

Week 12: Matthew 11

Hook



Main Point: Jesus is the King, but He doesn't fight physical battles: He fights spiritual ones.

Like all kids, Ben wanted the newest and best toy on the market for Christmas. As he went to bed that Christmas Eve in 1991, the excitement and expectations of how great Christmas morning would be were consuming all his thoughts. However, what happened Christmas morning would not turn out to be what Ben was expecting. That morning as Ben and his family opened their presents, the specific toy, the Super Nintendo was nowhere to be found. However, there was one last gift for Ben, and with all hope, he opened the box hoping to find a Super Nintendo, yet all he found was a piece of paper. Perplexed and disappointed, Ben was told that the paper showed all the stocks his parents had bought or had been given to them. While not thinking much of the stocks he now owned, later, when he finished college, he returned to find out their current worth. He learned that the stocks had grown tremendously in value over the years, and as Ben was preparing for seminary, anxious about how he was going to afford it, the stocks would provide the funds to pay for school completely.

Q: Have you ever been excited about getting a gift for Christmas, only to receive something entirely different? If so, what was it?

Q: When something completely opposite of what you expected happens, how do you respond? Do you readjust your perception and expectations? Do you respond in anger or sadness?

Transition: Today we will discuss how Jesus is King, but the battle is spiritual, not physical.

Week 12: Matthew 11

Book

Main Point: Jesus is the King, but He doesn't fight physical battles: He fights spiritual ones.

Matthew 11:1–15 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Jesus' ministry looked different than people, even John the Baptist, expected.

Q: How could even John the Baptist doubt Jesus? How does that make you feel about yourself?

Q: Why did Jesus say there was no one greater than John the Baptist?

It may be shocking to read that John the Baptist questioned whether Jesus was really "the One." He had been declaring that Jesus was the Lamb of God (John 1:29). He was the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus (Mark 1:3). He even leaped for joy in the womb when he first "met" Jesus (Luke 1:41). But now John was in prison, probably about to die, and Jesus wasn't turning out to be exactly the Messiah John thought He would be. So, of course, he had a moment of doubt, as anyone would.

Jesus didn't chastise John for lack of faith as He did the disciples in the storm (Matthew 8:23–26). He didn't pronounce woe on him as He did the Pharisees (Matthew 23:13–33). He responded gently and pronounced a blessing on him if he persevered (v. 6). Jesus did nothing but praise John the Baptist (vv. 11–14). He called him the greatest man who had ever lived (v. 11), Jesus' own forerunner (v. 10), and the Elijah promised in the prophets (v. 14). Jesus did not criticize John for his doubts. We will all have doubts at times, even the most faithful of us.

It is perfectly normal for even prophets to have moments of doubt. Right after the great victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah ran from Jezebel in such fear that he asked God to take his life (1 Kings 19:4). Beaten down by the anger, hatred and rejection from the people of Israel during his entire ministry, Jeremiah cursed the day he was born (Jeremiah 20:14–18). God's prophets were human just like anyone else. Sharing this realistic picture of John's doubt would only encourage Jesus' disciples, whose faith would be tested, that if they persevered to the end, they would be blessed (v. 6).

When John's disciples asked Jesus if He were really the One who was promised, Jesus didn't answer with sharp critique or snarky rhetoric. He simply pointed to the signs of His ministry – "What have you seen and heard?" (v. 4) Jesus referred to Isaiah, knowing John would recognize the passage (Isaiah 35:5–6). John's questioning was

understandable. Jesus hadn't yet done the things John had declared He would do – “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). Jesus would do that, but not until after His death, at Pentecost (Acts 2). John wasn't wrong about Jesus, but he didn't understand the whole picture. His expectations of Jesus were “correct, but incomplete.”ⁱ John thought that because Jesus had come, it was time for the final judgment. John didn't understand that the kingdom would come in two phases – in part now, but not fully until the final judgment, after which God will make all things new, including the new heavens and new earth. This is the final, consummated kingdom of God. John was looking for signs of the final judgment, but Jesus was only on phase one. Jesus pointed to His actions, which were considered Messianic signs too, but not what John the Baptist was expecting. Yet they were exactly what Jesus Himself had declared when He started His ministry (Luke 4:18–19).ⁱⁱ When John struggled with doubt, Jesus pointed him back to the Scriptures, God's wisdom, to find the truth. When we struggle with doubt, we should do the same (James 1:5–6).

