

“John: The World’s Greatest Roadworker”

MATTHEW 11:1-19

**Baxter T. Exum (#1128)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
August 21, 2011**



This morning if we were to get together and make a list of the greatest people in the Bible, I imagine that we would come up with a list of names that would perhaps include great leaders like Abraham, and Moses, and Deborah, and Ruth, and Elijah, and Peter, and Paul. And these men and women were certainly great leaders. These men and women certainly did some amazing things. However, this morning, I would like for us to return to our study of a man who was described by Jesus as being the greatest man who ever lived. I am referring, of course, to John the Baptist.

Last week we studied ***“a voice crying out in the wilderness,”*** as John prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah. You might remember that God was silent for a period of 400 years, and then John arrived on the scene, warning the nation to prepare for the King’s arrival by telling them to repent and be baptized; that is, they were to turn away from evil and back to God, and they were to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of their sins, a message that the world around us still needs to hear today.

As we continue our study of John the Baptist, I would like for us to move ahead a year or so as we look together at a passage in Matthew 11. But before we get to the text itself, we need to span the bridge between where we were last week and where we are this morning (roughly a year later). Last week, John was just getting started, and things were going very well. You might remember that thousands upon thousands of people were coming out to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. However, at some point John had the audacity to speak out against King Herod. Apparently, kings are included among those who need to repent of their sins. We hope to study more about that next Sunday morning, but for now, let’s just say that King Herod had John thrown in prison. So, John goes from unhindered wilderness life to being confined in prison. During this time, we learn in Luke 7 that Jesus has a run-in with a funeral procession (we studied this several years ago). You might remember that a widow’s only son had died, and when Jesus and His crowd ran into the funeral procession, Jesus saw the widow’s grief, He raised the young man from the dead. The Bible says that the young man sat up in his coffin and started talking. At the very end of that account, we learn that some of John’s followers happened to be in the crowd that day and that they went and reported these things to John who was in prison. However, instead of being thrilled, John seems to be a little bit confused, and that is where we come to our passage in Matthew 11. If you will, please look with me at Matthew 11:1-19...

¹ When Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities. ² Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the

works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see:⁵ the BLIND RECEIVE 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.⁶ And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."

⁷ As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?⁸ But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces!⁹ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'¹¹ Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.¹³ For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come.¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

¹⁶ "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children,¹⁷ and say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!'¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

As we look back over this passage, I would like for us to study John as the greatest road-worker who ever lived (in fact, the world's greatest prophet), and I would like for us to structure our study around the three paragraphs in this section—starting with the fact that John had some honest but very straightforward questions concerning the Lord, continuing with the Lord's assessment of John as one tough prophet, and then concluding with the Lord's statement that both He and John had something in common.

I. But first of all, let us please go back up to those first six verses as we study the fact that JOHN (EVEN AS THE WORLD'S GREATEST PROPHET) HAD SOME SERIOUS BUT HONEST QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE LORD.

And so that we can understand what John is thinking here, let's try to look at this from John's point of view. For more than a year, John has been preaching to thousands upon thousands of people, and he has been telling these people that the King is coming. Remember last week, *"...the axe is already laid at the root of the tree."* We remember the prophecy from the last chapter of the Old Testament, *"'For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,' says the LORD of hosts, 'so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.... You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing,' says the LORD of hosts."* John, therefore, was preparing the way for justice, he was preparing the way for punishment, he was preparing the way for the wrath of God—God is coming, and He will settle some scores, He's going to make everything right.

And yet in the middle of all of this, John is arrested. As he sits there in prison, days turn into weeks, weeks into months, and John (known for preaching that justice is right around the corner) has now been unjustly imprisoned for roughly a year now. And unlike Peter in the book of Acts, there was no angel sent to set him free. Unlike Paul and Silas, there was no earthquake to destroy the prison. But rather, John had become a laughingstock, “Hey John, how’s that justice working out for you? Hey John, you know that King of yours who’s supposed to free the prisoners, how’s that going for you these days?” You can see the people start to snicker.

