

Matthew 11 Commentary-C H Spurgeon

PREVIOUS

NEXT

MATTHEW 11:1-19 THE KING SUPPORTS HIS MESSENGERS BY HIS OWN APPEARING

Matthew 11:1. AND it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities

He arranged their missionary tour, and then followed in their wake. It was his plan to send them two and two through the cities of Israel, and then to follow them up in person, and sustain their testimony by his own instruction; for he came "to teach and to preach." We are to do our best for men, and then to hope that our Lord will deign to certify and confirm our teaching by his own coming to men's hearts. The term, "their cities", sounds rather singular. Had our Lord given those cities to the twelve? It would seem so. In a spiritual sense we go first and take possession of the souls entrusted to us, and then the King himself comes in and takes his own at our hands. Lord, give me many souls which may be thine in the day of thine appearing. To this end I would gladly go at thy bidding, and preach thy Word, trusting that I may hear the sound of my Master's feet behind me.

THE KING VINDICATES AND CHEERS HIS HERALD

Matthew 11:2, 3. Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

Here we begin quite another story. The first verse ought to have gone with the preceding chapter, to which it belongs. John was in prison: he did not make a good caged bird — he of the wilderness and the river — and his faith began to flag. So some think. Was it so? Or was this embassy sent to our Lord for the sake of John's disciples? Were they wavering so much that John could not reassure them without the aid of Jesus? Or was it that John would intimate to our Lord that there were doubts abroad which would be met by a further proclamation of his mission? Was this all that John now thought himself able to do — namely, to call upon the Lord to state his claims in the most decisive manner? Did John resolve to draw from our Lord a very clear statement, that his disciples might thus be readily transferred to Jesus? The question as to our Lord's having a mission was surely not for John's sake: he knew full well that Jesus was the Son of God. But when he heard of all that Jesus did, he may have wondered that he himself was left in prison, and he may have thought that possibly another was yet to come before all things could be rectified. Dark thoughts may come to the bravest when pent up in a narrow cell. It was well that John's question was put, that it might receive a distinct reply; reassuring for himself, and instructive for us.

Matthew 11:4, 5. Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again these things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Our Lord makes no assertion, but sets clear evidence before the eyes of John's delegates. He based the evidence of his Messiahship upon his miracles. Why is it that, in these days, it is said that the miracles are rather a trial of faith than a support of it? An unbelieving generation turns even food into poison. What John had heard in prison his messengers were to see for themselves, and then to tell to their imprisoned master.

Prison walls cannot shut out news of Jesus; but good news comes best through friends who are personal witnesses.

The messengers received command "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see." Of hearing and seeing they had more than they could fully report, and more than enough to make them see for themselves that Jesus was the Christ. The cures wrought were all beneficent, superhuman, and of a kind foretold by the prophets as signaling the coming of Messiah. The proof was cumulative: the argument increased in power.

The last two proofs are evidently placed as the climax of the argument: "The dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. " These two wonders are placed side by side. There is as much of the miraculous in the poor man's gospel as in the dead man's resurrection.

John's disciples had come at a right time when our Lord's work was in full swing, and all these wonderful works were following each other rapidly.

Jesus is his own proof. If men would have arguments for the gospel, let them hear and see what it is, and what it does. Let us tell to souls in the prison of doubt what we have seen Jesus do.

Matthew 11:6. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

That man is blessed who so believes, that his faith cannot be stumbled. A hint for John. John had not fallen, but very possibly he had stumbled. He had been a little put to it, through a sense of non-deliverance in time of need, and therefore he had asked the question. Blessed is he who can be left in prison, can be silenced in his testimony, can seem to be deserted of his Lord, and yet can shut out every doubt. John speedily regained this blessedness, and fully recovered his serenity.

Lord, grant me to be firmly settled in my convictions, that I may enjoy the blessedness which flows from unstaggering faith. May nothing about thee ever cause me to stumble at thee!

Matthew 11:7. And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind.

Our Lord will sooner or later bear testimony to the man who has faithfully testified of him. John honors Jesus; and in due time Jesus honors John. Our Lord asks his hearers what they thought of John. You went to see John; you even "went out into the wilderness " to have a look at him. What did you see? A vacillating orator? A man who felt the influence of his times, and bowed before its spirit, like a bulrush in the breeze? Nay, verily; John was no time-server, no flattering courtier, no pleaser of the great. The Baptist had not sent to Jesus because he was weak, but because he was honestly outspoken, and so anxious for absolute certainty that he could not endure the shadow of a doubt. John sent to headquarters to make assurance doubly sure, by a new declaration from Christ's own lips.

Matthew 11:8. But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.

Did you see a man of courtly manners, costly dress, pompous diction, delicate expressions? Was John a court preacher, fit to flatter royal ladies?

