

*7As 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, 17and 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."*

There's a drought in California. Millions of dollars worth of fruit trees that were a year out from returning their owners investments with produce to sell, are dying because there simply is no water to keep them alive.

I listened to one story, in Fairfield, there's a negro colony. Little shanties. The left overs of negroes who came to California from the deep south during the depression. Most of them were absorbed into the city life of California after WWII, but a few, wanted to live quietly in a

rural setting and they stayed in their shacks in Fairfield. Each had a well a few hundred feet deep. Not fancy. Adequate.

Until an almond tree project went in across the highway with deep wells. All the shallow wells went dry this year. That story is repeated in many places in California. It's a serious drought.

The Bible talks about a different kind of drought. A famine. People staggering from North to East because of lack. But it's a different kind of drought that has caused famine conditions.

The Word of the Lord through the prophet Amos: 8: 11 - 13

*11 "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord GOD,  
"When I will send a famine on the land,  
Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water,  
But rather for hearing the words of the LORD.*

*12 "People will stagger from sea to sea  
And from the north even to the east;  
They will go to and fro to seek the word of the LORD,  
But they will not find it.*

*13 "In that day the beautiful virgins  
And the young men will faint from thirst.*

I believe this is one of those prophecies that has multiple levels of fulfillment. But what we want to see and consider for our purposes this morning is that after Malachi, God went silent. Deafeningly silent.

Israel had had an unbroken line of prophets throughout their history. It was their signature. A God who speaks. It was the real deal. A man selected by God telling the people, "Thus saith the Lord". It was a connection. Even if what he said was terrifying. Israel always had that connection. And then, after Malachi, silence. Four hundred years of silence. Disquieting silence.

John the baptist was the prophet that broke that silence. And it did not go un-noticed.

Beginning with the angel who visited his father, Zacharias, there must have been an aura about John. Full of the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.

We don't know anything else about him after that until he appears at the Jordan river baptizing.

He created a sensation in Israel. A man dressed like Elijah who lived in the open spaces and dressed in rough hewn attire. Eating wild honey and insects. Finally, a prophetic voice in Israel after 400 years of silence. The whole nation flocked to him.

So Jesus question here is appropriate. Why did the nation go to "see" John? What is it that draws a crowd. Something has to be happening in order for 200,000 people to leave home and work and comfort and go out to see John. What is the rock star appeal that caused people to go down to the Jordan river and hear a man preach?

What causes that? Whatever it is, I need some, right? I can barely get 25 of you together. And I'm in the desert. And I wear funny clothes. Why did Israel go out to "see" John. And I stress "see". Because that's how Jesus poses the question. What did you go out to see. John was an event. Obviously a rock star.

Did you go out to see Casper Milquetoast? Funny clothes? No. People won't walk across the street to see that. Well, what then?

And the answer is that people will flock to see God at work. Evidence of deity. Spiritual power, if you will. Especially God's chosen people. After a 400 year hiatus. You bet they went to see John.

Why is this important to Jesus? Why is it important to us?? Why does He take the time to shore up John in the confidence of these hearers?

Turn with me to Matthew 21. We're in the temple grounds just a day or so away from the crucifixion.

*23When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" 24Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25"The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?'... 26"“But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.” 27And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.*

When Jesus says *The baptism of John* here, He's talking about His baptism where heaven was opened and the spirit descended on Him. Was that real, or phony? He's talking about a national repentance that marked the beginning of a new work of God in their midst. Messiah has come.

There's no dismissive answer to that. The people regard John as a prophet. Indeed THE prophet, after 400 years. That event at the river Jordan is an important credential, from God, that Jesus is who He says He is. There were hundreds of witnesses. Thousands.

If the people begin to doubt John, they might likewise doubt Jesus. If the credential is bad, maybe the article is not what it purports to be also.

So, with that in mind, let's look at these verses.

*7As 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?*

What is a reed shaken by the wind? A double minded man.

James 1:6 comes to mind;

*But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. A wishy*

washy faith. Blown this way and that way by every wind. Paul talks about . . . *children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming*; in Ephesians 4:14

Politicians. This group today, lean this way, that group tomorrow, lean that way. You get it. Jesus says, is that what you went out to see?

It's a rhetorical question. Of course not. John is a lion of a man. They probably went out to see someone with enough backbone to stand up against the phony religious leaders. It was worth the trip to watch him call the scribes and pharisees a brood of vipers.

8*“But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces!*

Don Carson says this is Jesus taking a swipe at Herod, who had thrown John in prison. That's who has soft clothes. Wicked rulers.

You didn't go out to the Jordan to see the latest styles in dress and decor. You went out to see the man dressed as if he were Elijah. Camels hair and a leather belt. A prophets attire of old.

Vs. 9 *“But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.*

Ever notice, God doesn't put gold where it's easy to get?

It's an arduous walk from Jerusalem down down down to the Jordan river. Not something done in an afternoon at the spur of the moment. From Mark 1;

5*And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.*

The people streamed out of every nook and cranny of Judea to go and

see this prophet. John. Who was baptising people as a sign of their repentance from their sin.

