

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XIX: THE DISCOURAGEMENT OF JOHN THE BAPTIST / JESUS' PRAISE OF JOHN

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
11:2-19		7:18-35		

The Offense of Christ

Matt 11:2,3 Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto Him, Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?

Luke 7:18-20 And the disciples of John shewed him of all these things. And John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou He that should come? or look we for another? When the men were come unto Him, they said, John Baptist hath sent us unto Thee, saying, Art Thou He that should come? or look we for another?

JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS IN PRISON: the Jewish historian Josephus states John the Baptizer's imprisonment took place in the castle or fortress of Machaerus by the Dead Sea (about 5 miles east and 15 miles south of the northern-most tip). This is a town where Herod had a residence and is probably where he held his grand feast in which John was beheaded.

How long had John been in prison? As we have repeatedly mentioned, it is very difficult to be chronological accurate and impossible to be overly dogmatic in these areas. The most we may offer is a "best guess" (also note that if things like this would have been important in the eyes of our God, He would have made sure the scriptures were more plain at these points; obviously, exact timing is not as important as the events themselves and the lessons we may glean from these events). We saw Jesus in Judea at His first passover at which time John was free (probably 27 AD; see lesson 24). During that time was the discourse with Nicodemus (lesson 25) and John's humility in the light of the Messiah (lesson 26). Scripture says Jesus left the Judean area when John the Baptist was cast into prison but the exact timing of that event depends upon our interpretation of John 4:35 (see lesson 27 for detail). If we take the four months to be literal, and if the feast in which Jesus healed the lame man was His second Passover (which I accept to be true; see lesson 33), then this could be anywhere between early summer to late fall of 28 AD. John the Baptist therefore would have been in prison *a minimum* of 4-6 months and possibly as long as a year or more.

Friends and followers had access while John was in prison; cp Paul in prison receiving visitors. Some of John's disciples had related to John the miracles of our Lord. "It is very likely that John's disciples attended the ministry of our Lord at particular times; and this, we may suppose, was a common case among the disciples of different Jewish teachers. Though bigotry existed in its most formidable shape between the Jews and Samaritans, yet we do not find that it had any place between Jews and Jews, though they were of different sects, and attached to different teachers." [Clarke, *Commentary*]

Note from the very beginning of this passage is a truth that goes directly against two prevalent teachings of today: **serving the Lord doesn't prevent negative things from occurring and when negative things happen to others, it is not necessarily due to sin in their life.**

SENT TWO OF HIS DISCIPLES: John wisely sent a couple disciples to question Jesus; *wisely because far too often when a believer has doubts, the believer is content to entertain his doubts rather than taking them to the Lord in prayer.*

There is again a lesson on manuscripts in these verses which relates to the modern "bible version" controversy. The text in Matthew has variant readings: some manuscripts say John sent "two disciples", other manuscripts (abbreviated, *mss.*) say John sent "by his disciples". The difference is between the use of the Gk word duo (δύο = two) and dia (διὰ = by). While some would take this opportunity to argue which is correct, I maintain my position: *what does it matter?* First the question is incidental to the story as a whole; and secondly even if the word *two* is missing from Matthew's account, it is there in Luke's account. *We have God's word that He intended us to have, and He wisely chose to preserve His word through the multiplicity of manuscripts.*

Luke's account goes farther than just two of John's disciples, it states two *certain* disciples. Two of John's closest disciples? Two of the most well-known? It is not known why these two in particular was assigned the task.

WHAT WAS JOHN'S QUESTION: "are you the one I spoke about on the river of Jordan?" — the question was whether or not Jesus was the Christ (Messiah), the one prophesied by John to be coming. "Art thou He that should come? — that is, to save. Art Thou the promised Messiah? Some have thought that this character of our Lord, *He who cometh*, refers to the prophecy of Jacob, Gen 49:10, where He is called *Shiloh*, which Grotius and others derive from *shalach*, 'he sent': hence, as the time of the fulfillment of the prophecy drew nigh, He was termed *He who cometh*, i.e. He who is just now ready to make His appearance in Judea. In Zech 9:9 a similar phrase is used, *Behold, thy king COMETH unto thee — having SALVATION*. This is meant of the Messiah only; therefore I think the words *to save*, are necessarily implied." [Clarke, *Commentary*] "John takes for granted what the disciples had known from their childhood; for it was the first lesson of religion, and common among all the Jews, that Christ was to come, bringing salvation and perfect happiness. On this point, accordingly, he does not raise a doubt, but only inquires if

Jesus be that promised Redeemer; for, having been persuaded of the redemption promised in the Law and the Prophets, they were bound to receive it when exhibited in the person of Christ. [Calvin, *Commentary*]

WHAT WAS JOHN'S REASON FOR ASKING THE QUESTION: several responses have been given as to why John the Baptist would ask such a question:

