

Faith or Offense?

Scripture Text: Matthew 11:2-6

Lesson Synopsis: Using the story of John the Baptist's doubt as a springboard, participants will consider times of doubt and challenge in their own lives of faith. Of special importance will be the idea that Jesus can sometimes give us cause for offense. The question in these times is whether we will take offense or respond in faith. Participants will be encouraged to embrace the latter.

Digging In

Introducing John

John the Baptist emerges in Matthew 3 as a fiery and compelling figure in the story of Jesus. Up to this point in his gospel, Matthew has focused on Jesus' genealogy and stories from his infancy and childhood. Now, in chapter 3, Matthew jumps forward in time to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and therefore to the story of John. That the story of Jesus' ministry should begin with John is explained in 3:3, where John is described as,

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”

These words come from Isaiah 40:3 and name John as the forerunner of the Messiah.¹ It is no surprise, then, that the primary content of John's preaching is, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As the forerunner of Jesus, John calls the people of Israel to prepare for Jesus through repentance.

As Matthew 3 unfolds, John is further presented as a bold prophet of God. With clothing reminiscent of the prophet Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8), he takes the leaders of the Jewish people to task. Upon meeting members of the Pharisees and Sadducees, John delivers a scathing rebuke, calling them a brood of vipers and saying that judgment is at hand (3:7-10). He then goes on to confidently speak of the one who will follow him. This one will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” The promised judgment, he prophesies, will come with the Messiah.

While John is unafraid to take the authorities to task, he is also humble and respectful when he is approached by Jesus for baptism (3:13-15). In Jesus, John sees the Messiah of whom he has spoken. He therefore defers to Jesus and is reticent to baptize him. Though John does not feel worthy, he nevertheless submits to Jesus' authority and baptizes him in the waters of the Jordan as he had so many others. After this, John fades from view except for a brief reference in 4:12 telling us that he has been arrested. We find out later in the story (Ch 14) that he was arrested for criticizing King Herod. More than this, he will die at the hands of the same man.

John's Doubt

Before learning of the reason for John's arrest and his ensuing execution in Chapter 14, Matthew gives us a view into John's prison cell in Chapter 11. In verse 2 of that chapter, we find that John has access to information about the outside world (he "heard about the deeds of the Messiah") and that he is still in contact with his disciples (he "sent his disciples"). We find also that John, who was so fiery and sure in Chapter 3 has now found reason to doubt that Jesus is the Messiah.

The reason for John's doubt is found in the information that he is receiving about the outside world. We are told, "When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" From this it seems that John is keeping up with Jesus from prison. After all, he has great expectations of this man! But when John receives a report about what Jesus has been doing, he begins to doubt that Jesus really is "the one to come." Why is this the case?

One answer to this question looks to John's situation. As a prisoner, he is wondering why Jesus does not act on his behalf. As Craig Blomberg muses, "Why would one who had promised to free the prisoners (Luke 4:18) not get John out of jail?"ⁱⁱ While frustration at his imprisonment probably did play into John's doubt, it was not the whole. After all, the text does not say that John sent his disciples to question Jesus after he realized that Jesus wasn't coming for him. No, John sent his disciples when he "heard about the deeds of the Messiah." The answer to John's doubt lies here.

It may seem strange that John would doubt Jesus when he heard what Jesus had been doing in Chapters 8-10. After all, Jesus has healed a man with leprosy (8:1-4), healed a centurion's servant (8:5-13), healed Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15), ministered to a crowd through healings and exorcisms (8:16-17), calmed a storm (8:23-27), exorcised the demons from two men whom no one else could control (8:28-34), forgiven and healed a paralyzed man (9:1-8), raised a girl from the dead (9:18-26), healed two blind men (9:27-31), cast the demon out of a man who was mute (9:32-34), and sent his disciples to do more of the same (10:1-42). What could John possibly

see wrong with such an amazing list? Why fault Jesus for doing such extraordinary things?

