

Commentary on Matthew 11:1-24

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JESUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST. 11:1-19.

I. JESUS ADDRESSES JOHN. 11:1-6.

A. The Introduction. 11:1-2.

John heard in prison "what Christ was doing," the continuation of which activity is reported in v. 1. The title **Christos**, v. 2, is Matthew's; John is still seeking to decide whether this title is legitimately ascribed to Jesus. The disciples' activity, ch. 10, an extension of Jesus' own, seems to be included by implication; but Matthew makes Jesus' own preaching the central focus.

B. John's Inquiry.

Why does John ask the question of v. 3? The report he has received might seem to confirm what John had learned at Jesus' baptism (3:13-17), namely that Jesus is indeed "the one who was to come." But the question arises from a certain **doubt**. John is troubled not so much by what Jesus is doing as by what he is not doing. If Jesus is the figure of John's expectation, where are the judgment and the wrath that John had predicted (3:7-12)? If Jesus is the mighty Messiah, why is his forerunner allowed to languish in prison at the hands of a wicked monarch?

C. Jesus' Response.

Jesus reports to John precisely those things of which John is already aware (11:5, cf. v. 2), as recounted in preceding chapters). As will be made plain in vv. 20-24, **that very activity** has unleashed a process of judgment (as is made more explicit in Jn 3:16-21). Israel is already being judged by her response to God's acts of grace through his chosen Messiah. V. 6 is an ominous warning that witnesses of these works "not fall away on account of" Messiah - i.e., that they not suffer the severest judgment of all because of their failure to believe and receive God's supreme saving action.

Does the reference to works in 11:2, suggest that John has not had sufficient access to Jesus' teaching to realize that Messiah and his people are to conquer by taking the way of lowliness and meekness? that God's mighty judgment is

unleashed precisely through acts of weakness and defeat? Has John yet understood Jesus' appointment to be the **Suffering Servant** of Isaiah? Cf. the comments on 3:13-17.

II. JESUS ADDRESSES THE CROWD. 11:7-19.

A. The Character of John. 11:7-9.

It is implied that the crowd has heard Jesus' conversation with John's disciples. Jesus addresses the crowd in that light.

1. The reed. This figure is suggested by John's baptizing in the Jordan River, along whose banks cane-grass grew. "Is John," Jesus asks, "so frail and so easily moved as such a reed?" No! says Jesus; and let no one so conclude from the previous conversation! "Jesus is denying that his warning against apostasy [v. 6] implies instability in John, whose courageous condemnation of the illicit marriage between Herod Antipas and Herodias caused him to be imprisoned [cf. 11:2a; 14:1-12]" (Gundry, 207).

2. The clothing. The question about "a man dressed in fine clothes" (v. 8), recalls 3:4, "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist." A contrast between John and Herod is intended (are readers meant to recall the conflict between Elijah and Ahab?). As John's attire contrasts strongly with Herod's "fine clothes," so by implication John's firm stand before Herod contrasts sharply with Herod's vacillating weakness: See the comments on 14:5, 9.

B. The Calling of John. 11:9-10.

It is precisely in his capacity as "a prophet" that John evidences the qualities of firmness and courage. Yet John is "more than a prophet," for he is in a unique sense the herald of the Kingdom. John **both** stands in the succession of the OT "Prophets and the Law" (11:13), **and** has the unique mission of announcing the imminent coming of the Kingdom (3:2) and serving as Messiah's immediate forerunner (3:11). He stands on the border between the Time of Preparation and the Time of Fulfillment; but he belongs more closely to the latter than to the former. Mt 11:10 quotes Mal 3:1; on these two verses, see the comments on Mt 3:11-12.

C. John and the Kingdom. 11:11-15.

1. The measure of greatness. Verse 11 does not exclude John from salvation. Rather Jesus is contrasting "the kingdom of men" (John is placed "among those born of women," v. 11) and "the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11b). According to the noblest criteria for judging humans, there is none greater than John. But what matters ultimately is whether one is included in the Kingdom of God. "The meanest citizen of [this] kingdom is greater than the greatest of the former - not because of superior merit (merit he may lack completely), but simply because he is a citizen of the Kingdom of God" (K. Chamblin, "John the Baptist and the Kingdom of God," Tyndale House Bulletin 15, Oct 1964, p. 16). Matthew elsewhere speaks of these citizens as "the poor in spirit," "those who mourn," and "the meek." The attitude of lowliness, of humility, of considering oneself "the least," is the very attitude required for entry into the Kingdom of God. The Synoptic portrait of John shows him to be the sort of person "to whom the Kingdom of God belongs" (Mt 5:3-10). He was humble (3:11; cf. Jn 3:27-30). He longed to see right prevail (3:7-10; Lk 3:7-17). As the latter-day Elijah [Mt 11:14], he was the "peacemaker" (Lk 1:17, 76-79; cf. Sirach 48:10). He was "persecuted because of righteousness" (Mt 5:10; cf. 14:1-12; 21:32).

