

Disruptive But Not Destructive: How Jesus Uses Doubt to further Discipleship Matthew 11:1-19

- I. The Doubt of John the Baptist (11:2-3)
 - a. John regresses from his bold witness of Jesus' Messiahship in his early ministry to doubt regarding His identity.
 - i. "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12).
 - ii. It even appears, according to John 1:29 that John the Baptist knew Jesus on sight and clearly declares Him to be the Coming One (Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world)
 - iii. Since the episode in Matthew 3, John had continued to preach repentance and had also kept a close watch on Jesus and His ministry
 1. John spoke out against Herod by denouncing the king's marriage to his brother's wife. The story is referenced in chapter 4 and told fully in chapter 14. Herod responded by having John tossed in prison and later executing him.
 2. John had also tasked a number of his disciples to keep tabs on Jesus and his ministry. Shortly after the banquet Matthew gave in honor of Jesus and to which he invited fellow "tax-gatherers and sinners," the "disciples of John came to Him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'" (Matt. 9:10, 14). And after Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain, "the disciples of John reported to him about all these things" (Luke 7:18).¹
 - iv. Some thing or a succession of things happen during the time that John is imprisoned that cause him to doubt that Jesus is who he declared him to be. We'll look at some of those reasons later on.
 - b. It is difficult for us to picture a hero of the faith like John the Baptist struggling with doubt.
 - i. There are a few ways this passage has been interpreted historically that I want to address because I feel they will help

¹ MacArthur, John F (2004-01-06). Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Serie) (Kindle Locations 19982-19985). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

us see how deep John's inner struggle was at the time he asked this question.

1. First, many have thought that John asked not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of his disciples.
 - a. The opinion entertained by some, that he sent them partly on his own account, is exceedingly foolish; as if he had not been fully convinced, or obtained distinct information, that Jesus is the Christ.²
 2. Second, some have said that John asked this question because he was waiting for the swift judgment that was a part of his message and that he thought the Messiah would bring.
 - a. The question as to our Lord's having a mission was surely not for John's sake: he knew full well that Jesus was the Son of God.³
 3. John's disciples may have gained an understanding of who Jesus was because of this question *and* John would have been right to expect the judgment of sin. However, the disciples understanding of Jesus was only a by-product of John's own understanding and the judgment John's message promised WAS to be fulfilled. Only, instead of God's wrath being poured out on Rome, it was poured out on Jesus himself for our salvation.
- ii. Generally, when we think of doubt we think of unbelievers. We think of people doubting the existence of God or doubting the Lordship of Jesus. But, Biblically we see that doubt was very much a factor in the lives of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments
1. Hebrews 11 lists a "hall of fame" of God's people . . . in that roll we see many who struggled with serious periods of doubt. Abraham and Sarah doubted they would have a son in their old age, even though God verbally told them it would be so. Moses doubted his leadership skills, and became the greatest leader in Israel's history. God called Gideon in Judges 6 to be a great warrior and lead His people to victory, but Gideon doubted God could pull it off with the one who was "least in his father's house" (Judges 6) But Gideon appears on this list.

² Calvin, John (2013-01-25). Commentary on Matthew (Kindle Locations 3723-3725). Titus Books. Kindle Edition.

³ Charles H. Spurgeon (2010-04-18). Commentary on Matthew (Kindle Locations 2895-2896). . Kindle Edition.

2. Early in the New Testament, John the Baptist's own father doubted God's proclamation that he would have a son due to his old age. And Jesus' own disciples were rebuked for their doubt on an almost regular basis. Even one of the Apostles has "doubting" widely attached to his name!
 3. Doubt is very real and it's most real in...believers who don't yet have enough understanding to continue to believe to a greater and greater degree. And amazingly the greatest man who ever lived, John the Baptist, struggled with doubt at the beginning of his exposure to the gospel. He was very little different than the disciples, the apostles who had little faith.⁴
- II. Doubt and Discipleship Today
- a. We need both understand and be open about doubt as a real struggle in the life of a disciple. Doubt is not just for unbelievers. In fact, we need to remember that doubt is not always faith's opposite.
 - b. Doubt is a real struggle within the church (read: for believing Christians)
 - i. Here is a list of some doubts expressed by Christians today. Think about how many of these you can identify with, or have identified with at one point: Why does God allow suffering? Or evil? Isn't the fact that I was born into a Christian family or society an accident of geography? I could just as easily have been born Hindu or some other faith. What should I believe about the Bible? Why? Don't all religions say basically the same thing? Why is Christianity so exclusive?
 - c. Is our church culture one in which doubt can be expressed and addressed with an eye toward making disciples?
 - i. David Kinnaman -- In our modern evidence-based, logic-oriented culture, we may have a certain picture in our head of what it means to be a doubter. Many Christians believe that people who experience doubts simply lack the proper evidence or depth of conviction. But doubt is a far more nuanced and slippery experience that involves personality, lack of fulfillment, notions about certainty, relational alienation, and even mental health.⁵
- III. Shepherded (and *Shepherding*) Through Doubt – (vv.4-6)
- a. We're calling this shepherded and shepherding because some of you sit here and you're not struggling with doubt, or at least you haven't lately. If that's you, then you're probably in a situation where you're