It may be best to say that John's doubt is not occasioned by the things that Jesus has been doing so much as by the things that Jesus *has not* been doing. Remember that John offered a very specific prophesy about the one who would follow him. In 3:11-12, John said, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." In thinking of the Messiah, John has been expecting (1) a baptism of the Holy Spirit and (2) an act of judgment. So far in Jesus' ministry, neither of these things have taken place. The closest that Jesus has come to judgment has been his placing a high cost on discipleship (8:18-22), and no one besides Jesus has yet been baptized with the Spirit. Instead, as David Garland has said concerning this passage, "John hears only about acts of divine mercy."ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, this does not mean that John was wrong in his prediction of Jesus' work. The Holy Spirit would come after the resurrection, and judgment will accompany the second coming. Craig Keener gets it right when he argues, "...John's expectations about the Messiah's future role were right; but John did not know that Jesus had another mission before the coming judgment."^{iv} At this point in his ministry, Jesus is displaying the dramatic mercies and compassion of God (he will do so all the way to the cross) rather than expediting judgment. John's doubt is occasioned because Jesus does not match John's expectations concerning what the Messiah should look like.

Jesus' Response

In his expectation of judgment, John may have been drawing from such passages as Isaiah 29:20, 35:4, and 61:2, all of which contain themes of judgment and vengeance. ^v In response to John's questioning and doubt, Jesus also draws from Isaiah, but his passages highlight themes of mercy. Thus, "The blind receive sight [Isa 29:18, 35:5-6, 42:18], the lame walk [Isa 35:5-6], those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear [Isa 35:5-6, 42:18], the dead are raised [Isa 26:19], and the good news is proclaimed to the poor [Isa 61:10]" (Matt 11:5).^{vi} In offering this response, Jesus shows that his actions are grounded in scripture^{vii} and should therefore be accepted as valid Messianic activities. He then offers a beatitude: "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (11:6). While Jesus has grounded his actions in scripture, he knows that not all will agree with this picture of the Messiah. Indeed, this beatitude "implies that there is something scandalous about Jesus, something that will always jolt preconceived notions of what a Messiah should be and do."^{viii} Thus, those who are able to accept Jesus on his own terms without taking offense or stumbling are in a

state of beatitude. Unlike the beatitudes listed in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not explain why those who do not take offense are blessed. It may be assumed, however, that these are the ones who will accept Jesus as Messiah and therefore place themselves in harmony with the kingdom that he proclaims. In offering this answer, Jesus acknowledges that John has reason to take offense because Jesus is not measuring up to his expectations. At the same time, Jesus calls John and all hearers of the gospel to allow him to define who the Messiah should be. In short, Jesus calls John to faith.

Application

Perhaps the first point of application from this passage should be that even great people of faith can sometimes get things wrong. John has been described by Matthew as the forerunner of the Messiah. Directly after this episode in his ministry, Jesus turns to the crowds and names John as a prophet and the forerunner, “the Elijah who is to come” (11:14), and says of him, “...among those born of women there has not yet risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (11:11). John, then, is given a very high standing in Matthew’s gospel, but here we see that he gets things wrong. Even though he is rooted in scripture, he has understood the Messiah incorrectly and must now choose whether or not to heed the challenging word of Jesus. Will he have faith or take offense at this unexpected understanding of the Messiah? If one so great as John got things wrong and doubted, we can expect to get things wrong and doubt ourselves! Notice how John handles his doubt, though. Instead of turning his back on Jesus, John stays connected to Jesus by sending his disciples to question him. And notice also Jesus’ response to John’s doubt. Rather than expressing disappointment, Jesus simply points to scripture and pronounces a beatitude. Jesus is not put off by John’s doubt. Instead, he meets John in his

Greatest or Least?

In Matthew 11:11, Jesus says that no human has ever been greater than John but then says that John is less than the least in the kingdom of heaven. This poses the question of whether John is great or not. The answer is both. John stands at a time of transition. He is the greatest prophet of the Old Covenant, but Jesus is inaugurating the New Covenant, and even the least of those who partake of this new work of Jesus are to be considered greater than the greatest of the old. None of this downplays Jesus’ high estimation of John. Instead, it shows the wonder of God’s kingdom, which exalts the least of its members over so great a man as John.

doubt and calls him to faith. Rather than beating ourselves up for doubting or turning away from the faith, we can learn from this passage to stay connected to Jesus and the faith community even in the midst of doubt while also expecting Jesus to meet us with compassion and grace.

