

A CLEARER VISION OF THE KINGDOM

Ben Janssen | **Matthew 11:1-15** | December 20, 2020

¹ 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.

Jesus loves you. It was love that moved him to enter into our world, to be the Savior of the world (Jn 3:16). It is because of his love that we’ve been delivered out of “the domain of darkness” and transferred into his kingdom (Col 1:13).

But do you know his love? Do you believe his love? Do you feel his love? Do you really? Many of us wonder often if he really does love us, don’t we?

We’re taking this Advent season to study the theme of the kingdom of God. And one reason we’re doing that is because understanding the kingdom of God will help us understand, believe, and even *feel* God’s love for us. Misunderstanding the kingdom of God is one of the reasons Christians often misunderstand the love of God.

We need a clearer vision of the kingdom. We need it because there are numerous difficulties we face in the kingdom. But we also have been given a clearer vision of the kingdom because of the privileged place we have in it. And with this clearer vision of the kingdom, we know the right way to fight for it.

DIFFICULTIES IN THE KINGDOM

Here in Matthew 11, we encounter John the Baptist again. We read in verse 2, “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” This is the first time we have heard from John the Baptist in Matthew’s Gospel since he baptized Jesus in chapter three. We are told in chapter four that he had been arrested, and now we find out that he is in prison. So he’s wondering, how does the kingdom of God square with his imprisonment? How can there be such difficulties in the kingdom of God?

John the Prisoner

The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that John was imprisoned in Herod's palace at Machaerus, a mountain fortress east of the Dead Sea.¹ We get more detail about the imprisonment in Matthew 14. Herod Antipas had an illicit relationship with Herodias, his half-brother's wife, and John had called him out for it (Matt 14:3-4). Herod arrested him and put him in prison. He wanted to execute him but the public regarded John as a prophet, so Herod hesitated to have him put to death (Matt 14:5).

Now while John was in prison, we are told, he heard stories and accounts of the ministry of Jesus. But for all the positive things he heard, something bothered him. Jesus may be doing some great things, but something is missing, something that makes John question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Messianic Expectation

John's question shows us that Jesus was not meeting his expectations about what the Messiah would look like. John had prophesied that one would come after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11). John spoke of the Messiah as one who would "clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn" while burning the chaff "with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:12). It's a metaphor for final judgment. John knew that when the king of God's kingdom arrives, he will bring judgment on the wicked.

But now here's John confined in prison under the authority of the ungodly and immoral Herod. And Jesus doesn't seem to be doing anything about it. So can't you identify with John? Jesus may be a great person doing some really great things, but is he really the one? Perhaps we should be looking for someone else who will make things right.

John the Baptist represents all who have ever become disillusioned with Jesus. John represents all of us who have ever thought, "Sure, Jesus is good. I like Jesus. I have no problem with Jesus. But Jesus is not enough. We need Jesus *and...*" After all, some two millennia after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there is still so much that is wrong with this world. There's still so much that goes wrong in my own life.

So it's natural for us to wonder at times, just like John was wondering as he languished in prison, "Is Jesus really the one?"

Sanctuary or Stumbling Block?

But to this question we really must hear the response that Jesus gives to John in verses 4-6.

First, Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." He speaks of six kinds of activities that Jesus has been doing, but he couches them in the language of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah sought to encourage the weary with the promise that God would one day come to their rescue.

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.” Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 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 (Isa 35:4-6).

Jesus wants John to take courage from the fact that Jesus is doing the very thing that Isaiah said would happen when God comes to save his people. So, no, you don’t need to look for another. Jesus is the Messiah. He is the king of the kingdom of God. His extraordinary life is the evidence that this is true.

But there’s a second element to the answer that Jesus gives to John. We read in verse 6, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” This may also be an allusion to the words of the prophet Isaiah, who said that in addition to being a “sanctuary” of protection, the Lord will also be “a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling” (Isa 8:14). And “many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken” (Isa 8:15). As the promised king of God’s kingdom, Jesus is for you either a sanctuary or a stumbling block. He cannot be both. It’s one or the other.