⁴ <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/42-96/why-the-believer-doubts-part-2>

⁵ Kinnaman, David (2011-10-01). *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Kindle Locations 2976-2978). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

shepherding people (or you should be) and it's highly likely that they'll be struggling with doubt at some point so I want you to have a better grasp on where doubt comes from. It comes from inside and from outside. There are a couple of internal things and a couple of external things that inform our doubts. These things were all true in John's life and they're true in many of ours.

i. External

1. Life Circumstances

- a. John's ministry would have been viewed by the world as a failure (much like Jesus's, by the way).
- b. John had been thrown into prison (Matthew 4:12); and may have been in prison for quite some time. He had served faithfully as God's prophet; and had even confronted open sin in the life of the king. He had confronted Herod Antipas - tetrarch of Galilee - because Herod had married the wife of his own brother in disobedience to the Scriptures (Matthew 14:4; Leviticus 18:16). Luke, in his Gospel, puts it this way: "But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison" (Luke 3:19-20). Try to think with me what might have been going on in John's mind, as he sat in prison for being a faithful prophet of God. He knew that he had indeed been sent by God as "[t]he voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD, Make His paths straight'" (Matthew 3:3; see also Isaiah 40:3). He knew that it was given by God for him to announce the coming of the Messiah (John 1:26-27; 3:28) - and to point Jesus out to the people and declare, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (v. 29). And what's more, He knew that this Coming One would be a conquering and victorious Messiah. He told the people who came to be baptized by him; "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire"

(Matthew 3:11-12). And yet, here he was languishing away in prison; and he couldn't help but notice that the mighty 'conquest' does not seem to have happened yet. His disciples had apparently told him what Jesus was doing (Luke 7:18); but it wasn't going the way he thought it was supposed to go.

- c. When a believer has faithfully and sacrificially served the Lord for many years and then experiences tragedy, perhaps even a series of tragedies, it is difficult not to wonder about God's love and justice. When a child is lost to death or to unbelief, a husband or wife dies or leaves, cancer strikes us or a loved one, we are tempted to ask, "God, where are You now when I really need You? Why have You let this happen to Me. Why don't You help?" But if we dwell on such thoughts, Satan magnifies them and tries to use them to undermine our trust and confidence in God. Except for when we willingly continue in sin, we are never so vulnerable to doubting God's goodness and truth and believing Satan's lies as when we are suffering.⁶
 - d. Paul was himself in prison, probably in Rome, when he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:4-7).
 - e. Our response to negative circumstances should be the same as John's, to go to Jesus.
2. Worldly Influence
- a. When circumstances cause the first whiffs of doubt to begin forming in your mind, it's easy to start listening to the advice of the world around you. This happened to John. Imagine the amount of time he would have had just to sit and think in that dark prison cell. He would

⁶ MacArthur, John F (2004-01-06). Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Serie) (Kindle Locations 20032-20037). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

have thought through his whole life over and over again. He would have rehashed all the decisions that led him to that point in his life. He also would have thought about what the world at-large would have to say about his situation. What Jesus was saying and doing did not jive with what most Jews thought the Expected One would do. The expected the Messiah to be a political, military, and economic guru who would take care of all their problems. When Jesus feeds a large crowd of people in John 6, they're ready to crown him on the spot! Another common misconception was that the Messiah would be preceded by a succession of prophets like John. That's why John asks if Jesus is THE one, or if he should expect another. Because Jesus' brand of Kingdom work wasn't aligning with what the world said it should.