- some believe John was ignorant of our Lord's divine mission and wanted to know merely for his own information. This conflicts with John's earlier pronouncements concerning Jesus (e.g., Lk 3:15; Jn 1:15,26,33; 3:28, etc.).
- some believe John knew of doubts abroad in others and wanted Jesus to further clarify His own position publically. I believe this misses the point of Jesus referring of Himself as an offense (see below).
- some believe John, knowing he was near death, sent his disciples for their own instruction so that after his death they would cling to the Messiah (e.g. see Calvin's Harmony of the Gospels commentary). While this coincides with what we read in John 3:22-36 (lesson 26), I believe it again misses Jesus being an offense (see below).
- I believe the reason which best fits the context is that **John himself was entertaining doubts.**

John knew the identity of Jesus. He even announced Him as the Lamb of God and felt unworthy to baptize Jesus. **But doubt was beginning to set in: the effect of John's confinement; the growing resentment of Jesus; the difference between Jesus and John's expectations of the Messiah all provide reasons for John's growing concern. Jesus was a different Messiah than John had predicted — note Matt 3:11,12: where was the ax and fan and holy wind and fire of judgement? This Jesus had too much patience, tolerance, gentleness, sympathy than John had expected.** "Jesus in no way recognized it as His duty to become the Messiah-Judge whom John had announced in such solemn terms, and whose expected coming had so unsettled the people. On the contrary, He said 'I am come not to judge but to save' (Jn 3:17). This contrast between the form of the Messianic work as it was being accomplished by Jesus, and the picture which John had drawn of it himself, leads him to inquire whether the Messianic work was to be divided between two different persons — the one, Jesus, founding the kingdom of God in the heart by His word and by miracles of benevolence; the other commissioned to execute the theocratic judgement, and by acts of power to build up on the earth the national and social edifice of the kingdom of God. This is the real meaning of John's question: 'Should we look for (not properly *another*, but) *a different one* (ἕτερον, heteron in Matthew and possibly in Luke)?" [Godet, *Luke*]

Matt 11:4-6 Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me.

Luke 7:21-23 And in that same hour He cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind He gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me.

THE PROOF CHRIST GIVES OF HIS MESSIAHSHIP: Jesus sent the disciples back, not with a new message because what they were told to report to John was what they had been telling him in the first place (note v2, hearing of the works of Jesus is what started this questioning). What is new was that Jesus couched it in prophetic terms, referring back to Isaiah 35:3-6; 61:1.

"Diseases — plagues: marking the two classes of disease recognized in medical writings, chronic and acute.... *Evil spirits:* it is applied to evil spirits by Luke only, with the single exception of Matt 12:45. In accordance with its signification of evil on its active side, it is applied in medicine to that which spreads destruction or corruption; as the poison of serpents. Note, moreover, that Luke distinguishes here between disease and demoniac possession, as often.... *He gave:* more is expressed by this verb than simple giving. *He gave as a free, gracious, joy-giving gift.*" [Vincent, *Word Studies*] "Unto many that were blind he gave light — rather, *He kindly gave sight; or, He graciously gave sight.* This is the proper meaning of the original words. In all His miracles, Jesus showed the tenderest mercy and kindness: not only the cure, but the manner in which He performed it, endeared Him to those who were objects of His compassionate regards." [Clarke, *Commentary*]

"He gives an indirect reply, and for two reasons: first, because it was better that the thing should speak for itself; and, secondly, because He thus afforded to his herald a larger subject of instruction. Nor does He merely supply him with bare and rough materials in the miracles, but adapts the miracles to his purpose by quotations from the Prophets. He notices more particularly one passage from the 35th and another from the 61st chapter of Isaiah, for the purpose of informing John's disciples, that what the Prophets declared respecting the reign of Christ was accomplished and fulfilled. The former passage contains a description of Christ's reign, under which God promises that He will be so kind and gracious as to grant relief and assistance for every kind of disease. He speaks, no doubt, of spiritual deliverance from all diseases and remedies; but under outward symbols Christ shows that He came as a spiritual physician to cure souls.... The latter passage resembles the former in this respect. It shows that the treasures of the grace of God would be exhibited to the world in Christ, and declares that Christ is expressly set apart for the poor and afflicted. This passage is purposely quoted by Christ, partly to teach all His followers the first lesson of humility, and partly to remove the offense which the flesh and sense might be apt to raise against His despicable flock. We are by nature proud, and scarcely anything is much valued by us, if it is not attended by a great degree of outward show." [Calvin, *Commentary*]

CHRIST IS AN “OFFENSE”: offended = **skandolon**; originally from the word for a trap-stick with bait on it which being touched the trap springs. This word always translated “offended”, a related word is translated “offenses, stumbling block, an occasion to fall”

Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:6-8 *rock of offense*

Rom 14:13 *an occasion to fall*

1 Cor 1:23 *unto the Jews a stumbling block*

In the NT the word is used metaphorically, ordinarily of anything that arouses prejudice, anything which becomes a hindrance to others or causes them to fall by the way; sometimes the hindrance is in itself good and those stumbled by it are the wicked. It is translated by others as “blessed is he who is not repelled by Me”, [Hendriksen]; “blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me” [NIV]; “spiritually prosperous is he whoever does not find in Me that of which he disapproves and that which hinders him from acknowledging My authority” [Wuest]. This is regardless of what happens as Vincent points out: “Note also the conditional *not* (μή, mā) ‘shall not find, whatever may occur’.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

“THE FORGOTTEN BEATITUDE”, so-called by Vance Havner. As we saw in the study of the Sermon on the Mount (lessons 38,39) the word *blessed* is the Gk word makarioi (μακάριοι) explained by Vines to mean “from a root *mak-* meaning large, lengthy, found also in *makros*, long, *mēkos*, length, hence denotes to pronounce happy, blessed ... **In the beatitudes the Lord indicates not only the characters that are blessed, but the nature of that which is the highest good.**” [Vines, *Expository Dictionary*] The implication is **there are few which on some ground or another do not stumble over Jesus** — even John the Baptist was in danger of being one who stumbled! This is a very important lesson for us to derive from this week’s passage: ***blessed (happy) are those who do not find in Me anything which would cause them to fall away or stumble!*** This is an amazing statement. *I can understand some of us being offended by each other, but to be offended by Jesus? How is this possible? Yet our text implies that most will probably be offended by Him!*

What was the problem? To understand this, we must consider where John was: in prison, discouraged — ***life has a way of surprising us, not always turning out the way in which we desire.*** One pastor my wife and I sat under for fourteen years put it like this: ***we get saved and we spend the rest of our lives learning Rom 8:28!*** For example:

- Biblically: Jeremiah was thrown in a pit to die, rescued, and lived long enough to watch his beloved city of Jerusalem captured by the Babylonians; Isaiah by tradition was sawed in two; Peter failed his Master and went out to weep; all the apostles except one died a martyr death; John boiled in oil and banished to Patmos; Habakkuk couldn’t understand God using the Babylonians.
- Historically, when Spurgeon was 22 years old (1856) he preached at the Surrey Music Hall in England. The hall had a seating capacity of 10,000; it was filled with others standing outside to hear him. Not long after the evening services began someone cried out “fire”. In the frenzy that followed, seven were killed and 28 were taken to the hospital. It so disheartened Spurgeon that he could not enter the pulpit for two weeks, and left him a scar which lasted a lifetime. ***Why?***
- My wife and I know of a woman who was active in serving the Lord when she had a car accident involving her two children. One was in a coma for a period, after which she had to learn to walk, eat, and take care of herself all over again. We saw this young lady some time ago (maybe six years after the accident) and she was still obviously handicapped. She will never recover fully. ***Why?***
- A close friend of mine during my youth later became a Baptist pastor / missionary. During the early years of his ministry he received a call in which he was told his brother had committed suicide. ***Why?***
- While my wife and I was involved at the Gospel Mission, we came to know and love an elderly couple. They were very active serving the Lord in their church as well as at the Mission. Their daughter went out one weekend and committed suicide. They found her with a note in her car. ***Why?***
- As mentioned in previous lessons, we had an assistant Pastor who’s 17-year-old daughter was followed home from a party, raped then murdered. It was a long time before the murderer was caught, then they had to suffer the ordeal of the trial. Their daughter was a committed Christian young lady with the parents both actively serving the Lord. ***Why?***

I don’t have all the answers, but I do know **these difficulties are at least partially given as prompts for our faith to grow — and these trials seem the more difficult due to the absence of Christ.** Note nowhere is there mentioned that Jesus ever saw John while in prison. We could take the lesson for us that **any trial with the presence of Jesus is bearable, the difficulty comes when we feel alone, abandoned.** Jesus promised to never forsake His people, yet His presence is not always felt. Has He gone? This is where faith steps in — as illustrated in the well-known poem of the footprints in the sand when the Lord carries us during the difficult times, even though we may be unaware of His presence.

Another lesson to be gleaned is **these periods of valleys could be a great time of learning.** Note John knew who Jesus was, *but it was only through his prison experience that he grew in his knowledge of the Lord, not only as the coming Judge, but as the gracious forgiving Savior.*

