

Gaudete

16 December, Anno Domini 2018

St. Matthew 11:2-11

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

There has been a lot of discussion trying to figure out exactly why the Baptizer asked this question of Jesus. Was it for his own benefit or for his disciples? Was John suffering buyer's remorse, was the view from prison making him wonder if he had been wrong? Or was he trying to push his disciples to Jesus, doing what he came to do, point to the real Messiah? Yes. Once Jesus had begun His public ministry, it was time for the friend of the groom to step aside and fade into the background. If John's disciples were listening and paying attention to John's preaching, they should have had no trouble making the transition.

But, as it goes with groupies, they were fiercely loyal. And in John the Baptist's case, it's no wonder. He was a preacher like none other. He preached with such zeal and conviction and authority. He completely eschewed the comforts of the world. This guy was the real deal! And so, when Jesus started baptizing, John's disciples were upset. That was John's thing! How dare Jesus take what belongs to John? Really, John seemed to play the part of Messiah better than Jesus. But they weren't listening. They had turned from the teaching to the teacher. It had gotten to the point that it probably didn't matter what John said. It was John. That was all that mattered. Look at what a pious life he lived. Look at how boldly he preached. This man must be great! It was a cult of personality because sinful man is so often more concerned with the packaging than the content.

But John was very clear - he was not the Christ. He was only the forerunner, the one who would point out the Christ who was in the world. And so John is fulfilling the office to which God had appointed him. John was faithfully, in true love, not letting his followers remain with him, even in his darkest hour. It wasn't about John. It was, for John, as it had always been, about Jesus. But let's not ascribe more to John than we should either. John was certainly the greatest of those born among women. But he was still born among women. He was still a man like you and me. He still bore in his flesh the same sin and weaknesses that you and I bear. No less than anyone else, John needed the very Messiah he was pointing to. "I need to be baptized by you!" John knew his own need. He was under no delusion. And when all hope seemed lost, when every approaching footstep could have very well been the executioner, John needed assurance. John needed to hear the Gospel so that he might be strengthened and meet his martyrdom with joy and peace.

And so John sends his disciples that they might confirm what he knew, but was struggling to believe. "Are you the one? Are you sure? From where I'm standing, I'm not seeing anything that looks like the kingdom of God. You don't quite fit the fire and brimstone bill of my preaching. Things seem to be getting worse, not better. I know you're the Christ of God. I saw the Spirit. But my flesh is weak." Can you blame him? No. You know how faith waxes and wanes. You know how easy it is to lose heart in the midst of the crashing of the seas, when the overwhelming

guilt of your sin brings you to the very gates of hell, when your enemies surround you on every side and death and defeat seem certain. The word and promises of God seem barely a whisper in your heart while the jeering and raging of Satan's forces is like a trumpet blast. Behold just what kind of Savior, what kind of God you have. Does he chastise the weakness of John or his disciples? Does Jesus leave John without help? Far from it. Instead preaches the most profound sermon to those messengers and sends them back to preach it to their teacher. And if we will give our attention to exactly what Jesus says without passing over it as though it's no big deal, we may very well find ourselves filled with the peace and joy that passes all human understanding, the kind of peace that allows the martyrs to gladly lay down their lives without fear.

Hear again where Jesus directs our attention, let this sermon ring in your ears. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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." These aren't magic tricks. Jesus isn't saying "Look at how powerful I am! I can do all these amazing things! Why wouldn't you believe in me?" Notice who are the recipients of the Christ's work? It isn't the holy or the pious or the strong or the smart. Rather it is the broken, the hurting, the weak, the suffering. These are the ones receiving the Lord's care. This is why Jesus points it out. He wants you to know, you who are hurting, you who are mourning 'neath sorrow's load, you who have suffered loss, you who know well your own brokenness and the darkness of your heart - the anointed one of God has been anointed for the sole purpose of helping you. God the Father has appointed Him to comfort and heal you, to bind you up and lavish upon you divine mercy and grace.

And the greatest of the works of Jesus, the one that sums them all up? The poor have good news preached to them. Clearly, Jesus isn't speaking about the physically poor. If He were, if that were the only problem, then the answer would be more daily bread, more money, more stuff. But the poor receive good news, they receive the Gospel. These are the poor in spirit. These are those who have been humbled under the Law, who are terrified of their sins, and cower under the dark cloud of God's just judgment. These are those whose spirits are filled with sorrow and contrition on account of their sin, who don't pass by the Ten Commandments with little more than a glance, who are laid in the dust of repentance when they consider just how good and holy they are. To these, to you, Jesus proclaims good news!

To them, to you, Jesus IS good news. Because Jesus is your salvation. He has been anointed for the sole purpose of standing under God's judgment against your sin and being condemned on your behalf. The Spirit of God was upon Him to come to you precisely in your brokenness and humility, when you finally realize how lost you are and how ugly your sin is. There Jesus is, where He wills to go - not to chastise or condemn, not to frighten you or drive you further into despair by demanding more of you. Hidden in the person of His servants, Jesus finds you there so that He can preach to you the seemingly impossible truth that your sins are forgiven. God has wiped out your guilt forever. And more than that. He hasn't just brought your account to zero. In His unfathomable grace, He has paid your debt to Him and then poured out to you double that debt in blessing.

That's how God works. Jesus has come precisely for those who can't help themselves and confess it, for those who have nowhere left to turn, no comfort left to take except in the mercy and grace of God. And this rich mercy of God has been poured out to us generously through Jesus' cross. There Blood and water came pouring out of Jesus' side so that the font and the chalice might be filled to overflowing with forgiveness, life, and salvation for repentant sinners who have and can do nothing to earn it.

This is certainly offensive to our sensibilities. Our hearts find this nearly impossible to believe. And don't kid yourself. If John the Baptist suffered from doubt, if his crosses and trials were able to shake him, you are certainly vulnerable. Follow John's finger. Judge the prophet by his preaching. There you will find the Lamb, God's Lamb. He didn't come then in great power and glory. Just the opposite. He came in great meekness and gentleness. And this is where unbelief stumbles and is deeply offended. The unbeliever dismisses Jesus and looks for another either because they were looking for someone wearing soft clothing, riding on a war horse, seeking the strong or the unbeliever refuses to count themselves among the weak and those who need a Savior. Such an unbeliever is content to rely on his own righteousness. Such a one feels no need for the righteousness of Christ. His ears don't long for good news to be preached to him because he doesn't believe that he is poor. His soul doesn't hunger and long to be fed with the life-giving fruit of the cross, the very Body and Blood of God's Son that were offered on his behalf. Pity such a one. And if that one is you, pray that God would remove the veil from your eyes so that you aren't scandalized and offended by Jesus who has come to save all sinners, including you. Dearly beloved of the heavenly Father, though you feel crushed and weighed down, though you feel weak and defeated, rejoice. Though you feel trapped behind your own prison walls of sin and fear, rejoice. Your warfare is over, your iniquity is pardoned, and you have received a double blessing from the Lord for all your sins. Behold Jesus who has come to bring you comfort, who doesn't break bruised reeds or snuff out smoldering wicks, but who speaks tenderly to you. Behold the one who was not offended by you, but rather claimed you as His own, washed away all the filth of your sin in the Baptismal waters, and raised you up from death to sit with Him and to be served by Him at His table. Rejoice! This day the Lord is at hand to save you.

In the Name of +Jesus.