

Matthew 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 11. When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see.

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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me. 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? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. 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. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied and told John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces, and calling to their playmates, We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon. 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.

[2 : 1 0] Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you. At that time Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and have revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. In Matthew chapter 11, the twelve disciples have been sent away, and Jesus is continuing his ministry. John has heard the accounts of Jesus' ministry, but is himself in prison. John the Baptist preached an imminent judgment, but Jesus is healing and restoring people. And you can imagine, John the Baptist is uncertain about whether Jesus is in fact the one awaited. He might be wondering where the promised fire is. He's expecting judgment to fall, and yet he is someone going around healing and restoring, raising the dead, casting out demons, and it just doesn't seem to fit the bill. The first part of this chapter focuses upon Jesus' identity, and then that of John the Baptist. The key question is, are you the one who is to come?

And the important thing to notice is that Christ is judging. Christ is bringing this judgment foretold by John the Baptist, but he's doing so by showing mercy. And he responds to John the Baptist's question with allusions back to the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 35, verse 5, we read, Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

[4 : 52] But in the previous context, it reads, Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble needs. 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. These things belong together. What Christ is bringing in his healing belongs with the judgment that he's bringing. And we'll see more of that as the chapter proceeds.

Jesus answers the question of John the Baptist in a way that highlights the relationship between judgment and mercy. Isaiah 61 is another passage being alluded to.

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. And then, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God.

Jesus is fulfilling all these themes of restoration and healing that Isaiah foretold. But within it, he is also bringing the vengeance and the judgment that John the Baptist foretold.

By sending the messengers from John the Baptist back with this report, he wants John the Baptist to see that he is fulfilling all these different parts of the prophecies of the book of Isaiah. And the other things are part of it.

[6 : 14] They will be understood in time as things play out. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. The point of Jesus' statement there is that he's doing all these healings.

He's restoring in many ways. And the person who can see those things and thank God for them, rather than seeing those as an obstacle, is going to be blessed on that account.

I don't think we should read this primarily as a rebuke to John the Baptist. It's a statement of blessing to those who will truly understand what's taking place. And Jesus takes this occasion, provided by the messengers from John, to discuss the ministry of John more generally.

Who was John? A reed shaken by the wind? Jesus here taking up an image that we find in places such as 1 Kings 14, verse 15.

The Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water and root up Israel out of this good land. A reed shaken by the wind is something or someone who is weak, easily moved or pressured or swayed this way or that by people around it.

[7 : 19] John the Baptist was not that. He was not that sort of person at all. Was he a man dressed in soft clothing? The sort of person that you find in Kings houses? No, quite the opposite.

He was dressed in the clothing that you associate with Elijah, camel skin and a leather belt. John the Baptist marks the transition between the age of the prophets and the age of the kingdom.

And he is someone who was to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness. And the kingdom ushers in a new period of violence, this conflict between the enemies of the kingdom, between Satan and his forces, and the work of the kingdom which is pushing forward.

He was Elijah who was to come. John the Baptist and Elijah are associated in their dress, in their behavior. John the Baptist was foretold in Malachi, the very last verses of our Old Testament, where we read, Like the first Elijah, John the Baptist is a man associated with the wilderness.

He's a forerunner of a land prophet. Elijah led up to Elisha, and John the Baptist led to Jesus. He's a man clothed in camel skin with a leather belt, similar to the way that John the Baptist is described in 2 Kings 1, verse 8.

[8 : 49] And there are further similarities to notice. Reading the story of Elijah, we have a fierce prophet who declares a drought upon the land, who brings down fire from heaven to burn up opponents, who wins this great conflict on Mount Carmel, and several other dramatic events.

And then God tells him at Mount Horeb that he's supposed to appoint a successor, and he's supposed to anoint two other people. And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you arrive you shall anoint Hazei to be king of Assyria, and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king of Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place, and the one who escapes from the sword of Hazei shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death.

Now, we're expecting this great figure who's going to bring all sorts of judgment, bring down judgment upon the people, and be this fierce warrior of Yahweh. But that's not actually what we find.

