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The Gospel According to Matthew

John the Baptist and the Unity of Scripture

November 4, 2018

Sermon Text: Matthew 11:1-15

Scripture Reading: John 1:15-34

Jesus' words here demonstrate the correct way to interpret the Scriptures – the true overall plan of redemption shown through the Old and into the New Testament. And the key figure in this is John the Baptist. He is the bridge, the last of the OT prophets and the herald of the New Covenant in Christ.

Before we read our text, let's supply the historical background from the 14th chapter of Matthew which is a lookback to even before chapter 11-

Mat 14:1-12 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, (2) and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." (3) For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, (4) because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."

(5) And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. (6) But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, (7) so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. (8) Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."

(9) And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. (10) He sent and had John beheaded in the

prison, (11) and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. (12) And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

We talked about John last February when we considered the baptism of John in Matthew 3, and Jesus' baptism. That message is online at Sermon Audio for anyone who wants to listen to it or read it again.

Alright then, here in chapter 11 John is still alive but in prison. Let's read our text then for this morning:

Mat 11:1-15 When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. (2) Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples (3) and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

(4) And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: (5) the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. (6) And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

(7) As they went away, Jesus began to

speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? (8) What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. (9) What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. (10) This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" (11) Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (12) From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. (13) For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, (14) and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. (15) He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

NOTE: John the Baptist was the OT personified. That is why he said he bore witness of Christ. It is why he said Christ must increase but he must decrease. The OT faded away, the New had come. John was the epitome, the culmination of all the OT prophets, all of whom pointed to Christ and the New Covenant. His voice was the OT Scriptures *speaking!*

And yet, here he is in prison and even he did not see the OT prophecies with absolute clarity because their fulfillment is only explained in the New Testament scriptures, which did not exist yet. It was this:

1Pe 1:10-12 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, (11) inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. (12) It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

See it. John was the Old Testament. He prophesied of Christ, but he did not see Christ in the OT as clearly as we do, having the New Testament to reveal it to us. So what John is doing here as he asks Christ if He is really the One who is to come – the Messiah – he is doing what all the OT prophets did. They specifically did not understand:

- The OT prophecies about the sufferings of Christ,
- The “subsequent glories,” ie, the New Creation, the kingdom of God.

And so:

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. (2) Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples (3) and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Now, with this background we are in a position to understand what Jesus gave as an answer, and to what He then tells the crowds. First, His answer to John:

(4) And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: (5) the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. (6) And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

What Jesus is doing here is quoting John's OT to him. Certainly He has Isaiah 35 in view (as well as other OT texts)-

Isa 35:1-10 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; (2) it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the

majesty of our God. **(3) Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. (4) Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."**

(5) Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; (6) then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; (7) the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. (8) And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. (9) No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

(10) And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

We could go on and on about all that these 10 verses are saying, but just mark down these main points:

- This is a New Creation prophecy pointing to the New Heavens and the New Earth. This new creation had begun with Jesus' arrival in this world. The curse is being reversed in Christ.
- The wonderful and gracious encouragement Jesus gives to John by reminding him of the promises of vss 3-4.
- The miracles of Jesus, His giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, legs to the lame, tongue to the mute (and other scriptures point to the resurrection, the dead raised) all prove that Jesus is the One John was looking for.
- "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." In other words, Jesus is THE way into the kingdom of God. It is in Him and Him alone that we are blessed by God.

Now, notice that John is not delivered from prison. Jesus allowed him to remain there and even to be executed. Why?

- The Old Covenant era, which John personified, was passing away, just like the Temple would be torn down and done away with.

- But also, the New Creation is not of this present world. John dies, but like all believers, he is going to be raised a new creation.

Jesus' Explains the Office of John the Baptist

Mat 11:7-15 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? (8) What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.

