

Lessons from Matthew 11

By Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 11 opens with one of the set phrases used to conclude each of the five major blocks of teaching (cf. Matt 7:28; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Jesus has just finished instructing the twelve disciples and sending them out to preach. Now attention shifts to Jesus' missionary activity, which is summarized in Matthew as teaching and preaching (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 11:1). This is followed by a description of Jesus' identity as the Messiah and John the Baptist as His forerunner (Matt 11:2–15), of the largely negative reaction to their respective ministries (Matt 11:16–24), and of the heavenly wisdom and rest that Jesus offers (Matt 11:25–30).

Interpretation of the Chapter

1. Verses 1–15 (relation of John to Jesus)
 - The work of Jesus in “their cities” may refer to cities associated with the twelve disciples, including Capernaum (Matt 8:5, 11) and Bethsaida (John 1:44; 12:21), which would help to explain Jesus' condemnation of them later (Matt 11:21, 23).
 - According to Josephus, John the Baptist had been imprisoned in Machaerus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.119), which was Herod Antipas' palace on the eastern side of the Jordan. Upon hearing about Jesus' ministry and, specifically, about His works as the “Christ” (that is, Messiah, cf. Matt 1:16), he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus whether He is “the Coming One” whom he spoke about, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11), or whether “we look for another.” It seems that John had begun to entertain doubts, because his expectations that God's glory would soon be revealed (Isa 40:5), the wheat gathered and the chaff burned up (Matt 3:12), and liberty proclaimed to the captives, including perhaps himself (Isa 61:1), were not being fulfilled.
 - According to Luke 7:21, Jesus did not answer John's question immediately; only after healing many does He instruct these disciples to “tell John the things which you hear and see” (Matt 11:4). Then Jesus points them to the prophecies of Isaiah, which John himself referred to when asked about the nature of his work (John 1:19–23; cf. Matt 3:3; Isa 40:3)—the blind see again (Gk. *anablepō*) and the deaf hear (cf. Isa 29:18; 35:5; 42:18; LXX 61:1), the lame walk (cf. Isa 35:6) and lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised (cf. Isa 26:19) and the poor have the gospel preached to them (cf. Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18). Texts found at Qumran (11QMelch; 4Q521) alluding to these prophecies suggest their expectation of a messianic fulfillment.
- The blessing pronounced by Jesus on the one who finds no cause of stumbling in Him is the positive counterpart to the warnings of Isaiah 8:14–15, which Jesus alludes to in a later confrontation with religious leaders (Matt 21:44). This message made clear to John that Christ's was a spiritual kingdom, focused on an inner righteousness of the heart rather than on outward glory.
- Surprisingly, Jesus does not speak about John further until after the Baptist's disciples leave. John could not be compared to a reed that moves with the winds of popular opinion, but with Elijah who rebuked Ahab as John had rebuked Herod (Matt 14:3–4; cf. 1 Kgs 18:17–19). Nor could he be compared to kings who live in luxury (Matt 3:4; cf. 2 Kgs 1:8). Instead, John's simple manner of dress and lifestyle was in harmony with his call to repentance and reformation of heart to prepare for the coming of God to Zion (Isa 40:9).
- John was not only a prophet, but also God's messenger, in fulfillment of prophecy (Mal 3:1; cf. Mark 1:2; Luke 1:76). Yet, the “least” follower of Jesus would be greater because the kingdom of heaven was dawning, which would ultimately surpass and replace the kingdoms of this world (Matt 13:32; 19:28; 24:30). Even violent efforts made against it, including John's imprisonment and the opposition that Jesus encountered, would fail as Jesus' followers press forward to beat back the powers of darkness that oppose their advance (cf. Matt 16:18).
2. Verses 16–24 (responses to the proclamations of John and Jesus)
 - Jesus' several references to “this generation” describe the unbelief of Israel's religious leadership, despite their being given overwhelming evidence that the messages of John and Jesus were from heaven (Matt 12:41–42, 45). Their persistent fail-

ure to believe will eventually invite God’s judgment (Matt 23:34–36; cf. Deut 32:20). Matthew especially focuses on the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees as epitomizing Israel’s proud unbelief (Matt 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

- Although some identify the children in the parable (Matt 11:16–19; Luke 7:31–35) with John and Jesus, it is told as a description of “this generation” and the children’s complaints parallel the complaints against John and Jesus. The hypocrisy of “this generation” (especially the religious leadership) is like the fickleness of children who expect the people to accept their contradictory complaints against John (gloomy message, fasting—“he has a demon”) and against Jesus (popular message, feasting—“He is a glutton and wine drinker,” GNT; cf. Matt 9:14). While their lifestyles and methods were different, the motivation of John and Jesus (which these accusations ignore) was the same: both sought to draw even the marginalized into God’s kingdom.
 - Jesus, like John the Baptist, speaks a prophetic judgment against rejecters of the message (cf. Matt 3:7–10)—in this case whole cities. Even the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon were not as gospel-hardened as the Galilean cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (cf. Matt 15:21–28; 1 Kgs 17:8–24). Jesus even implies that, spiritually, Capernaum was worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Matt 10:15; Isa 1:10).
3. Verses 25–30 (Jesus as the Source of Wisdom and Rest)
- The words of Jesus regarding the divine revelation of wisdom and the relationship He holds, as the Son, with the Father (Matt 11:25–27) has often been compared to the lengthier discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of John and helps confirm that these kinds of sayings do indeed stem from Jesus.
 - The “wise and prudent” apparently refers to those who are “wise in their own eyes” (cf. Prov 3:7; 12:15; 26:12; Isa 5:21) and who are, therefore, unwilling to learn wisdom from God (cf. Isa 54:13). On the one hand, Jesus’ message is simple enough that even children can understand (Matt 21:16), yet also contains profound mysteries that require a willing heart and divine illumination from Jesus to grasp (Matt 11:27; 13:11–15; cf. Luke 24:45).
 - Jesus’ reference to God as “Lord of heaven and

earth” (Matt 11:25) and His invitation to “Come . . . and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28) allude to the Sabbath, on which the next two stories (Matt 12:1–14) focus and, not coincidentally, Jesus there refers to Himself as “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8, NAS95).

- The rest that Moses and Joshua failed to give Israel, Jesus offers (cf. Heb 4:8–10)—not only in a spiritual sense, but in its truest reality when He ushers in the kingdom of heaven “with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30; cf. 16:27).

Application of the Chapter

Among the lessons that may be gleaned from this chapter are the following:

1. Doubts may arise in the minds of even the most dedicated followers of Jesus, but this is no reason to be discouraged or lose hope. Instead, we should reexamine the reasons for our faith and the purpose for which God has raised us up as a church.
2. Just as Elijah was a model for John the Baptist, the two of them are models for us in connection with the message, life principles, and mission committed to us.
3. God’s kingdom will triumph and—notwithstanding all the bad things that may happen, including the trials and suffering we may experience—we can rest in that assurance.
4. We need to take seriously the message of Jesus, not relying on our spiritual heritage or status as God’s remnant people; otherwise, like many in Gideon’s army, we may fall away when put to the test. Also, like the Jewish leaders and the Galilean towns that Jesus rebuked, some may not even realize the depth of their spiritual destitution.
5. The more childlike willingness to learn we have, the more we will learn from Jesus—both in terms of the truths of His kingdom and the humility and rest that characterize its citizens.



Clinton Wahlen
Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute