
The Authority of Jesus over the Messenger

Matthew 11:1-20

Russ Kennedy

Many people who have professed faith in the Lord have left the faith in the last few years. Some names are well known, like Josh Harris, Abraham Piper, several prominent worship leaders... Others are people who struggled with questions, doubts and frustrations that led some to renew their faith. Others have given up to unceasing pressure of the world, error, culture and sometimes, just the pursuit of sin. Sadly, many have gone on to very vocally attack the faith (often under the guise of evangelicalism).

But, have you ever had doubts? Have you gone through periods in your life where doubted what you had been taught, had believed? I went through a period in my life as a teenager when, reading the Bible for myself, discovered that some of what I had been taught as “true” and “Biblical” was in fact, not so much. It was a period of doubt that led eventually to greater faith and to sustainable faith that has held me fast now for almost 48 years.

Some of you have struggled. You had questions. Some of you may be struggling now. Matthew 5 through 10 has seriously challenged your ideas of what being a follower of Jesus is. I hope it has challenged many to hold firm to faith, to have an assurance of faith. But I also hope that those who are trembling and troubled will allow the Word to grow real, saving belief your hearts.

Matthew introduces us to some who appears to have doubts about Jesus.

Expectations leading to Doubts (v.1-6)

We are faced with a surprising question from an important person.

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

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and 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. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

The Ministry Context (v.1)

Jesus has sent out the twelve. They have been sent only to the Jewish people in Israel. They are to preach the gospel of the kingdom. They are mostly to expect rejection, hardship, and the suffering Jesus predicted. But they have the Lord’s power on them and His truth in them.

Jesus is teaching and preaching, traveling from city to city. He is also carrying out the ministry in Israel. The focus is on his teaching and preaching. He has been performing miracles. He is preaching the gospel of kingdom which calls people to believe and bow to the King. It is a call to personal salvation.

But it is not a call to national revolution or political deliverance. This raises a question.

The Personal Situation (v.2a)

John, the Baptist was imprisoned for preaching against the sins of Herod, the Jewish King. As a prophet, John did what prophets did in the Old Testament. Because Israel as a nation was a type, but not the reality, of God's people, John did what Old Testament prophets did. They not only preached the message to the people, but they preached against the wickedness of the nation and the evil of the kings. He simply followed the long tradition that Jesus, quite frankly, affirms.

The Troubling Question (v.2b-3)

John was responding, to what Jesus is doing. He sends his disciples to ask a simple question, "Are you the One or are we waiting for another?" Now let's be careful about how we respond to John's question. First, Matthew is placing this immediately after the warning to Jesus' disciples that rejection of the messenger and message will be the norm. Second, John's ministry, for all practical intents, has been brought to an end. He has been imprisoned for the truth. He is suffering unjustly at the hands of an illegitimate king. The Messiah has come...

John has accepted the message of the Kingdom. But he appears to be struggling with what that entails, what he expects. If the Messiah is here and He is establishing His rule, then why does John see no evidence of what he would expect? Frankly, he is asking why Jesus has not overthrown Herod and released him from prison.

Is the question doubt? Yes. But it is doubt seemingly growing in the soil of expectations. Like almost everyone of Jesus' day, they expected that the Messiah would deliver Israel from her oppressors. This was not only the overthrow of Rome's tyrannical oppression, but also the removal of Herod as a false king squatting on Israel's throne. John the Baptist expected that Jesus would not only preach, teach and do miracles, but also that Jesus would have a national and political agenda.

The Scriptural Response (v.4-6)

When there are questions and doubts, they should be responded to with compassion and Scripture. Jesus' answer here is simply, "Yes, I am the One. You can be assured of that because what I am doing is exactly what these Old Testament texts said I would do." Every one of these phrases is taken from an Old Testament text pointing to Jesus. That is the central question that John is asking. That is the central question that is always asked in the gospel. Who is Jesus? Is Jesus the One promised in the Old Testament? Will Jesus do what the Bible says He has done and will do?

Jesus tells John's disciples to go back and say these sentences. In essence, Jesus is telling John, open your Scripture and read what these texts say. Read not only what Jesus

said, but the writing around it as well. The first are alluding to Isaiah 35:5–6. However, listen also to verse 4 and see why Jesus chose to allude to these texts.

⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

So, John, your heart is anxious. You are concerned that maybe you have made a mistake. You expect what Isaiah 35:4 prophecies. But not yet. There will be a day when God will come to bring full and final justice. But now, God has come, and He has come to save. How do we know that? Because of the miracles Jesus is doing.

Jesus also helps all who are anxious and doubting by reminding them of the central aim of His mission. John, the Baptist, and Matthew’s readers need Isaiah 61:1–2 to encourage their faith.

61 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,

John was the forerunner of Jesus. John’s ministry prepared the way for Jesus to come and to execute this ministry. He was anointed, not to serve an earthly kingdom, but to preach the gospel to all including the poor. This is the time of the Lord’s favor, His great grace. Vengeance and justice will come. But now, the gospel in all its multifaceted grace is being preached to all.

