

Doubt and Discipleship

Matthew 11:1-19

Introduction

New Series: Tonight we're in Matthew 11, picking up in Matthew where we left off before Easter. Matthew 11:1 a change of scenery, a shift in the action: ¹ When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. In the next few weeks, in Matthew 11-12, we'll see people and situations that **oppose Jesus**. People questioning his authority and his message. His opponents are sometimes disciples, Pharisees, strangers in the crowd, or even his own family. My hope is that you will use these (often negative) examples as opportunities to evaluate your own life. **These stories force us to ask ourselves if we're submitting to or fighting against Jesus' reign in our lives.** Is Jesus in control?

We Think We're Heroes: "The hero's journey." Our ingrained narcissism makes us identify with the hero when, in reality, we're not Superman. At best we're the hapless bystander who the building falls on in the battle. At worst, we're the enemy. Same in Scripture. We judge and malign the Pharisees, disciples, crowd, etc. (e.g., rebellious, faithless, stupid, etc.). They're us! **We're the faithless cowards, the judgmental hypocrites, the rebellious sinners.**

The Opponent of Doubt: Today's message brings this idea home because the opponent in today's passage is **the opponent of doubt**. I venture to say that each one of us has battled doubt at some point or another. "Give me the benefit of your convictions, if you have any; but keep your doubts to yourself, for I have enough of my own" (Goethe).

- "Doubt is not so much a dividing line that separates people into different camps, as it is a razor's edge that runs through every soul" (Michael Novak). Sometimes believers think doubters are given over to meaninglessness, moral confusion, and despair. Doubters assume other believers are non-thinking, dogmatic, judgmental moralizers. But the reality is, we all have believing and doubting inside us." (John Ortberg).

A Story of Doubt: A little boy cried out over and over in the grocery store, "Mom, where are you?!" as he paced frantically, searching each aisle. He reached the last aisle still with no sign of his mom. "What happened, he wondered." He was looking at the fruit snacks and when he looked up, his mom was gone. And now he is full of doubt! Everything is uncertain. He can't see her. He doesn't know what is going on. His little mind starts to race. He notices a store employee and walks up to him for help. "I think my mom left me at the store or got abducted by aliens or something," the boy said. "Now what makes you think that?" the man asked. "Well," the boy answered, "I was looking at fruit snacks and then she was gone. I asked her if we could get some and then she just was gone." The man in the blue vest responded, "Let's see if we can find her." "We won't find her," the little boy said, "I have looked all over and she is gone." As they searched, the man asked, "so what makes you think that your mom left without you?" "Because I don't see her," said the boy. "Has she ever accidentally left you anywhere before,"

the man asked. "No." "Has she ever been abducted by aliens before," the man inquired. "Not that I know of." "So why would you doubt her now?"... After a minute, an announcement came over the store that echoed down the aisles. A few seconds later the boy's mother appeared with her full cart. **Aren't we like this.** When we can't see we begin to doubt.

Following Jesus inevitably comes up against the obstacle of doubt but, even in the midst of doubt, we have the opportunity to renew our trust in Jesus.

¹ When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. ² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." ⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" ¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who 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 suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear. ¹⁶ "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ "'We played the flute 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, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."¹

