

Heeding Wholly

Devotional Reading: Matthew 10:31-42

Background Scripture: Matthew 11

Matthew 11:7-15, 20-24

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.

²⁰ Then 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. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Key Text

Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. —Matthew 11:20

Introduction

A. 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.

B. 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 Judea (Luke 1:65). His father, Zechariah, was of a priestly family (thus of the tribe of Levi). His mother was Elizabeth, a relative of Mary (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 (3:1; 14:2).

John contributed to the ministry of Jesus in

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 3: Life in God’s Kingdom

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Jesus’ description of John the Baptist.
2. Explain why the generation that Jesus criticized displayed a lack of wisdom in its evaluation of both him and John the Baptist.
3. Recruit an accountability partner to ensure that hearing results in heeding.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Celebrity Preachers
- B. Lesson Context

I. John, the Messenger (Matthew 11:7-15)

- A. Unlikely Celebrity (vv. 7-10)
Preparing a Way
- B. Last of His Kind (vv. 11-15)

II. Jesus, the Wonder Worker (Matthew 11:20-24)

- A. Failure to Repent (vv. 20-22)
- B. Judgment to Ensnare (vv. 23-24)
A Stubborn Dog

Conclusion

- A. Pivotal People in Unrepentant Cultures
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

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 fulfill 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, who takes 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).

I. John, the Messenger

(Matthew 11:7-15)

A. Unlikely Celebrity (vv. 7-10)

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?”

Having just received Jesus’ answer to their query (see Lesson Context), John’s disciples *were leaving* to relay that response to John the Baptist, who was in prison (Matthew 11:2). As they left, Jesus turned the tables 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 swayed by 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.

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.”

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).

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?

9. “Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”

Jesus posed another rhetorical question. And then he voiced the answer that was 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 prophets of Israel often began their messages with “Hear the word of the Lord” (Isaiah 39:5; Jeremiah 7:2; Hosea 4:1; etc.). 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!

B. Last of His Kind (vv. 11-15)

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

The key is understanding that in various contexts, Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God (Matthew prefers the designation “kingdom of heaven”) in terms of three time frames: near, present, and yet to come. Jesus spoke of God’s reign as being “near” (Luke 21:30-31). But as Jesus healed and drove out demons, he also spoke of God’s kingdom as being present (Matthew 12:26-28). And when he spoke of his own return, Jesus pictured the kingdom as a future reality (7:21-23; 25:34). The ultimate nature of that future kingdom will be so marvelous that the person who is least in it is to be thought of as greater than John the Baptist—whom no one (other than Jesus himself) surpassed in terms of the kingdom of heaven being near.

John’s importance lies in the fact that he is a transitional figure in the history of salvation. He didn’t carry out his ministry as an early member of the new covenant being ushered in by Jesus. Instead, he was the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets. The next verse strengthens this idea.

12-13. “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. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

Combining the time elements recorded in Matthew 4:12, 17 with those in Luke 3:1-3, 23, we realize that the interval between *the days of John the Baptist* and *now* (as Jesus was speaking) was relatively short—only a few months. This points to an overlap of the ministries of John and Jesus, confirmed by John 3:22-36. Thus, there is no clear line of demarcation between John’s role as the last of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus’ inauguration of *the kingdom of heaven*. John’s job was to proclaim

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.

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.’

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).

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?

Preparing a Way

During World War II, the United States was worried about the defense of Alaska. As a result, the Army Corps of Engineers was tasked to build a highway that could be used to transport troops and equipment rapidly to Alaska as needed. The idea for the resulting 1,543-mile Alcan Highway had been around since the 1930s, but the war made it a priority.

More than 11,000 soldiers worked on the project. They worked long shifts, sometimes in subzero temperatures, and finished the project in less than nine months. This remarkable feat of engineering enabled the United States to safeguard its territory by establishing a way through the wilderness.

God, in his wisdom, foresaw the need to prepare the world for the arrival of Jesus. John the Baptist was the point man in that regard. He preached about the need for repentance and the inbreaking kingdom of God.

Jesus built a highway between earth and Heaven through his death on the cross and resurrection. How would you describe your experience walking along life’s highway with Jesus? —J. M.

the Prophets and the Law (the old system) to ready the people for encountering the Messiah. Jesus, as that Messiah, came to open the doors to the kingdom via his death and resurrection (the new system; compare Luke 16:16; Hebrews 9:20; 10:19-20).

Jesus' mention of *violence* foreshadows John's pending death by beheading (Matthew 14:6-12). It may also apply to Jesus' own death by brutal crucifixion (16:21; etc.). The church's beginning was not calm and readily accepted. Both the Romans and the Jewish people who did not believe in the gospel used violence to stop the advance of the gospel, as seen in the death of James the Apostle (Acts 12:1-2). Although Isaiah saw the Messiah as the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6), the history of the church is littered with violence and persecution.

More difficult to understand is Jesus saying that the *violent people have been raiding it*. Some have seen this as a call for Christians to be more active, even violent, when met with opposition. These interpreters say we must fight fire with fire as we both live and die by the sword, citing Jesus' words in Matthew 10:34. But surely Jesus' words in our lesson text are an acknowledgment of violence against his kingdom, not a call to violence in promoting or defending it. Jesus later admonished Peter to put his sword away after he slashed a man (John 18:11). Jesus was the object of violence in his time on earth, not the leader of a violent revolt.