For John who finds himself in prison, and to all who find themselves downtrodden and looking for relief, Jesus offers himself freely. He will be a sanctuary for you in your storm. But there’s “an implicit challenge” in the offer, writes one commentator, the challenge “to reexamine one’s presuppositions about what the Messiah should be and do in the light of Jesus and his fulfillment of Scripture and to bring one’s understanding and faith into line with him.”² Yes, there’s a lot we do not yet understand about the kingdom of God, since it has not yet come in its fullness. But there is plenty we do know, and we need to live in light of what has already been revealed. That’s how you and I can keep from stumbling over Jesus and the good news of his kingdom.

OUR PLACE IN THE KINGDOM

So what do we know about the kingdom of God and how does this give clarity for how we should view our own lives? Starting with verse 7, Jesus takes the opportunity to address the crowds about the significance of John the Baptist in salvation history and in the kingdom of God. This is how we can see our own privileged place in the kingdom.

The Prophet in the Wilderness

Who was John the Baptist? What kind of a person was he? Jesus reminds the people that he was no “reed shaken by the wind.” The metaphor pictures cane grass swaying in the wind and signifies someone who is fickle or unstable.³ That certainly did not characterize John the Baptist, a man of great conviction and uncompromising commitment. Nor was he “a man dressed in soft clothing,” a reference to a refined, sophisticated man.⁴ John was instead a rough character. A real man’s man.

John was no pushover, and he was not the kind of person to try to win friends and influence enemies. No one went out to meet him because he was some self-help guru.

The reason people went to hear him was because they believed he was a prophet. And prophets were not common at all in first century Judaism. Many Jewish rabbis taught that no prophet had existed since the days of Malachi some 450 years before.⁵ So this is why people were fascinated by him. They believed that John spoke on behalf of God.

Jesus affirms the peoples' evaluation of John the Baptist. Indeed, he was a prophet, so the people ought to listen to what John had prophesied even if John was having a hard time believing his own message.

More Than a Prophet

Jesus goes on to say that John was not just a prophet, he was "more than a prophet." Now what kind of person is that?

In verse 10, Jesus says that John was the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Malachi 3:1. God promised to send "his messenger" who would prepare the way for his royal coming. So John was a prophet, arriving on the scene of human history and announcing the arrival of the Messiah. But he was also "more than a prophet" because he not only *spoke* prophetic words, he also *fulfilled* prophetic words, particularly the one that promised the coming of the immediate forerunner to the Messianic king.⁶

When *that* prophet arrives, the Old Testament prophets say, you better start paying attention because the King of Kings is not far behind.

So now that we know that John the Baptist was a prophet, indeed the immediate prophetic forerunner to the King, then we do not need to be hung up by John's own disillusionment with Jesus. I mean, if John the Baptist had his doubts about Jesus, you might start wondering how in the world you can still believe. When those we look up to as spiritual leaders start to question their faith, it can really put our own faith to the test. But it's not John we should be looking at any longer. As the last of the Old Testament prophets, we now know who they all were pointing to.

Who's Greater Than John the Baptist?

In fact, Jesus makes a rather startling statement in verse 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." D.A. Carson helpfully explains what Jesus means here.

[John] was the greatest of the prophets because he pointed most unambiguously to Jesus. Nevertheless even the least in the kingdom is greater yet because, living after the crucial revelatory and eschatological events have occurred, he or she points to Jesus still more unambiguously than John the Baptist.⁷

In other words, John's disillusionment with Jesus came about because of his own place in salvation history. Another commentator writes, "For all his crucial role as herald of the kingdom of heaven, John (together with all the prophets and godly people of the OT) belongs essentially to the old era, not the new."⁸ But you and I and every member of the church for the past 2000 years live in the

new era, what the Bible calls the “last days,” and have a much clearer picture of the kingdom of God than John or any of the old era believers ever had. They all had to look forward. We have the privilege of looking backward. So the disillusionment that John experienced need not plague us any more. We are in a much better position to understand the reality of the kingdom of God than John could ever understand.

FIGHTING FOR THE KINGDOM

But we still become discouraged, don't we? We still get disillusioned, right? We still cry and lament? We still suffer. We still wonder, “Why?” There's plenty we still do not know. We ask God, “How much longer?” But in the midst of such questions, we have a much clearer picture than John ever had. We know the kingdom has come because we know who the king is. And we also know that his kingdom is advancing. We see how it advances. So we know how to fight for it.

