

Chapter 11 begins with the observation that, after instructing his disciples, Jesus moved on to teach in their cities.

Jesus' ministry is often described as being an itinerant ministry. That is, he had no particular plan of action, no particular agenda, and no particular place in mind other than his priority of reaching the people of Israel. He simply moved from one village to the next, proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom, and demonstrating the power of that kingdom in his teaching, healing, and preaching.

However, there is one thing that might be mentioned in this regard. In none of the four gospels does it ever say he entered one of the large cities in Galilee. There were two. The main city, the seat of Herod's government, was Tiberius. The other, Sepphoris, was a place the wealthy lived in elaborate homes decorated with impressive artwork. That he said he came to seek and find the lost sheep of the house of Israel probably explains this. The villages were places where you could find the poor, the landless peasants, and those who were considered "low class" people. Jesus knew full well who was open to hearing his message, and the rich and powerful were not among this group. One gospel story illustrates this. A rich young man came to him with the question as to how a person could inherit eternal life. "Sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and follow me." The man went away in sorrow because he was in love with his wealth and couldn't imagine giving it up. Jesus' message was that eternal life comes to those who love God more than anything else, and so this man was making a choice to live in luxury for his time on earth in exchange for living eternally with God.

In the next scene, John the Baptist, who is now in prison because he condemned the marriage of Herod to his sister-in-law, sends messengers to Jesus asking if he is the promised Messiah. His question, the text says, is based on what he has heard about Jesus' ministry.

This may mean that John was expecting other things of the promised Messiah. However, Matthew does not say this, so we don't know for sure why he asks the question. However, Jesus' answer is clearly designed to assure John that he is, in fact, "the One who is to come." He clearly states that redemption is being experienced through him. Those things that bring destruction and death are being reversed. From the healing of the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf, from the fact that the dead are raised and that the poor (the rejected, marginalized, and condemned) are receiving good news—all this points to the presence, power, and love of the Spirit of God.

John had said that "the one who is to come" would baptize with the Holy Spirit. These things that Jesus mentions show exactly that—the power of the Spirit. And so, the answer in a word is, "Yes. I am the one who is to come." John had also said that the Messiah would bring the Kingdom of God. In the things that Jesus mentions, one can see the coming of the

kingdom. It was not here yet in all its glory. But its power was now present, and Jesus was introducing God's kingdom into the world.

In verses 7-10, Jesus explains in detail who John the Baptist was. When they came to him, (which they did in large numbers) what did they expect? In answer to this question, he begins by using the image of a reed shaken by the wind. What is that? It seems clear that Jesus is referring to someone who conforms to whatever the social situation holds up as the popular position. A "reed shaken by the wind" is a person who conforms to popular opinion, one who advocates for whatever people want to hear. It's a preacher who preaches to the choir, or a politician who decides how to vote or what to say based on his/her constituents' desires. Truth does not enter the equation. Acting with integrity and telling it like it is never enters the mind of "reeds shaken by the wind." They are party line liberals in places like San Francisco, and hard line conservatives in rural Texas. Such people will never act in ways that might upset the people of their district, nor will they violate cultural norms.

But one might say, "Aren't they supposed to be the voice of the people?" Perhaps. But this is not their motivation. Their motivation is self-interest. Votes and popularity are their self-interest. Should there arise a situation where the national wellbeing of the nation suggests a position that departs from the prevailing winds, you won't get it from this "reed." They will bend wherever the wind blows. John the Baptist was not such a person. He spoke the truth to them regarding their need to take responsibility and change. This takes courage and a commitment to a larger truth than a popular opinion. Few and far between are such people. And yet, it is not possible to be a real leader without having these characteristics. John was steadfast in his commitment to speaking truth to those who were both in and out of power.

Since they didn't go out to see a person who would simply pander to whatever people wanted to hear, then what? "A person dressed in soft robes?" By this, Jesus refers to the rich and powerful. In today's standards, we might say "celebrity." Did they go out to see a celebrity—a person who speaks eloquently about justice for the poor and oppressed but who lives in either gated communities where such people are excluded and kept out by watch dogs and armed guards, or who build high brick walls around their mansions?

