust Him.”** (Exalting, 147) John was not to be scandalized by the message and actions of Jesus, and he was to trust Jesus (the answer to John’s unmet expectations). Nor was he to question Jesus because of his current situation. “The man is blessed who so believes that his faith cannot be stumbled. A hint for John...Blessed is he who can be left in prison, can be silenced in his testimony, can seem to be deserted of his Lord, and yet can shut out every doubt.” (Spurgeon, 135)

Summarize Transition: At some point in our lives, we will find ourselves in difficult situations or facing unmet expectations. At every point in our lives, we will have limited perception. If doubt creeps in, we should turn to the Lord’s Word and submit to His will. (Teacher’s note: See the Notes Box for some quotes on faith and doubt.)

In the next passage, Jesus is going to turn to the fickle nature of those who heard both His and John’s message.

2. CYNICISM (MATT. 11:16-19)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 11:16-19.

Explain: In verse 7, Matthew tells us John’s disciples departed. Following their departure, Jesus turns to the crowds and begins to teach. In verses 7b-15, Jesus affirms John and his ministry. This shows us that Jesus was not angered by John’s faith-filled doubt. This topic also gives Jesus a springboard to discuss the faithlessness of many in Israel.

Jesus provides an analogy to describe the people of His day. He compares them to children playing in the marketplace. The game these fictional children were playing is a dancing game (maybe akin to dancing at a wedding). One group plays the instruments for a joyful dance, but the other group will not dance. So, the “band” plays a sad song, but again, the other kids will not dance. Those who refuse to dance “were disagreeable, sullen, and capriciously resolved to reject every offer.” (Spurgeon, 139) Jesus says that is exactly how the people responded to His and John’s message. “Jesus’ generation rejected John because he came neither eating nor drinking; they rejected Jesus because He came eating and drinking. They were like children who insisted that other children play their games. They played the flute for John, but he didn’t dance; they sang a lament for Jesus, but he didn’t mourn.” (ETBC, 110)

“God’s blessing rest on those who remain committed to Jesus, even when that commitment leads to different expectations than one may have.” (ETBC, 109)

Notes on Faith and Doubt

Alister McGrath “Doubt is natural within faith. It comes because of our human weakness and frailty.” (Exalting, 144)

McGrath: “Doubt arises within the context of faith. It is a wistful longing to be sure of the things in which we trust.” (Exalting, 144)

John MacArthur: “It’s as if you have to believe something before you can doubt it; you have to be committed to it before you begin to question it.” (Exalting, 135)

“Like spoiled children, they would accept nothing God put before them. John came through town, sang his sad song of repentance, and they said, ‘Oh, he’s a madman!’ Jesus came through town and sang his happy song of salvation, and they said, ‘Oh, he’s immoral!’” (Preaching, 295)

Application: How can we apply this to our generation? First, let's consider the lost person you may know. Because of their life situation, expectations, and limited perception, they can be like the children in Jesus' analogy. God is too judgmental, they say. On the other hand, Jesus wants me to be too forgiving, they say. This church is too dead, they say. This other church is too emotional, they say. The answer to this kind of fickleness is to stop playing games and rely on God's Word to understand Him, His church, and His expectations. As believers seeking to bring lost friends and family members to Jesus, we have to remember that those yet to be redeemed by Christ will be fickle like these children. We can pray for them and show them the love of Christ. Nevertheless, if those in Jesus' generation would not listen to the incarnate Christ and "super-prophet" John, there are going to be some in your life who simply will not hear the Truth.

Next, let's consider those who have been redeemed by Christ.

Discuss: How can Christians and church members act like the spoiled children in Jesus' analogy?

Explain: We, too, can be capricious like the children in Jesus' analogy. We want God to be a little more judgmental of those who oppose us or spread evil. On the other hand, we want Jesus to be a little more accepting of our foibles. We want the church to cater to our whims and our desires. We, too, can be fickle and act like sullen children. Regarding our relationship with the Lord, if He does not play the game as we see fit, we might give up on Him, the faith, and righteous living. In church life, we might "drop out," spread gossip about leadership, or sabotage an initiative because it does not suit our desires.

Summarize and Transition: The honest doubt of John is one thing. The cynicism of the crowds is another. Jesus lifts up the faith-filled doubter. He calls out the sin of the capricious cynic. In the end, He says, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." Here, the proof really is in the pudding. The KJV says "wisdom is justified of her children." The wisdom of Jesus and John will be demonstrated by what it produces. The wisdom of following their teachings will be justified in what following the Lord produces. Jesus is telling the crowds you can be as fickle and undecisive as you want, but in the end, my wisdom will be proven right. In the next passage, He is going to present the calamitous results of not following Christ.

3. DENIAL (MATT. 11:20-24)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 11:20-24.

Explain: Previously, Jesus had called out the people of His generation for their cynical view of Himself and John. In this passage, He pronounces woe on those with the least excuse to deny His call. Matthew tells us "he proceeded to denounce the towns where most of his miracles were done" (v. 20). We will come back to that idea in a minute, but let's begin by examining Jesus' words. First, He calls out Chorazin and Bethsaida. He

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Notes:

pronounces “woe” upon them. This is a “warning of doom upon [the cities].” (Exalting, 150) He says on the day of judgement, these cities (specifically the unbelievers in the cities) would fare worse than Tyre and Sidon. These two cities were Mediterranean port cities. “Tyre and Sidon were paradigms of Israel’s enemies of old (cf. Isa 23; Ezek 26–28; Amos 1:9–10).” (NAC, 191) They were also pagan cities. The daughter of the King of Tyre was Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. Her time in Israel was marked by Baal worship. Jesus compares these two pagan cities to Chorazin and Bethsaida. He declares that if these evil cities had witnessed His ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, they would have repented of their sin. Chorazin and Bethsaida, on the other hand, had seen more than others, yet they refused to repent. Likewise, He compares Capernaum to Sodom. This was another wicked city of old that God actually destroyed because of its sin. Like the two other pagan cities, Sodom would have repented if Jesus had lived and ministered there as He did in Capernaum.

For those hearing Jesus words, this was a warning for them to make a decision. John knew the truth, but was struggling at the moment. The wider generation was fickle and did not know what to think. But these cities in Galilee, where Jesus’ words and actions were well known, had no excuse. They should repent or face the consequences.

For those of us reading these words today, the message is very similar. We have more access to the Bible and biblical content than any generation in history. As believers, we have no excuse to forego the commands of Christ. Moreover, those who attend church and hear the Word regularly have no excuse to deny the truth of the Messiah. “All people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus” (ETB LG, 24), and those who have seen and heard much have no excuse.

Summarize and Transition: This third passage presents the end result of those who reject Christ. For those in the West, the Truth of the Gospel is widespread. However, some need help seeing and understanding it. We should be like John and Jesus in this respect and share the Good News with those around us. It is their decision to accept the truth, but it is our duty to share it.

CONCLUDE

We began our lesson discussing doubt and then proceeded to cynicism, and ended with the topic of denial. We can deal with doubt by going to the Word. We address cynicism by making a decision to follow Christ. We cut off denial by accepting the message of Jesus.

Challenge:

- If you are dealing with doubt, turn to Scripture for the Truth and align your expectations to the Truth revealed there.
- If you are struggling to make a decision to follow Jesus, the answer is the same. Assess your life situation and expectations in light of the perspective of Scripture. If you do, you will realize that the Bible and the gospel will help you make sense of your life and address the true problem of sin.