If so, how came he to be in the wilderness? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. John was hated for his plain rebukes, and revenge against him burned in the heart of one near the throne because he knew not how to be silent in the presence of royal sin. John the Baptist was not in the palace: he had been promoted to the prison. His style had grated on the ear of a shameless princess; for he knew not how to speak soft words like those who are "clothed in soft raiment. " Thus does our Lord bear witness to John who came to be his witness.

Matthew 11:9, 10. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

John was all that the very greatest of the prophets had been; and he came nearer to Jesus than all the rest; his Master's steps were close upon his heel. He shone like Milton's star — "Fairest of stars, last in the train of night, If better thou belong'st not to the dawn." He was almost a gospel-preacher, and failing to reach that point, he was chief among the prophets, yea, and more than a prophet. In the book of Malachi, the Lord God had promised to send a messenger before Messiah, and now the Messiah himself quotes the prophecy with a change of persons not to be understood save as we believe in the Trinity in Unity. He who is "Me " is also

"Thee " according to the aspect in which he is regarded, or the person who speaks. John was the messenger of God to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus, and our Lord recognizes him in that honored capacity.

Jesus is not ashamed of his herald because he is in prison, but the rather he speaks the more openly of him. John had confessed his Lord, and now his Lord confesses him. This is a rule with our King.

Matthew 11:11. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven greater than he.

Jesus sets John in a very high position, and we know that his judgment is true. Up till the coming of our Lord, John was greatest of woman born; but the new dispensation was on a higher plane, for "the kingdom of heaven " was set up. As we may say, as a rule, that the darkest day is lighter than the brightest night; so John, though first of his own order, is behind the last of the new or gospel order. The least in the gospel stands on higher ground than the greatest under the law. How privileged are we who, by virtue of entering into the kingdom of heaven by faith, are made to see, and hear, and enjoy those things which even the prophet of prophets could not enter upon! We may rest assured that there is nothing better to be discovered or revealed than that heavenly kingdom into which our Lord and King has brought us.

Matthew 11:12. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

John had aroused an unusual earnestness which had not died out. Men were eager for the glories of "the kingdom of heaven. " Though they misinterpreted it, they were on fire to seize it. John himself, in his excess of eagerness, had sent his two disciples to our Lord with an impatient question. Our Savior does not blame his intense enquiry; but says that so it must be. A holy violence had been introduced by John, and they had just seen it in his question, and our Lord would have all those who would obtain the kingdom capture it by the same passionate eagerness. The time was come to end indifference, and put on a holy resolution as to the things of God.

Thus the King sets forth the spirit demanded in these who would take part and lot in his great cause and kingdom. Lord, wake us up! Suffer us not to be using dead formality, where living violence can alone avail.

Matthew 11:13. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

God left not himself without witness all along. John ended the chain of foreseers and foretellers, and now the Lord himself appears. Our Lord draws a line at John by saying "until John ": henceforth the kingdom is set up.

Matthew 11:14. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

John was the Elijah for whom they looked. Would people believe it?

Would they obey his command to repent? Then he would be to them a true Elijah, and make straight for them the way of the Lord. Even a man sent of God is to his hearer very much what that hearer chooses to make of him.

No doubt, many a great boon has been missed by men failing to accept it. "If ye will receive it ," a minister, may be the channel of salvation, or the means of spiritual edification, or of surpassing joy; but if not received it may become a weariness, or as meaningless as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

Matthew 11:15. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

This matter is worthy of earnest heed. If you can hear anything, hear this truth. This call to attention needs to be oft repeated.

Through the hearing ear, the divine blessing comes to the soul; therefore hear, and your soul shall live. Our Lord and King, who made the ear, has a right to demand its attention to his voice. Some men have no ears to hear truth, but quick ears for falsehood. We should be grateful if the Lord has given us spiritual perception; for “the hearing ear and the seeing eye” are from the Lord. 16-19. But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

Our Lord condemns the folly of the age in which he lived. The people would not listen to the messenger of God whoever he might be, but raised childish objections. Therefore the Lord likens them to “children sitting in the markets”, who were asked to play by their fellows, but they could never agree upon the game. If certain of the children would imitate a wedding, and began to pipe, the others would not dance; and when they proposed a funeral, and began to mourn, the others would not lament.

They were disagreeable, sullen, and captiously resolved to reject every offer.

Such was the foolish manner of men in our Lord’s time. John was an ascetic: he must be out of his mind and under the influence of a demon.

Jesus is a man among men, and goes to their feasts: he is accused of eating and drinking to excess, and associating with the sordid and wicked. There was no pleasing them. Thus is it at this hour: one preacher, who speaks with elegant diction, is too flowery; and another, who uses plain speech, is vulgar: the instructive preacher is dull, and the earnest preacher is far too excitable. There is no suiting some people. Even the great Lord of all finds his wise arrangements met with discontent.