We hear a lot from such people today, particularly when they attend elaborate and expensive award ceremonies and have a large public platform from which to speak. But you won't find such people in the slums and ghettos of inner cities. In fact, you won't find them anywhere because they are holed up in their lavish neighborhoods where, once again, bodyguards are the norm. John the Baptist was not to be found in the wealthy cities of Israel. He was out in the wilderness, living on insects. Therefore, his call to repent, to turn to God, and to act with justice was authentic. He didn't just live with the poor. He lived below the poor. The space from which he spoke was not some lavish and popular affair where only the rich and famous were invited. He spoke to the people in a place identified as a place of hardship, trials, and suffering.

Since neither the one who panders, nor the one who is identified as being a member of the elite fits John the Baptist, then what does? "...a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet...no one has been greater than John the Baptist."

A prophet is a person who has been chosen by God to speak God's word to the people. No one can decide on his own to be a prophet. Only God can make a person a prophet because it's not possible to bring God's word to the people unless God has anointed that person with the Spirit. God's word is not something we can discern or figure out on our own. Such a word would be our word, not God's. God speaks for himself because the mind of God--the leading of God—is something only God knows. God speaks for God. Therefore, in order for a human being to speak for God, that person has to have received the call and the Spirit of God.

A prophet speaks the word of God under the influence of God's Spirit. Jeremiah went so far as to say he was chosen to be a prophet before he was even born.

But John, says Jesus, was even above the prophets because he was chosen to be the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus then goes on to say that John was, in fact, Elijah. It was believed that Elijah would return to prepare the way for the Messiah. This expectation was fulfilled by John.

Jesus concludes this section by using a metaphorical story to illustrate how the people reacted to both John and himself. John came among them demonstrating the need for repentance. His message in this sense was a warning, not meant to be observed as a celebration. Rather, he fasted and denied himself to show them what repentance looked like. Because of this, the people accused him of being under the influence of a demon.

Jesus came to bring the good news of the kingdom. He therefore did not fast or deny himself. Rather, he celebrated by eating and drinking. For this, he was called a glutton and a drunkard.

Nevertheless, both demonstrated the wisdom of God. The life of a disciple will contain both. There will be a time for repentance and a time for celebration. When a person becomes aware of the sin that keeps him/her from the joy of loving God above all things, repentance is necessary. When a person accepts the good news of forgiveness and justification through the grace of God, it's time to celebrate. This is the wisdom Jesus speaks of. It is vindicated in all those who do this: repent and come to faith. For in this way, they come to know and love God. God does not have wisdom. God is wisdom.

In verses 29-34, Jesus laments the destiny of the places where he clearly showed himself to be the presence of God in their midst. Yet, they did not repent and turn to him in faith. They rejected the love of God. Therefore, their future is one of remaining alienated from God. This is the destiny they chose, and therefore this is what they will receive. Hell is reserved for people who want nothing to do with God. They prefer to live without him. It's their choice, and therefore, it's their end as well.

The closing verses of Chapter 11 are classic sayings that express the fact that all things are in the hands of God. Jesus thanks his Father for deciding to reveal his wisdom to “infants” rather than to the “wise and intelligent.” The latter prefer to rely on their own wisdom. They are not open to receiving the wisdom of God. It’s too simple and uncomplicated.

It can be characterized with a few easy to understand observations. If a person puts his faith in the things of this world, his end is destruction. For, by definition, the things of this world are passing away. If a person passes away holding onto things that are passing away, he loses his soul.

On the other hand, if a person puts his faith in God as God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, then he gains his soul, for the destiny of Christ is the Kingdom of God.

But here is the problem. It is not possible to put your faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as the revelation and therefore the presence of God, unless he is revealed as such. Only God can do this. Only God can reveal who his Son really is. This he does through the gift of the Spirit. Therefore genuine saving faith is a gift from God. Some he chooses to have faith. Some he does not choose to have faith. This is the point of Jesus’ prayer. He is thanking his Father for revealing the Son to those who would not be expected to receive such a gift.

We can love God only if God first loves us. This he does by revealing the Son through the Spirit. Not complicated. But it is a mystery.

In the closing verse, Jesus uses a saying of the rabbis regarding the yoke of the law. When we take on the yoke of faith in Christ, we receive rest for our souls. That is, we are enabled to rest in God and therefore receive new and everlasting life. Moreover, his yoke is “easy” and his “burden is light.” We don’t have to strive and work for Christ. He gives himself to us as he comes to us in the Spirit. Spiritual health, wholeness, peace, and rest are gifts of God.

On this positive note, Matthew ends Chapter 11.