¹ ¹ Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς διατάσων τοῖς δώδεκα μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, μετέβη ἐκεῖθεν τοῦ διδάσκειν καὶ κηρύσσειν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν αὐτῶν. ² Ὁ δὲ Ἰωάννης ἀκούσας ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ πέμψας διὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ³ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Σὺ εἶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἢ ἕτερον προσδοκῶμεν; ⁴ καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Πορευθέντες ἀπαγγείλατε Ἰωάννῃ ἃ ἀκούετε καὶ βλέπετε. ⁵ τυφλοὶ ἀναβλέπουσιν καὶ χωλοὶ περιπατοῦσιν, λεπροὶ καθαρίζονται καὶ κωφοὶ ἀκούουσιν, καὶ νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται καὶ πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται. ⁶ καὶ μακάριός ἐστιν ὃς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῇ ἐν ἐμοί. ⁷ Τοῦτων δὲ πορευομένων ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγειν τοῖς ὄχλοις περὶ Ἰωάννου, Τί ἐξήλθατε εἰς τὴν ἔρημον θεάσασθαι; κάλαμον ὑπὸ ἀνέμου σαλευόμενον; ⁸ ἀλλὰ τί ἐξήλθατε ἰδεῖν; ἀνθρωπῶν ἐν μαλακοῖς ἡμφιεσμένον; ἰδοὺ οἱ τὰ μαλακὰ φοροῦντες ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις τῶν βασιλέων εἰσίν. ⁹ ἀλλὰ τί ἐξήλθατε ἰδεῖν; προφήτην; ναὶ λέγω ὑμῖν, καὶ περισσώτερον προφήτου. ¹⁰ οὗτός ἐστιν περὶ οὗ γέγραπται, Ἴδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου ἔμπροσθέν σου. ¹¹ ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν· οὐκ ἐγήγερται ἐν γεννητοῖς γυναικῶν μείζων Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ· ὁ δὲ μικρότερος ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν μείζων αὐτοῦ ἐστιν. ¹² ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ ἕως ἄρτι ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται καὶ βιασταὶ ἀρπάζουσιν αὐτήν. ¹³ πάντες γὰρ οἱ προφῆται καὶ ὁ νόμος ἕως Ἰωάννου ἐπροφήτευσαν. ¹⁴ καὶ εἰ θέλετε δεῦξασθαι, αὐτός ἐστιν Ἥλιος ὁ μέλλων ἔρχεσθαι. ¹⁵ ὁ ἔχων ὄτα ἀκουέτω. ¹⁶ Τίνι δὲ ὁμοίωσά τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην; ὁμοία ἐστὶν παιδίοις καθημένοις ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς ἃ προσφωνοῦντα τοῖς ἐτέροις ¹⁷ λέγουσιν, Ἡὐλήσαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐκ ὤρχήσασθε, ἐθρηνήσαμεν καὶ οὐκ ἐκόψασθε. ¹⁸ ἦλθεν γὰρ Ἰωάννης μῆτε ἐσθίων μῆτε πίνων, καὶ λέγουσιν, Δαιμόνιον ἔχει. ¹⁹ ἦλθεν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου

1. Anatomy of Doubt (vv. 2-6)

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Doubts in the Dungeon: John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ John shows up in Matthew 3 (e.g., preaching, baptism, etc.). John’s arrest is briefly mentioned in Matt 4:12 (circumstances will be explained in Matt 14). **His imprisonment seems to spur his doubts.** He has heard word *from prison* of Jesus activity (e.g., preaching, teaching, miracles, etc.)

- In Matthew 3 he is confident that Jesus was the promised Messiah who was to come but now he is starting to doubt that is the case. *Prison* will do that for you. **Where are you now God?**
- He sends a question via messenger: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” He thought Jesus was the one but now the shock of the sermons and the shine of the miracles have worn off, especially in prison (e.g., that organ isn’t going to follow you around during the week).

Even the Great Ones Doubt: Doubt is natural. It comes as part of our human weakness and frailty. If John doubts (the man who baptized Jesus) then why should you be immune? There will always be moments when we doubt. **Doubt is not the problem.** Doubt *becomes* a problem when we allow it to be more reliable than Jesus. **Living with doubts and leaning on them are two different things.** But even the great one’s doubt.

- “Some of us have preached the Word for years, and have been the means of working faith in others and of establishing them in the knowledge of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, yet have nevertheless been the subjects of the most fearful and violent doubts as to the truth of the very gospel we have preached” (Spurgeon).

Dissecting Doubt: John begins to doubt when Jesus doesn’t **seem** to fulfill God’s promises, at least the way he thought. He had believed the promises of God but now he starts to wonder.

- Doubt often arises:
 1. **Difficult situations.** We rarely question God’s goodness when things are going well but when things are tough we start to question his plan and his heart for us (e.g., John’s imprisonment).
 2. **Unmet expectations.** We start to think that God should work a certain way. John knew that Jesus was the Messiah coming to save his people but he didn’t imagine the plan being executed this way (**he didn’t expect to be executed**).

ἔσθίων καὶ πίνων, καὶ λέγουσιν, Ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος φάγος καὶ οἰνοπότης, τελωνῶν φίλος καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν. καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἢ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ.

- Jesus fulfilled God's promises perfectly and in the promised way but it was often in a way that others didn't expect. They misinterpreted or selectively interpreted the plan of the Messiah to save. When would he save (now or in the last days)? How would he save (military vs. spiritual)? Who would he save (Jewish people or Gentiles too)?
3. **Limited perspective.** We only see what we see. We can't see the bigger picture of God's plan. As a result, we doubt.
- The challenge is to feed your faith rather than your doubt (e.g., we overfeed our doubt, focusing on anxiety and worry; spending all our mental energy obsessing it and we never "fan into flames" our faith; the muscle of doubt grows and the muscle of faith atrophies).