2. The mighty advance of the Kingdom. "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing [**biazetai**]" (v. 12a, NIV). The opening **apo** must be viewed inclusively (cf. Chamblin, *ibid.*, 10; Gundry, 209). The proclamation of the kingdom's coming began with John (3:2), not with Jesus (4:17). In John's ministry, OT prophecy is not uttered, but **fulfilled** (3:3; 11:10). John stands within the Eschaton (Chamblin, 11). **Biazetai** means "forcefully advancing" (NIV), the dominant usage ("nearly always as a middle deponent **biazomai** apply force," BAGD, s.v.). This is achieved through both the preaching of John and the ministry of Jesus. Thus also Carson, 267. For another view, namely that **biazetai** means "suffers violence" (thus achieving a synonymous parallel with v. 12b), see Gundry, 209-10.

3. The hostile reaction to the Kingdom. "And forceful men lay hold of it" (v. 12b, NIV). I take **biastai** to denote persons hostile to the kingdom's advance. This accords with the usual sense of **biastēs**, namely a "violent man" **in malem partem** (see BAGD, s.v.). Carson views the v. as "a form of antanclasis (a figure of speech in which the same word is repeated in a different or even contradictory sense), based in this instance not on exactly the same word but on a cognate [**biazetai** and **biastai**]" (p. 267). This interpretation admirably suits the context, which speaks of John's imprisonment and of "this generation's" rejection of both John and Jesus (11:16-19). Viewed in the light of John's inquiry (v. 3), v. 12b as interpreted here declares that while the kingdom is indeed forcefully advancing by

the works of the Messiah, it has not yet swept all opposition away as John had envisaged. On the contrary, the enemies of the kingdom are intensifying their opposition, as will become tragically clear in the closing chapters of Mt. Gundry thinks the whole passage is dominated by the theme of persecution, this being the concrete means by which the opposition seeks to "plunder the kingdom" (pp. 204-13). Another view of 11:12 is that both clauses should be taken **in bonam partem**, i.e. as a positive statement in its entirety (as in the parallel Lk 16:16) of the Kingdom's forceful coming and of persons' eager acceptance of it. While this view is defensible (particularly if we view the two vv. as variants of the very same saying of Jesus), it does not fit the Matthean context nearly so well as does the other view. I believe Jesus made **variant statements** to make different points.

D. Jesus, John, and Israel. 11:16-19.

1. The picture. Jesus likens "this generation" to "children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others" (v. 16). "The girls complain that the boys have not responded to their flute playing with a round dance (danced by men) in a game of mock-wedding; the boys complain that the girls have not responded to their singing a dirge with mourning (done professionally by women) in a game of mock-funeral" (Gundry, 212). Still, we must emphasize that Matthew likens this generation to one entire **group of dissatisfied children**.

2. The meaning. The dirge recalls John's preaching of judgment and austere lifestyle; the mourning, the repentance he sought to elicit (3:2). The playing of the flute stands for Jesus' proclamation of the gospel, the dancing the joy that faith in his message would bring (following Gundry, 212). But in actual fact the people neither repented under John's preaching nor believed Jesus' preaching. "This generation" rejected both John and Jesus, and turned against both of them with hostility (11:18-19a).

3. The vindication of wisdom. Gundry, 213, interprets this instance of "wisdom" Christologically (so that Wisdom's **erga**, v. 19, = Christ's **erga**, v. 2; i.e. Wisdom = Christ). Yet the proverbial nature of the saying and the subject of the immediately preceding context favor the idea that OT wisdom (i.e. the wisdom of God as revealed in the right "way of life," Ps 1, Prov) is in view (thus Carson, 271). Wisdom, i.e. God's appointed way of life, is vindicated by the lifestyles of both John and Jesus. Despite the great differences in their behavior, each was **obedient** to God; the life of each bore witness to the **rightness** of the wisdom (God's) which had determined and guided their behavior. That John came "neither eating nor drinking," accorded with the fact that he **awaited** the kingdom's coming. That Jesus came "eating and drinking," accorded with the fact that the

kingdom began to **arrive** with him. The fasting of expectation was right for John; the feasting of joyful celebration was right for Jesus (cf. 9:15).

WOES ON THE UNREPENTANT CITIES. 11:20-24.

I. THE CONTEXT.

Jesus here responds to "this generation's" rejection of both himself and John, and to their hostile opposition to the Kingdom's advance. Moreover, 11:25-27 (with 11:28-30) makes it plain both (i) that God's judgment upon those who reject his truth, while culminating on "the day of judgment" (vv. 22, 24), has already begun to exercise itself (cf. above on 11:4-6) by God's **withholding light** on the truth; and (ii) that the unbelief reflected in 11:20-24 is not universal, that there are "little children" among Jesus' contemporaries to whom God reveals truth for salvation.

II. THE MESSAGE OF THE PASSAGE.

"Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent" (v. 20). As Jesus has come to inaugurate the Kingdom of God and to usher in the great final Day of Grace, his contemporaries have witnessed quite **unprecedented** manifestations of God's power and grace. Unbelief in the face of such revelation places people in a position far more perilous than the citizens of the most iniquitous OT cities (11:22-24, cf. 10:15) - not least because given the same revelation, they would have repented (v. 21)!