But, there is also a reminder to be careful how Jesus’ ministry is responded to. “Blessed is the one who is not offended at Jesus...” Why? Because of Isaiah 8:11–15:

¹¹ For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: ¹² “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. ¹³ But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. ¹⁴ And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁵ And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”

Questions, doubts, uncertainties often arise because of our wrong expectations. That was true of John, the Baptist. It is often true of us as well. We have expectations about what being a follower of Jesus will mean. Often those expectations are Biblically informed and reasonable. But then people or situations or churches don’t turn out to be what the Bible says they ought to be. We may even have very high expectations or

very deep misunderstandings that then lead to hard questions and deep doubts. If this is you, you need answers from the Scriptures. If you are helping someone who is struggling with questions and doubts, you need the Scriptures. Faith does not come by rehearsing doctrine. Faith does not come by quoting our favorite authors. Faith comes by hearing the Word. Faith is strengthened by using the Scriptures that speak directly to the need, the question, the doubt.

True followers of Jesus may have doubts and questions, but they will want real answers from the Scriptures.

Explanations leading to Decisions (v.7-15)

John is not the only one who must answer Biblical questions about Jesus. The crowd must as well. They are being confronted with their own weak, silly expectations. They will have to decide to accept Jesus' claims or not.

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, " 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'

Jesus is challenging the crowd about John. But He is also challenging them about Himself. It is a "If John, the Baptist was this... Then how much more is Jesus that..."

John's Ministry (v.7-10)

Jesus' challenge is carried in a question repeated three times, "What did you go see?" What drew you out to the wilderness? What did you expect? What did you find. Here is certainly what you did not find. Jesus says all of this to challenge the crowd who is following Him to check their own motivations.

They did not see someone who was an easily broken reed, who was fragile (v.7).

They did not see someone who was rich and dressed in soft clothes (v.8).

They did see someone who was more than just prophet (v.9).

They went and saw someone who was actually foretold by the Scripture. He is the forerunner predicted in Malachi 3:1 which Jesus quoted here. This was no ordinary prophet. This one was the one who prepared the way for the Messiah. So, who then do they think is standing before them? Jesus, the one standing before them, the one preaching and teaching and doing miracles is the promised Messiah, the son of David, the King from heaven.

John's Times (v.11-14)

But John is a transitional person in a time of great change.

¹¹ 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. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered 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 accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

If John is the greatest prophet as well as the last of the Old Testament prophets, then how much greater is Jesus?

If the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John, then how much greater is Jesus?

If John has suffered violence and many others will as well, how greater is Jesus and the violence He will suffer?

If John is the end of the Old Covenant, then how greater is Jesus who will bring in the New Covenant?

If you listened to John, then you have better listen to Jesus. If God has granted you the ability to hear with understanding then we need to hear with faith. Yes, doubt and questions are understandable. But when the Scriptures tell us who Jesus is and what He has done, regardless of our expectations or disappointments, then that is the truth.

True followers of Jesus will hear the word and grow in faith to overcome fear and doubt.

Expectations leading to Disbelief (v.16-20)

What has been the general response? Even to the crowds that are following Jesus, He makes a most remarkable statement and devastating charge.

¹⁶ “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ “ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

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 at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Oh, how expectations lead to complaining. But complaining in this case led to condemnation. Jesus leads into His condemnation with two clear comparisons.

Their Rebellious Responses (v.16-17)

They are compared to children who would not respond to overtures. They would not respond regardless of the kind of music. This was what the Jews were like. No matter what the prophets or the disciples or even what Jesus said, the crowd wanted something different. They would not be joyful when they should. They would not grieve when they should. Their stubborn refusal to respond to God’s messengers was not simply childishness, but outright rebellion.

Their Wrong Evaluations (v.18-19)

How do we know it was rebellion? They attacked John and Jesus. John, the Baptist came with an austere, simple, ascetic life and ministry with thunderous and sin exposing preaching. He was accused of having a demon.

But Jesus comes with a normal, friends engaging, crowd drawing, miracle working ministry focused on preaching and teaching and... he is accused of being a drunk and a glutton.

Neither accusation has any bearing in the truth. It is rebellion against God that framed and fed their accusations. They were dead in sin, darkened in their understanding and blind in their spiritual insight. So the wisdom of John coming in one way and Jesus coming in another was borne out by the response of the people.

Their Deserved Condemnation (v.20)

²⁰ Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

They did not repent. With the prophetic ministry of John and the powerful ministry of Jesus, they refused to repent. Everywhere Jesus had been there had been crowds gathering and sometimes following. But the people of those cities, and I think, the people of those crowds, did not repent.

True followers of Jesus will believe and bow to Him, repenting of their sins.

Reflect and Respond

Christians sometimes have real questions and doubts. But faith will rise when answers and help is sought and accepted from the Word. If you are struggling with questions or doubts, take advantage of our *Fridays Coffee with a Counselor* to talk through your issues.

So many real questions and doubts are connected to our expectations and our interpretations of the Scripture. But in all these honest wrestling with truth, may we be humble, poised and prepared to submit to what the Scriptures actually say.

In writing on how Jesus dealt with John's doubts, Matthew once again gives us some marks of a true disciple, a true follower of Jesus.

- True followers of Jesus may have doubts and questions, but they will want real answers from the Scriptures.
- True followers of Jesus will hear the word and grow in faith to overcome fear and doubt.
- True followers of Jesus will believe and bow to Him, repenting of their sins.

For many, the Lord is pressing you to repent. Some may need to repent of unbelief and in faith bow the Lord. Some may need to repent of doubting the Scriptures and receive help to grow in faith. Some need to repent of complaining about the Lord's ways and accept His message.

May the Lord help all of us, when we have our doubts and our questions, to turn to help, to reach for Scripture and grow in faith.