When John's disciples left, Jesus talked to the crowd about John. John was not weak like a reed in the wind, swayed by the world (v. 7). He was not one of those professional prophets in the king's court who did it for the money and status and typically told whoever was paying them whatever he wanted to hear (v. 8). John was a true prophet. He spoke God's Word and lived the sacrificial lifestyle of a Nazarite, completely dedicated to his mission (Numbers 6). He is the Elijah promised at the end of the Old Testament, the messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord (vv. 10, 14; Malachi 4:5). Jesus even said John was the greatest person who had ever lived up to that point, not because of the man himself, but because of his message, because he had the honor of introducing Jesus to the world. And yet, even the least in the kingdom of God would be greater than he. He didn't say this to denigrate John; this was a typical device of Jewish rhetoric. Again, it was about the message, not the man. Even the least of the disciples of the kingdom would be greater than the greatest man who ever lived, because they proclaim the message of the Gospel.ⁱⁱⁱ

The “violent” people who have tried to take the kingdom by force are not just people who have physically tried to overthrow the throne of Israel. It is a metaphor with a broader meaning, referring to anyone who tries to lay claim to the kingdom of God “without God's consent.”^{iv} Throughout Israel's history, and even now, false prophets have claimed to have the truth, the way. But Jesus here declared that those who have ears to hear – the ones who listen to Jesus' teaching and follow it – are the ones who will inherit the kingdom. They don't have to violently overthrow it; it will be given to them as an inheritance (1 Peter 1:4). Jesus is *the way* to the Father and the kingdom of God.

All of this is Jesus' assurance that He really is the promised Messiah. He really is the son of David who will reign forever over the kingdom of God. That kingdom just looks a bit different than they expected. Many Jews thought the Messiah would overthrow Rome and sit on the physical throne in Jerusalem over the nation of Israel. John thought it

meant Jesus would bring the day of the Lord – the Day of Judgment, separate the wheat from the chaff – and institute God’s eternal heavenly kingdom right away. John was closer to the truth, but he didn’t understand that the full kingdom wouldn’t come right away. Jesus would initiate the kingdom; He would create a way to the kingdom through His death and Resurrection. But the end would not come right away, in order to give more people time to say yes to Him (2 Peter 3:1–10).

Q: Describe times you have struggled with doubt. How did you respond? When we are doubting, how can we find confidence and assurance in Christ? (see James 1:5–6)

Q: In what ways do we try to paint our own pictures of who Jesus is, why He came, and what His kingdom is like? How can we know the truth?

Q: If you had to explain to an unbeliever why you think Jesus is *the* way to the kingdom and why we should *only* listen to what He says about it, what would you say?

Matthew 11:16–24 [Read]

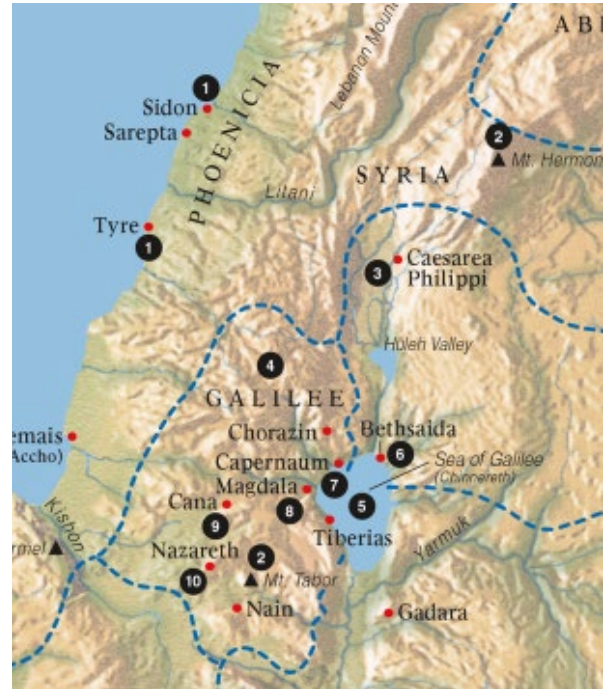
Talking Point 2: Entrance into the kingdom is not based on heritage or background but on faith.

Jesus turned to people’s reactions to John the Baptist and Himself. He pronounced a harsh judgment on His current generation using graphic illustrations, comparing them to children in the marketplace who whine that other children won’t play their games. In a culture that didn’t value children, this would strike ancient hearers as spoiled and obnoxious. John and Jesus came to the people from completely different angles, but their opponents didn’t believe either way. They criticized John for not eating and drinking, but when Jesus ate and drank, they called him a glutton and a drunkard. Their critics were completely inconsistent. No matter what the prophets did, they couldn’t win. Jesus called them spoiled brats who weren’t happy no matter what you offered them.^v Keener writes, “The striking image of this parable is clear: the generation is committed to refusing the truth, even if fickle in its reasons for doing so.”^{vi}

And in addition to rejecting their message, their critics charged them with very serious offenses. They said John had a demon, which would have been punishable by excommunication or even death, though they wouldn’t have actually enforced capital punishment for the offense in that time period.^{vii} Still, what they accused him of was a capital offense, which slandered his reputation. Accusing Jesus of being a “drunkard and a glutton” alluded to the law against a “rebellious son,” which was also a capital offense (Deuteronomy 21:20–21).^{viii} Their opponents not only rejected their message but slandered and eventually killed them both. Yet, Jesus said, “Wisdom is justified by her deeds” (v. 19). Jesus and John would be proven right in the end. This points back to what Jesus said to John’s disciples, to look at what they had seen and heard Him doing

for proof as to whether He were the Messiah and also that He would prove who He really was on the day of His Resurrection, when He won victory over sin and death.