- b. The mindset that Jesus was a neat guy, but he wasn't God, or that God can't be who he says he is based on a number of arguments permeates our society.
 - i. We continually hear people ask, "If Christ loves everybody so much, why do children die and people starve and get diseased and become crippled? If God is a God of justice, why is there so much corruption and injustice in the world? Why do so many good people have it so bad and so many bad people have it so good? If God is so loving and merciful, why does He send people to hell? If God is so powerful and false religions are so evil, why doesn't He just wipe out those false systems?" Because the Lord does not fit their preconceived ideas of what He should be like, people are perplexed, often indignant, and sometimes even blasphemous.⁷
- c. Sometimes this can even come from a worldly voice that is well meaning. It is even preached in some churches. One pastor who's name you

⁷ MacArthur, John F (2004-01-06). Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (Macarthur New Testament Commentary Serie) (Kindle Locations 20114-20118). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

would recognize, but I will omit for the sake of arguing over his ministry, said: "When you focus on being a blessing, God makes sure that you are always blessed in abundance." How would that fit with John's situation? Remember, John's circumstances never improved on this side of eternity. You have to be very careful about what outside influences you are allowing to impact your theology.

ii. Internal

1. Incomplete Revelation

- a. Well, the trouble with John is that John has an incomplete view of the truth. He lived before the time of the cross. He lived before the writing of the rest of the New Testament, and so he did not know one simple truth that everyone in this auditorium who has ever read the New Testament knows, and it's this: that there are two comings of the Messiah; a first coming in which he comes and carries out his saving work in ministry and shedding his blood on the cross; and a second coming separated from that first coming now by 1900-plus years at which he will execute judgment upon the earth and establish his kingdom. These two aspects of the Lord Jesus were not known to John yet, because history had not unfolded the full significance of those passages in the Old Testament. They read the passages in the Old Testament, and they said the Messiah would suffer and the Messiah would experience glories. But they were not clearly told that there was a lengthy period of time between them. And so they tended to look off to them, as Crisostom said hundreds of years ago, "As a mountain range, and thus saw the peaks of the mercy ministry and the judgment ministry, but did not see the valleys between the peaks." And so that was John's difficulty. He had to learn that atonement is a prerequisite to reigning as king, that the shedding of blood is necessary before the Lord Jesus can come back and execute judgment upon the earth. The king must come to his throne through the blood of the cross, and the proper sequence is always

redemption by blood and then redemption by power.⁸

- b. John misunderstood because the tools by which he could understand were not available to him. Jesus reminds John to look back at his scripture, and by performing miracles that fulfilled Messianic prophecy. We, though, have God's complete revelation in the Bible. Sometimes, our doubts are caused because our theology isn't sufficiently formed due to our lack of knowledge of the Scriptures. We're reminded of the Bereans in Acts 17, who received Paul's teaching with eagerness but always searched Scripture diligently to see that it was true. In the light of God's truth, doubt will vanish because our understanding changes. Our expectations sometimes change, too.

2. Unfulfilled Expectation

- a. John's expectation, and his preaching, were of a mighty king coming in judgment.
- b. He had to learn that atonement is a prerequisite to reigning as king, that the shedding of blood is necessary before the Lord Jesus can come back and execute judgment upon the earth. The king must come to his throne through the blood of the cross, and the proper sequence is always redemption by blood and then redemption by power.⁹
- c. John just couldn't figure it out. Jesus was on a mission of mercy, and John's was a message of judgment, waiting for the fury and fire and flame and wrath. He was saying, "When are You going to blast Your enemies?" He sounds like David in Psalm 9, 10, 35, 52, 58, and all those psalms where David asked God to do in His enemies. He sounds like the people under the altar in Revelation 6, "How long, Oh Lord, how long will you tolerate this?" He's thinking, "If you're the Messiah, what's going on?" He has unfulfilled expectations.¹⁰

⁸http://www.sljinstitute.net/sermons/new%20testament/pages/johns_doubts_about_jesus.html

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ ¹⁰ <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/42-96/why-the-believer-doubts-part-2>

- b. Jesus comforts and reassures John's doubt
 - i. The witness of Scripture
 - ii. The witness of His Work

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