Jesus Answered His Doubt: Don't miss how significant these words are: ⁴ And Jesus answered them. Jesus heard the second guessing, the doubting question and rather than chastising, condemning, or shunning him, Jesus **answered** him.

- Jesus will answer your doubts, take them to him. They won't hurt his feelings. They won't bruise his pride. Jesus has compassion not condemnation for your doubts.
- **Doubt does not disqualify you.** But how you deal with it could. Having doubts is normal and natural. Trusting your doubts above Jesus is deadly.

A Straightforward Reminder: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. Jesus gives John a **gentle reminder** of the truth of his work. He is **reminding John of what he already knows**. The same Messiah who John saw so clearly in Matt 3 is the same Messiah who has been working during John's imprisonment. Jesus hasn't changed, John's perspective has shifted because of his current situation. He's focused on his problems. He's distracted by his situation. His current fear has made him forget what he already knows about Jesus. He really knows the truth but he's not *able to see it* at that moment.

- **We're forgetful people.** Those truths we know about God, those graces we've experienced, get buried under the weight of our current predicament. "Memories are not just the key to the past, but the future." Our ability to remember the faithfulness of God *in the past* helps us trust the faithfulness of God in the future.
- Jesus is helping John see that he is still the promise-keeping Savior. Faith is renewed by confirmation that Jesus fulfills God's promises.
 - Has my spouse stopped loving me? Random act of self-sacrifice and kindness. A gift from now where. They never stopped loving you but the reminder helps you remember.

A Blessing In Belief: ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Following Jesus is not easy (e.g., count the cost). Following Jesus stretches our faith, it causes us to submit and trust rather than *perfectly* understand everything. The gospel is a stumbling block to many (Gal 5:11). Few understand trust, grace, sacrifice, Lordship, etc. Jesus is not saying you are blessed

because you never doubt (John doubts here). Jesus is saying that there is a blessing in trusting him. Trusting Jesus in the midst of our doubts goes beyond our instincts. But there is a beauty in believing Jesus without requiring undue proof (*contra* Gideon). We can trust fully without understanding completely. We can trust Jesus' character rather than our feelings (e-mail thinking spouse is mad, which is more likely based on character not feelings?).

2. Defense of John (vv. 7-15)

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." ¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who 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 suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Remember John's Ministry: Don't let John's present doubts cause you to forget the message he proclaimed (it was always about the message not the messenger, cf. Jonah). You can imagine that when John's disciples start to head back that the people who had heard his message start to doubt what they heard. They were ready to move on from John. Doubt does that. Doubt pushes us away from what we know to find something new. Doubt sends us on a never-ending quest to find something we think we want when we already have what we need.

- But don't forget John's powerful preaching of repentance. Crowds came from far and wide to hear him.

Three Questions: (1) "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? Reed shaken by the wind (e.g., the scenery of the Judean countryside). But also a common Rabbinic idiom meaning someone who does not bow to pressure. John is such a person. Despite his current doubts he courageously confronted crowds, religious leaders, and even kings! (2)⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. John did not pursue personal comfort but faithfully embraced a life of sacrifice. He was not prophet with sophistication and refinement. His asceticism was legendary! He was not a royal "yes man" (beware of "yes men). In fact, the only way he made it to the palace was in the dungeon. (3)⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. A prophet. Yes! He was the promised "Elijah to come" ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their

children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Mal 4:5-6).

More Than a Prophet: John was the last and greatest prophet leading up to the promised Savior of whom the prophets prophesied. He was God’s messenger, **the mouthpiece of God**, clearing the way for the Messiah to come. John was not just calling the people to return to God but to prepare for God’s arrival. He is a pivotal figure (literally pivot). He is not only the greatest prophet: ¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

John Falls Short: Reminder, if John is this amazing and still has doubts, what makes you think you’ll be exempt. John gets closer than anyone else in understanding the Messiah but he still falls short.

New Era: John’s example should **humble** and **encourage** us. If John the Baptist falls short, then we shouldn’t be discouraged by our shortcomings. However, if John the Baptist holds such a prominent place in God’s plan of salvation then, guess what (?!), you are even more important in God’s kingdom. Don’t believe me?: Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he [John the Baptist].

