



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from November 15 afternoon through November 22 morning

Matthew 11:1-9

Jesus continued to travel and preach as he made his way through some of the cities that his disciples had called home. Matthew records that by this time, John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod (more details of this are recorded in chapter 14). John was somehow able to communicate with his own followers, and through them he heard about what Jesus was doing. He then sent them to Jesus to find out if he was in fact the Messiah. Rather than directly answer their question, Jesus pointed them to his miraculous works and his teaching. This was a connection to Isaiah 35:5-6 and Isaiah 61:1, with one passage describing the return of God's people to Zion and the other a messianic passage that matched up to the ministry of Jesus. He also instructed them not to be offended by him, which was a way of telling them that John needed to accept him as the Savior. Jesus then used this encounter as an opportunity to remind the people of the greatness of John the Baptist, his rugged appearance and his powerful ministry. Jesus said that John was more than a prophet.

Matthew 11:10-19

The purpose of Christ's reminder about John was to teach the people about the kingdom of heaven. John had set himself apart with his appearance, his teaching and his baptism ministry. He had prepared the way for the Messiah (Jesus cited Malachi 3:1 in connection to this), and was considered greater than the Old Testament prophets because he personally pointed out Jesus as the Messiah. And yet, Jesus said that a person who was least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than John. Below is a commentary note that explains the meaning of this:

John is thus seen, in his capacity as the forerunner, as standing outside the kingdom of heaven. He is the last of the old order, as the subsequent identification with Elijah (v. 14) will make clear. In v. 12 his 'days' are seen as the time when God's kingdom begins to be a reality, but his own place is rather with the Old Testament (v. 13). It was not his privilege to be involved in the ministry of Jesus, with its new perspective and dynamic. To speak of him as 'outside the kingdom of heaven' in this sense is not of course to pronounce on his personal salvation (any more than that of any of the Old Testament saints), but on his place in the development of God's plan.

R. T. France, Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 198.

Jesus then shared a truth regarding the kingdom of heaven: from the time of John's ministry to that moment, there were those who stood in violent opposition to the Gospel. John already had experienced this through this imprisonment and Jesus had experienced it through the religious leaders who had began to stand against him. In the same way, many of the Old

Testament prophets faced violent opposition to their ministries, including Elijah. It was thought by many that Elijah would return to introduce the Messiah, and Jesus said that John embodied this return though most did not accept him as such.

At that point, Jesus used a children's game to pronounce judgment upon the current generation for its rejection of both John and Jesus. Like the children in the marketplace, the people of Israel had specific expectations of the coming king. Rather than accepting how God was working, they compared what was happening to their own expectations and rejected God's ways. John was seen as an intense and serious man. Jesus was viewed as a man who spent time at parties with those who were known for their sinful lifestyle. The people of Israel had chosen to reject both men and their perceived lifestyles. In other words, the people simply refused to be satisfied with what God was doing, even though the power of God upon both of these men was undeniable.

Matthew 11:20-30

In connection with how so many had rejected both John and Jesus, he then pronounced judgment upon cities where people had seen his power and heard his teaching and yet refused to believe. In the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon were known for their rejection of God (Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26-28, Amos 1:9-10). Jesus cited Isaiah 14:13-15 which pronounced judgment upon Babylon, and of course Sodom was well known for its evil ways (Genesis 19). Jesus' message that even these foreign cities that were detested by Israelites would fare better on the day of judgment than the towns in the region of Galilee reinforced the seriousness of their choice to reject him as the Messiah.

There were many who had a high level of understanding regarding God's ways, who had chosen to reject Jesus. He stated that the Father had "hidden these things" from those who believed themselves to be wise, and "revealed them to little children." In this time period children were seen as insignificant, and so the message of Jesus was an indictment on those who should have received him but did not. In addition, those who lacked the background knowledge of God and His ways also were free of the preconceived notions of the religious leaders and thus were more open to Jesus and his ministry. This was all by the grace of God the Father, as no one could utilize human knowledge alone to arrive at the realization that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. The Father and the Son have a special relationship, and it was only through Jesus the Son that anyone could come to know the Father. This is the grace that led Jesus to then call for those who carry heavy burdens to come to him so he could give them rest. The yoke was that piece of farm equipment that was attached to oxen to allow the animals to do work in the fields, and there also was a type of yoke that people used to help them accomplish manual labor. The yoke, then, actually enabled a person to carry more weight! When taking on the yoke of Jesus, the burden of the law became lighter and more manageable. This is the Gospel of Jesus, which reconciles a person to God and begins an abiding relationship with Jesus himself. No longer must a person attempt to obey God in one's own power. Instead, obedience to God is an outflow of this right standing with God and abiding relationship with the Son.

Discussion Questions

1. John had baptized Jesus, probably saw and heard God the Father identify Jesus as His Son, and had proclaimed Jesus was “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Why do you think he sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah?
2. What can we learn from Jesus’ response to John’s question?
3. Why did Jesus tell the people that even the person who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John?
4. In your own words, describe the generation that Jesus refers to in verses 16-19. Do you see similarities to our generation today? If so, what are they?
5. Why did Jesus pronounce judgment upon certain cities where he had ministered? What does this teach us about the importance of repentance?
6. How does Jesus’ message in verses 25-30 encourage you right now? How can you use this message to encourage others?