A second point of application is the reason for John's doubt. Ultimately, Jesus has failed to live up to John's expectations. Where he expected a fiery pronouncer of judgment, John finds in Jesus an expression of God's mercy and compassion. Because Jesus does not live up to John's expectations, John is given reason to take offense at him. Rather than being the exception, it seems that offense can be understood as a frequent response to Jesus. Jesus implies as much when he pronounces blessing on those who do not take offense. The apostle Paul played on the same theme when he spoke of Christ crucified as "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). While it is easy to point out this reality of offense in those who have not named Jesus as lord, it is perhaps more beneficial for us to consider the offense of Jesus in our own lives. How might Jesus offend us?

Of course, we will want to say quickly that Jesus does not offend us. We are, after all, his people. Yet let us take a closer look. What about when Jesus calls us to forgive when we desire vengeance? What about when he counsels against anger when we are seething inside? What about when Jesus names our hypocrisy and condemns it, or when he calls us to love those we would rather hate? What about when Jesus challenges our commitment to riches and tells us to care for the poor? What about when he describes discipleship in sobering terms and demands that we take up our crosses daily? What about when he demands that we love him more than our families? What about when our prayers seem unanswered? What about those moments when we suffer for our loyalty to Jesus? We needn't look far to find reasons to take offense at Jesus. If we will only take Jesus seriously, we will find him not only acting as Savior, but also staking his claim as Lord of our lives. And while we believe that Jesus leads us in the best way to live, his teachings do not always come easily and sometimes even push against our desires. What will we do when we find ourselves offended by Jesus? Will we follow him in faith, or will we turn away? This is the all-important question of discipleship, and it must be answered each time we come to a place of challenge in our walks of faith.

A final point of application looks at our understanding of scripture. As noted above, John probably drew his understanding of a judging Messiah from passages in Isaiah. While he was correct to do so (Jesus will act as judge at the second coming), his picture of the Messiah was not complete. Thus, in his response, Jesus highlighted other passages that John had not yet linked to Jesus' ministry. It is important to note here that even the great prophet John, called by Jesus greater than all of the prophets before him, had an incomplete understanding of the scriptures and needed Jesus to

call his attention to an alternative interpretation. The same will be true in our own congregations and personal walks of faith.

Perhaps the easiest proof of our need for Jesus' continued teaching in our lives is a look at the past. Slavery, for instance, was at one time believed by many to be supported by the scriptures because of passages that speak of the relationships between slaves and masters (Eph 6:5-8; 1 Pet 2:18-21). Ignored, however, were other passages that call the practice of slavery into question. The book of Philemon, for instance, contains Paul's exhortation to a slave owner named Philemon to welcome his runaway slave "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Phil 1:16). In these words, Paul calls Philemon to view the slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Implicitly, Paul may be going so far as to encourage Philemon to free Onesimus. More than this, two passages speak of there being "neither slave nor free" in Christ (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). While these passages do not give an outright call for the abolition of slavery, they do challenge the social constructs that make slavery possible. And all of this says nothing of the calls for justice found in the prophets. Looking back, we wish that our forebears had allowed their view of the scriptures to be broadened in such a way as to challenge their commitment to the institution of slavery.

If this was true in the past, it will be true today. As humans, we have a tendency to read the scriptures in ways that make us comfortable. The scriptures often, however, include a challenge to our ways of seeing and being in the world. Our approach to scripture, then, should be one of lifelong humility, learning, and commitment. The scriptures are a primary way that God shapes us, and it is important that we approach them prayerfully over a lifetime.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "What is your favorite dessert and why?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of Matthew that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will come from Friday's reading and will focus on Matthew 11:2-6, where John the Baptist sends his disciples to question Jesus.

Getting to Know John the Baptist

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask participants to open their Bibles to Matthew 3 and have someone read 3:1-12 aloud.
- **Question:** Ask participants what words they would use to describe John after reading this passage. Write their answers on the board.
 - Be prepared to talk about John as the forerunner of the Messiah and as a prophet like Elijah (See the “Introducing John” section above).
 - Highlight John’s boldness and fiery preaching if no one else does so.
- **Scripture Reading:** Ask someone to read 3:13-17.
- **Question:** What is John’s attitude toward Jesus in this passage?

