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Matthew 11:7 - 11:10



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In Matthew 11:7-10, Jesus speaks about John the Baptist, who was not a typical religious leader. John wore rough clothing made of camel's hair and lived in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey. Jesus highlights that John's ministry was characterized by a lack of doubt and a violent force towards the kingdom of heaven. Thus, John was not a dime a dozen leader, but a unique prophet who defied societal norms. Ultimately, Jesus reminds his followers that they too are children of the King and should not focus on material wealth or luxurious clothing.

Transcript

We'll be beginning our study in the life of Matthew today at chapter 11 in verse 7. Now, if you were listening last time, if you caught our last session, you know that in the earlier verses in this chapter, John the Baptist, now in prison, had sent messengers to Jesus to inquire about the nature of his identity and his ministry, and Jesus had sent back word through the disciples of John that his ministry was progressing essentially as it ought to, and that John ought not to be stumbled by having unrealistic expectations. What the Messiah ought to be doing, essentially he was saying, trust me in this, I am doing the right thing, and don't be stumbled. Blessed is the man who is not offended because of me, meaning because of what I'm doing.

Now, as these messengers departed, Jesus had some things to say about John the Baptist to the crowd who had been there, and apparently this conversation had occurred in a public setting because in Matthew 11 in verse 7 it says, as they departed, that would be the disciples of John, departed to go back and take this message back to John in prison. It says, as they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John, What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet, for this is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.

Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater

than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Now, I don't know if we'll have time in this session to talk about all these verses, but we can start on them, and if necessary, we can continue on next time. There's a great deal here to look at.

Jesus obviously gave the highest recommendation of John the Baptist that could be had here. He said, of all those born of women, there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist. And tremendous things that Jesus said about John.

And yet this was in the context of John having expressed some doubts or misgivings about Jesus in just the previous context. And so one thing that's encouraging is that Jesus did not hold it against a man, that he was assailed by certain doubts once in a while. John's ministry was not characterized by continuous doubt.

He was not an unbeliever. He was a believer, but he had his moments where his faith was tried and where he might have even come close to losing his faith, but he did not. Instead, when his faith was weak, what did he do? He consulted Jesus.

He said, are you the one or not? He didn't just sit back in prison and conclude that because Jesus didn't do what he thought he should, that Jesus must not be the one and then give up his faith. He did the right thing. What you should do, too, if you happen to have struggles in your faith, go to God about it.

Talk to him. Ask him to settle matters for you. But anyway, John was well spoken of by Jesus, quite obviously, and Jesus said some unique things about John that apparently not only he did not, but probably could not be said about any other man.

And this gives us a fair bit of insight into the nature of John the Baptist's ministry and who he was. Let's talk about it. Now, Jesus, when the disciples of John turned to go back to John, Jesus himself turned to the crowds and began to talk about John and said, What did you think you would find when you went out there to see this wilderness prophet baptizing in the Jordan? I mean, did you expect to see a reed shaken in the wind? What did you go out to see? A reed shaken in the wind? Now, of course, out by the Jordan, there were a lot of river reeds growing.

And no doubt, as John was preaching and there were crowds watching, there were reeds blowing in the wind, even there, as John spoke, in all likelihood. It's possible that some people might have even noticed the reeds moving or may have been distracted by them or whatever. But obviously, that's not what they went out there for.

They didn't go out there to look at the scenery. Now, Jesus might simply be saying that.

When you went out to see John, you didn't go out there to see the scenery.

You didn't go out to see something common like reeds shaken in the wind, which you could see any day anywhere that the wind is blowing. I mean, you went out to see something special. Now, that is one thing that Jesus might be saying when he said, Did you go out to see the reeds shaken in the wind? It is also possible, though, that what he meant is that if you expected John the Baptist to be flexible, like a reed shaken in the wind, if that's the kind of person you thought he would be, well, you certainly were surprised, no doubt.

You certainly were mistaken about him because he was not a man without backbone. John was not one who was tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. He was not a broken reed.

He was not some kind of a weakling, a moral weakling, who could just be manipulated or intimidated, like a reed who would just bend to every wind gust that came his way. John was a strong moral leader who stood against the tide of the time, stood with the wind in his face and did not bend. And so Jesus, it's hard to know exactly which of these ideas Jesus is trying to get across.

There are some who believe that he's simply saying, You went out there where the reeds were blowing to hear John preach, but you didn't go out to see the reeds. You didn't go out to see something as ordinary as that. You went out to see something extraordinary.

And of course, Jesus is about to say, John was clearly and is extraordinary. Now, the other possibility, of course, is that he is telling the people that some people really are like reeds shaken in the wind. Some people don't have any moral compass or moral foundation, and every wind of human opinion or disapproval or doctrine will just send them another direction.

They just don't have any, what should we say, principles. They don't have any conscience. And if they were hoping to find a preacher like that out there in the Jordan, then they were looking in the wrong place because John was not that kind of a man.

And then Jesus asks another rhetorical question. But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. Now, what is Jesus getting at here? He's clearly saying that, again, John was not your ordinary religious leader.