And then on top of that, as John is sitting there in prison, his followers start bringing back reports of what the Lord is doing. Is Jesus bringing the wrath of God? Is Jesus solving all of the world’s political problems? Is Jesus smiting the world with unquenchable fire? Let’s think about this: What’s the first report that John gets? What is the first miracle that Jesus ever performed? Here is John languishing in prison, looking for justice, looking for the wrath of God, and what does Jesus do? Jesus goes to a wedding party and miraculously creates roughly 180 gallons of the best wine known to man! “What? That’s not the Messiah I’ve been preaching! That’s not fire and justice! That’s not the wrath of God!” Well, maybe His second miracle will do it. Do you remember we studied the Lord’s second miracle several weeks ago? The second miracle Jesus performed was to heal the son of one of King Herod’s royal officials! And we can almost see John in prison, “Wait a minute! King Herod is the one who threw me in prison! And now the Messiah, the King of justice, is healing King Herod’s people?” And then the other reports start coming in: The Messiah is feeding people, He is sitting down for dinner with tax collectors and sinners, He is hugging little children, He is telling people to love their enemies, and on and on and on. And I think we start to see why John gets a little confused here. What John has been preaching does not seem to match what the Lord is actually doing (at least from John’s very limited point of view).

So, John sends his followers to go ask the Lord, ***“Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”*** In other words, “What are we missing here?” And with that, we find that even the strongest of God’s people will sometimes have doubts, will sometimes have struggles, and will sometimes ask some serious questions. As Christians, we know who the Lord is, but sometimes we struggle. Sometimes we hit a rough patch, and sometimes our faith may have a little hiccup, a little bit of doubt creeps in. Maybe we have some marriage struggles, maybe we have some financial struggles, maybe we have a serious fallout with a friend, maybe we are having some health issues, and maybe we start to pray, “Lord, I’m doing the best I can here, but Lord, I’m having a hard time!” And that’s okay! As we have learned from our study of King David’s Psalms on Wednesday evenings, it is okay to just lay it all out before God, “God, this is what I’m dealing with here, God, I am struggling here, I’m having some doubts, I don’t understand, I’m getting disillusioned, I’m having a hard time!” It is okay to share those thoughts with the Lord.

And let’s not forget: John actually saw Jesus, John had publicly proclaimed that Jesus was the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world, John had actually baptized the Lord, John had seen the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. So, if John can struggle, then certainly we can as well. But let’s notice the Lord’s reply. Jesus did not say, “Oh you of little faith!” Jesus did not cut on John for having such a ridiculous little question. Jesus did not condemn John for doubting. But instead, Jesus took John back to the Scriptures, and the Lord told John’s disciples to go back and tell him what they had seen, ***“The blind receive 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,”*** a direct quote from Isaiah 35. It is interesting, then, that Jesus did not answer with a “Yes” or a “No.” But instead, Jesus invited John to consider the evidence. Jesus invited John to make a decision for himself. In the same way, we may have doubts from time to time, and during those times of doubt, the Lord invites us to slow down and reconsider what His word actually says. John, therefore, had an honest question, and the Lord gave an honest answer by directing John back to the Scriptures.

II. At this point, the passage takes an interesting turn, because the Lord waits for John's disciples to leave, and then the Lord starts praising John as being **THE GREATEST PROPHET WHO EVER LIVED**.

In verse 7, Jesus starts asking some questions to get the crowds thinking. Some believed and obeyed and others did not, but for all of you, ***"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"*** No! ***"But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?"*** No! ***"Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces!"*** So, why did all of you people go out in the wilderness? To see a prophet? ***"Yes!"*** John was a prophet! John was a man speaking for God, speaking on God's behalf, and whether everyone in the crowd would admit it or not, that is what drew them to John. John was a prophet.

And this is where we find (in verse 10) that John was God's most valuable prophet, a man who was sent to prepare the way for God in the wilderness, the world's greatest roadworker! This goes back to the prophecy in Isaiah 40 (our Scripture reading from last week), that John would fulfill the command in Isaiah 40:3-4, ***"Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley."*** John's mission was to prepare the way for Jesus, and Jesus tells us (in verse 11) that, ***"...among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!"*** But did you notice that the Lord also said, ***"Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he"?*** In other words, John was one tough prophet, John was the world's greatest roadbuilder, and yet those of us in the kingdom have a greater position than John. Those of us in the church are now living in the kingdom that John could only see from a distance.

We have a rather unusual statement in verse 12. There are several ways we can take this statement, and if you disagree with what I'm about to say, that's okay—you might even be able to persuade me to come around to your point of view. But when I look at verse 12 in the context of what Jesus is saying here, I take it that the violence is a good thing, it is good with the idea that those who are serious about the kingdom will struggle to get into it. And I say this because of the contrast in those who came out to hear John preach. Some (the Pharisees and the religious leaders) did not take it seriously, they just kind of drifted along and eventually ignored John, but the sinners (the common people) were going out there in the wilderness and they were practically forcing their way into God's kingdom. They were desperate for a message from God. They were elbowing their way in, trying to hear, practically stepping on each other to try to listen to John (and eventually to Jesus). You might remember those crowds who pressed in on the Lord to such an extent that Jesus literally had to get on a boat so that he had room to breathe to deliver the sermon (this happened at least twice). Later on, I'm thinking about Zaccheus, the "wee little man" who clawed his way up into a sycamore tree so that he could just get a glimpse of the Lord. Nothing would stand in his way. But regardless of how we view verse 12, I think we can agree that there is a definitely a struggle involved when it comes to entering God's kingdom. As we studied several months ago, Jesus said (in Luke 13:24) that we must ***"Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."*** Or, as Paul and Barnabas said to those new Christians in Acts 14:22, ***"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."*** In other words, it will not be easy.