How does the Lord deal with these lapses in our faith? **Jesus begins by reminding John of who He was.** This is where we all

must begin, **by letting God be God!** — *Isa 55:8,9 as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are the Lord's thoughts to ours.* Even the disappointments are ordained by God. One illustration has been given of a man on a deserted island praying to be rescued. During his prayers his hut burned to the ground, greatly discouraging the man. But a ship far off saw the fire and rescued him. While the truth presented in that illustration is obvious, the harder lesson to learn is to have these things happen *without any apparent reason*. **Many people have difficulties believing God is the author of things we call bad**, and that is a stumbling-block to many. For example, the entire book of Habakkuk. Personally, I had a friend at work approach me the day the space shuttle blew up, asking *where was God then?* I responded *He was still on the throne where He always was!* It provided me an opportunity to witness to this person concerning the facts of this lesson. **“Christ intended to remind them that he who would adhere firmly and steadfastly to the faith of the Gospel must encounter offenses which will tend to interrupt the progress of faith. This is said by way of anticipation, to fortify us against offenses; for we shall never want reasons for rejecting it, until our minds are raised above every offense.** The first lesson, therefore, to be learned is, that we must contend with offenses, if we would continue in the faith of Christ; for Christ Himself is justly denominated a rock of offense and stone of stumbling, by which many fall (1 Pet 2:8). This happens, no doubt, through our own fault, but that very fault is remedied, when He pronounces those to be blessed who shall not be offended in Him; from which too we infer, that unbelievers have no excuse, though they plead the existence of innumerable offenses. For what hinders them from coming to Christ? Or what drives them to revolt from Christ? It is because He appears with His cross, disfigured and despised, and exposed to the reproaches of the world; because He calls us to share in his afflictions; because His glory and majesty, being spiritual, are despised by the world; and in a word, because **His doctrine is totally at variance with our senses.** Again, it is because, through the stratagems of Satan, many disturbances arise, with the view of slandering and rendering hateful the name of Christ and the Gospel; and because every one, as if on purpose, rears up a mass of offenses, being instigated by not less malignity than zeal to withdraw from Christ.” [Calvin, *Commentary*]

Matt 11:7-9 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

Luke 7:24-26 And when the messengers of John were departed, He began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.

THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST TOWARDS THOSE WHO ARE DISCOURAGED: Jesus begins *immediately* (as John's disciples were leaving) to speak to the multitude to correct any misgivings they may have been thinking concerning John — **no turning in disgust and warning not to have the attitude of John, but rather support, understanding, compassion — there is no place in the Christian life for judgmental, self-righteous condemnation for the failures of others.**

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPEN SIN AND MOMENTARY LAPSES IN OUR FAITH: if we're not careful, our doubt which God graciously deals with may be nurtured into rebellion, held on to as an excuse for our heart's attitude towards God. This is something only the Lord may see and know the difference, and perhaps this is not for us to judge in others, but does serve as a warning. As believers we must ask ourselves: **what is our position with the Lord? Is my attitude one of “not my will but Thine, dear Lord” or is there something in our lives which is a hindrance to our service?**

JESUS' DESCRIPTION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST: Christ asked those around Him what they went out “*to see, to behold*”. “The verb implies steadfast, intent gazing.... calm, continuous contemplation of an object which remains before the spectator.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] “The purport of our Lord's design, in this and the following verses, is to convince the scribes and Pharisees of the inconsistency of their conduct in acknowledging John Baptist for a divinely authorized teacher, and not believing in the very Christ which He pointed out to them. He also shows, from the excellencies of John's character, that their confidence in him was not misplaced, and that this was a farther argument why they should have believed in Him, whom the Baptist proclaimed as being far superior to himself.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

REED IN THE WIND? : “An emblem of an irresolute, unsteady mind, which believes and speaks one thing today, and another tomorrow. Christ asks these Jews if they had ever found any thing in John like this: Was he not ever steady and uniform in the testimony he bore to me? **The first excellency which Christ notices in John was his steadiness; convinced once of the truth, he continued to believe and assert it.** This is essentially necessary to every preacher, and to every private Christian. He who changes about from opinion to opinion, and from one sect or party to another, is never to be depended on; there is much reason to believe that such a person is either mentally weak, or has never been rationally and divinely convinced of the truth.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] “Our Lord asks his hearers what they thought of John.... What did you see? A vacillating orator? A man who felt the influence of his times, and bowed before its spirit, like a bulrush in the breeze? Nay, verily; John was no time-server, no flattering courtier, no pleaser of the great.” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*] An alternative thought: “But this reed shaken by the wind may be regarded simply as the emblem of something of ordinary, everyday occurrence. ‘It was not certainly to behold something which may be seen every day that you flocked to the desert’.” [Godet, *Luke*] This is interesting (and unique; Godet is the only source I've read which took this interpretation) but I still like the image of a “vacillating orator”.

