

The One Who is to Come (Matt. 11:1–15)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In Matthew 10, Jesus trained his disciples for the mission on which they would embark. As many commentators note, Matthew does not tell us explicitly that Jesus' disciples went off to do the mission for which he had trained them in the previous chapter. This does not mean that Matthew ignored the mission, since he himself went on this mission, as one of the Twelve. It does, however, mean that narrating the details of the mission falls outside the scope of what Matthew intends to focus our attention upon. Here, Matthew offers of a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples of John that sheds important light on the identity of Jesus, the role of John the Baptist, and a singularly important—yet counterintuitive—fact: *Jesus forcefully advances the kingdom of heaven by preaching and teaching.*

The Deeds of the Coming One (Matt. 11:1–6)

Rather than telling us about the work of the disciples, Matthew intends to direct our attention to what Jesus does after sending his disciples: “When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities” (v. 1). Why does Matthew tell us this detail? In part, Matthew tells us in this verse that Jesus “did not desist from the exercise of his office, while the Apostles were laboring in another direction.”¹ One aspect of Jesus' work was to multiply the reach of his ministry by sending his disciples to join in his work, but while Jesus remained on earth, he intended to continue the same work himself.

Another part of the reason for Matthew's telling us that Jesus continued the work, though, is to shape the way that we hear the question of John the Baptist in the next section. That is, as Hendriksen writes, “it was exactly the report concerning Christ's activities, his teaching, preaching, etc. in the cities, that contributed toward John's doubt.”² Whatever we make of John's question (“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”; v. 3), Matthew intends for us to interpret it in light of Jesus' ministry of teaching and preaching: “*Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples...*” (v. 2; my emphasis). It is difficult to read too far into John's question, but it is clear that John found Jesus' work of preaching and teaching as possibly incompatible with the work that the Christ would come to do.

What, then, does John mean by this question? Due to the lack of an explicit explanation, commentators have offered several solutions to explain John's purposes here. To some, John was not asking the question for himself, but for his disciples who (apparently) struggled more than he did to

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 2:7.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 483.

believe that Jesus was indeed “the one who is to come.”³ I find this explanation difficult to believe, since the phrase, “*he sent word by his disciples*” suggests that the disciples were the instruments in bringing *John’s* question, and not their own. Even so, Calvin is certainly correct to draw out a particular application from John’s actions: “the pastors of the Church are here reminded of their duty. They ought not to endeavor to bind and attach disciples to themselves, but to direct them to Christ, who is the only Teacher.”⁴ For others, this question suggests that John himself had lost faith in Jesus, but Lenkski rightly dismisses this explanation: “The fact that John sends to Jesus for an answer proves John’s faith in Jesus.”⁵

A better solution comes, then, by examining the exact words John uses to frame his question. He does not ask whether Jesus is truly the Christ, or whether Jesus is truly “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That is, John is not revising his fundamental understanding of the identity of Jesus. Nevertheless, it seems that John was unclear on the precise role that Jesus would play in God’s work of redemption. As Morris writes, “John is asking whether it is this sort of thing that God’s Messiah would do, ‘*or do we wait for another?*’ Was Jesus, like John, a kind of forerunner? Would a greater come and bring judgment on sinners?”⁶ John knew that he himself was not the Christ, but that his work was nevertheless essential (e.g., Matt. 3:11–12; John 1:20). Furthermore, John expected the Messiah to do great works of judgment, but here Jesus was only preaching and teaching.⁷ Is this really what the Messiah was supposed to be doing, especially now that he has trained disciples to do this kind of work for him? What about everything else that had been prophesied?

Jesus’ response answers John’s actual question, but does not fully address John’s underlying concern. To reassure John that he was indeed the “one who is to come,” Jesus describes his work in the language of various Messianic prophecies from Isaiah 35–61: “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.”⁸ We should notice, however, that even Isaiah did not foretell Jesus’ great works of raising the dead.⁹ By adding this detail, Jesus was reminding John of his power even over life and death. All this material is designed to answer John’s questions: *yes*, Jesus is the one who is to come. *No*, John does not need to expect another.

Even so, Jesus seems to know that John may be disappointed by the nature of his answer. John seems to have an idea of what the Messiah *should* be doing, and Jesus was not going to deviate from his actual mission in order to fulfill the mission that John believed necessary. Seemingly aware that John may be disappointed, Jesus offers a promise: “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (v. 6). France is probably right that there is a mild rebuke here: “The verb does not in itself justify the conclusion that John is outside the scope of salvation, but it suggests that the attitude which led to his

³ e.g., Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:7–8.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:8.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 426.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 275.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 426.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:9.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 484–85.

question is not conducive to spiritual insight.”¹⁰

More than rebuke, however, Jesus is also reminding John of the necessity of faith. While John will not live long enough to see the culmination at the cross, even more doubt will be cast over Jesus’ success when our Lord gives up his life. What was difficult to believe when Jesus was spending his time teaching and preaching will become impossible (humanly speaking) for someone to believe when Jesus breathes his last, since at the cross Jesus “appears...disfigured and despised, and exposed to the reproaches of the world; because he calls us to share in his afflictions; because his glory and majesty, being spiritual, are despised by the world; and in a word, because his doctrine is totally at variance with our senses.”¹¹ Jesus is calling John to follow him by faith, and not by sight.

The Developments before the King (Matt. 11:7–11)

After sending away John’s disciples, Jesus addresses the crowd. He wants to make sure that the crowd does not interpret his response to John as a rejection of John. To avoid misunderstanding, Jesus helps the crowd to understand the unique role of John. First, Jesus reminds the crowd that they were not drawn to visit John in the wilderness because he was “a reed shaken by the wind” (v. 7)—that is, he was not “a man who yields to popular opinion, veers with it, and has no solid convictions of his own.”¹² Second, Jesus observes that John was not “a man dressed in soft clothing” (v. 8), since part of John’s appeal was his rough and rugged prophetic status.¹³ Third, drawing on this point, Jesus tells the crowd that John was “more than a prophet” (v. 9), but the one who fulfilled the prophecy in Malachi 3:1 of going before the Messiah to prepare the Messiah’s way. Therefore, Jesus insists that the crowd recognize that “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (v. 11a).