14-15. "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Jesus concluded his teaching on John the Baptist by noting the fulfillment of a prophecy from Malachi 4:5: "See, I will send the prophet *Elijah* to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." Elijah's ministry is documented in 1 Kings 17:1-19:21; 21:17-28; and 2 Kings 1:1-2:11. First-century Jews expected the prophecy of Elijah's return to be fulfilled by the arrival of Elijah reincarnated. Jesus affirmed the expectation of Elijah's return but not that of reincarnation. Rather, someone with the attitude and spirit of the original Elijah would come. That person was John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10-13; compare John 1:21).

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"?

II. Jesus, the Wonder Worker

(Matthew 11:20-24)

A. Failure to Repent (vv. 20-22)

20. Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent.

Following criticisms of "this generation" in Matthew 11:16-19, Jesus rebuked the residents of specific villages. (Luke 10:12-15 offers a parallel condemnation, although the setting differs.) The locations at issue were in Galilee, where *most of* Jesus' *miracles* had been displayed. Jesus' popularity did not result in people heeding his message to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17); this message was identical to that of John the Baptist (3:2).

The Greek word translated *repent* 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 to Say It

Bethsaida	Beth-say-uh-duh.
Canaanite	Kay-nun-ite.
Chorazin	Ko-ray-zin.
Galilean	Gal-uh-lee-un.
Herod Antipas	Hair-ud An-tih-pus.
Levi	Lee-vye.
Nineveh	Nin-uh-vuh.
Phoenician	Fuh-nish-un.
Sidon	Sigh-dun.
Tyre	Tire.



Visual for Lesson 11. Point to this visual as you ask learners to silently consider how they might follow these imperatives in the upcoming week.

21-22. “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. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.”

The villages of *Chorazin* and *Bethsaida* are located near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, less than 10 miles from each other. Chorazin, a prosperous agricultural town in the hills above the Sea, is mentioned in the Bible only here and in Luke 10:13. Bethsaida, whose name means “house of fishing,” was on the east side of the Jordan River where it feeds into the Sea of Galilee in the north. It was the hometown of Philip, Peter, and Andrew (John 1:44).

Tyre and Sidon, on the other hand, were famous Phoenician cities on the Mediterranean coast north of Galilee. For these cities to *have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes* brings to mind the city of Nineveh, whose citizenry repented when hearing the message of the prophet Jonah (Jonah 3:5-6; Matthew 12:41). This also foreshadowed Jesus’ travel to the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, where he encountered the extraordinary faith of a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). Repentance and faith will be honored *on the day of judgment*, even among Gentile cities such as Tyre, Sidon, and Nineveh.

B. Judgment to Ensnare (vv. 23-24)

23-24. “And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

The importance of *Capernaum* is reflected in the fact that it is mentioned 16 times by name in the four Gospels. This fishing village was on the Sea of Galilee, several miles southwest of Bethsaida. Capernaum was strategically located between villages along the Sea of Galilee and those in the Galilean highlands to the west—villages such as Nazareth. This may have been the reason that Jesus used Capernaum as a type of home base for his ministry (Matthew 4:13). Jesus performed several *miracles* in and around this location during his earthly ministry (8:5-13; Mark 1:21-34; 2:1-12; John 4:46-54).

The comparison of Capernaum to *Sodom* is quite stark! The latter was one of the cities God destroyed with “burning sulfur . . . out of the heavens” (Genesis 19:24) because of sin “so grievous” (18:20) that not even 10 righteous people were to be found there (18:32). In the later books of the Old Testament, Sodom becomes a byword for a place harshly judged for its unrepentant sinfulness (Isaiah 3:9; Zephaniah 2:9). Jerusalem did not escape this comparison (Jeremiah 23:14).

Jesus’ calls to repentance, like those of John the Baptist, were threatening and unappreciated in places like Capernaum and therefore rejected. Repentance precedes forgiveness (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22). But prideful hard-heartedness will result in a mighty fall, even to the eternal destiny of being brought *down to Hades*.

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 hard-heartedness do not take root in your life?

A Stubborn Dog

Our furry friend Omar dashed out the open door at 5:00 a.m. before I could get his leash on him. As a Belgian Malinois, Omar can sprint faster than the speed limit in our area! Despite attempts with training collars and weeks of reward-based training, he bolts as soon as he realizes he is off the leash. He eventually returns after a few hours, but trying to chase him down is futile. Seeing us in pursuit makes him run faster and farther.

It's all a game for Omar. His doggy brain does not perceive any wrongdoing. Running is just a natural thing for him to do. Reminding myself of this helps temper my frustration when I welcome him back inside after his adventures. As much as Omar can vex me, God employs this dog to teach me invaluable lessons. I have been like Omar more times than I can count, reverting to old habits and disregarding the Spirit's call. Yet, every time I return in repentance, God is there, ready to welcome me back.

Jesus admonished the stubborn cities that refused to repent. Although they had seen the miracles firsthand, they resisted his call. Their lack of "ears to hear" and "eyes to see" is actually worse than our dog's attitude because it's self-inflicted (Matthew 13:15-16; Mark 8:18). Think about it: the city of Sodom would have repented if it had witnessed the same divine acts! Are there parts of your life where you persist in your stubbornness, refusing to surrender to God? —J. M.

Conclusion

A. Pivotal People in Unrepentant 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 cov-

enant (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 AD 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?

B. 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.

C. Thought to Remember

Choose repentance. Choose eternal life.