

## Jesus and John the Baptist (2)

### Reading Matthew 11:1-19

We have now come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount and we are now in the second half of Jesus' great Galilean ministry. He travels all over Galilee preaching his message and healing the sick. We will look at some of the stories relating to this period over coming weeks, with Andrew Ryland next week sharing about the Widow's Son and following this Dave will share about the Centurion's faith before the Easter Sunday Guest meeting when I'll preach the good news of Jesus dying and rising again.

This passage falls into three parts. 1. John sends his disciples to ask Jesus a question. 2. Jesus tells the crowd about John the Baptist. 3. Jesus reproves this generation for their superficial childish responses.

**1. John's Question.** God gave John the Baptist a message that would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. He had baptised thousands in the river Jordan repenting of their sins and choosing God's way, but then one day Jesus came and was baptised and he was different. John recognised his cousin and knew his godly reputation and at first refused to baptise him, but Jesus persuaded him it was right, so he baptised him, even though they both knew he had no sin to repent of. Suddenly the heavens opened and God's voice said, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" and then the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove and filled Jesus to overflowing. John had seen his fair share of emotion when he baptised; some wept, others were so excited as they came up from the water but this was not emotion - this was GOD. Later, John pointed Jesus out as *'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'* But as Jesus began to gather his own group of disciples, John was arrested by Herod and was thrown in prison, no one to preach to except Herod, who kept him like a court jester.

John's disciples visited him in prison, and he continued to teach them God's ways, but it must have been quite depressing for an outdoor type like John to be cooped up in a cell. Why was he here? Would he ever get out? If Jesus was indeed the one for whom he had been preparing the way; then his job was done and he would probably never get out of prison. So when he heard of the amazing things that Jesus was doing, he sent two of his disciples to check it

out. *“Are you the One who was to come or should we expect someone else?”* Was poor John, stuck there in prison having doubts about who Jesus was? I don't think so. He knew all too well that Jesus was the One. His question was not an expression of doubt; but a man clutching at some hope as to his own future. If there is someone else to come then he still has a message to preach and a job to do. If Jesus is it, then it's curtains for John: his job done, his call complete, This young man in his early thirties had nothing left to do, no future on this earth, nothing but to die and go home to be with the Lord. John was coming to realise and accept that his job was done; it was now all over to Jesus. None of us know when it is our time to die. Some will live to their nineties, others will die in their 60s or 50s or 40s or even their 30. The big question for us is are we making our lives count for eternity? Are we serving God's purposes and fulfilling whatever call God has given us?

Parents, we have to know when its time to let our children go when our job of preparing the way for God to work in their lives is complete; they know God; they have their own journey with him; we must step back and let them walk with God themselves.

John's question was not about Jesus, but about himself and Jesus replied, *‘go and tell John what I am doing, blessed is the person who is not scandalised by me.’* *Skandalizo* is translated take offence, cause to stumble or in the NIV fall away. If we are concerned about ourselves when everything is actually all about Jesus, then it may well cause us offence or cause us to stumble. John had already said, *“he must increase and I must decrease”*. But imprisonment had been tough for John; he yearned for a way out. Jesus is saying, “Sorry, mate, Don't let the fact that I'm doing so well and you are on your way home to the Father, get you down. You have carried out your mission very effectively, well done.” Will Jesus say to you “Well done, faithful servant?”

**2. Jesus' Commendation.** I don't know if John's disciples heard the rest of what Jesus said, but Jesus commends John with the highest acclaim. John was the greatest prophet to have ever 'been born of woman'. John was a latter-day Elijah, who had been prophesied in Mal 4:5 *“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.”* John wore the gear and ate locusts and honey. He was the last of all the Old Covenant prophets, the culmination of all the Prophets and the Law. Yet those days had now come to an end, the coming One had come to bring in a New Covenant; the Kingdom of God. Even the least significant person in Jesus' new Kingdom

is greater than JB, because the new is so far superior to the old. You are greater than the greatest prophet ever to have lived, because the grace in which we stand is infinitely greater than the Law. So let's don't put ourselves down, because we are greater than the greatest of all the OT prophets of God.

v12 *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it."* This verse has caused considerable consternation, especially as other versions speak about the Kingdom of heaven suffering violence and violent men taking it by force! What on earth was Jesus taking about? Remember that Jesus spoke Aramaic and what we have is a Greek translation of his words. Some scholars puzzled by this have tried to go back and see what Jesus would have said in Aramaic. It is most probable that the word used by Jesus means to press in, break through and is connected to the prophecy in Mic 2:13 *"One who breaks open the way will go up before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head."* Jesus is the Lord of the breakthrough. His Kingdom had been steadily advancing; pressing through, breaking through into people's lives and many were strongly taking hold of it. Ex 19:24 The Lord told Moses on the Mount Sinai, *"Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."* Now the times have changed. God wants us to force our way through to get to God and he will not break out against us. We need have no fear of pressing through to know God ourselves. Being a Christian is not about being passive. We have to forcibly take hold of the Kingdom, we have to press through, break through. Being passive will get us nowhere, being a private Christian will not advance God's Kingdom. We have to press through against the crowd, go against the flow, tell people about the Lord even if they then decide they don't want to hear it. The Kingdom of God can only breakthrough if we are actively involved in taking the Kingdom into our workplace, our school, our family our neighbourhood. One of the most important areas of breakthrough is breaking through in prayer. It is too easy to be passive, but in prayer we need to press in and break through until we know we have whatever we ask from God.

**3. A Childish Generation.** Many ordinary people recognised that John's message of repentance was God's Way and was right and so were baptised by John, even some tax- collectors, but the Pharisees and the experts in the Law rejected God's purposes for them, and wouldn't listen to John or be baptised by him. When Jesus came along the people loved all the healings and all the

show, but they were not so keen on his message of the Kingdom. Have you ever watched a child who is not getting its own way? 'This generation' were too selfish and picky like spoiled children and only wanted to do what suited them. Jesus message of seeking first the kingdom of God was not what they wanted to hear. Because it was not about them, it was all about God and what he required of them. But they didn't like this, so they behaved childishly. If Jesus was serious, they criticised him for 'not dancing' and if he was joyful, they criticised him for not being serious enough. But Jesus refused to play their games or dance to their tune. If they wouldn't dance to his tune, that would be their loss. They would be on the road to destruction rather than to life. Jesus is the only way and anyone who is not interested in following him is lost and will never find their way into God's kingdom. When Jesus said that 'unless we become like little children we won't enter God's kingdom', he did not mean behaving childishly, as these people were. Being childlike is being vulnerable, dependant and trusting, not wanting everything our own way as they did. Following Jesus is about what he wants of us not what we can get out of him.

Many people just want Directions: a book of rules, what to do and not do. But it is impossible not to go wrong with a list of directions. It is better to have a Roadmap. At least you can then see if you are going wrong and make some sort of adjustment. But the best of all is to have sat-nav. There is voice in your car that tells you exactly where to go and a small screen showing you where you are. The Holy Spirit is our spiritual sat-nav. We need the Word and we need to Spirit to go God's way. It is not about us, what we want but about him and what he wants. Let us not be childish always wanting our own way. but take God's road, however difficult it might be at times.

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