Yet wisdom, after all, gave forth her teachings by rightly chosen ambassadors. She is justified of her children. Her children recognized the fitness of her messengers; and her messengers, who were also her children, were a credit to her choice, and justified her selection and preparation of them. The All-wise God is a better judge of what a minister should be than any of us are. Well did George Herbert write — “Judge not the preacher, he is thy judge.” The varied orders of preachers are all needful, and, if we would but know it, they are all ours; whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas; and it is ours not to cavil at them, but to give earnest heed to their proposals.

Lord, deliver us from a captious, fault-finding spirit; for if we begin objecting, we are apt to keep on at it. If we will not hear one preacher, we may soon find ourselves quite weary of a second and a third, and before long it may come to pass that we cannot hear any minister to profit.

MATTHEW 11:20-30 THE KING’S WARNINGS, REJOICINGS, AND INVITATIONS

The wonderful portion of Scripture which makes up the rest of this chapter deals with three things, about which there has been great disputing: namely, the responsibility of man, the sovereign election of God, and the free invitations of the gospel. They are all here in happy combination.

Matthew 11:20. Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.

Some cities were more favored with the Lord’s presence than others, and therefore he looked for more from them. These cities ought to have repented, or Christ would not have upbraided them: repentance is a duty.

The more men hear and see of the Lord’s work, the greater is their obligation to repent. Where most is given most is required. Men are responsible for the way in which they treat the Lord Jesus and “his mighty works.” There is a time for upbraiding: “Then began he.” The most loving preacher will see cause for complaining of his impenitent hearers: HE upbraids, even he who also wept. Repentance is what we who are preachers drive at; and where we do not see it, we are sore troubled. Our trouble is not that our hearers did not applaud our ability, but because they repented not. They have enough to repent of, and without repentance woe is upon them, and therefore we mourn that they do not repent.

Matthew 11:21. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had

been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

Jesus knew what the doom of certain Jewish towns would be; and he knew what certain heathen cities would have done if they had been placed in their favorable circumstances.

He spoke infallibly. Great privileges were lost on Chorazin and Bethsaida, but would have been effectual had they been granted to Tyre and Sidon.

According to our Lord's declaration, God gave the opportunity where it was rejected. and it was not given where it would have been accepted. This is true, but how mysterious! The practical point was the guilt of these favored cities, in that they remained unmoved by visitation which would have converted the heathen Sidonians; yes, and would have made them repent quickly "long ago "; and in the most humiliating manner, "in sackcloth and ashes. " It is a sad fact that our impenitent hearers do despite to a grace which would have brought cannibals to the Savior's feet!

Matthew 11:22. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of Judgment, than for you.

Terrible as the hell of these two sinful cities will be, their punishment will be more bearable than the sentence passed on cities of Galilee where Jesus taught and wrought miracles of love. The sin is in proportion to the light.

Those who perish with salvation sounding in their ears perish with a vengeance. Assuredly the day of judgment will be notable for surprises.

Who would have thought to see Bethsaida sink lower than Sidon?

Believers will not in the day of judgment be surprised, for they will remember in that day our Lord's "I say unto you. "

Matthew 11:23. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

The warning to Capernaum is, if possible, still more emphatic, for Sodom was actually destroyed by fire from heaven. Capernaum, his own city, the head-quarters of the army of salvation, had seen and heard the Son of God: he had done in it that which even Sodomites would have felt; and yet it remained unmoved. Those foul sinners of the accursed Sodom, had they beheld the miracles of Christ, would have so forsaken their sins that their city would have been spared. Jesus knew that it would have been so; and therefore he mourned to see Capernaum remain as hardened as ever.

Because of this rejection of special privilege, the city which had been exalted unto heaven would be brought as low in punishment as it had been raised high in privilege. May none of our favored English race perish in the same condemnation! Alas, how much we fear that millions of them will do so!

Matthew 11:24. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee.

What Sodom will endure when the great Judge of all appoints the doom of the wicked, we may not try to realize; but it will be somewhat less than the penalty inflicted upon those who have sinned against the light, and rejected the testimony of the Lord from heaven. To reject the gospel of the Son of God-is to create for one's self a sevenfold hell. Here, again, our Lord speaks from his own full authority, with "I say unto you. " He speaks what he knows: he will himself be the Judge.

So far our Lord spake in heaviness of heart; but his brow cleared when he came to the glorious doctrine of election in the next verse.