In John's time, then, certain people were so desperate that they were practically storming the gates of heaven trying to get in. That is the message. Those who accept John as a prophet will do whatever it takes to make it into the kingdom of heaven. And for those who can accept it (according to verse 14), ***"John himself is Elijah who was to come."*** Not that John was literally Elijah, but John was Elijah in a spiritual sense, a tough man, a man who was willing to suffer and fight and struggle for God's kingdom. The kingdom of heaven, then, is not for those who just want to go along with the crowd. The kingdom of heaven is not for those who are willing to

compromise the gospel message. But the kingdom of heaven is for those who are willing to stand firm. The kingdom of heaven is for men like Joseph, and Daniel, and Stephen, and Paul. The kingdom of heaven is for tough women like Ruth, and Deborah, and Esther, and Lydia. The kingdom of heaven is for men and women with the spirit of John the Baptist. Think about John: Even after this glowing recommendation by the Lord, John sat there in prison until he was beheaded by King Herod. From the world's point of view, John's life was basically wasted. From the world's point of view, John never did anything truly great. He never made a lot of money, he never went to college, he never invented anything. But in the eyes of Jesus, John was the greatest prophet who ever lived because he pointed people to the Messiah—and that is something that we can still do today! We can also point people to Jesus just as he did.

III. At this point, the passage takes another rather interesting twist as Jesus points out that BOTH HE AND JOHN HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON.

We see some frustration come through in this last little paragraph as the Lord compares His generation to children in the marketplace who demand that all of the other children dance to their tune. In other words, many of the listeners were a bunch of whiners! They played the flute, and Jesus did not dance. They sang a funeral song, and Jesus refused to mourn. They wanted to write the music and have Jesus dance to it, instead of the other way around. Specifically, the Lord says that John lived the most strict lifestyle imaginable, and the people accused him of being demon-possessed. And on the other hand, Jesus came and actually ate and drank with people, and these people said, ***"Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"*** In other words, the Lord pointed out that it is just impossible to please everybody.

As I was preparing for this morning's lesson, I read about one minister who went back and read some of the old business meeting minutes from his congregation, and way back in there many years ago, the minutes said, "Elder Smith recommends we hire Mr. Johnson as our student minister. He has a background in music and a history of outstanding youth work. Music and education are two areas of church life where we need improvement." And then eighteen months later, there was another entry, "Elder Jones made the motion that we fire Mr. Johnson, our student minister. The man spends too much time working with the kids in the church, and it seems all we do is sing during the worship service. We need more preaching and someone to work with the older people." It seems that things have not changed very much through the years! It is impossible to make everybody happy! That is the message of verses 16-19!

We think about those crowds who had the privilege of hearing two of the greatest preachers of all time (Jesus and John the Baptist), but instead of being thankful, instead of accepting the message, they came up with all kinds of excuses for not listening. They whined. They complained. And maybe in this way Jesus was trying to encourage the crowd to knock it off. Jesus was saying: There is no pleasing you people! The message, then, is that John should keep up the good work and that the crowds should listen to the message. And that is the message for all of us here this morning, nearly 2000 years later. Living for Jesus is not just for all of those famous people in the Bible. We have a place of much greater privilege than those people, because we now have the big picture. We are now living what John could only imagine, what John could only dream about.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would like for us to go home this morning thinking about John the Baptist and what he did. In the big scheme of things, John was basically nothing—a backwoods preacher who wore camel skin and ate locusts and wild honey. But his greatness came in the message that he preached. He was willing to speak up without really slowing down to think of the consequences. John was willing to do the

one thing that really mattered, and the Lord was able to refer to John as being the greatest man who ever lived. As we close this morning, let us ask ourselves: What will Jesus say about us when this life is over? Will He say that we had the courage of John, or will He say that we were like those children who got upset that Jesus would not dance to their music?

The good news is that Jesus went on to die for our sins. He was buried, and He was raised up on the third day. We respond to that sacrifice by turning away from sin, doing whatever it takes, and then we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, please ask, but if you are ready to obey the good news, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com