

Matthew's Gospel - chapter 11

Jesus and John

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Welcome to the recommencement of our talks on Matthew's Gospel. Scriptures quoted will be from the English Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

We will look at chapter 11 under the following six headings.

- Encouragement for John the Baptist, vv.1-6.
- The Lord recognises John's work, vv.7-15.
- Unresponsiveness of the hearers, vv.16-19.
- The cities that lacked response, vv.20-24.
- The Lord's prayer, vv.25-27
- The Lord's appeal, vv.28-30.

1.Encouragement for John the Baptist, vv.1-6.

Let us read these verses.

"When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. 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?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind received 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me"" (Matthew 11:1-6).

It is encouraging to see in chapter 10 the Lord Jesus preparing the twelve disciples to go out and preach. As we commence looking at chapter 11 the Lord has finished giving instructions to the disciples and we can assume that in obedience they went forth to carry out their commission. This is immediately followed by the Lord going out to the cities of His disciples to also teach and preach. The disciples were to preach, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." This was followed by the Lord who was probably announcing that "The King is here." From verse 2 we find that John the Baptist was in prison so the disciples themselves were taking John's place by becoming heralds for the Lord Jesus.

As we have just said, John was in prison but that did not stop him receiving news about what Jesus was doing. John might not have expected to be cast into prison but rather go into the kingdom with the Messiah. Therefore, John's incarceration was all the more puzzling when he heard what Jesus was doing. This raised a very serious question in his mind. Determined to find

the answer to his problem he sent two of his own disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" The answer Jesus gave was not a simple 'yes.' Jesus said, "Tell John what you hear and see." So in verse 5 we have a wonderful summary of the activities of the Lord Jesus,

"The blind received 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."

Isaiah 35 and 61 foretell most of these events by speaking prophetically of the Messiah and John would have been well acquainted with these Old Testament Scriptures. It must have been a wonderful time for John's disciples to be with Jesus and experience first-hand the mighty works of a Saviour God. Closing this section with verse 6 the Lord states,

"And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

John's expectation (and probably the majority of the nation of Israel) meant he looked for a Messiah who would deliver them from their enemies and return the nation to the glory days of king David and king Solomon. But this was not in the purposes of God. First there needed to be a suffering Saviour and later a reigning Saviour. John was soon to become the last godly person to be martyred prior to the Lord's crucifixion. The church period had only just begun when Stephen was martyred in Acts 7. Faithfulness to the Lord Jesus might lead to martyrdom, the ultimate price to be paid in a world controlled by Satan.

The Lord will reign in a coming day. As the hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674 -1748) states in one of his hymns.

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

But for now believers will find the pathway of life one of suffering as we look forward to the Lord's coming and eventual reign over this whole earth.

2.The Lord recognises John's work, vv.7-15.

Let us read these verses.

"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? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' 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. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:7-15).

As the two disciples returned to John, the Lord Jesus turned and spoke to the crowd about him. What a testimony about John who was steadfast in his calling, and he lived a life of separation. John was the answer to the early verses in Isaiah 40. He came to prepare the people for the coming Messiah. John's father, Zechariah prophesied about his son when he was born.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76).

Zechariah spoke as one filled with the Holy Spirit. However, the Lord pointed out that John's clothing was that of a prophet, and that he lived an austere life in the desert. No life of ease or grandeur for John. The Lord even spoke of John as the greatest of prophets but in contrast those of the kingdom of heaven were greater than John. John had his place at the close of the Old Testament dispensation whereas Jesus was bringing that which was new, the kingdom of heaven. However, the King was being rejected except by a few.

Verse 12 often causes some difficulty, but against the background of the Lord being largely rejected and those of prominence in the nation hostile to the Saviour, it required forcefulness on behalf of those who would believe to enter the kingdom. John 9, about the blind man made to see, is a good example of one who was determined to believe Jesus rather than the religious leaders of the day. He was, by the Spirit's power, being forceful in his attachment to Christ in order to have his place in the kingdom of heaven. He was entering in by the narrow gate. Finally, the Lord gave praise to John by saying that he was Elijah who was prophesied to come. John had come in the same power and spirit which will be fully realised in a coming day. Whether it was the preaching of John who proclaimed the coming of Jesus, or the Lord's own works and teaching, there was opposition. The opposition stirred up by Satan to stop people believing the message of Salvation. What is required nowadays is simple faith in a risen Saviour and it starts when we acknowledge our sinfulness and see in Christ the only hope of eternal blessing.