Then Jesus draws a puzzling conclusion: “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (v. 11b). This does not mean that John the Baptist stands outside God’s salvation—and, much more, this certainly does not mean that John has somehow lost his salvation because of the question he asked. Rather, it means that (1) John was the greatest up to that time because, more so than any prior prophet, he pointed directly at Jesus (“Behold, the Lamb of God!”), and (2) anyone coming after him would even more clearly *see* Jesus.¹⁴ While John could point to Jesus, he did not understand Jesus’ work of preaching and teaching, because he fundamentally did not understand that Jesus came the first time in order to accomplish our salvation by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Thus, Jesus’ preaching and teaching to prepare people for his work was essential to his mission. Then, after Jesus had accomplished all of those things, even the youngest child born and catechized in the church knows that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. What was veiled to the old covenant’s final and greatest prophet now constitutes the most fundamental facts of the gospel.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 425.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:11.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 430.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 432.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 307–08.

The Dynamics of the Kingdom (Matt. 11:12–15)

In v. 12, Jesus broadens the scope of his discourse beyond John the Baptist alone, to encompass the whole kingdom of heaven: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (v. 12). This is another one of the difficult verses in this passage, since it is unclear who is committing the “violence,” and even whether the violence represents something that is good or bad. Beginning with the first phrase, some believe that Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven *suffers* from the violence of other people, as the ESV translates it.¹⁵ On the other hand, Carson is probably right to note that, while the verb could be translated in the passive voice (“*suffered* violence”), it is probably here in the middle voice: “forcefully advancing.”¹⁶ The second phrase seems a bit clearer, since the word for “violence” is put in noun form: “the violent.” Thus, Jesus is speaking of the harm that “the violent” seek to do to the kingdom of heaven:

[The history of the kingdom of heaven] is not one of unmixed triumph for God’s purpose, but paradoxically has been marked throughout by “violence.” John himself has already suffered the “violence” of imprisonment, soon to be followed by execution. Jesus and his followers have already been received with a hostility which, if it has not yet resulted in physical violence, will soon do so both for Jesus himself (16:21 etc.) and for his disciples (10:17–23, 28, 34–39).¹⁷

Thus, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven *both* proceeds violently *and* suffers violence

Both sides of this reality are important. The kingdom of heaven looks so weak and unassuming as its great champion goes out preaching and teaching—and later, as he dies on the cross. Nevertheless, what is not visible to the eyes is the way in which, by these simple, ordinary means, the Messiah is establishing his kingdom. What puzzled John is therefore symbolic of the way that the kingdom will advance: not by physical violence of believers, but by a spiritual forcefulness. On the other hand, the physical violence will continue to persecute the church until Jesus Christ returns. As Carson writes, “Simultaneous with the kingdom’s advance have been the attacks of violent men on it. That is the very point John could not grasp. Now Jesus expressly affirms it.”¹⁸

Next, Jesus connects what he has discussed back to the ministry of John the Baptist: “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (vv. 13–14). Formally, Jesus is referring to Malachi 4:5: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” More than this one prophecy, Jesus is connecting everything he has been saying about his own ministry and John the Baptist’s ministry to the whole scope of redemptive history. So, “all the Prophets and the Law prophesied” in a way that points forward to Christ. Now that John the Baptist has come, he has taken over the mantle of

¹⁵ e.g., Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 282.

¹⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 310.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 429.

¹⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 310.

the Old Testament to continue pointing forward to Christ, but in a much more direct way. Thus, John the Baptist stands outside the Old Testament, but he also connects back with the Old Testament—to such a degree that he “is Elijah who is to come.” This does not mean that John is somehow Elijah reincarnated (or Elijah returned from the fiery chariot), but only that John’s ministry carries forward what prophets like Elijah did to its ultimate fulfillment.

Of course, Jesus knows that what he has taught is not straightforward to the human mind, and must be grasped by faith, rather than sight. Therefore he closes this section with a challenge toward faith: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 15).

Discussion Questions

1. After Jesus’ extensive instructions in Matthew 10, why do you think that Matthew tells us nothing about the actual mission the disciples went to do? Why does Matthew immediately redirect his narrative to tell us what Jesus continues to do through teaching and preaching? What about this raises questions for John the Baptist? What questions does Jesus’ work raise in your own mind? How does Jesus answer those questions?
2. What kind of a man does Jesus tell us John the Baptist was (vv. 7–8)? What does Jesus mean when he says that John was not only a prophet, but “more than a prophet” (v. 9)? What was the role of the messenger who was to come before the ultimate Coming One (v. 10)? How is John both greater than any who have come before him and also lesser than the least in the kingdom of heaven? What does that tell us about the gospel?
3. What does Jesus mean when he says that the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence/advanced violently (v. 12a)? What does Jesus mean when he says that the violent take it by force (v. 12b)? How do these two statements fill out our understanding of life as Christians? In light of this, what should we expect? What, then, should we do? Why does Jesus insist that this is something that must be grasped by faith, rather than sight (v. 15)?
4. What significance does the preaching of the gospel hold in your life? How do you respond to the preaching of the Word of God as it is happening? Does the way you treat the preaching of the gospel reflect the nature of preaching as the forceful advancement of God’s kingdom? Why or why not? How might you approach preaching differently? How might you seek to lay hold of Jesus through his Word preached this week?