

July 5 Lesson 5 (NIV)

VINDICATING WISDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 10:1-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 11:1-19

MATTHEW 11:7-19

⁷ As 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? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

" 'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly 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. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ Whoever has ears, let them hear.

¹⁶ "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

¹⁷ " 'We played the pipe 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, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

KEY VERSE

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." But wisdom is proved right by her deeds. —Matthew 11:19

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 2: Wisdom in the Gospels

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. Love it or Hate It
- B. Lesson Context
- I. John the Baptist (MATTHEW 11:7–15)
 - A. A Reed, a Royal (vv. 7, 8)
Judging Appearances
 - B. A Prophet, a Messenger (vv. 9–15)
- II. This Generation (MATTHEW 11:16–19)
 - A. Like Children (vv. 16, 17)
Play Ball!
 - B. Like Fools (vv. 18, 19)

Conclusion

- A. Paradox of God’s Kingdom
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AhaziahAy-huh-zye-uh.

HerodAntipas *Hair-ud An-tih-pus.*

MessiahMeh-sigh-uh.

MalachiMal-uh-kye.

NaziriteNaz-ih-rite.

Introduction

A. Love It or Hate It

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder ... or the tongue of the taster or ear of the listener. We all make distinctions between what is good and what is bad, and sometimes these opinions are no more than personal taste. In the end, they don’t really matter. How you decorate your home (or choose not to) is a matter of preference, one that can lead to conflict with others in the house who disagree. But there is no real right or wrong.

When preparing dinner, you may not have strong feelings about carrots, but you probably do about brussels sprouts and beets—if you even eat them! Some music blends into the background, while other songs you turn up and sing along to—or maybe turn off to stop the assault on your ears. The same may be true of movies or TV shows: most are average, neither great nor horrible. But others divide us between fans and critics.

Today’s text explores the seemingly vast gulf between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ—and the variety of opinions surrounding them. Many loved them; many hated them. Yet loving or hating these two is very different from loving or hating carpeting or cushions, music or movies. Choosing to hate these two, even in their differences, is choosing to hate God’s wisdom.

B. Lesson Context

The Gospel of Matthew is one of four books in the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Through Jesus, God was restoring his rule over his world, setting right what human rebellion had made wrong. Matthew put special focus on the surprising way in which God fulfilled his promises to Israel in Jesus.

For instance, we might expect God’s true king to be warmly received. But in fact, Jesus met with hostility from his infancy (examples: Matthew 2:13; 21:45, 46; 27:20). Jesus warned his followers that they would meet with similar opposition (10:14–25, 34–36).

The same hostility is seen in the arrest and death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1–12), which foreshadowed Jesus’ own crucifixion (26:1–5, 14–16; 27:32–44). Yet this very climax of the hostility against God’s wisdom was the means by which God fulfilled his wisdom, for Jesus died not merely as an innocent victim but as the willing and worthy sacrifice for the sins of humanity (20:28; 26:28).

God’s victory came through rejection, death, and resurrection. Nothing could have been more contrary to expectations. In an episode preceding our text, the (to human thinking) upside-down wisdom of God proved confusing even to John the Baptist, the prophet who announced the nearness of God’s reign and the coming of his true king (Matthew 3:1–3, 11, 12).

John had clearly identified Jesus as that promised king and had witnessed God’s affirmation of Jesus as beloved Son (Matthew 3:13–17). John had been imprisoned for his declaration that Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, was wrong to have taken his brother’s wife as his own (11:2a; 14:3, 4). John became distressed and sent messengers to ask Jesus whether he was indeed the promised king, as John had previously proclaimed (11:2b, 3). John’s question expressed either doubt or impatience as he languished in prison.

Jesus’ response affirmed that he was indeed the promised coming one (Matthew 11:4, 5). But what did that imply about John? Had his impatience or doubt demonstrated him to be a failure as God’s prophet?

I. John the Baptist

(MATTHEW 11:7–15)

A. A Reed, a Royal (vv. 7, 8)

7. As 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?”

Concurrent with the departure of John the Baptist’s *disciples* (see Lesson Context), Jesus speaks to *the crowd* regarding their attitude toward *John*. This large group likely includes those

who already consider themselves students of Jesus, others who are merely curious about his power and teachings, and still others who are skeptical or even hostile.

Jesus' rhetorical questioning expects his audience to scoff at the idea that John has been timid. Certainly he is no easily shaken *reed*, bowing over in whatever *wind* came along. John boldly told the prominent and self-satisfied that they have no standing with God unless they repent (Matthew 3:7–10).

8. “If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces.

Being made entirely by hand, *clothes* in the ancient world were expensive. Ordinary people owned few garments, and those few were made of scratchy, uncomfortable fibers. Softer fabrics were too expensive for any but the wealthiest.

John's characteristic garb is made of camel's hair and is bound with a leather belt (Matthew 3:4). This perhaps imitates Elijah, the prophet who boldly confronted Israel's wicked King Ahab (2 Kings 1:1–8).