Jesus proclaimed woe on the three cities where He did the majority of His miracles and teaching. As a lakefront town, Capernaum, Peter's hometown and the location of his family's fishing business, served as Jesus' home base throughout His ministry. Bethsaida, another lakefront town, was located at the spot where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee. Chorazin was about three miles inland from Capernaum, on a hill above the sea. Scholars call the area between Bethsaida, Tabgha (another shorefront town) and Chorazin the "evangelical triangle" because this is where Jesus spent most of His ministry, preaching and doing miracles. Tyre and Sidon were both Gentile (Canaanite) towns on the opposite side of the country, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, further north. The Canaanites were the bitter enemies of Israel. They lived in the promised land before the Israelites conquered it during Joshua's time. The Israelites were supposed to get rid of all of the pagan tribes when they conquered the land so they wouldn't be tempted to follow their gods, but they didn't. As a result, throughout their history, Israel was led into idolatry by the Canaanites. Yet, Jesus proclaimed that if the Gentile people of Tyre and Sidon had seen the miracles these Galilean towns had seen, they would have repented long ago, just as the Gentile people of Nineveh did during the time of Jonah.



Proclaiming "woe" on someone in the ancient world was a statement of judgment from a prophet of God. The people of Israel expected their prophets to pronounce woes on their enemies but to vindicate and praise them. Sometimes they did. Isaiah (13–23), Jeremiah (46–51), Ezekiel (25–32), and Amos (1) all pronounced woes on other nations. Yet many other times, these same prophets proclaimed woe to the people of Israel, too (Isaiah 22, Jeremiah 2–22, Ezekiel 24, Amos 2–3). Though the people may have felt that their status as God's chosen people exempted them from judgment, God never said that. He preached judgment to them just as much as any other nation when they turned from Him to worship other gods and when they oppressed the poor and the vulnerable.

In His whole ministry, Jesus never proclaimed woe on Gentiles or sinners or the unclean, those the Jews would have considered outcasts and not part of the kingdom of God. His only proclamations of woe are here to these three Jewish cities and later to the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel (Matthew 23). Yet there were many times He praised Gentiles and sinners for their faith –the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5–13), the

Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), the sinful woman at the Pharisee's feast (Luke 7:36–50), the Canaanite woman *in Tyre and Sidon* (Matthew 15:21–28), and others. Jesus judged people's faithfulness by their faith, not by their religious status, ethnicity, or lineage. Keener writes that Jesus' pronouncement against these cities teaches us that:

- God judges people according to the opportunities they have had to respond to His truth (v. 20).
- Those who claim to be God's people are often the most hard-hearted hearers of all (v. 21).^{ix}

We see this contrasted over and over in the Gospels, in stories such as the sinful woman at the feast of Simon the Pharisee. Simon looked down on her with disdain, yet Jesus praised her faith over Simon's. In the contrast between the Samaritan woman at the well and the Pharisee Nicodemus in back-to-back chapters of John, the Samaritan woman didn't understand the Old Testament theology of worship, but she accepted Christ and became the very first evangelist of the Gospel (John 4). Jesus chastised Nicodemus for being a teacher of the Old Testament who didn't understand the Gospel it points to (John 3). In God's kingdom, the exalted are brought low, the first and the last switch places, and people are judged only by their faith in Jesus.

Q: In what ways can the Church today seem like these cities in Galilee or like the Pharisees? How can we keep ourselves from being like them?

Q: How do we sometimes look down on those outside of the Church based on their background instead of welcoming them into the kingdom and encouraging them to have faith?

Matthew 11:25–30 [Read]

Talking Point 3: A relationship with Christ is one of rest and letting go of our burdens.

Q: What does it say about God that He hides things from the wise and reveals them to children?

Q: How is a relationship with Jesus one of rest?

We often read this passage about finding rest in Jesus' easy yoke out of context, but it is significant to remember that He said it in the context of contrasting the faith of Gentiles and sinners and the hardened hearts of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The one other place Jesus talked about putting heavy burdens or yokes on people's shoulders is in the other passage of woe to the scribes and Pharisees: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger" (Matthew 23:4). All the nit-picky little laws the Pharisees

and scribes had created were a burden on the shoulders of the people, too much to bear. In contrast, Jesus' yoke is easy, and His burden is light (v. 30).