Violence in the Kingdom of God

Jesus tells us in verse 12, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” The verb “suffered violence” may also mean “is forcefully advancing” (NIV84/NLT), but the point is roughly the same. Even in just the few short years since the ministry of John the Baptist had begun, the kingdom of heaven is not a straight line of obvious victory for the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is, in these “last days,” marked by violence.⁹

But isn't that what we might expect? When one kingdom begins to threaten another kingdom, tensions escalate, skirmishes break out, war begins.

The Attacks of the Violent

The “violent” who war against the kingdom of God here in verse 12 is a general statement because the opposition comes in various kinds.¹⁰ The swords of men, literally or metaphorically speaking, are often brandished against the “push” of the kingdom of light. And that's because, as we've seen before, there is a cosmic clash that is happening behind it all.

The point is that while the kingdom of God comes quietly, in the form of a baby in a Bethlehem manger, it does not come peaceably, and the kingdom of darkness knows it. So the enemy of the kingdom will do everything he can to fight against it. The kingdom of God has not come to *make* peace with the world but to *bring* peace to the world by rooting out in every corner of the universe all opposition to the absolute reign of God. There can be no compromise with the powers of darkness. The kingdom of heaven comes to drive the forces of darkness out. That's why there is violence in the kingdom of God in these last days.

But what John the Baptist could not understand is why Jesus, if he is the king of the kingdom, seems to do nothing about it. Why does the darkness seem to win? That's the question we wrestle with, too, isn't it?

But Jesus gives us the answer. It's because the kingdom of God has come first as a gift that can be accepted or rejected. The kingdom has come with the power of persuasion rather than with the power of force.¹¹ Consequently, many people reject it, criticize it, and oppose it. They are like little children who complain rather than participating in the game being played (Matt 11:16-19).¹² They are never satisfied with the king or his kingdom. They'd rather sit out. And God let's them.

The Fight of Faith

To be sure, the day of judgment is coming, as Jesus says in verses 20-24. But his kingdom has already come, so you must not wait to receive the king and become a citizen of his kingdom. The coming of Jesus in the 1st century makes plain that the kingdom of God is no longer a feature of the future but a reality in the present. Not only *can* we enter it now, but we *must* do so if we want to be saved.¹³ We must join the fight of the kingdom of God.

But this is a kingdom that does not advance by the swords of men, as Jesus explained to Pilate: "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting" (Jn 18:36). This is a kingdom that does not need the powers of men to accomplish its goal. It does not need to control the kingdoms of men. It does not need to be privileged to make progress. For just as "Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, and come to wealth through giving all away," so "those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost."¹⁴

This is why Jesus said it is not easy to enter the kingdom of God. "For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction" while "the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life" (Matt 7:13-14). The way is hard because it requires us to fight against the easy path of trusting in ourselves.

But the way is also easy. It requires nothing from us. It is God's gracious will to make known the riches of his kingdom not to "the wise and understanding," but to "little children" (Matt 11:25). We do not advance the kingdom with our power and might, but with our simple, child-like faith. We wage war for the kingdom of God not by taking on more burdens but by laying them all down and taking up Christ.

At the end of this chapter, Jesus invites all who are burdened down to come to him and find rest, to take up his yoke and to learn from him. That's where our souls can find rest (Matt 11:28-29).

So let us come to him now, let us come by faith. We get a clearer vision of the kingdom only by getting closer to the king, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* [18:116-19](#).

² D.A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), [262](#).

³ J. Eckert, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (EDNT), ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), [2:240](#).

⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), [426-27](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*, [427](#), note 29.

⁶ Carson, "Matthew," [263-64](#).

⁷ *Ibid.*, [265](#).

⁸ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, [429](#).

⁹ *Ibid.*, [429](#).

¹⁰ Carson, "Matthew," [267](#).

¹¹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), [55](#).

¹² Carson, "Matthew," [270](#).

¹³ Gerald Bray, "The Kingdom and Eschatology," in *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [210](#).

¹⁴ See [Foundation Documents](#), The Gospel Coalition, available at www.gospelcoalition.org.