The religious leaders of the Jews were, well, there were a number of types of religious leaders. There were the priests, of course, who wore soft and priestly garments. They wore linen garments and very ornate garments at that.

And then, of course, there were the Pharisees, and they too dressed in regal-like robes. Jesus made a comment about this in Matthew 23 when he said that the Pharisees loved

to wear their long robes and be called Rabbi, Rabbi. So we know that the religious leaders, the average religious leader in Israel, was distinguished by his ornate and holy garments.

As a matter of fact, in the parallel of this passage over in Luke, in Luke 7, 25, where we here read, indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. In the place of soft clothing, in the parallel in Luke 7, 25, it says, those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in king's houses. Well, whichever are the exact words of Jesus, it's clear that Jesus is saying that John was not one who would be gorgeously appareled, and he was certainly not living in luxury.

He was living out in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey and nothing else, and wore a rough garment of camel's hair, which was of the poorest kind of cloth. Now, that being so, Jesus is getting something across. Once again, he's saying, he is not your typical religious leader, this John.

You will find many religious leaders who do live luxuriously, and who do dress gorgeously. And the Pharisees probably mostly fit that description. The priests certainly did.

And he said, you don't go out in the wilderness to find people dressed like that. They get their garments soiled going out there. They stay in their fancy houses.

They have houses that correspond in luxury to the dress that they wear. But John, of course, dressed appropriately for his environment. He lived in the wilderness, and he wore rough clothing, and had a rough diet, and did not live in luxury.

Once again, Jesus is pointing out that John the Baptist was not one of your garden variety, dime-a-dozen kind of religious leaders. He's going to go on and say he was more than an ordinary prophet even. Now, what Jesus is saying in these passages, of course, is that John is extraordinary.

John is not ordinary at all. Before we go further with Jesus' remarks, we might wonder whether we are to see in Jesus' remarks about those who wear soft clothing and are gorgeously appareled, whether we should see a bit of a cut there, a bit of an edge on his remark where he's kind of putting down the Pharisees, that they're in their ivory towers, and they dress to match their lifestyle. They're aloof.

They're like those in king's houses. Kings are not exactly down among the real people. John was out where people were.

I mean, he wasn't a sociable type. He lived out in the wilderness, but the people came to him, and he was approachable, and he answered their questions, and he was down at their level, that's for sure, maybe below their level in terms of his choice of lifestyle. And Jesus might have, we can't be sure, intended this remark about those who wear soft

clothing and live in king's houses.

He might have intended that as sort of a jab or a criticism of those religious leaders that did live like kings, there were some, and that that was not the kind that Jesus was nor the kind that John was, and we might also point out later on, not the type the apostles were, nor the religious leaders in the early church. However, anyone who knows anything about church history or even about the current church knows that it wasn't very many centuries after the time of Christ that the successors to the apostles in the pre-medieval church did begin to become more ornamented. They began to wear robes.

They began to build cathedrals. They began to do things that was, well, like living in king's houses, and they dressed like it. Now, this was not like Jesus or his apostles, and certainly not like John the Baptist, but it was very much like kings, and in many respects, the church became corrupted about the same time, not by what the priests were wearing, certainly, but by the very mentality that the priest craft are, in a sense, a cut above ordinary people, that they are like kings, in a sense.

There is a clergy-laity disparity, and that began to be very clear in the way that the clergy of the church began to dress and so forth. Now, in our time, especially in the Protestant churches, well, there are some Protestant churches where the priests wear robes, just like in the Catholic church, but in the more evangelical churches, it's much less common to find it so, and you'll find preachers usually dressed in, well, let's say, secular clothing, if there's such a thing. They're not wearing sacerdotal robes, at least, but, you know, there are some preachers today who say, essentially, that we are the king's kids, and because we are king's kids, we should live in some degree of luxury, and the preachers of these churches often are the models of this very teaching by wearing expensive suits, gaudy rings and jewelry, and so forth, and this is, in a sense, their way of bearing testimony to a gospel of prosperity.

This is not a gospel Jesus preached, nor is it a gospel the apostles preached, and it's very clear from the way the apostles and Jesus lived their lives. They not only did not preach a gospel of prosperity, they did not believe in one or live like they believed in one. Jesus was a poor man.

Yes, it is true. He said, Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. There are many things that indicate that Jesus was poor, including precise statements directly made in Scripture to that fact, as we find in 2 Corinthians 8, verse 9, which says that Jesus, though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich.

Now, of course, Paul is not talking about the Christians becoming financially rich, but he does indicate that Jesus became very poor, so that we could be enriched by his stepping down from the throne of dignity and luxury and heaven that he had before. That enrichment, of course, can't be financial because Paul, to the same people, in a previous

epistle in 1 Corinthians, says that he himself was in nakedness and hunger and with no certain dwelling place, and that he was the off-scouring of the world and so forth. And so it's quite clear that wealth was not the riches that Paul was talking about when he said that we would be made rich through Jesus' poverty.

But it's quite clear from Scripture that Jesus was a poor man and that Paul was a poor man, and that John wasn't exactly rich either. And these are the founders and the early leaders of the Christian church, including the head of the church himself. They were not dressed in soft garments.

