

Lesson 6

Matthew 11: John the Baptist

Fighting Back Against Doubt

Introduction

Among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared..., Matthew 11.11a.

Could there ever be a higher compliment paid to a human being? What a tremendous affirmation by the Son of God! Besides Jesus Himself, no other human being born rose to the quality of John the Baptist. Does this mean John was superior to all others in intellectual ability, spirituality, or influence? *No*. But no person ever had a greater responsibility or more privileged duty: *John introduced people to the promised Messiah*. Jesus' statement about John may challenge us a little. Greater than David? Moses? Abraham? *Yes*. Until Jesus, John the Baptist was the greatest person who ever lived.

Thinking about John's Character

Matthew 11.7-11 details important character traits that made John the Baptist who he was. These are worthy of our consideration.

John was a man of conviction

As these men were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the wind, Matthew 11.7.

Those who heard John preach would have never heard a compromised message. He would have never lessened his standards to fit in more with the world of his day. John wasn't afraid to stand up to the religious establishment, Matthew 3.7-12. John would have been far from the very flexible and bendable reed which swayed whichever way the wind blew. It was because of John's strong conviction in the ways of the Lord that he now found himself in jail for condemning the marriage of Herod. This was a man with a backbone.

John also refused to play to popularity. Luke 3.15 details him at the height of his influence with the great masses of people coming to the Jordan to be baptized. Some thought he was the Messiah. Had he been driven by his own self-interests, he could have played up his power and position, winning approval of the religious establishment and political authorities. Instead, he directly confronted their hypocrisy. He said their religion was a sham.

John characterized himself by self-denial

What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothes? See, those who wear soft clothes are in royal palaces, Matthew 11.8.

Someone full of selfish pride would have never lived in the wilderness as John did, and someone who viewed themselves as important and influential would have never worn the type of clothing he did. During the days of Jesus, the scribes, lawyers, and other influential religious leaders were encouraged to

wear the finest of clothing denoting their power and position. John was dressed in the exact opposite manner:

Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey, Matthew 3.4.

John had no use for the approval of this world. There was nothing in him that was attracted to worldly power or influence. The way he dressed, ate, and lived are a powerful example of his self-denial.

John's Work as a Prophet

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you. “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared, but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he, Matthew 11.9-11.

The mission given to John by God was special and unique. He was tasked with proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. He was also tasked with preparing the hearts of the people for the Messiah by calling them to repentance, Matthew 3.8. John was mentioned at the end of the Old Testament:

“See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in—see, he is coming,” says the LORD of Armies, Malachi 3.1.

MacArthur² has written that John was both a prophet and a fulfillment of prophecy. He was the Lord's messenger who was to prepare the way for Messiah and who would even baptize Him. He announced the Messiah and ministered to the Messiah with his own hands—as no other prophet had done or would ever again do. After thousands of years of God's preparation and prediction, John was given the unequalled privilege of being the Messiah's personal herald.

Yet, John Struggled with Doubt

Despite his tremendous character traits and his practice of godly virtues, John was still human. That he had come to battle doubt and uncertainty should not really be a surprise. For some time, he had been placed in prison by Herod for denouncing the king's marriage with Herodias.

For Herod had arrested John, chained him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, since John had been telling him, “It's not lawful for you to have her,” Matthew 14.3-4.

Before being banished into the prison, John had been busy in his role. He had announced the coming Messiah, declared Jesus to be the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*, John 1.29, and even baptized Jesus in the Jordan, Matthew 3.13-17. And yet, here he is in prison filled with a growing sense of doubt. I think more than anything he simply needed confirmation. For months on end, he had been sitting inside a dark, dirty cell, with very little contact with the outside world. Other than a few visits from disciples, his interaction with anyone else would have been minimal. It is during this time, alone, where he becomes filled with a few misgivings about Jesus.

² MacArthur, *Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 255.

John is no different from us. Difficult and unfair circumstances can be hard. Those are occasions where Satan wreaks havoc inside our mind. John would have been a target for Satan. Think of how powerful his preaching had been. He fearlessly confronted the religious establishment of his day, calling out their hypocrisy. He had been aggressive and faithful to God's call in every way. Now he was in prison because of that faithfulness.

Can you imagine what was running through his mind?

- If Jesus was *really* the Messiah, why did He allow his servant and herald to suffer in prison?
- Where were the mercy, love, and compassion of God?
- Where was the justice of God in dealing with his unfair situation?
- God where you are now when I really need you? Why won't you help?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?

There may have been more doubts running through his mind but know that Satan was magnifying these questions to facilitate a lack of trust and confidence in God. Suffering and difficult circumstances can make even the strongest spiritual servant entertain Satan's lies.

John sought answers

Rather than simply surrender to Satan's work, John fought back by sending a message by his disciples, who asked Jesus *are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else*, Matthew 11.3. To this Jesus sends the messengers back to John:

Jesus replied to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 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, and blessed is the one who isn't offended by me," Matthew 11.4-6.

This is a very direct and personal report from Jesus to John. Luke adds that as the messengers from John are there with Jesus, He worked miracles in front of them:

When the men reached him, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to ask you, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" At that time Jesus healed many people of diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits, and he granted sight to many blind people, Luke 7.20-21.

For the personal benefit of John and his disciples, Jesus provided direct evidence of His Messiahship. Everything Jesus was doing was a picture of life in the kingdom. Jesus is saying, "I care, I heal, and I have power over all things."

The beatitude of verse 6 is a gentle rebuke to John. Jesus is saying ever so softly, "don't doubt." Jesus did not want John to be impacted by skepticism and unbelief.

We Can Go to God When We Doubt

If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself, 2 Timothy 2.13. Even when we doubt Him, God remains faithful to us. Because of that, we can go to Him even when we doubt. It is only by going to Him as John did can our doubts be relieved.