- In the KoG greatness is not based on personal prestige but on acceptance by the King. Therefore, the lowest person in the kingdom is greater than anything that came before because they know the king. Once Jesus comes, all of us, John included, have a greater privilege than before because we have the King in our midst. **The greatest herald of the coming king has a lesser position than those eating at the King’s table.**

Still Have Doubts: ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Even though Jesus has inaugurated the kingdom and confirmed his identity through authoritative acts of miraculous power and teaching there are those that seek to oppose and harm the Kingdom of God.

- How is the Kingdom of God opposed? (1) Some oppose it through violence and persecution. (2) Some undermine it by sowing seeds of doubt and questioning its legitimacy. (3) Some undercut it by infiltrating and co-opting it for their own power and gain.
- The same thing continues today.
 - There is persecution and violence against Christians around the world.
 - Opponents sow seeds of doubt, questioning the truth of Scripture and the relevance of faith to modern life. The goodness of God is on trial almost every day.
 - And the church is full of hypocrites who defame the reputation of the gospel through materialism and self-gain.

- In this context it takes a sanctified perspective, a God-given imagination to see the reality and progress of the Kingdom of God.
 - From John's perspective it didn't look like the KoG was advancing as he sat in prison. As Jesus hung on the cross, the disciples couldn't have thought that God was winning. But the apparent defeat is merely that, **apparent**. For in all of these seeming setbacks God is working for his glorious end to rescue and redeem a lost work.
- ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Will you allow God to give you the spiritual vision to see what he is doing? These are tough things. It is tough to see what God is doing when our vision is so clouded by our broken world and our personal sin. Can you see past the failures of Christians, the skepticism of the world, and put your trust in Christ?
- Having "ears to hear" is not about lack of information but failure of our hearts to trust what Jesus is telling us. Nearly everyone has ears but not everyone listens. **My kids "hear what they want to hear."** Can we tune our hearts to God's voice? Train to hear differently.

3. Doubt vs. Unbelief (vv. 16-19)

¹⁶ "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ "We played the flute 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, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

Doubt vs. Unbelief: Doubt is (ultimately) not the problem for those who oppose Jesus. You can have doubts as a believer. That is, you can, in your weakness have doubts but still place your trust in Jesus.

- But these opponents didn't just doubt, they placed their faith in themselves. Their *doubts* became bigger than their *trust*. And that's the danger of unchecked doubt. "When we doubt something we tend to start trusting something else" (Michael Polanyi).
- Doubt is normal and okay but it can't have the final say. "Have you ever noticed that the phrases in our culture favor doubt over faith? We speak of "honest doubts" and "blind faith." Faith or doubt can be honest or blind? Belief (for example) is often spoken of as inferior to "science." But the reality is, "one does not learn anything except by believing something, and — conversely — if one doubts everything one learns nothing" (Lesslie Newbigin).

Unwilling to Surrender: There's a world of difference between genuine doubts and using doubts as an excuse not to trust Jesus. Are your doubts genuine questions where you don't understand or are they excuses? Jesus uses a little nursery rhyme from village life to explain the problem with these opponents. ⁷ "We played the flute 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, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

- Think of John and Jesus. John was too serious, too somber, too “fire and brimstone” for them to follow. John was too ascetic (e.g., alcohol) They would say he’s crazy. Jesus was too partying too much, hanging out with sinners. He wasn’t holy enough for them.
- John was too somber and Jesus was too joyful. John was too far one way and Jesus was too far the other (which isn’t accurate, just a caricature). They wanted the “Goldilocks religious leader” (not too hot or too cold but *just* right). But there is no such thing. Jesus hasn’t come to fit into your preconceived comfort zone but to transform you according to his kingdom priorities. If you find a faith system that fits “just right” into what you want and what you’re comfortable with then, rest assured, you are worshipping yourself. You have made yourself the object of your own worship, a position you were never meant to occupy and that will most certainly come crashing down. E.g., Nate Dog and godhatesfags.com in college.

Conclusion

- Your sincere doubts are ok. Voice them to God. Voice them to other believers. Let your doubts take you to God and learn to trust his voice.
- It is possible, just like every area of discipleship, to submit your doubts to the Lord.
- Allow him to refine your expectations even in the midst of difficult circumstances.
- Rather than asking him to fit into your plan, learn what it means to find joy in his perfect plan, **even when you don’t understand**.
- Even when you can’t see it, even when you don’t understand, you can trust that every promise of God is perfect and good, and we know this because of Jesus. He has proven himself trustworthy.