John's clothes are anything but *fine!* The contrast in clothing with that of people who live *in kings' palaces* points to a difference in lifestyle. John is a bold spokesman for God; are people able to look past his attire and see that? Individuals with a worldly agenda may try to get what they want by flattery (example: Acts 12:19b–22), but that won't work with John the Baptist! His attire suggests that he has nothing and wants nothing of earthly value.

B. A Prophet, a Messenger (vv. 9–15)

9a. “Then what did you go out to see? A prophet?”

Having exposed as absurd the fictitious reasons for seeking out John, Jesus begins to offer the real one. People went to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist because they believed him to be God's *prophet* (Matthew 14:5; 21:26; Luke 1:67, 76), someone empowered to speak for God.

Often we associate the work of prophets with predicting the future. Certainly the biblical prophets did speak about the future (example: Isaiah 9:1–7). But their primary work was not prediction but proclamation (example: 1:10–15). The prophets were God's spokesmen in their own day and time, declaring to their own generations what God was doing or was about to do (example: 2 Kings 19:5–7).

Prophecies of all kinds were concerned with various aspects of God's promises. Having been taken captive by hostile nations, the Israelites heard the prophets promise that God would free them from captivity and return them to their homeland (examples: Isaiah 44:26; Jeremiah 16:15; Zechariah 10:6). This deliverance was to be so exceptional that it would demonstrate to the nations that Israel's God was and is the only true God (example: Isaiah 2:1–5).

Because this promised act of God so closely resembled his deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the prophets could speak of it in similar terms (example: Isaiah 4:2–6). God had visited his people in their distress in Egypt, defeating the rulers of Egypt and bringing his people into the promised land (Exodus 15; Joshua 1); he would do so again (Deuteronomy 30:1–10).

9b, 10. “Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’”

Jesus can affirm that John is *more than a prophet* because his appearance on the scene fulfills the promise of Malachi 3:1. God himself is the one who sends his *messenger ahead of* Jesus. Jesus has declared that he is the one about whom John spoke (Matthew 3:11). If John's role is to prepare

the way for the Lord, and if John has indeed prepared the way for Jesus, then logically it follows that Jesus is the Lord, living among his people.

John's announcement of the nearness of God's kingdom and the coming of God's true king is the announcement that the Messiah's reign is about to begin (Matthew 3:1, 2; John 3:27–30). Other prophets had articulated this promise (example: Zechariah 9:9, 10). To John the Baptist has fallen the duty to proclaim that it was about to be fulfilled (Mark 1:2–4).

11. “Truly 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.

In using the word *truly*, Jesus introduces this proclamation with an expression that affirms his trustworthiness (Matthew 5:18; 6:2, 5, 16; 8:10). But the declaration itself is very difficult for his audience to understand because it seems self-contradictory: first, Jesus says that *John the Baptist* is “more than a prophet” (see 11:9b, above), which places him among the greatest people in history. How then can someone who *is least in the kingdom of heaven* be *greater than he*?

Jesus is challenging his audience to rethink their understanding of the kingdom of Heaven (compare Matthew 5:3, 10, 19, 20; etc.). Jesus' contemporaries believe that the kingdom God will establish is to be a political continuation of David's throne (example: Acts 1:6). This interpretation means that Judah and Israel are to be restored as a united kingdom in political power, not subject to Rome or anyone else.

But God's intentions are much broader than that: his kingdom is his promised reign over the world (Philippians 2:10, 11), his restoration of wholeness to the world that currently suffers under the curse and brokenness of sin. It is the full realization of God's promises to all people.

Jesus spoke of God's kingdom in terms of three time frames: near, here, and yet to come. Like John the Baptist, Jesus speaks of God's reign as “near” (Luke 21:31). But as Jesus heals and drives out demons, he is more likely to be speaking of God's kingdom as already present (example: Matthew 12:26–28). And as he speaks of what his followers come to understand as his return, he speaks of the kingdom as a future reality (7:21–23).

From the perspective of the kingdom as either near or future, Jesus can speak of John as less than the least in God's kingdom. John is the herald of God's kingdom, first announcing its nearness. But he is not yet a subject of that kingdom in terms of its future reality, for it has not yet arrived in that sense. God has done great things through John, but God will do greater things through and for the subjects of God's kingdom by way of Jesus' death and resurrection (John 14:12).

12. “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.

Jesus follows one challenging saying with another that is even more challenging. The idea that God's *kingdom* can suffer *violence* seems absurd. How could the rule of the Almighty be challenged by anyone? Jesus seems to refer to the world's treatment of citizens of God's kingdom. One example is how Herod Antipas has imprisoned John the Baptist for speaking out against Herod's sin (Matthew 11:2; 14:3, 4). Herod later will have John killed (14:9, 10). Jesus himself will eventually be arrested and crucified (26:50–56; 27:32–50). Looking further into the future, Jesus has already spoken of the opposition that his followers will face (10:16–31).

