

Jesus Affirms the Ministry of John
Matthew 11:1-19, Luke 7:18-35

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 kings’ 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 until 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.”
(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Emissaries would often be sent to prepare people for the coming of a king or other important figure before his arrival. “Cities” (11:1) is meant in a broad rather than a technical Greek sense.
- John’s disciples probably traveled on the main road northward from Herod’s fortress, where John was imprisoned, through Perea beside the Jordan, to cross into Galilee, where Jesus taught.
- In 11:4-6 Jesus cites signs from Isaiah 35:5-6 that refer to the arrival of the messianic era.
- Reeds were fragile, so a “reed shaken by the wind” was notoriously weak (1 Kings 14:15) and undependable (2 Kings 18:21; Ezekiel 29:6).
- Prophets were rarely well-to-do, and in times of national wickedness they were forced to operate outside societal boundaries. Royal luxury is not a standard of holiness in the Kingdom.
- Many Jews in the 1st century believed that full-fledged prophets had died out long ago, but they would have been open to the restoration of prophets in the end time. By fulfilling Malachi 3:1, John is more than just any herald of God; he is the direct announcer of the Lord, who fulfills the prophecy of Elijah’s return (Malachi 4:5-6).

- The statement in 11:11 elevates Jesus' disciples rather than demeans John. One may compare the early rabbinic saying that Johanan ben Zakkai, one of the most respected scholars of the 1st century, was the least of Hillel's 80 disciples. This saying was not meant to diminish Johanan's status, but to increase that of his contemporaries. Calling John the greatest was a Jewish form of praise, which could be applied to more than one person at a time. "Those born of women" was a familiar Old Testament and Jewish expression for humans (Job 14:1).
- Revolutionaries, such as those later known as Zealots, wanted to bring in the Kingdom of God by military force. Jesus uses their zeal in a figurative way for the single-minded commitment necessary to enter the Kingdom. He describes his followers as spiritual zealots (Matthew 10:34).
- Jewish people sometimes summarized the Bible as "the Law and the Prophets." Many believed the prophetic voice was muted until the messianic time; thus, John introduces the messianic era.
- Malachi 4:5 had promised the return of Elijah, who had reportedly never died (2 Kings 2:11). Thus, Elijah's return became part of Jewish expectation for the future.
- "To what may we compare...?" was a familiar idiom preceding a rabbinic parable or argument. Spoiled children, who pretend to have weddings and funerals, stand for the opponents of Jesus and John, who are dissatisfied no matter what.
- John the Baptist fit the role of an apparently ascetic prophet, like Elijah. Jesus follows a model more like David, but both are proper in their place. The charge that John "has a demon" suggests that he is a false prophet possessed by an evil spirit or a sorcerer who manipulates a spirit guide. Either charge would warrant the death penalty under OT Law (Deuteronomy 13:1-11; 18:9-20). "Glutton and drunkard" was also a capital charge (Deuteronomy 21:20).
- Some scholars have suggested that 11:19 identifies Jesus with the Jewish image of personified, divine wisdom (see 11:25-27). Jesus might, however, simply be claiming that one can recognize that his behavior (11:2) is truly wise by examining it.

Questions:

- + If John acknowledged the identity of Jesus in Matthew 3:13-14, why does he question it now? What is significant about Jesus' response to John's question: Are you the one who is to come? If actions validate one's identity, what actions would those closest to you list to describe you? Of the actions Jesus lists concerning himself, which one is most significant to you, and why?
- + What do the questions Jesus asks the crowds tell you about John's mission and message? What does Jesus mean when he says, "my messenger...will prepare your way before you?" What does Jesus mean by saying, "there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist?" What is your mission in life? How can you best fulfill the mission God has given to you?
- + What does Jesus mean when he says that John the Baptist is "Elijah who is to come?" How does your generation compare to the generation Jesus describes in vv. 16-19? How can you effectively communicate the truth about Jesus to your generation?