

“Heeding Wholly”

Lesson Text: Matthew 11:7-15, 20-24 **Background Scripture:** Matthew 11

Devotional Reading: Matthew 10:31-42

Matthew 11:7-15, 20-24 (NIV)

⁷As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence,^[d] and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵Whoever has ears, let them hear.

²⁰Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades.^[e] For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

TODAYS’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To summarize Jesus’ description of John the Baptist.
- **Biblical Principal:** To explain why the generation that Jesus criticized displayed a lack of wisdom in its evaluation of both him and John the Baptist.
- **Daily Application:** To recruit an accountability partner to ensure that hearing results in heeding.

INTRODUCTION

Celebrity Preachers

If there ever was a “celebrity preacher,” George Whitefield (1714–1770) was him. An English preacher who toured America in the eighteenth century, Whitefield’s strong voice allowed him to address crowds of thousands with his emotionally charged and highly effective sermons. Whitefield contributed to the religious revival known as the Great Awakening, which was a significant influence on the history of the United States.

Today, celebrity preachers have tools of which Whitefield would never have dreamed; television, smartphones, and the Internet allow the preachers’ messages to be seen and heard throughout the world. Such preachers are known to construct enormous buildings that can seat thousands at a

time. Televangelists receive contributions to support their ministries and (sometimes) lavish lifestyles.

Both Jesus and John the Baptist were celebrity preachers in their day. But they were very different from the high-profile televangelists we see today! Today's lesson will explore why.

LESSON CONTEXT

The significance of John *the Baptist* is hinted at in the fact that his name is mentioned about 90 times across the four Gospels and the book of Acts. It's important to clarify that he is not the same as John *the Apostle*, who's mentioned about half as often in the New Testament. The New Testament mentions another man by the name of John (also known as "Mark") in Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37. "John" was a popular name!

John the Baptist was born in Judaea (Luke 1:65). His father, Zacharias, was of a priestly family (thus of the tribe of Levi). His mother was Elisabeth, a relative of Mary (her cousin, 1:35–36), so John and Jesus were related through their mothers. John spent a great deal of time in the wilderness while young (1:80).

John preached repentance "for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). His baptizing of the multitudes resulted in his identifying title. In the Gospels, he is called "John the Baptist" by both his supporters and adversaries (Matthew 3:1; 14:2; etc.).

John contributed to the ministry of Jesus in three important ways. First, he was in one sense "the Elijah who was to come" (Matthew 11:14; compare Malachi 4:5–6; Matthew 17:10–13; contrast John 1:21). In this regard, John was understood to assume the role of Elijah as a prophetic voice that prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah (Luke 1:17; John 1:23).

Second, John's baptizing of Jesus in the Jordan River was "to fulfil all righteousness"—it was the right thing to do in God's plan, confirmed by "the Spirit of God" and "a voice from heaven" (Matthew 3:13–17). Third was John's prophetic identification of Jesus as "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Today's lesson examines a time after John's ministry as a wilderness preacher had ended. He had run afoul of the local ruler, Herod Antipas, and ended up in prison. This turn of events resulted in doubts for John, which he attempted to resolve by sending two of his disciples to Jesus to determine whether or not Jesus was the Messiah (Matthew 11:1–3). Jesus responded by pointing to the evidence of the miracles (11:4–6). Today's lesson text picks up after Jesus' response to John's disciples (Luke 7:24–28 is a partial parallel).

John, the Messenger: Matthew 11:7-15

Having just received Jesus' answer to their query about His identity (Matthew 11:2-6, see Lesson Context), John's disciples departed to relay that response to John the Baptist, who was in prison (v. 2). As they left, Jesus turned the tables on the crowd to inquire about John's identity. Why did so many people leave their comfortable homes to make an uncomfortable, inconvenient trip out into the wilderness to be baptized by John (Mark 1:5; Luke 3:3–7)? Did they make such a trip because

they wanted to see a reed shaken with the wind—a description of a wishy-washy, indecisive person whose message shifts with the winds of popularity? These questions were designed to make Jesus' audience consider the kind of individual John the Baptist was.

Jesus continued to probe His audience's motivation for making inconvenient trips to see John in the wilderness. Did they travel to a wilderness area to see a fashion show featuring *a man* dressed in fine clothes? This question paints a word picture of someone who lived in stark contrast to John the Baptist. John led a minimalistic life in the wilderness, far removed from the lavish comforts of a king's palace (see Matthew 3:4).

1. Why did Jesus question the crowd who went into the wilderness seeking John the Baptist? (Matthew 11:7, 8)

What Do You Think?

What distinctive actions will you take to demonstrate faithfulness to God, even if they conflict with cultural expectations?

Digging Deeper

How are God's people called to be different from the world? What Scripture references support your answer?

Jesus posed another rhetorical question. And then He voiced the answer that was probably on everyone's mind. John's message was of such a nature, his preaching so powerful that even hostile religious leaders and Roman soldiers came to investigate if not outright repent (Luke 3:14; John 1:19–27). They came because they thought John was at least *a prophet* and possibly even the Messiah (Luke 3:15; John 1:19–20; Acts 13:25).

Jesus confirms that the multitudes were correct in their belief that John was a prophet. This designation carries specific implications. First, a prophet speaks for God. The people believed John was speaking the word of God to them. Second, prophets were perceived as an integral part of Israel's history. By the time Jesus was born, Israel had about 2,000 years of history, tracing back to the time of Abraham!