John’s Doubt

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask participants to turn in their Bibles to Matthew 11 and ask someone to read 11:2-3 aloud.
- **Explain:** Explain that John has been arrested and give the reason why (see Matthew 14).
- **Question:** Ask participants what words they would use to describe John after reading this passage.
- **Question:** Ask why John would be confident in Matthew 3 but doubting in Matthew 11. What changed? (See the “John’s Doubt” section above for more on this.)
 - If no one mentions it, ask what reason is given in the text for John’s doubt (11:2 – “When John ... heard about the deeds of the Messiah...”)
- **Explain:** Explain that the “deeds” that John has heard about are from Matthew 8-10.
- **Question:** Ask participants to look at the section headings in Chs 8-10 and name the “deeds” that Jesus has been performing. Write answers on the board.
- **Question:** Have participants look at the list of Jesus’ deeds and point especially to the many healings, exorcisms, and the raising of the dead. Ask why such an extraordinary list would cause John to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah.
- **Explain:** Explain that John’s doubt is not occasioned by what Jesus is doing, but instead by what Jesus isn’t doing.
- **Scripture Reading:** Explain that Matt 3:11-12 hold John’s expectation of what the Messiah would be like and have someone read that passage.
- **Question:** Ask participants to name the qualities of the Messiah that John describes in this passage.
- **Question:** Why would John expect the Messiah to judge?
- **Scripture Reading:** Have different people read:

- Isaiah 29:20
- Isaiah 35:4
- Isaiah 61:2.
- **Question:** Ask what these passages have in common.
- **Explain:** Explain that John is probably drawing his expectation from scriptures like these that predict judgment.
- **Question:** Ask how John's expectations in Ch 3 square with the deeds of Jesus in Chs 8-10.
 - If no one else mentions it, be prepared to note that while John is expecting judgment, Jesus is acting in mercy and compassion.
- **Explain:** Explain that John doubts Jesus in Ch 11 because Jesus is not living up to his expectations of what the Messiah should be doing.

Jesus' Response

- **Scripture Reading:** Ask a participant to read Matthew 11:4-6.
- **Question:** Ask participant to name the different pieces of Jesus' answer to John.
- **Question:** Remind participants that John probably drew his expectation of a judging Messiah from scripture and then ask where Jesus is drawing his picture of the Messiah from.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have different people read:
 - Isaiah 26:19
 - Isaiah 29:18
 - Isaiah 35:5-6
 - Isaiah 42:18
 - Isaiah 61:10
- **Question:** Ask participants where they already seen themes of the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, and good news being preached to the poor in this lesson.
- **Explain:** Explain that Jesus, like John, is drawing his picture of the Messiah from the scriptures. While John's picture was scriptural and accurate, it was incomplete. Jesus will indeed baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire after the resurrection and will act as judge at the second coming, but he will also display the vast extent of God's mercy. John's picture was incomplete, and Jesus, in his answer, fills in the missing parts.
- **Question:** Ask if anyone would like to share about a time when they had a part of the picture but not the whole. If you have such a story, be ready to share it.

- **Question:** What does this passage teach us about our readings of scripture? (See “Application” section for more on this.)
- **Scripture Reading:** Read 11:6 and ask if anyone else has a different interpretation of the same verse. (NIV: does not stumble; KJV, NKJV, NASB: does not take offense)
- **Question:** Why would John stumble or take offense at Jesus? Why would other people do the same?
- **Question:** What are ways that Jesus can offend us as we follow him? (See “Application” section for more on this.)
- **Question:** Ask if anyone would like to share a time when they took offense at Jesus.

Application:

- **Question:** What do we need to remember about this passage as we pursue our walks with God this week?

ⁱ Isaiah 40:3 was understood during Jesus’ time as having eschatological significance (referring to the end times when God would free his people). While the Isaiah text speaks of straight paths for “our God,” Matthew, Mark, and Luke all speak of straight paths “for him,” thereby allowing the text to be applied to the Messiah. This change in the text shows that Matthew, Mark, and Luke interpret the movement of God as coming in the Messiah. For more on this, see: Eugene M. Boring and Leander E. Keck, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” vol. 8, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1995), 156.

ⁱⁱ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *The New American Commentary* v. 22 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1992), 185.

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1999), 126.

^{iv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 335.

^v Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 128. Garland names these passages as “proclaiming the day of vengeance,” though he does not tie them directly to John’s expectations of judgment. Garland names 35:5 rather than 35:4, apparently mistakenly since the former does not mention themes of judgment.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 126. Garland supplies these cross references to Isaiah.

^{vii} Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 335–336.

^{viii} Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 128.