(9) What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. (10) This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'

(11) Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

(12) From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

(13) For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, (14) and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah

who is to come. (15) He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

“A reed shaken by the wind”? Listen to William Hendriksen explain:

Here, Jesus corrects the erroneous conclusion which some of the people were apt to draw with respect to John because of the question in which he had revealed his doubt concerning the very One whom he had formerly pointed out as the Messiah – that conclusion being that the Baptist was a fickle, vacillating person. [New Testament Commentary]

Or maybe the crowds just went out into the wilderness because John was a kind of circus show – a wild man dressed in skins? No. The people all knew this wasn't the case either.

So who was John, really?

He was a prophet. And in fact, John was the greatest of the prophets. John was the very person the Scriptures promised would come:

Mal 3:1 "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

John, Jesus said, was Elijah. That is to say, John was the one spoken of in the very closing words of the Old Testament, before God's voice went silent for 400 years:

Mal 4:5-6 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (6) And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

NOTE: Think about the implications of this identification of John as Elijah, particularly in regard to Herod and his evil wife, Herodias and her wicked daughter. It identifies them as Ahab and Jezebel and indicates that their doom is just as certain!

Now, there are two more statements here that Jesus makes which we need to take a closer look at:

- Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
- From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

Regarding the first – As great as John was in the Old Covenant era, being the culmination really of all the OT

Scriptures pointing to and announcing the Messiah, *something greater has now come*. The kingdom of heaven. The King. The New Covenant which effectually saves us and creates the true Israel of God. Actual forgiveness of sins. One sacrifice effectual for all time. So the person who is in Christ's kingdom is greater even than John. Here is Hendriksen again:

This cannot mean that John, after all, was not a saved man. Perish the very thought! Rather, the statement must be explained in the light of this:

Mat 13:16-17 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. (17) For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The one least in the kingdom was greater than John in the sense that he was more highly privileged. [Ibid]

We forget this. We are more privileged than Abraham was, or David, or any of the OT saints. We see more clearly than they did and our riches in Christ are something they knew was coming but they could only see them very dimly. With this privilege comes great responsibility:

Heb 2:1-3a Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. (2) For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, (3a) how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

And then finally that curious statement Jesus made-

- From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

Here is a parallel statement from Jesus:

Luk 16:16 "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and **everyone forces his way into it.**

And again:

Luk 7:28-30 I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (29) (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, (30) but the Pharisees and the lawyers

rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

I think that these two scriptures give us the key to Jesus' meaning. It is something like this:

The kingdom of heaven suffers violence at the hands of the wicked who hate Christ and try to destroy His kingdom. But the irony is that it is the "violent" people (the prostitutes and sinners and tax-collectors) who believe and do all they can to be sure that they enter His kingdom with an energy that is a kind of violence. "Get out of my way! Nothing is going to stop me from getting in!"

Let me close with these words and challenge from William Hendriksen:

By no means is everybody entering. Many, very many, even now are refusing and resisting. But vigorous, forceful men, people who dare to break away from faulty human tradition and to return to the Word in all its purity, no matter what be the cost to themselves, such individuals are eagerly taking possession of the kingdom; that is, in their hearts and lives that kingship or reign of God and of Christ is established.

What Jesus here emphasizes is that one cannot sleep his way into the

kingdom. On the contrary, entrance into the kingdom requires earnest endeavor, untiring energy, utmost exertion. This is true because Satan is mighty, has a large army of helpers, the demons, has learned to use crafty methods, and receives aid and support from his fifth column established in man's very heart.

Therefore it takes vigorous men, men who are eager to fight and conquer, to overcome Satan and thus to take possession of the kingdom, of all the blessings and of salvation. *The kingdom, then, is not for weaklings, waverers, or compromisers.* It is not won by means of deferred prayers, unfulfilled promises, broken resolutions, and hesitant testimonies. It is for strong and sturdy men like Joseph, Nathan, Elijah, Daniel and his three friends, Peter, Stephen, Paul, Ruth, Deborah, Esther, and Lydia.

What kind of man, what kind of woman, are you?