MAN IN SOFT RAIMENT? : probably referring to those who are flexible, refined, effeminate, knowing how not to offend to get ahead. “A preacher of the Gospel should have nothing about him which savours of effeminacy and worldly pomp: **he is**

awfully mistaken who thinks to prevail on the world to hear him and receive the truth, by conforming himself to its fashions and manners.... He was contented to live in the desert, and to announce the solemn and severe truths of his doctrine to the simple inhabitants of the country. Let it be well observed, that the preacher who conforms to the world in his clothing, is never in his element but when he is frequenting the houses and tables of the rich and great.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

MORE THAN A PROPHET: “One more excellent than a prophet; one greatly beyond all who had come before him, being the immediate forerunner of Christ, and who was especially commissioned to prepare the way of the Lord.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]
“A prophet (προφήτην, prophētān). The popular conception of a prophet is limited to his foretelling future events. This is indeed included in the term, but does not cover its meaning entirely. The word is from φημί (phāmi) *to speak* and πρό (pro) *before, in front of*. This meaning of the preposition may have reference to time, viz., *before, beforehand*; or to place, viz., *in front of*, and so, *publicly*; and this latter meaning, in turn, easily runs into that of *in behalf of; for*. **The prophet is, therefore, primarily, one who speaks standing before another, and thus forming a medium between him and the hearer.** This sense runs naturally into that of *instead of*. Hence it is the technical term for the interpreter of a divine message.... **The central idea of the word is, one to whom God reveals himself and through whom he speaks. The revelation may or may not relate to the future. The prophet is a forth-teller, not necessarily a foreteller.** The essence of the prophetic character is immediate intercourse with God. One of the Hebrew names for ‘prophet’, and, as some maintain, the earlier name, signified a *shewer* or *seer*. (1 Sam 9:10; 1 Cor 14:26-30).” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

The meaning is not that John’s the greatest man ever to live but rather refers to *John as being the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, fully accomplishing all which the Father had sent him to do: prepare the way for Jesus, then humbly recede to the background when the One who was to come arrived.* **He was not only a prophet but he was one which was part of prophesy himself!** John also had the privilege of seeing the fulfillment of all which the prior prophets could only imagine. This was a bold saying to those who regard the dead greater than the living, and it is comforting to note **this is Jesus’ opinion of John, even in his doubt!**

Matt 11:10,11 *For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

Luke 7:27,28 *This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*

THE PROPHETIC REFERENCE TO JOHN taken from Mal 3:1. “The Baptist was ... the instrument, in God’s hand, of preparing the people’s hearts to receive the Lord Jesus; and it was probably through his preaching that so many thousands attached themselves to Christ, immediately on his appearing as a public teacher.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

WHOSOEVER IS LEAST IN KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS GREATER THAN JOHN: “Least: literally, *less...* or, as we might say, ‘comparatively little’.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] This can take upon itself several interpretations:

- the moral sternness of John was his greatness and also his weakness; it made him doubt Jesus, and therefore placed him below any who understood Jesus’ gracious ministry
- some explain this as an exhortation to be a servant; therefore as great as John was, one who is willing to take the place of “the least” in the kingdom of God is potentially greater than John.
- explained in the light of Matt 13:16,17, *the least* were more highly privileged not because of any personal qualities they may have, but because they live in the time of fulfillment. “There is a saying similar to this among the Jews: ‘Even the servant maid that passed through the Red Sea, saw what neither Ezekiel, nor any other of the prophets had seen.’ [Clarke, *Commentary*] “All the ministers of the Gospel are included. Many of them undoubtedly have received a small portion of faith, and are therefore greatly inferior to John; but this does not prevent their preaching from being superior to his, because it holds out Christ as having rendered complete and eternal satisfaction by His one sacrifice, as the conqueror of death and the Lord of life, and because it withdraws the veil, and elevates believers to the heavenly sanctuary.” [Calvin, *Commentary*] “Up till the coming of our Lord, John was greatest of woman born; but the new dispensation was on a higher plane, for ‘the kingdom of heaven’ was set up. **As we may say, as a rule, that the darkest day is lighter than the brightest night; so John, though first of his own order, is behind the last of the new or gospel order. The least in the gospel stands on higher ground than the greatest under the law. How privileged are we who, by virtue of entering into the kingdom of heaven by faith, are made to see, and hear, and enjoy those things which even the prophet of prophets could not enter upon!**” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*]

Matt 11:12-15 *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. :* Jesus continues to commend John’s ministry by illustrating the results of his preaching.

BECAUSE OF JOHN’S PREACHING, MEN WERE EXCITED ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN: yes, John was in prison; and yes, he was downcast himself. But the Lord had used John to arouse great emotion concerning the kingdom. **“John had aroused an unusual earnestness which had not died out. Men were eager for the glories of ‘the kingdom of heaven’.**

Though they misinterpreted it, they were on fire to seize it. John himself, in his excess of eagerness, had sent his two disciples to our Lord with an impatient question. Our Savior does not blame his intense enquiry; but says that so it must be. A holy violence had been introduced by John, and they had just seen it in his question, and our Lord would have all those who would obtain the kingdom capture it by the same passionate eagerness. The time was come to end indifference, and put on a holy resolution as to the things of God.” [Spurgeon, Matthew] “The tax-gatherers and heathens, whom the scribes and Pharisees think have no right to the kingdom of the Messiah, filled with holy zeal and earnestness, seize at once on the proffered mercy of the Gospel, and so take the kingdom as by force from those learned doctors who claimed for themselves the chiefest places in that kingdom. Christ Himself said, The tax-gatherers and harlots go before you into the kingdom of God. **He that will take, get possession of the kingdom of righteousness, peace, and spiritual joy, must be in earnest: all hell will oppose him in every step he takes; and if a man be not absolutely determined to give up his sins and evil companions, and have his soul saved at all hazards, and at every expense, he will surely perish everlastingly. This requires a violent earnestness.**” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