Not that Jesus' teachings are easier to follow than the Pharisees. Remember, Jesus actually made the Law harder in the Sermon on the Mount when He said that even anger was murder and lust was adultery. His standard of righteousness is even greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). The difference is that Jesus carries the yoke for us. The Pharisees just said, "Here is a list of rules to follow" but wouldn't lift a finger to help. Jesus said His standards are more than rules, they are an issue of the heart. And He gives us a new heart. He fills us with His Spirit who makes us a new creation, changes our desires to His desires, and grows His fruit in us so we can follow His law (Galatians 5).

Jesus' metaphor of a yoke would have helped His ancient audience see this clearly. In a typical yoke, two oxen who are about the same size are paired, each pulling their own weight, so they are balanced and don't go around in circles or pull to one side. But when a new ox, a very small ox, was being broken in, it was matched with a very large ox who would be the one really pulling all the weight. We are like the small ox and Jesus is the large one. He is teaching us and training us and growing us, but He is the one pulling all the weight. The late J. Dwight Pentecost, a theologian and former Dallas Theological Seminary professor, wrote, "When we are yoked with Jesus Christ, he bears the load, and we who are yoked with him share in the joy and the accomplishment of the labor but without the burden of the yoke."^x

Jesus can say His yoke is easy and His burden is light because when we yoke ourselves with Him, He takes all the weight. We just walk alongside Him. *The Message* translation does a great job with this particular passage. "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Matthew 11:28–30 MSG).

Our relationship with Jesus isn't a burden because it isn't just a laundry list of rules to follow. It is Jesus, the Master Himself, walking with us through life, showing us where to go and how to live. Step by step, day by day, side by side. Kind of like having the greatest tennis player in the world play doubles with you, teaching you how to play and taking the hard shots for you when you can't reach them. Not only would your burden be light – you would know he could get the shots for you – you would also learn and grow as a player the more you played with him. This is only an insufficient metaphor for what it like to walk this life with Jesus through His Holy Spirit. He cares for us, bears our burdens, and takes on our anxieties for us (1 Peter 5:7; Philippians 4:6–7), all the while showing us how to live the way He did, growing us stronger in love, peace, joy and all the Fruit of the Spirit.

Q: What loads are you trying to carry on your own? What burdens have you let the “Pharisees” of your life impose on you? What burdens have you imposed on yourself?

Q: What is the difference between living with religion and living in a relationship with Jesus? What does a relationship with Him look like practically? How does it change your attitude? Your heart for others? The way you experience your own life? How does it lead to peace and rest?

Week 12: *Matthew 11*

Took

Main Point: Jesus is the King, but He doesn't fight physical battles: He fights spiritual ones.

Many of us live in a constant state of exhaustion from the demands of daily life, difficult seasons, or from the consequences of our shortcomings with sin. But Jesus doesn't want us to stay in this cycle of weary. He wants to give us life and rest. The effects of constant anxiety are not only disastrous for our spiritual and mental health, but for our physical health as well. The Mayo Clinic describes how stress and anxiety can cause headaches, muscle pain, upset stomachs, and chest pain. We were not made to live in constant exhaustion, rather we are called to come to Jesus, not under the burden of religion or slavery to sin but rather to freedom and rest in Christ Jesus.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Be honest with yourself. Are you living like a Pharisee, with a laundry list of rules to follow and boxes to check to earn God's favor? Or are you living in relationship with Jesus, walking in freedom, rest and peace? How can you tell the difference? How can you describe the difference to friends who don't know Jesus?

PRAY: For those who don't know Jesus in this way, who either don't profess to follow Him at all or who claim to follow Him but live like the Pharisees. Pray for Jesus to make Himself real to them, to show them who He really is, to take their burdens, and give them peace.

ACT: Lay your burdens on Jesus. Take whatever anxieties or stresses are weighing you down or any Pharisee-type religious burdens you're carrying and cast them on Jesus (1 Peter 5:7). Don't just pray about them, really give them up to Him and walk in freedom and peace.

Hook, Took & Editing by Mitchell Webb

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- ⁱ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ⁱⁱ Graham N. Stanton, *Gospel Truth? New Light on Jesus and the Gospels* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ^{iv} S. R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Vol 7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).
- ^v Charles Harold Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).
- ^{vi} Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ^{vii} Carl H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951).
- ^{viii} Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).
- ^{ix} Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
- ^x J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Yoke of Jesus," *DTS Voice* (Dallas Theological Seminary) - <https://voice.dts.edu/article/the-yoke-of-jesus-j-dwight-pentecost/>