God's kingdom is great, but until it comes in its fullness, God's people experience great hardships. God's kingdom enters the world in Jesus, but the fullness of God's reign, including the complete defeat of evil, awaits Jesus' return. Until then, Jesus' followers experience the blessing

and power of God's reign in the midst of a world that opposes them and the king they serve. It is not an "all at once" kingdom. It is an "already but not yet" kingdom.

13. "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John."

The Prophets and the Law is an expression referring to Israel's Scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament. Jesus says that John's work was the climax of the message of those books. Jesus speaks of the Old Testament in its entirety—the stories of the patriarchs and the nation of Israel, the laws, the teachings of the prophets—as coming together as a message of promise. They announced this promise *until John*, who was directed by God to announce the soon-to-be fulfillment of the promise.

14. "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."

Underlining this point, Jesus identifies John as *Elijah*. That prophet had confronted the evil leaders of his day with the reality of God's powerful authority (example: 1 Kings 18:16–40). Generations later, the prophet Malachi promised that one like Elijah would appear as the forerunner of God's promised rule (Malachi 4:5, 6). John is this promised prophet like Elijah, the one who announces the fulfillment of God's long-awaited promises.

15. "Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Jesus sometimes ends a discourse with this word of warning and encouragement (Matthew 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35). The saying encourages hearers to think carefully about what they have heard and to respond appropriately to the challenge it poses (contrast Mark 4:12).

II. This Generation

(MATTHEW 11:16–19)

A. Like Children (vv. 16, 17)

16. "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

The phrase *this generation* and expressions like it appear often in Jesus' teaching. He uses the phrase to focus on those who reject his message despite their having witnessed his mighty acts of power (Matthew 12:39–45; 17:17).

Though Jesus' contemporaries may not realize it, their refusal to trust God parallels the same attitude of their ancestors during the exodus. That refusal resulted in wandering in the wilderness until the generation died off (Numbers 26:62–65; 32:13).

17. " 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

Certain children in the marketplace call out to each other to express frustration that the other children will not respond to their playful activities. They have played a dance tune on their flutes, but the other children *did not dance*. So the children began to wail as at a funeral, but the other children still did not join in. Regardless of the situation, the other children never offer the expected response. The idea seems to be that the generation Jesus is criticizing wants him to dance to their tune. But that doesn't happen.

B. Like Fools (vv. 18, 19)

18. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'"

The two actions of the children in the marketplace suggest the contrast that Jesus now makes. John the Baptist lived under the vow of the Nazirite, refusing wine (Numbers 6:4; Luke 1:15) and adopting a diet symbolic of a great crisis (Matthew 3:4), refusing ordinary food. Jesus describes those who reject John's message as justifying their refusal by claiming that his strange actions indicate that he is possessed by *a demon*. Like the children just noted, John refuses to dance to their tune.

19. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

Jesus, by contrast, is known to attend banquets given by those on the margins of society (example: Matthew 9:9, 10). *Tax collectors* work for Rome and are regarded by fellow Jews as having forfeited their standing in God's people. *Sinners* are notorious in their communities for violating God's law. In contrast to John, Jesus is called *a glutton* and *a drunkard* for his association with such people at meals. Jesus, of course, has an explanation: he has come to save just such people (9:12, 13).

For those unwilling to heed God's wisdom, no messenger is good enough. Note the wrong-headed criticisms: John is too strict with himself and thus has a demon; Jesus is too indulgent. But God is at work in both, bringing his promises to fulfillment. The people of *wisdom*, those who responded to John and Jesus in faith, will prove the truth of what those two proclaim.

Conclusion

A. Paradox of God's Kingdom

If we think that the wisdom of God is bound to meet with universal acceptance, the New Testament tells us otherwise. The gospel has always been sharply divisive. Jesus inspired joyous faith from many but received powerful, even violent, opposition from others. God's wisdom appeals to some people as it addresses their deepest needs. But it repels others as it challenges their self-rule.

For those expecting a kingdom to come with military and political power, Jesus seemed the opposite of God's true king. For those who expected God to bring an immediate end to injustice and suffering, Jesus' idea of God's kingdom seemed absurd. But for those with ears to hear and eyes to see, Jesus brings the fulfillment of every divine promise and the answer to every human need. That he was rejected comes as no surprise to us, for God's messengers have always been rejected by many.

How do you deal with the tension of God's kingdom, which is both "now" and "yet to be"? Circumstances can prove discouraging at times, but trusting that Christ reigns now and will reign fully in the future can provide strength and encouragement to meet even the biggest challenges. Those included even the challenge of Herod's prison for John and the challenge of the cross for Jesus. In the strength we have in Christ, we witness the vindication of God's wisdom.

B. Prayer

Father, as we rely on your power in good times and bad, teach us to trust your wisdom. May we not be so self-centered that we fail to hear your wisdom—wisdom that corrects wrong ideas and expectations. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

What seems like foolishness to humans is sometimes the wisdom of God.¹