“Suffereth violence: literally, *is forced, overpowered, taken by storm*. Christ thus graphically portrays the intense excitement which followed John’s ministry; the eager waiting, striving, and struggling of the multitude for the promised king.... **The violent take it by force:** This was proved by the multitudes who followed Christ and thronged the doors where He was, and would have taken Him by force (the same word) and made Him a king (Jn 6:15). The word *take by force* means literally *to snatch away, carry off*. It is often used in the classics of plundering.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS THE PROPHETIC ELIJAH: “The Prophet Malachi, who predicted the coming of the Baptist in the spirit and power of Elijah, gave the three following distinct characteristics of him. First, That he should be the forerunner and messenger of the Messiah: *Behold I send my messenger before me*, Mal 3:1. Secondly, That he should appear before the destruction of the second temple: *Even the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple*, *ibid*. Thirdly, That he should preach repentance to the Jews; and that, some time after, the great and terrible day of the Lord should come, and the Jewish land be smitten with a curse, Mal 4:5, 6. Now these three characters agree perfectly with the conduct of the Baptist, and what shortly followed his preaching, and have not been found in any one else; which is a convincing proof that Jesus was the promised Messiah.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

(from lesson 9, comments on Luke 1:17): Was John Elijah? If taken *literally*, the answer would be no. John could truthfully say he was not Elijah in that sense (Jn 1:21). But *figuratively*, the answer would be yes. Even Jesus referred to John in that sense (Mt 11:14; 17:12,13; Mk 9:11-13). John clearly displayed the “spirit and power of Elijah” in several manners:

- both fell on evil times: Herod and Ahab
- both witnessed fearlessly for God: Elijah directly confronted Ahab and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:18-20); John directly confronted Herod as well as the Sadducees and Pharisees (Mt 3:7; 14:4)
- the message of both was repentance (1 Kings 18:21; Lk 3:8)
- neither was much seen except for direct exercise of their ministry (1 Kings 17:2-6; Mt 3:1)
- both were heads of schools of disciples (2 Kings 2:3; Jn 3:25; 4:1)
- the results of both could be expressed in the same terms: many (not all nor even a majority) would turn to the Lord through them

“John was the Elijah for whom they looked. Would people believe it? Would they obey his command to repent? Then he would be to them a true Elijah, and make straight for them the way of the Lord. Even a man sent of God is to his hearer very much what that hearer chooses to make of him. No doubt, many a great boon has been missed by men failing to accept it. ‘If ye will receive it’, a minister, may be the channel of salvation, or the means of spiritual edification, or of surpassing joy; but if not received it may become a weariness, or as meaningless as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*]

If ye will: *If ye are willing or disposed*. “For there would naturally be an unwillingness to receive the statement about John’s high place, in view of John’s imprisonment.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] Wuest: “*And assuming that you would be disposed to receive the following favorably...*”

All the prophets and the law prophesied until John: “I believe this means *they taught, or continued to instruct*. They were the instructors concerning the Christ who was to come, till John came and showed that all the predictions of the one, and the types and ceremonies of the other were now about to be fully and finally accomplished; for Christ was now revealed.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] “God left not Himself without witness all along. John ended the chain of foreseers and foretellers, and now the Lord himself appears. Our Lord draws a line at John by saying ‘until John’: henceforth the kingdom is set up.” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*] “The word prophesied is emphatic; for **the Law and the Prophets did not present God before the eyes of men, but represented Him under figures and shadows as absent**. The comparison, we now perceive, is intended to show, that it is highly criminal in men to remain indifferent, when they have obtained a manifestation of the presence of God, who held His ancient people in suspense by predictions. Christ does not class John with the ministers of the Gospel, though He formerly assigned to him an intermediate station between them and the Prophets. But there is no inconsistency here: for although John’s preaching was a part of the Gospel, it was little more than a first lesson.” [Calvin, *Commentary*]

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear: “As if our Lord had said, These things are so clear and manifest that a man has only to hear them to be convinced and fully satisfied of their truth. But neither the Jews of that time nor of the succeeding times to the present day, have heard or considered, these things. When spoken to on these subjects, their common custom is to stop their ears, spit out, and blaspheme; this shows not only a bad, but a ruined cause. **They are deeply and willfully blind. They will not come unto the light, lest their deeds should become manifest, that they are not wrought in God. They have ears but they will not hear.**” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