While agreeing with the people's assessment that John was a prophet, Jesus upped the ante by designating John as *more than a prophet*. What that entailed comes next.

As the Messiah's immediate forerunner, John was not only a prophetic voice of the Lord. He was also a fulfillment of a prophecy himself. This prophecy is found in Isaiah 40:3–5 and Malachi 3:1. It is so significant that all four Gospels mention this role (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:1–3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23).

2. What did Jesus confirm about John the Baptist? (Matthew 11:9, 10)

What Do You Think?

In what ways do believers prepare the world for Christ's second return?

Digging Deeper

What steps do you need to take to prepare your life for Christ's return?

In this verse, Jesus said no person born of women up to that point was greater than John the Baptist. On the other hand, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. How can these both be true?

John was a great and good man, yet not perfect; therefore he came short of glorified saints. The least in heaven knows more, loves more, and does more in praising God, and receives more from Him, than the greatest in this world.

Jesus spoke of John's role as the last of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus' inauguration of *the kingdom of heaven*. John was to form a link between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus then stated that the interval between *the days of John the Baptist* and *now* (as Jesus was speaking) was relatively short—only a few months (see v. 12). This points to an overlap of the ministries of John and Jesus, confirmed by John 3:22–36. Yet during this short time Jesus acknowledged the heavy violence against His kingdom, which started stated way back with the prophets before and until John's time.

Jesus went as far as to say that “if you are willing to accept it,” He saw the ministry of John like that of “Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:14). Why? Because John came *in the spirit and power of Elijah, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (Luke 1:17). Those who have ears, let them hear.

3. How did Jesus get the crowd to understand the role of prophets as it relates to the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 11:11-15)

What Do You Think?

What can you do to ensure that you do not become “hard of hearing” in a spiritual sense?

Digging Deeper

What are some reasons a person might be spiritually “hard of hearing”?

Jesus, The Wonder Worker: Matthew 11:20-24

Following criticisms of “this generation” in Matthew 11:16–19, who made excuses for rejecting both John and Jesus, now Jesus rebuked the residents of specific towns in Galilee where most of His mighty works had been displayed. Jesus’ popularity did not result in people heeding His message to “repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17); this message was identical to that of John the Baptist (3:2).

The Greek word translated repentance means “to change one’s thought process.” When someone repents, they alter their thinking about sin and embrace new thoughts and actions. But Jesus’ message and method were not what the Jews of His day expected. To see God’s work in the healing of lepers, the casting out of demons, etc., should have prompted repentance.

How unusual to find the word *woe* on the lips of Jesus! This word means judgment, but it also includes pity and sorrow. How tragic that these towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida (located near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, less than 10 miles from each other) should treat lightly their opportunities to see and hear the Christ of God, and be saved! Even the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, and the godless cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, would have repented had they seen the miracles that Jesus and His disciples performed. Capernaum had been “exalted to heaven” NIV “lifted to the heavens” by being privileged to have the Messiah live there. Yet her greater privileges only brought greater responsibilities and greater judgment. Five of the ten miracles recorded in Matthew 8-9 were performed in Capernaum.

Repentance precedes forgiveness (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22). But pride and hardheartedness will result in a mighty fall, even to the eternal destiny of being brought *down to Hades*.

4. Why did Jesus condemn the towns where He had performed miracles? (Matthew 11:20-24)

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to orient your life around repentance that leads to forgiveness?

Digging Deeper

How will you ensure pride and hardheartedness do not take root in your life?

CONCLUSION

Pivotal People in Unrepented Cultures

Pivotal people are agents of change in moving others to new ways of thinking and doing. An example of a pivotal person in a nonreligious sense is Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon. We see several pivotal people in the Bible. Just one example from the Old Testament is Samuel, seen in his being the last of the judges and the first of the prophets (1 Samuel 3:20; 7:6, 15–17; Acts 3:24; 13:20). In the New Testament, we rightly see the ultimate pivotal person to be Jesus. His life, death,

resurrection, and ascension marked and enabled the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant (Romans 7:6; Colossians 2:13–15; Hebrews 8; etc.).

The image of Jesus in this regard is so powerful and profound that it's easy to overlook John the Baptist as a pivotal person also. As the last of the prophets who ministered under the realities of the old covenant (Matthew 11:9; 14:5; 21:26; Luke 1:76), he prepared the way for Jesus by preaching the nearness of the kingdom of heaven and the need to repent in anticipation of the new covenant.

Many in the first century A.D. did not accept John the Baptist's view of the kingdom of heaven and the need to repent. It is not widely accepted today. We live among unrepentant people who are often proud of transgressing God's standards. The power and prosperity of an unrepentant culture confront us relentlessly with a choice: Who will be the pivotal person(s) we allow to direct our thinking and doing: the pivotal people of social media or the Bible?

Making the wrong choice with regard to such influence runs the risk of infecting us with the "godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). That decision, in turn, might cause us to love the world at the expense of our love of the kingdom of heaven.

As we make the right choice daily, may we repeat neither the infamy of evil Sodom nor the unrepentance of Chorazin, Bethsaida, or Capernaum.

What Do You Think?

What concept or teaching in today's lesson do you have the most trouble coming to grips with? Why?

Digging Deeper

How will you resolve this problem?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father may Your Holy Spirit continue to bring us to repentance and acceptance of Your forgiveness even as we model this reality to others. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Choose repentance. Choose eternal life.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Living Lastly" and will help us take an honest look at our lives and to be honest about whether our possessions possess us. Study Matthew 19:16–30.