

Gaudete

17 December, Anno Domini 2017

St. Matthew 11:2-11

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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yes, even John the Baptist needed a preacher to proclaim Christ into his ears. He may have been the greatest of the OT prophets, chosen to usher in the kingdom of the promised Christ. He may have had the boldness to call everyone a brood of vipers and tell King Herod in no uncertain terms that his adulterous relationship with his brother's wife was contrary to God's Word. But John was still a man like you and me. Under the camel skin clothing and leather belt, under the bold and brash preaching, was sinful human flesh subject to temptation and weakness and unbelief.

No one can survive the constant temptations and worldly pressures without hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, the good news that sin, death, and hell, as strong as they may seem, are vanquished. No one. Not John the Baptist. Not me. Not you. From John's perspective his ministry was failing. He was sitting behind bars, the Jewish leadership had rejected his preaching and baptizing, and it was likely (and did happen) that he wasn't going to leave prison alive. And for what? Hadn't he been faithful? Hadn't he preached the coming of the Messiah, even revealing Him to Israel in Baptism? I imagine his social life was pretty much non-existent. He wasn't tolerant of any speaking or confessing falsely about the Christ. But now the doubts began to creep in. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he took this "prepare the way of the Lord" thing a little too seriously. Maybe if he'd been okay with a little false doctrine here and there, more people would have liked him. Maybe if he'd understood the God-ordained separation between church and state Herod wouldn't have gotten so upset and thrown him in prison.

Yes, even John the Baptist was vulnerable to doubt. Jesus wasn't exactly meeting John's expectations. Where John had been preaching about axes cutting down arrogant trees, Jesus was engaging the Pharisees and trying to show them their error. Where John proclaimed the unrepentant suffering the eternal burning torments of hell, Jesus was walking around having mercy on sinners, eating with tax collectors and prostitutes and welcoming them into the kingdom of God. One of these things is not like the other. Or

so it would seem. Remember, John is also the one who plainly said “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

Was John wrong? Were his condemnations and warnings out of line? Was he just an overzealous fundamentalist who took things a little too far? Had he misunderstood God and the Holy Scriptures? By every worldly measure, yes. In truth, no. His preaching was spot on. He had been faithful. But faithful preaching doesn't meet with the success the world and our flesh expect and want. It often meets with resistance and is surrounded by weakness and brokenness. The Gospel itself is one of humility. It isn't a Gospel that speaks highly of man. It is a Gospel that gives all glory to God. It is the only and saving Gospel nonetheless.

And like John, even the most faithful among us, the so-called strongest Christians still need Christ, they still need to have their eyes drawn time and again to the fullness of Jesus' work. They may say all the right things and we may think “They really get it. They never appear to be shaken. They must always be filled with peace because their faith is so strong.” But there are no such things as uber-Christians. The lips may speak wisdom but the heart can still be filled with doubt and fear. The same one who says “You brood of vipers,” can be desperately tormented by his own guilt. The one who says “Your sins are forgiven” can just as easily believe that his own aren't. They too are surrounded on every side by temptation and affliction.

Don't believe for a second that there is a single Christian out there who doesn't need to hear God's Word. Don't assume “Oh, they know.” No wife would be satisfied to just “know” that her husband loves her. She wants and loves to hear again “I love you.” It gives fresh joy and peace. Children aren't content to just assume that their parents forgive their sins. They want to hear the words “I forgive you.” John needed to hear again, to be reassured, to be instructed again in the fullness of the truth. He needed to hear that Jesus of Nazareth was exactly who John preached Him to be.

And Jesus' response isn't “Buck up. You should know better. You just need to pray harder and have a stronger faith.” No, in love, Jesus sends preachers to the preacher. “Go and tell John...” Yes, go tell John! Go comfort him. Go reassure John that his preaching wasn't in vain and that Jesus was the fulfillment of his own preaching and his own hope. But don't tell John that he has been good or that if he would just endure patiently

God will be pleased with him and things will work out. John doesn't need to hear that. John needs the Gospel. "Go tell John what you see and hear: 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." Tell John that Jesus is crushing sin and death. Tell John that Jesus is setting us free from Satan's prison. The tyrant's reign is coming to end. And John, though you die, yet shall you live. Blessed are you if you are not offended by me."

Our sinful flesh is perpetually messing things up, confusing the truth of God's Word with the poisoned lies of Satan. This is why God continues to speak and why it is imperative that we are continually listening. Our sin-darkened minds are easily led astray into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. All too easily, when Christ's saving Word is absent, we begin to imagine things like "I don't really need forgiveness. I haven't been that bad lately." Or, "You know, the difference in the various confessions of the Christian Church aren't that big a deal. We're all basically the same." Or "I am simply too sinful for God to forgive me." Or "I'm sure God won't mind if live like the rest of the world. He'll forgive me anyway since I showed up to church."

Yes, Jesus is the Savior that every one of us need. He is not a tyrant nor is He a new Moses filled with new commands. He is the Redeemer who offers His life as a ransom for you. He sees your plight, the plight that John the Baptist and every other faithful preacher exposes by preaching the holy will of God. He sees your pride and your doubts. He sees you trapped behind death's iron gates, sentenced to an eternity of damnation for the crimes against God you have committed. John was right. We are a brood of vipers with hearts and tongues and minds filled with the poison of vengeance and selfishness and lovelessness. And God speaks so that we can see and confess the truth, to unmask the evil within that we try to hide and sugarcoat and laugh off. God speaks with John and says "Repent." Let us in faith and humility hear that sermon and hunger for righteousness.

And to those who repent, who feel the crushing weight of the Law's guilty sentence, who thirst after God's righteousness and turn from their sin, Jesus sends his preachers and says through them "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Look at what I do - I heal, I give life, I set free. I am not here to destroy you but to save you. I am here to rescue you." And your Lord pours out that Good News to you in a never-

ending flood. As often as you hear, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, as often as you recall your Baptism, You hear the Lord speak. And those promises are your life. They are the cause of our joy and hope in this world no matter what the affliction may be. It was true of Abraham, Jacob, Ruth, Job, David, Mary, John, Peter. They all were comforted and sustained by the freedom God's promises granted them - freedom from their enemies, freedom from their sin, freedom from the fear of death.

But you can't fully taste your freedom in this life because there is still sin. And the fallen world hates God's Word and anyone who would dare to confess it. You will suffer for your faithfulness. They will imprison you, they will speak evil of you, they may even kill you. But these mean nothing. Do not listen. Do not judge your Lord's faithfulness or promises by your afflictions any more than John needed to doubt because of his prison. Rather hear God's Word again and again. If you are not afflicted now you will be. Prepare. Arm yourselves. And then, in the midst of your afflictions be refreshed by that same Word. As often as you come to know your sin, as often you suffer the chains of guilt and persecution, hear the Word of the Lord. See what he is doing - casting out demons, forgiving our iniquities, delivering us in our time of need according to His wisdom and faithfulness.

Dear Christian, God speaks in order that you may have peace and hope, in order that you may know the truth and not be deceived by the lies and deceptions of the devil, the world, and your own flesh, in order that you may live. Take up that Word. Hear it at every opportunity. Make opportunity - every day to listen to your God who speaks to you. Do not despise the preaching of His Word because what He speaks is life and He speaks it for you. May God grant us all to daily hunger and thirst for this Word which gives hope in the midst of darkness and life in the shadow of death.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.