They came from everywhere to witness God at work. Spiritual power in a barren land. It was something to see. Something to witness. It had been 400 years! They walked for miles to get a little piece of that. A man of God, mighty in spiritual force. A true prophet! Jesus reminds them of that. He reaffirms everything they witnessed and experienced from John.

*9“But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.*

How can you be more than a prophet?

He's the prophet that was foretold in prophecy. He was THE prophet. The messenger that paved the way for the Promised One.

He played a unique role in redemptive history. He is the one who identifies and announces the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. 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.’*

In ancient times, if a king was going to travel, a band of people would go ahead of him to accomplish several things. The road would be made ready for a king to pass over it. The towns would be made ready. Then someone would go ahead and announce the King's arrival so that the people would be prepared to receive him.

That was what John did for God's annointed one. That was his role. And he was foretold of in Malachi's prophecy. John was that person. He fulfilled that requirement. And not less than God the father joined him in announcing His Son. Jesus.

This is Matthews purpose here. A mighty King. Make ready his paths.

Get the people ready to receive their King when he arrives. How did they receive Him? That's what Matthew wants to talk about in these 2 chapters. John was the one who prepared the way for the King!

What would happen in an ancient land if a small army goes ahead and prepares the way, widens the road and makes it smooth, cleans up the city, prepares the way. Emissaries go to the city first to prepare the people to meet their king. He rides into town, and no one shows up. No one can be bothered to break the daily rhythm for an afternoon to go see a king. Nothing.

That's what Matthew is exploring here.

Now Jesus says some things that are difficult for us. These give the commentators fits. But . . . fools rush in, right. So I'm going to tell you what I think they mean.

*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.*

Among those born of women is a hebraism that means everyone. Everyone that got here by ordinary means. Jesus, not included. He was not born by ordinary means. His Father is God and his mother was a virgin. So we'll count Him out. But everybody else; John is the pinnacle. No ordinary person born of a man and a woman is greater than John.

Yet the least in the kingdom is greater than John.

He's not saying John isn't in the kingdom. He's dividing humanity into 2 groups. Born of the flesh. Born of God.

Born of the flesh, John was the pinnacle. No one in the entire fallen human race was greater than John. But, the least of those who has been re-born, spiritually quickened from the dead, by God, because He's the only one who can do that, the least of that group is greater than the pinnacle of the normal fallen human race group.

That was a small group at this point. The disciples. Other followers who had left this world behind to follow Jesus at any cost. Those folks, those who are willing to give up everything in order to have Jesus, the least of those is greater than the pinnacle of ordinary fallen men.

*Vs.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.*

OK, you dispensationalists. Get out your pencils. Jesus is going to say something important. In fact He's going to say several things that are important right here.

I'm going to flip flop here for a minute and consider verse 13 first, then go back and talk about verse 12.

*13 "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.*

Jesus is saying John was the end of the line, and the beginning of the new. John was the last old testament figure.

All the prophets and the law, is another hebraism. It means the whole Bible up to that point. The Law and the Prophets is the whole thing. The written word of God. You can draw a line at John. Old dispensation. New dispensation. Old Covenant. New Covenant. John is the dividing line. He's the last of the old and the first of the new.

Why? Well, that's obvious. He announces Jesus, and everything changes. IN the old covenant, God deals with a nation, preparing the way for the messiah to come. With the promised messiah, God will deal with the nations. And He will deal with sin.

But, and here's Matthew's point, if you were sitting there listening to Jesus that day, you'd be saying, I don't see any change. John's doubts were because he didn't see any change. Nothing earth shattering happened after John's announcement. Everything is as it always was.



Or is it? What about the realities we can't see. The spiritual world around us, unseen?

What happened in that world when Jesus showed up and John baptized Him and He began to say, The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The authority of God to reign instead of and in place of Satan, on earth, is at hand. Did that effect a change.

And now we'll go to verse 12. *"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force."*

What's the time frame here. From John the baptist, until now. That's the period of time, perhaps a year, of Jesus public ministry after John and the Father in heaven and the Holy Spirit all combined and announced that Jesus was the Holy One of God.

OK, so we've narrowed down the time frame. And what Jesus is saying is that violent men do not want this Kingdom. The reign of God. On earth. Violent men are going to do anything they can to stop this kingdom. We do not want this man to reign over us. Lk. 19:14 *But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'*

Why do you think John is in prison? Why do you think the Sanhedrin, the 70 elders of Israel are plotting Jesus death. Already! Let me tell you why. Because of the spiritual forces of wickedness. Listen to Paul in Eph. 6:12 *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

There is a great unseen battle going on to limit and destroy the authority to reign of God. The Kingdom of God. We are at war on this planet. Satan will do anything to stop the spread and the growth of the Kingdom of God.

Throw John in prison. Make him doubt. Get him all confused. Get the leaders of Israel all spun up and furious. Make them think Jesus is a

threat to their rule. Their control. And He is! They're on the wrong side of this battle. The battle lines are drawn and they've thrown in with Satan. They are dupes. Most people don't even know they're fighting a war for Satan and the demons.