For the Christian today he can say using the words of E Mote's (1834) hymn.

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesu's blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesu's name.

On Christ, the Solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

3.Unresponsiveness of the hearers, vv.16-19.

Let us read these verses.

“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Matthew 11:16-19).

The Lord here begins to talk about the current generation of unbelieving Jews by illustrating what they were like. They had the fickleness of children, who did not respond to each other to join in activities. The Lord then likens that to what the people said about John, that he was controlled by an evil spirit, because he did not involve himself in feasting. As to the Lord Jesus, who often

accepted invitations to eat with people, they said that he was a glutton and a drunkard. Neither accusation was true regarding John nor the Lord.

John was filled with the Holy Spirit as we are told in Luke 1:15. As regards the Lord Jesus He is God, 'The Son of the 'Most High', Luke 1:32. The actions of both John and the Lord are summarised by the Lord saying, "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." The intention of John was to reach sinners so that they might be ready when the Lord Jesus came. The Lord likewise was here to reach sinners to bring them into the blessing of sins forgiven. The majority of people then, and it holds true today, was that they had no appreciation of the Lord Jesus, it is only as we know Him as Saviour that we can understand who He is. He never did anything out of place that would dishonour His Father. He ever pleased His God and Father in His pathway through this world which included going to the cross. The challenge for Christians today is to reach out to lost souls to bring them into the blessing of Salvation.

As Dr Heyham Wreford (1850 - 1934) states in one of his hymns.

Christ is the Saviour of sinners,
Christ is the Saviour for me;
Long I was chained in sin's darkness,
Now by His grace I am free.

Saviour of sinners,
Saviour of sinners like me,
Shedding His blood for my ransom,
This is the Saviour for me.

4.The cities that lacked response, vv.20-24.

Let us read these verses.

"Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you"" (Matthew 11:20-24).

Here the Lord Jesus turns to three cities to declare that their fate will be worse than some of the wicked cities found referenced in the Old Testament. The Lord groups Chorazin and Bethsaida together and compares them with Tyre and Sidon. We are not told what those mighty works done in Chorazin were and only of the giving of sight to a blind man in Bethsaida, yet the Lord speaks of mighty works done in both. We know from John 21:25 that everything the Lord Jesus did has not been recorded.

"Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21.25).

In the days of king David and king Solomon, Tyre was friendly towards Israel and willing to provide the material useful for the building of royal houses and the Temple; and also supplying craftsmen

to undertake the work connected with the temple. However, in later years the city became an adversary of Israel. This is recorded in Psalm 83 where Asaph makes mention of the conspiracy of many nations against Israel.

In the Gospels the Lord visited the area of Tyre and Sidon and multitudes came out of that region to receive healing from the hand of the Saviour. We also have the remarkable account of the Syrophenician woman from this same area, who sought healing for her daughter. We read about this in Mark 7:24-30.

“And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone” (Mark 7:24-30).

Although we do not read of faith, we do see the words and persistence of faith of this mother for her daughter. She was not going to leave until she had the Lord’s blessing and assurance that her daughter would be healed.

It reminds me of a verse in that well known hymn, “What a Friend we have in Jesus” by J.M. Scriven (1819 - 86).

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
Take it to the Lord in prayer,
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness:
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

No matter what the Lord said, this woman was not discouraged, she persisted in her petitions for her daughter.