Matthew 11:25, 26. At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

He turned to the other-side of truth. "Jesus answered ": one doctrine answers to another: sovereign grace is the answer to abounding guilt. With rejoicing spirit Jesus sees how sovereign grace meets the unreasonable abounding of human sin, and chooses out its own, according to the good pleasure of the Father's will. Here is the spirit in which to regard the electing grace of God: "I thank thee. " It is cause for deepest gratitude.

Here is the author of election: "O Father. " It is the Father who makes the choice, and reveals the blessings. Here is his right to act as he does: he is "Lord of heaven and earth. " Who shall question the good pleasure of his will? Here we see the objects of election, under both aspects; the chosen and the passed-over. Babies see because sacred truths are revealed to them, and not otherwise. They are weak and inexperienced. They are simple and unsophisticated. They can cling and trust, and cry, and love; and to such the Lord opens up the treasures of wisdom. The objects of divine choice are such as these. Lord, let me be one among them! The truths of the heavenly kingdom are hid, by a judicial act of God, from men who, in their own esteem, are "the wise and prudent. " They cannot see, because they trust their own dim light, and will not accept the light of God.

Here we see, also, the reason of election, the divine will: "So it seemed good in thy sight. " We can go no further than this. The choice seemed good to Him who never errs, and therefore it is good. This stands to the children of God as the reason which is above all reason. Deus vult is enough for us. If God wills it, so must it be, and so ought it to be.

Matthew 11:27. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

Here we have the channel through which electing love works towards men: "All things are delivered unto me of my Father. " All things are put into the Mediator's hands; fit hands both towards God and towards man; for he alone knows both to perfection. Jesus reveals the Father to the babes whom he has chosen. Only the Father can fill the Son with benediction, and only through the Son can that benediction flow to any one of the race of men. Know Christ, and you know the Father, and know that the Father himself loveth you. There is no other way of knowing the Father but through the Son. In this our Lord rejoiced; for his office of Mediator is dear to him, and he loves to be the way of communication between the Father whom he loves, and the people whom he loves for the Father's sake.

Observe the intimate fellowship between the Father and the Son, and how they know each other as none else ever can. Oh, to see all things in Jesus by the Father's appointment, and so to find the Father's love and grace in finding Christ.

My soul, there are great mysteries here! Enjoy what thou canst not explain.

Matthew 11:28. Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Here is the gracious invitation of the gospel in which the Savior's tears and smiles were blended, as in a covenant rainbow of promise. "Come "; he drives none away: he calls them to himself. His favorite word is "Come." Not, — go to Moses, "Come unto me. " To Jesus himself we must come, by a personal trust. Not to doctrine, ordinance, or ministry are we to come first; but to the personal Savior. All laboring and laden ones may come: he does not limit the call to the spiritually laboring, but every working and wearied one is called. It is well to give the largest sense to all that mercy speaks. Jesus calls me. Jesus promises "rest", as his gift: his immediate, personal, effectual rest he freely gives to all who come to him by faith.

To come to him is the first step, and he entreats us to take it. In himself, as the great sacrifice for sin, the conscience, the heart, the understanding obtain complete rest. When we have obtained the rest he gives, we shall be ready to hear of a further rest which we find.

Matthew 11:29, 30. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

"Take my yoke, and learn ": this is the second instruction; it brings with it a further rest which we "find. " The first rest he gives through his death; the second we find in copying his life. This is no correction of the former statement, but an addition thereto. First, we rest by faith in Jesus, and next we rest through obedience to him. Rest from fear is followed by rest from

the turbulence of inward passion, and the drudgery of self. We are not only to bear a yoke, but his yoke; and we are not only to submit to it when it is laid upon us, but we are to take it upon us. We are to be workers, and take his yoke; and at the same time we are to be scholars, and learn from him as our Teacher. We are to learn of Christ and also to learn Christ. He is both teacher and lesson. His gentleness of heart fits him to teach, to be the illustration of his own teaching, and to work in us his great design. If we can become as he is, we shall rest as he does. We shall not only rest from the guilt of sin — this he gives us; but we shall rest in the peace of holiness, which we find through obedience to him. It is the heart which makes or mars the rest of the man. Lord, make us “lowly in heart”, and we shall be restful of heart. “Take my yoke.” The yoke in which we draw with Christ must needs be a happy one; and the burden which we carry for him is a blessed one. We rest in the fullest sense when we serve, if Jesus is the Master. We are unloaded by bearing his burden; we are rested by running on his errands. “Come unto me”, is thus a divine prescription, curing our ills by the pardon of sin through our Lord’s sacrifice, and causing us the greatest peace by sanctifying us to his service.

Oh for grace to be always coming to Jesus, and to be constantly inviting others to do the same! Always free, yet always bearing his yoke; always having the rest once given, yet always finding more: this is the experience of those who come to Jesus always, and for everything. Blessed heritage; and it is ours!