

## **Matthew 11 and Wisdom's Vindication**

July 5, 2020

It was very nice to finally be in Church for a worship service, despite having to wear masks, stay distant from friends, missing fellowship time, and of course sharing our Bible Study time together. I mentioned to Rev. Zanicky that we would like to be able to meet when conditions are appropriate for that, and he seemed friendly to that suggestion. But, at least for now, we need to be thankful for what we have. If I hear of anything that changes things, I'll be sure to pass on the word.

Today we make an enormous leap into the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 11. The thread that connects this material to what we have been studying in Proverbs is the idea that "Wisdom" is vindicated in what actually happens: by actions of the wise. The "key verse" Matt. 11: 19 focuses on that. But, there is a lot going on in this chapter! I'd like to dig into some of that. The lesson book has some helpful background on page 25 about the various gospels and writings, on pages 26 and 27 about prophets, and page 30 "scripture notes".

I believe the lesson writer only gets part of the role of prophets right. She sees the role of a prophet as conveying "an uncomfortable truth." The prophetic scripture readings of last quarter also reflected that role. Indeed, the mainline Protestant church seems particularly focused on just that understanding of prophets. That is an important, maybe even the most important, role of prophets: speaking truth to power. Elijah serves as the prototype. Even Jesus's ministry, to an extent, follows that concept. I believe that Protestant churches focus on that aspect of prophesy almost exclusively, because traditionally in the United States, the Protestant Church has been the church of those in power. Pastors have been preaching to the lawyers, the politicians, the corporate executives and managers, the government administrators, the teachers, and others who occupy positions of power or influence in our society. We do need to be conscious of our roles, and heed the message of Jesus, and the prophets, to be fair, equitable, just, and kindly in our dealings with all of God's people.

But there is another role that is also important: the promise of God's care and healing in the future, especially to those who are oppressed. The first mention of a prophet in the whole Bible is Miriam, Exodus 15: 20-21. (This passage is believed to be one of the oldest in the Bible, predating the Song of Moses earlier in Chapter 15.) Miriam sees in the destruction of the pursuing Egyptian army in the Red Sea,

the saving grace of God for his people. It is a message of God's caring, his acting on that caring, and an implication that he will continue to care for the Israelites in the future.

Consider the first two words in Handel's Messiah: "Comfort ye!" It is drawn from Isaiah 40, the first words of "Isaiah of the Exile." Verses 1-2a in our translation are:

**1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid**

....

These are not words speaking truth to power. They are words of hope, words of encouragement, words that are "Good News," In Greek, that means "Gospel!" Likewise, Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke and wrote words of hope to the refugees from Judah in exile, words that said, "God is still with you, and cares for you, and will redeem you." As Christians, that is our primary message. Yes, Jesus spoke truth to power. But that was not his primary calling. As with so many of the prophets, his words to those in power were unheard by the powerful. It was his "Good News," lived out and vindicated in his Resurrection, that has carried the Church even to our day, and is the distinguishing grace of Christianity.

John the Baptist is considered by Christians as "Elijah" as prophesied by the prophet Malachi in Malachi 4:5. Elijah is to precede the Messiah when "the great and terrible day of the LORD comes." As Rev. Zanicky recently discussed, the Christian Old Testament puts most of the books of prophesy last, so placing this reference to the coming of the Messiah is at the very end. It says: "Wait for it! Turn the page to the New Testament!" In contrast, the Jewish Bible, which includes the same books, places II Chronicles last, ending with Cyrus the Great of Persia's proclamation for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

Returning to Matthew 11, John the Baptist is in prison. He is limited in what he, himself, can hear and see. But we see that his disciples remain in communication with him. In fact, John the Baptist, in effect, founded a Church too. We read in Acts 19 1 ff.:

**1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No,**

**we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” 3 Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.”**

It seems that there were also disciples of John, not only in Judea but also spreading through the gentile world, baptizing as John did in the Jordan, with water. (This would have been before the siege destruction of Jerusalem.) There remains even today a secretive sect that primarily reveres John the Baptist, called the “Mandaeans,” or sometimes “Sabians,” that until the recent wars existed primarily in southern Iraq. They have mostly fled or been expelled in the continuing religious and ethnic purge of Moslem lands.

John is wondering about Jesus. Was he wrong in thinking Jesus was the Messiah? Jesus says, “Go and tell John what you hear and see ...” Or perhaps, his disciples doubt, and he tells them, “go and see for yourselves.” Perhaps, after John’s prophecies of coming destruction on the great and terrible day of the LORD, Jesus’s words on God’s love seemed inconsistent. What Jesus is doing fulfills the prophecies, the prophecies of hope, not destruction. What he is doing is a message of “good news” for those who will receive it.