Violent men do not want Jesus to reign. They are taking that rule back and preventing it, to the death. It began with John. That in itself makes him incredibly significant.

And then Jesus says; *“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.*

Here's a wake up call, Israel. Go back and read Malachi again. We have entered into that era. On God's time clock of history, we have passed this point. Elijah came and did his best to pave the way for the messiah of Israel.

He's in prison about to die and you're plotting the death of the very promised messiah. *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

How's that working out for Him? The Kingdom is here. John announced it. How's that being received. How's that playing?

The King arrived. Nobody cares. Mostly. And the ones who have paid enough attention to form an opinion, want Him to go away. Why? What are their reasons? The King has come and no can be bothered to walk across the street to see Him. Why?

*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, 17and 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.”*

Israel doesn't want any of it. And they've got all kinds of reasons why.

Just listen to them.

John's a nut case. Nobody goes out and dresses in camel hair and eats bugs unless they're demon possessed.

And this Jesus. What good is He? He pals around with sluts and has taken up friendship with traitors. He eats too much and He drinks too much. All He wants to do is party with his slutty pals.

Reasons, reasons, reasons. John's too austere. Jesus is too loopy goosey.

Nothing's changed folks. I can knock on every door on my street and hear these same reasons all over again. Too much this and not enough that. Bunch of hypocrites. Empty heads. Rediculous people do that.

You don't dance to *our* tune. We don't like *your* tune.

Jesus illustration is apt. If you've raised kids you've seen them all get together and play a game where they make up the rules as they go. The dominant kids always seem to win every game.

The picture is of children in the agoura. The market place in the center of town. Their parents are there trying to sell their goods or buy others. It's the social gathering of the village. And the kids are there too. There's no child care. They hang around the agoura and play with the other kids.

And they've got a couple of games. The 2 big events in Israel are weddings, and funerals. And like all kids that mimmick the adults, these kids are playing wedding and they're playing funeral.

And one group of kids is playing a flute gayly. Come and play wedding with us. And the other group of kids is playing funeral. They're wailing and howling like the hired funeral mourners. Having a great time. Driving their parents nuts. Wailing and crying. And the other ones are playing their flute.

And the one group of kids says; We played the flute but you wouldn't join our game. And the other group of kids says we were having too much fun playing funeral and you wouldn't join us. That's what kids do. I know of what I speak. I'm a dad.

And Jesus says when John came and was austere, you were in the mood to play wedding, and when I came celebrating life and healing you and loving you, you were in the mood to play funeral.

No matter what the Kingdom of God is doing, the kingdom of Satan is in the mood to play the other game.

Talking to a guy out at work. Point blank ask him, do you have any beliefs. Oh, I'm very spiritual. Very spiritual. But I don't buy into anything organised. I'm just very spiritual.

That's my invitation to not trespass any further into his spirituality. I let him know that I'm a Bible expositor and preach every Sunday as a hopeful lead into a further discussion some time. I don't push. He's got all the same reasons these folks did why Jesus doesn't have any weight in spirituality.

And that's how it goes. No one needs Jesus. He's an importance 3 on a scale of 100. These folks who were there that day, and the folks now. Nothing's changed.

Reasons, reasons, reasons. How's that going to go down on judgement day. John had a demon. Jesus was a drunk and a glutton. A party guy. He hung out with sleezy folks. Low lifes and radicals.

How's that going to work out for you on judgement day. Think that's going to fly. Think that will sway God's wrath.

He sent His son to die in your place, but you had to paint the house? And then it was something else, and then it was this and then it was that. And anyways, the folks there are weird. Rediculous. Or hypocrites. Either they're weirdo's or hypocrites.

Maybe that'll be a great argument on judgement day. I kinda don't think so though. The God that spoke the universe into existence came and died for you, but you were too busy to give Him a second thought. But you had a whole bunch of good reasons.

*"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, 17and 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."*

What does that last part mean. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds?

It means, all else aside, really, you're going to go with the scribes and pharisees miracles, instead of the ones Jesus is doing? But, they didn't do any. And He has. All else aside, that one thing, if everything else got taken off the table, just the miracles alone should be enough to make you pay any price, do any thing, leave everything else behind, and follow Him. The works alone.

I believe it means, in view of the gravity of who this is and what He's done, you need to stop in your tracks, skid to a halt, and fall on your face in repentance to a God you've maligned and give the rest of your days to Him for His glory and honor.

That would be the wise thing to do. Not think up more stupid excuses to ignore Him and go about your business.

This life is 5 minutes long. After that; eternity.

The King got to town. Everything was prepared ahead of time. Nobody came. They don't care. That should send a chill down your spine.

What would happen to a city that treated a King like that? Some of you are already reading ahead. We'll pick it up next week, and begin with

that question. What happens when the King spends 2000 years letting you know He's coming to town, sends His messenger to get things ready, and the whole city shuns Him?

Look around you this morning. 25 or 30 faithful folks. Out of what? What's the population of this town? 1800? 2500? So 1% can be bothered to honor the King of Kings!?

I hope you're praying for a harvest. And workers. Like Jesus told us to do. Sheesh, if it was 3%, we'd have to go find a bigger room.