

## Text: Mt 11.7-15

This afternoon we return to our “Ask the Pastor” series with a Bible interpretation question. The question I got recently might require a serial answer, I am thinking about how to go about it, so it will take a few weeks to get started on it.

Today comes a question about Mt 11.11

Mt 11.11 “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

What does that mean? The question is simple, but the answer is not! In addition, the question arises in a passage that itself has a couple of other difficult interpretational questions.

Consequently, I thought we should work through the whole paragraph and try to cover the context (always important for Bible interpretation) as we answer the question.

The setting, as the chapter opens, is an occasion where the disciples of John come to Jesus with a question, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (Mt 11.3)

Jesus answers, essentially saying, “Yes,” then John’s disciples depart. Jesus then turns to the crowd and his disciples and offers our text as a bit of teaching about John.

Read Mt 11.7-15

I’ll hold off on a proposition until we finish our message.

### I. The purpose of the passage

A. The context (as noted) is John’s question (v. 3)

1. John previously made strong statements about Jesus
  - a. There is one coming whose sandals I am not worthy to unloose
  - b. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world
  - c. He is the Son of God
2. During the Lord’s ministry, many attacks were raised, many wondered just who he was

3. The crowd could wonder whether these doubts were well-founded if John wavered

So, “John had often borne witness to Jesus; now Jesus bears witness to John.”<sup>1</sup>

#### B. The passage ends with a challenge (15)

1. Those hearing need to hear if they have ears to hear
2. That means they should accept what Jesus taught about John (and whatever that teaching implied)

## II. The testimony concerning John

### A. Who is John? (7-10)

1. Jesus starts with rhetorical questions
  - a. Did you go to see a reed shaken in the wind? (*i.e.*, some weakling who vacillated in his opinions?)
  - b. Did you go to see a man dressed in soft clothing? (look to the king’s palace for that)

This might be a subtle dig at Herod, who held John in prison at this time.
  - c. Did you go to see a prophet? (answer: yes!)
2. The affirmation of John’s greatness as a prophet
  - a. The last prophet in Israel had passed off the scene hundreds of years before
  - b. God at last appeared to be stirring in the nation
    - 1) A new prophet!
    - 2) What could that mean?
    - 3) What was God going to do next?

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<sup>1</sup> D. A Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 263.

c. Jesus says, John was more than a prophet

1) Not only a prophet, but...

2) A fulfillment of prophecy

3. The prophecy that identified John

a. The prophecy basically quotes Malachi 3.1

Mt 11.10 “This is the one about whom it is written, ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’”

Mal 3.1 ¶ “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.

b. Includes ideas from Ex 23.20

Ex 23.20 ¶ “Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.

c. The effect of the changes: the way Jesus quotes it points to a person — “I am sending my messenger ahead of you”

1) This makes the Lord address the Messiah

2) This identifies John as the forerunner

B. Why are those least in the kingdom greater than John (and how)? (11)

1. The rhetorical questions establish the greatness of John as prophet and subject of prophecy

2. Jesus declares him to be the greatest man of history

“he is greater in that he alone of all the prophets was the forerunner who prepared the way for Yahweh-Jesus and personally pointed him out. While the OT prophets doubtless contributed to the corpus of revelation that pointed to Messiah, they did not serve as immediate forerunners.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Carson, 264.

3. The kingdom implication of the statement: John isn't a part of the kingdom in this sense
  - a. No one thinks that excludes John from the ultimate aspect of the kingdom (*i.e.*, we will see him with the saints in the Millennium and beyond)
  - b. Thus, Jesus must mean those coming into the kingdom in response to the gospel message, *i.e.*, roughly equivalent to "the church"
  - c. Why are they greater
    - 1) John (and the prophets) points forward to the Messiah
    - 2) The least saint in the kingdom points back to the Messiah... "still more unambiguously than John the Baptist"<sup>3</sup>
  - d. This accomplishes three things:
    - 1) John's question doesn't diminish his importance
    - 2) The Great Commission ministry of the church gifts every disciple with a greater relationship to the Messiah than the prophets had
    - 3) The whole question serves to elevate the importance of Jesus as the center of the kingdom

C. How does the kingdom suffering violence fit into the John narrative? (12-13)

"Verse 12 forms an amazingly difficult interpretive crux."<sup>4</sup>

1. Translators have found this challenging
  - a. There is a view that the verse means the kingdom is available to those who vigorously seek it out
  - b. I preached it that way many years ago
2. The words don't naturally lend themselves to that understanding

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<sup>3</sup> Carson, 265.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 187.

3. Better: the kingdom has always suffered from the attacks of God's enemies
  - a. Whether Israelites during the days of the prophets who abused them and slew them
  - b. Or those who attacked John the Baptist
  - c. And certainly those who will beat and crucify our Lord
4. All those prophecies (from the "prophets and the Law" up to John) point to the Messiah and his kingdom
  - a. All those prophecies suffered doubt and abuse
  - b. Many would not accept what they said

D. What is John's place in the prophetic plan? (14)

1. Jesus plainly says that John is Elijah who was to come
  - a. John himself said, "I am not Elijah" – *i.e.*, not *literally* Elijah
  - b. Jesus said, "John ... is Elijah who was to come" – *i.e.*, the Elijah figure who comes in the Spirit of Elijah
2. The point of Elijah as the forerunner

Isa 40.3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

Mal 3.1 ¶ "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.

Mal 4.5-6 ¶ "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse."

### III. The challenge for those who hear

A. "If you are willing to accept it"

1. If you accept what Jesus says about John
2. You must accept what John says about Jesus: "behold the lamb of God"

B. "He who has ears to hear..."

**Proposition:** The role John plays in the redemption story is vital, making Jesus certainly the answer to the salvation question: John points to Jesus.

"By the way, John was not the reed shaken with the wind; he was a wind shaking the reeds! In our day, the pulpit has become very weak because it is in subjection to somebody sitting out there in the pew who doesn't like the preacher. Or the message is tailored to suit a certain group in the church. Too often the pulpit is a reed that is shaken in the wind. Thank God for John the Baptist, a wind shaking the reeds!"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, V. 4, electronic ed., vol. 4 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 62–63.