Capernaum was different to Tyre and Sidon in that it became the residence of the Lord upon Him leaving Nazareth. The Lord taught the people and did works of healing there, the paralytic and the centurion’s servant are two recorded incidents which highlighted faith. It is remarkable that these and no doubt many other mighty works done in this city would have caused Sodom to remain if they had been done in it and not destroyed as we find in Genesis 19. What we have recorded in the Scriptures about the work of the Saviour shows us the seriousness of not taking heed to the witness and testimony of His works and words. What has been documented is intended to challenge the hearts and minds of all people that Jesus is the Son of God. He needs to be listened to and taken account of because it is the only way of blessing. Blessing that starts with the forgiveness of sins and culminates in the secure dwelling place of heaven. Ignoring the Saviour leaves a person in the precarious position of coming under the judgment of a holy God and ending up in the place of the eternally lost who suffer forever for their sins.

5.The Lord's prayer, vv.25-27.

Let us read these verses.

“At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:25-27).

In these verses the Lord prays to His Father ascribing to Him the title, “Lord of heaven and earth.” The Lord Jesus acknowledges the Father’s supreme authority in heaven and on earth. No matter what Satan attempts to do, this authority belongs to the Father. In a similar way no matter what mankind attempts to do, authority still belongs to the Father. Why does the Lord thank the Father? No doubt it is in connection with both His teaching and His works of grace. Although the people flocked to hear the Lord speaking the impact seems to be limited to only a few responding to Him. In a similar way His amazing works of grace, whether feeding or healing, had a limited impact upon the crowds. So, the Lord could say that the real message was hidden from the wise and understanding. But those described as little children in their simplicity accepted what the Lord was doing and saying. We find that the Lord acknowledges that this was the gracious will of the Father.

Then in verse 27 the Lord states that the Father has handed all things to the Son showing the equality that exists between the Father and the Son. Then we have this wonderful statement concerning the essential understanding of these two divine persons. It is only the Father who fully understands the Son for who He is. Also, the Son is the only One who fully appreciates the Father, but this is expanded to others who believe on the Son, to them He makes the Father known.

6.The Lord's appeal, vv.28-30.

Let us read the last three verses of our chapter.

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

We now come to the close of our chapter. Verse 28 can be looked at as an appeal and verses 29-30 as an answer to those who respond to that appeal. So, in verse 28 there is a universal invitation to all people to come to the Lord Jesus. It is to those who are labouring and not getting anywhere. Also, to those who are feeling the weight of their burdens and have no idea how to lift them off their shoulders. Do you feel down, distressed, nothing is going right, and no matter what you try, nothing helps? The Lord says, “Come to me ... and I will give you rest.”

Sin can make a person feel like this when they are awakened to the reality that they are a sinner. The invitation “Come to me” is the Saviour saying, “I am your solution, trust me with all you heart and receive the forgiveness of sins and be blessed for all time and eternity.”

Additionally, believer and non-believer can feel the burden of the circumstances of life and become depressed. For believers they need to re-focus upon the Lord who alone can give rest and assurance in the midst of life’s circumstances and bring back into their lives the calmness of rest provided by the Saviour. For unbelievers they must start by acknowledging their sin and trust the Saviour for salvation.

Verse 29 starts with sharing, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” We don’t see this much on farms today, but at one time a yoke was used to help animals work together; to plough, haul heavy loads and other things. When the Lord says, “Learn from me” it again is illustrated in the old farming life when younger untrained animals were yoked to a more experienced animal to teach the younger what to do. This is what the Lord is saying to believers. “Stay close to me and learn how to live in this chaotic, sin saturated, world.” For the Lord is “gentle and lowly in heart” and He would have His people to be of the same character. It is with this type of attitude we can draw near to burdened sinners of this world and minister the Gospel of God’s grace to broken and burdened hearts.

So, as yoked to the Lord we will find rest for our souls, the burdens of life will seem easier when shared with Jesus. The Lord follows this by saying “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” The Lord takes the strain and the burden that is afflicting us and makes it easy and light. Notice the Lord does not remove the burdens but makes them much more bearable.

[Let us close with a verse of a hymn by Katherine A.N. Kelly \(1869 – 1942\).](#)

Give me a sight, O Saviour,
Of Thy wondrous love to me,
Of the love that brought Thee down to earth,
To die on Calvary.

Oh, make me understand it,
Help me to take it in,
What it meant to Thee, the Holy One,
To bear away my sin.

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