Luke 7:29,30 *And all the people that heard Him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.* : Luke records the results of Jesus’ statement concerning John the Baptist. Those who had accepted the preaching of John declared what God was saying concerning John to be correct, while those who rejected John’s teachings did so to their own destruction. “The substance of this passage is, that the common people and the publicans gave glory to God; while the Scribes, flattering themselves with confidence in their own knowledge, cared little for what Christ said. At first sight, this tends only to obscure, and even to disfigure, the glory of the Gospel, that Christ could not gather disciples to Himself, except from the dregs and offscourings of the people; while He was rejected by those who had any reputation for holiness or learning. But the Lord intended, from the beginning, to hold out this example, that neither the men of that age, nor even posterity, might judge of the Gospel by the approbation of men; for we are all by nature inclined to this vice. And yet nothing is more unreasonable than to submit the truth of God to the judgment of men, whose acuteness and sagacity amounts to nothing more than mere vanity. Accordingly, as Paul says, ‘God hath chosen that part which is weak and foolish in the eyes of the world, that He may cast down from its height whatever appears to be mighty and wise,’ (1 Cor 1:27). Our duty is to prefer this foolishness of God, to use Paul’s expression (1 Cor 1:25), to all the display of human wisdom.” [Calvin, *Commentary*]

Justified God: “Declaring, by being baptized, that God’s will concerning John’s baptism was right.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]
“Justified God — or, *declared God to be just*. The sense is this: John preached that the Divine wrath was coming upon the Jews, from which they might flee by repentance, Lk 3:7. The Jews, therefore, who were baptized by him, with the baptism of repentance, did thereby acknowledge that it is but justice in God to punish them for their wickedness unless they repented, and were baptized in token of it.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

Lawyers: “Not legal practitioners, but interpreters and doctors of the Mosaic law.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Rejected the counsel of God: “Or, *frustrated the will of God....* The will of God was that all the inhabitants of Judea should repent at the preaching of John, be baptized, and believe in Christ Jesus. Now as they did not repent, etc., at John’s preaching, so they did not believe his testimony concerning Christ: thus the will, gracious counsel, or design of God, relative to their salvation, was annulled or frustrated. They disbelieved His promises, despised the Messiah, and disobeyed His precepts.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] “Literally Luke says, *that they despised AGAINST THEMSELVES*: and indeed I do not disapprove of the meaning which is preferred by some, that the scribes were rebellious to their own destruction. But as Luke’s narrative is simple ... I have chosen rather to translate it, *within themselves*; as meaning, that although they did not openly and expressly contradict, yet as they inwardly swelled with hidden pride, they despised within themselves.” [Calvin, *Commentary*]

Rejected: “*Set aside, or annulled; made it vain* through their disobedience.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Matt 11:16-19 *But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.*

Luke 7:31-35 *And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! But wisdom is justified of all her children.*

“Our Lord condemns the folly of the age in which He lived. The people would not listen to the messenger of God whoever He might be, but raised childish objections. Therefore the Lord likens them to ‘children sitting in the markets’, who were asked to play by their fellows, but they could never agree upon the game. If certain of the children would imitate a wedding, and began to pipe, the others would not dance; and when they proposed a funeral, and began to mourn, the others would not lament. They were disagreeable, sullen, and captiously resolved to reject every offer. Such was the foolish manner of men in our Lord’s time. John was an ascetic: he must be out of his mind and under the influence of a demon. Jesus is a man among men, and goes to their feasts: He is accused of eating and drinking to excess, and associating with the sordid and wicked. **There was no pleasing them.** Thus is it at this hour: one preacher, who speaks with elegant diction, is too flowery; and another, who uses plain speech, is vulgar: the instructive preacher is dull, and the earnest preacher is far too excitable. **There is no suiting some people.**” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*]
“He does not include all the men of his age, but speaks particularly of the scribes and their followers. **He charges them with this reproach, that while the Lord endeavored, by various methods, to draw them to himself, they repelled his grace with incorrigible obstinacy....** I think that, in order to abase the pride of the scribes, Christ intentionally borrowed from children the

materials of his reproof: thus declaring that, however distinguished they were, nothing more was necessary to condemn them than a song which children were wont to sing in the market-place for their amusement.” [Calvin, *Commentary*] **“There are some to whom every thing is useful in leading them to God; others, to whom nothing is sufficient. Every thing is good to an upright mind, every thing bad to a vicious heart.”** [Clarke, *Commentary*] “Leading an austere life, [John] thundered out repentance and severe reproofs, and sung, as it were, a plaintive song; while the Lord endeavored, by a cheerful and sprightly song, to draw them more gently to the Father. **Neither of those methods had any success, and what reason could be assigned except their hardened obstinacy? This passage also shows us, why so wide a difference existed, as to outward life, between Christ and the Baptist, though both had the same object in view. Our Lord intended, by this diversity, and by assuming as it were a variety of characters, to convict unbelievers more fully; since, while He yielded and accommodated Himself to their manners, He did not bend them to Himself.** But if the men of that age are deprived of every excuse for repelling, with inveterate malice, a twofold invitation which God had given them, we too are held guilty in their persons; for God leaves not untried any sort of pleasing melody, or of plaintive and harsh music, to draw us to Himself, and yet we remain hard as stones.” [Calvin, *Commentary*]