When Elisha comes on the scene, he multiplies loaves. He's someone who heals people. He heals Naaman the Syrian from his leprosy. He raises from the dead.

He does all these things that we associate with Christ. And it might be surprising. This is not what we're expecting. We're expecting this person to bring the sword, and yet he brings healing.

[10 : 17] However, even in those acts of blessing, there is a judgment contained, and we see the same thing in Christ. John the Baptist and the Son of Man come in contrasting ways, and yet the people of that generation reject both, for different and perhaps contradictory reasons.

They do not know the times. They do not know when it's the time to dance, when it's the time to mourn. A couple of chapters earlier, we saw an indication of this with the flute players at the death of the daughter of the ruler.

Wisdom, however, is known by her deeds. I believe this should be seen as personified wisdom, and personified wisdom that's manifested in Christ and in John the Baptist.

In both cases, they come and they act properly for the times, in accordance with the times. Jesus challenges the cities he has performed most of his works in to that point.

It's a preparation for judgment. These people have received great mercy, and it's in their response, or their failure to respond to that mercy, that their judgment is found. And so the judgment and the fire that John the Baptist foretold is happening through the separation that occurs as a result of the response to Jesus' works, and the works of his disciples.

[11 : 31] We've seen in the previous chapter that Jesus declares that as his disciples shake the dust off their feet in response to an unreceptive city, it will be worse for that city on the day of judgment than for Sodom and Gomorrah.

And he continues that theme here. Judgment through blessing and through mercy. He describes Capernaum, his home city, as the one that sought to be lifted up to heaven.

This should draw our mind back to Isaiah chapter 14, verses 13 to 14. where God addresses the king of Babylon. You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God.

I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the cloud. I will make myself like the most high.

But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. And Jesus declares the same thing of Capernaum, his hometown. This all sets things up for Jesus' prayer to the Father, with which this chapter ends.

[12 : 35] The Father, as the Lord of heaven and earth, is the one who reveals and who hides. He hides the truth from the proud, who imagine themselves to be wise, while revealing things to the weakest and the most humble.

All authority and all things have already been given to Christ. And he is the one who passes on all that the Father has given him. And apart from him, there is no access to it.

No access to the Father. He gives a promise of rest to those who accept his yoke, his teaching or his law. We can think about this in terms of the Sermon on the Mount.

That's Christ's yoke, the teaching that he gives. And those who take that upon themselves will find that it brings rest. Christ's commandments, as the Apostle says, are not burdensome.

This might also be a reference back to Exodus chapter 33, verse 14, where God speaks about giving his presence and bringing them into rest. Another background for these statements might be found in intertestamental literature concerning wisdom.

[13 : 39] For instance, in the book of Sirach, chapter 51, verses 23 to 27, we find the words, Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction.

Why do you say that you are lacking in these things? And why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for your souls without money. Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction.

It is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have laboured but little, and found for myself much serenity. There are probably allusions in this statement back to Isaiah chapter 55, verses 1 following.

Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me, hear that your soul may live, and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

[14 : 54] The book of Sirach, taking up this biblical background, presents these words in the mouth of wisdom, and I think Jesus is doing the same thing. He's speaking, as it were, in the persona of wisdom, presenting her invitation to the people, that they should come and accept her words, and find rest.

The sort of words that we find in the book of Proverbs, chapter 9, the invitation of wisdom, and Christ is presenting it. Those who receive the words of Christ, though they may be babes, and not considered the wise of this age, will receive wisdom.

It's to learn from one who has the deeds of wisdom, that demonstrate that he knows the times. They will also find that his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and that he brings rest for their souls.

[16 : 10] So how exactly is this yoke easy and burden light? It seems to me that the answer is found in the fact that the Master who places this upon us is gentle and lowly in heart.

These are not burdens that we have to bear alone. He bears them for us and with us. And as a result, we find that the burden that we are bearing is one that has joy attached to it.

And that burden, though it might be the heaviest burden on earth to bear, is light when born with him. A question to consider. This chapter reveals a lot about the relationship between grace and judgment, and the way in which rejected grace can be the means by which the most severe judgment is known.

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