Verse 6 needs some explaining. Jesus has just described what John’s messengers see and hear about him. “And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” A more literal translation of “he who takes no offense at me” would be “he who is not scandalized.” The root word means “lead into sin” or “cause someone to lose his faith.” In a effect, Jesus is saying that “It is not necessary for John to understand and acknowledge the full meaning of these events; I shall be content if he does not join my opponents in condemning my ministry. Anyone who looks on this work with friendly eyes is blessed.” (*Interpreter’s Bible*, Sherman E. Johnson, “Exegesis on Matthew,” vol. 7, p380.) I found this explanation very helpful. Jesus admires John the Baptist greatly. Verses 7 – 15 make that very clear. But in the midst of Jesus’s praise for John, we have the puzzle that is verse 11:

**11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**

This gives us problems because we think of “greatest” and “least” as a valuation of one’s worth or achievements. Yet, Jesus also says, “The last shall be first and the first last.” later in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 19:30). How can John be “least” in the Kingdom of Heaven?

I think it helps to consider that Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom of Heaven being present in the present. Those who hear and listen to and act on Jesus's message, and by that door enter the Kingdom of Heaven, live lives in the present blessed by it. John, in prison, had never had that opportunity. He was a great man, but he simply could not, at that time, be where Jesus's disciples were. Even some of John's disciples either rejected, or simply did not take the opportunity, to receive Jesus's message. They continued to preach and perform the baptism of John, as we saw in Acts. Just as other Jews of Jesus's day did not accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and missed the benefit of being "greatest" in that Kingdom.

It is not about standings in the world to come, where the difference between a penitent and an archbishop will not matter, and the artifice of social standing is erased: we will all be Children of God. Consider this: Moses, the receiver of the Ten Commandments, and the leader of the Exodus, did not live to enter the Promised Land. Joshua did. Joshua was blessed by seeing God's plan fulfilled in his lifetime, a blessing Moses was denied. Was Joshua greater than Moses? Perhaps in his being able to enter where Moses didn't. But in importance? No. Often it is that way – one person plays a key part and someone else gets the credit or enjoys the benefits. These are but transient matters in God's Kingdom.

The main point the lesson writer is trying to get to is that, as Jesus himself says, "Wisdom is justified by her deeds." John was an ascetic, living a life of poverty, challenging the powers that be, and preaching a message of repentance. Jesus ate at dinners with sinners, even turned water into wine on one occasion, and preached a gospel of not just repentance, but a new relationship to God. Jesus was at one point accused of being in league with Beelzebub (a name for the devil). Likewise, John was accused of having been possessed by a demon. Both exhibited the fruits of Wisdom. In similar manner, Elijah was always bringing bad news to the King of Israel. Elisha got along fine with the king on almost all occasions. Elijah, tradition has it, had lots of hair, no doubt rather wild looking. Elisha was mocked for being bald. Elijah was so poor he had to sponge off of a poor Phoenician widow in the midst of a famine. Elisha was so rich that he was plowing his fields with twelve teams of oxen when Elijah found him. Both were prophets of God, and served Him faithfully. Have you heard the expression, "Darned if you do; darned if you don't?" with respect to something? So many times, critics will be willing to jump on us for whatever path we may take. They are not important.

It is the fruits of what you do that matters. Wisdom is vindicated by those fruits. We can think of those fruits as deeds (the word Jesus uses in Matthew) and we can think of those fruits as the children of a personified Wisdom (as Luke has it in a parallel passage).

The last section of this lesson in our Bible Study booklet starts to talk about modern politics. I would be wary about assumed motives of others. Often times the powerful are much louder than anyone else. Amplified by today's media, they seek to twist the truth to make evil sound good (such as the "do what you want!" messages) and make good sound evil, or at least out of date ("that's old fashioned and prudish!"). We all must eventually face the great Judge, who will examine our deeds, and how we lived out our faith. All of the self-righteousness and self-justification we may have weaved for ourselves will be stripped away. At that point, we must throw ourselves on God's mercy received through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rev. Zanicky made his point about the different endings of the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament, mentioned earlier. But, don't stop there – how does the Christian Bible end? The end of the New Testament: It's the last two chapters of The Revelation of John. There is a new heaven and a new earth. Right at the end, Jesus calls out to us:

**“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” (Rev. 22: 17)**

This is the Good News of the Gospel of Christ. Wisdom and the Holy Spirit are urging us in that direction. The Father's creation manifests that the things of the Universe are far beyond our understanding, also demonstrating that we are not ourselves gods, and that we need to walk in humility with Him. His prophets call to us also with that message. Jesus taught us how to live, and showed us God's love lived out. The Holy Spirit and Christ Himself, in this passage from the Revelation, calls to us from a future in which we will share with Him glory as children of God.

*Prayer: Gracious God, as we turn to the Gospels, help us to make connections that offer deeper insight and wider viewpoints about the world of the early Christians and the world in which we live today. Amen.*