“For John came neither eating nor drinking: Leading a very austere and mortified life: and yet, he did not receive him. A sinner will not be persuaded that what he has no mind to imitate can come from God. There are some who will rather blame holiness itself, than esteem it in those whom they do not like. **He hath a devil:** He is a vile hypocrite, influenced by a demon to deceive and destroy the simple.... **The Son of man came eating and drinking:** That is, went wheresoever He was invited to eat a morsel of bread, and observed no rigid fasts: how could He, who had no corrupt appetites to mortify or subdue? They say, **Behold a man gluttonous, etc.: Whatever measures the followers of God may take, they will not escape the censure of the world: the best way is not to be concerned at them. Iniquity, being always ready to oppose and contradict the Divine conduct, often contradicts and exposes itself.**” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

“To eat and drink means here nothing more than to live in the customary way; as Christ says that John came neither eating nor drinking, because he confined himself to a peculiar diet, and even abstained from ordinary food.... **Those who think that the highest perfection consists in outward austerity of life, and who pronounce it to be an angelical life when a person is abstemious, or mortifies himself by fasting, ought to attend to this passage. On this principle John would rank higher than the Son of God;** but, on the contrary, we ought to maintain, that bodily exercise profiteth little, but godliness is profitable to all things (1 Tim 4:8). And **yet we must not make this a pretense for giving a loose rein to the flesh, by indulging in luxuries and effeminacy:** only we must beware of superstition, lest foolish men, imagining that perfection lies in matters of a purely elementary nature, neglect the spiritual worship of God. Besides, while Christ accommodated Himself to the usages of ordinary life, He maintained a sobriety truly divine, and did not encourage the excesses of others by His dissimulation or by His example.” [Calvin, *Commentary*]

But wisdom is justified of her children: “Those who follow the dictates of true wisdom ever justify, point out as excellent, the holy maxims by which they are guided, for they find the way pleasantness, and the path, peace.... Some suppose that our blessed Lord applies the epithet of ... Wisdom to Himself; as He does that of Son of man, in the first clause of the verse: and that this refers to the sublime description given of wisdom in Prov 8. Others have supposed that by the children or sons of wisdom our Lord means John Baptist and Himself, who came to preach the doctrines of true wisdom to the people, and who were known to be teachers come from God by all those who seriously attended to their ministry: they recommending themselves, by the purity of their doctrines, and the holiness of their lives, to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. It is likely, however, that by children our Lord simply means the fruits or effects of wisdom, according to the Hebrew idiom, which denominates the fruits or effects of a thing, its children. So in Job 5:7, sparks emitted by coals are termed *the children of the coal*.... **Wisdom is vindicated by her works, i.e. the good effects prove that the cause is excellent. The children of true wisdom can justify all God’s ways in their salvation; as they know that all the dispensations of Providence work together for the good of those who love and fear God.... True wisdom shows itself by its works; folly is never found in the wise man’s way, any more than wisdom is in the path of a fool.**” [Clarke, *Commentary*] “Even the great Lord of all finds His wise arrangements met with discontent. Yet wisdom, after all, gave forth her teachings by rightly chosen ambassadors. She is justified of her children. Her children recognized the fitness of her messengers; and her messengers, who were also her children, were a credit to her choice, and justified her selection and preparation of them. The All-wise God is a better judge of what a minister should be than any of us are. Well did George Herbert write — ‘Judge not the preacher, he is thy judge.’ The varied orders of preachers are all needful, and, if we would but know it, they are all ours; whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas; and it is ours not to cavil at them, but to give earnest heed to their proposals. **Lord, deliver us from a captious, fault-finding spirit; for if we begin objecting, we are apt to keep on at it. If we will not hear one preacher, we may soon find ourselves quite weary of a second and a third, and before long it may come to pass that we cannot hear any minister to profit.**” [Spurgeon, *Matthew*]

Generation: “That is, the Jewish people (τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης, *tās geneas tautās*), *this race*: and so the word *genea* is often to be understood in the evangelists.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

Children: Diminutive, *little children*. [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Market-places: (ἀγοραῖ, *agorai*) “From *ageirō* (ἀγείρω), *to assemble*.... The primary conception in the Greek word has nothing to do with buying and selling. *Agora* is *an assembly*; then *the place of assembly*. The idea of *a place of trade* comes in afterward, and naturally, since trade plants itself where people habitually gather. Hence the Roman Forum was devoted, not only to popular

and judicial assemblies, but to commercial purposes, especially of bankers. The idea of trade gradually becomes the dominant one in the word. In Eastern cities the markets are held in bazaars and streets, rather than in squares. In these public places the children would be found playing. Compare Zech 8:5.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

Mourn: “Literally, *beat or strike (the breast)*, as in oriental funeral lamentations.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]