Now, Jesus was talking about John when he said that John wasn't dressed in soft garments, but Jesus himself was not dressed in a soft garment, because he said those who are dressed in those garments are in king's houses, and Jesus was not there. Jesus lived out on the hillsides and under bridges and things like that, apparently, and in people's homes who invited him in. But the point here is that John the Baptist, as well as Jesus, did model a style of ministry that is in spirit very different than that found in many churches today where prosperity and luxury is considered to be a mark of spirituality and faith and of success in ministry.

And frankly, I think it's a very sad thing that we could live in a time where the people of God can be so readily deceived by those who think that by showing off prosperity and affluence, they can adorn the gospel that way. It's an interesting thing that the Bible says that that is not how the gospel is to be adorned. If you would look over at 1 Timothy, for example, in chapter 2, Paul is talking about women there.

Of course, what is true of women, we have no reason to believe that it's not also true of men in this particular respect. He says, in like manner also, this is 1 Timothy 2, 9, in like manner also that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel. Now, modest doesn't just mean it covers their nakedness.

Modest means it's not gaudy. It does not draw attention to itself. With propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but which is proper for women professing godliness with good works.

Now, Paul is very clear on this. Christian women should not be wearing costly clothing. That's what he said.

The words are not hard. Where it says costly clothing, you know what the Greek says? The Greek words mean costly clothing. And so it's not really hard to understand the Scripture.

What's hard to understand is how many Christians don't follow the Scripture. It's not easy to understand how many people want to get to heaven but don't want to do what the Bible says Christians are supposed to do. People going to heaven are supposed to be

doing what the Bible says.

That's what Jesus said. Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and you don't do the things that I say? Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father in heaven, said Jesus. And that being so, we ought to look at what he says.

He said that women should adorn themselves modestly, not, among other things, not in costly apparel, but with propriety and moderation. And in particular, he says they should clothe themselves with good works, which is proper for women professing godliness. Well, do our churches have women who profess godliness? Well, let them adorn themselves in good works, not in costly clothing.

And as I said, what's good for the goose is good for the gander, though Paul makes this comment to the women, perhaps to redress a certain imbalance in their thinking, and maybe the women in that particular church of Ephesus to which he wrote this might have been the greater offenders in terms of modesty and apparel. But Jesus also did not encourage the ministers of God, men, to wear fancy clothes or unusual clothes either. We read of Jesus talking about the Pharisees and their practices.

And he says in verse 6, well, let me see, I'm talking about Matthew chapter 23, let me start at verse 5. It says, But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

He says, But you don't call yourself that. Don't be called Rabbi. Anyone who exalts himself shall be brought low, will be humbled.

Now, the Pharisees actually loved to exalt themselves, and one way that people can exalt themselves is the way they dress. What Jesus is pointing out in Matthew 11 is that John didn't seek that kind of prestige. He didn't try to impress people by his prosperity or by his fancy dress.

Those who do that kind of thing really belong in king's houses. And those who say, Well, therefore, we should dress well, we should be fancy dressed, we should live in king's houses because we are king's children. Such people need to be reminded that we are indeed king's children, but so is Jesus.

And Jesus lived as a poor man, and the reason for that is that, and by the way, he was the patterned son of the king. We are to follow his pattern. But the reason that Jesus didn't live in luxury is because the king is at war, and his sons are his soldiers in the battlefield.

When you are at war, you do not endure all the, I should say, you don't enjoy all the

luxuries of a king's house. You're in the trenches. Remember what Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 3? He said, Endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

We are soldiers as well as sons, and as such, we need to endure hardships. And the king's children are in the trenches right now. Later, when Jesus comes back, we will go to the king's house.

Then the fighting will be over. Then we will not have to live this way and endure these things. But in the meantime, those who seek to live in the king's house and dress like those who live in king's houses today, I think, are getting a little ahead of God on the matter.

John the Baptist, fortunately, was not under that kind of influence, nor was Jesus, nor were the early founders and leaders of the church. It's a shame that the modern church, in many cases, has gone so far away from the spirit of Christianity as modeled by the founder. Then Jesus said in verse 9, But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Meaning, of course, going out to see John the Baptist.

And this time, the answer is yes. Yes, he is a prophet, I say to you, and more than a prophet, for this is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. Now, the verse that Jesus quotes is from Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament.

And chapter 3 in verse 1, this particular verse is also quoted about John the Baptist in the gospel of Mark and in the gospel of Luke. And so, and in fact, I believe even John uses it in speaking of himself. This is a commonly quoted verse about John the Baptist in the New Testament.

It basically is saying that Jesus is saying, Yes, John is a prophet. It would be wrong to exclude that honor to him, but he's really more than a prophet. He's more than an ordinary prophet.

There were many prophets in the Old Testament and in the New, for that matter. But John was a unique prophet. He was one who had a position no other held.

And that position was the one who came to be a forerunner for the Messiah. And he had a unique message, and that was that the Messiah had come. And here he is.

Now, that message was lost on much of Israel. We'll see further what Jesus has to say about John in our next session. And we'll continue reading on because there are some very interesting verses, some that have been very confusing to Christian readers.

And we'll do our best to clarify them when we get together next time to continue.