

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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MT. 11 - 12 JOHN THE BAPTIST IN PRISON; JESUS' LIGHT YOKE



After Jesus gave His instructions to the disciples, we read, "He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities" (Mt. 11:1). So He not only taught, but put His teaching into practice.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist was still in prison and was restless about when Jesus the Messiah would act, thinking that Christ would soon bring the kingdom of God on the earth—and hopefully, rescue him. We read, "And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'" (Mt. 11:2-3).

It might appear strange that after John had presented Jesus as the Messiah and as the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world (John 1:29-34), he would now harbor doubts.

Why did this happen and how did John end up in prison? Luke explains, "But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison" (Luke 3:18-20).

William Barclay notes, "Herod Antipas had paid a visit to his brother in Rome. During that visit he seduced his brother's wife. He came home again, dismissed his own wife, and married the sister-in-law whom he had lured away from her husband. Publicly and sternly John rebuked Herod. It was never safe to rebuke an eastern despot and Herod took his revenge; John was thrown into the dungeons of the fortress of Machaerus in the mountains near the Dead Sea" (Daily Bible).

Halley adds, "About a year after he had baptized Jesus, he was imprisoned by Herod, to satisfy the whim of a wicked woman (Mt. 14:1-5). This was at the close of Jesus' Early Judean ministry" (Halley's Bible Handbook, p. 496).

John had not understood that Jesus would only complete the first part of His mission in this first coming and there was still one left in the future.

Halley explains, "We wonder about John's doubt. He had borne such confident and positive testimony that Jesus was the Lamb of God and the Son of God. But now, as he mused behind dungeon walls, he was puzzled. Jesus was not doing what he thought the Messiah would do. He evidently shared the popular notion of a Political Messianic Kingdom. God did not

reveal to him everything as to the nature of the Kingdom. Even the Twelve were slow in learning it" (p. 497).

So Jesus patiently and lovingly told John's disciples, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see. The blind see 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. *And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me*" (Mt. 11:4-6). This latter statement was a gentle reminder to John not to jump to conclusions about what the Messiah should do.

Despite these doubts, Jesus praised John's mission and identified him as the Elijah that came for the first arrival of the Messiah. He said, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he...And if you are willing to receive it, *he is Elijah who is to come*" (Mt. 11:7-14).

Christ also explained that, although the preaching of the kingdom of God was advancing, it was facing much resistance—John was in jail and Jesus was continually hounded by the Jewish leaders. He said, "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Mt. 11:12). This translation is not very clear and here is a better one: "From the time John preached his message until this very day the Kingdom of heaven has suffered violent attacks, and violent men try to seize it" (GNB). He was referring to the growing opposition of the Jewish leaders against them.

Jesus then describes the whimsical nature of these leaders who seemed never satisfied with what John or Jesus did. He said, "But what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions,, and saying, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not

dance. We mourned to you, and you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a wine-bibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children" (Mt. 11:16-19). This last sentence is better translated, "God's wisdom, however, is shown to be true by its results" (GNB).

Here we see proof that Jesus truly did drink wine and ate heartily, but in moderation. John, on the other hand, did not drink wine since he was under a life-long Nazirite vow and ate little. Yet, the Jewish leaders weren't happy with either of their way of life. Since most of them were self-righteous, they looked down on any that did not follow their example. But Jesus simply stated that John's and His good fruits justified their behavior.

Jesus then visits the cities around Lake Galilee where He had done many miracles. Sadly, He did not find many converts and they had gone back to their ordinary lives, controlled by the Jewish leaders. He chides them for their unbelief. We read, "Then He began to *rebuke* the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you were done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades, for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you" (Mt. 11:20-24).

There are two important truths here. (1) We see the negative effects of Pharisaic doctrine had on the populace. They taught their traditions as if they were equivalent to God's laws and when Jesus the Messiah came to amplify God's truths, they had rejected them. This is the danger of elevating any man's teachings to the level of God's revealed Word. (2) Notice Jesus speaks of a future judgment of the peoples of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom and said they would not be judged as severely as those Jewish towns that witnessed all of Jesus' teachings and miracles and yet did not repent. The judgment

mentioned can't be part of the First Resurrection, since only those converted and who persevered will be part of that "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35; Rev. 20:5). It has to be after the Millennium when they will come back to life and receive the opportunity to repent and have their names written in the book of life (Rev. 20:12).

Luke relates the return of the 70 from preaching the gospel: "Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject in Your name.' And he said to them, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this that the spirits are subject to you, but rather *rejoice because your names are written in heaven*" (Luke 10:17-20).

Here is another important truth—power and authority ultimately come from God, not man. God bequeaths power according to His will and the authority to cast out demons He has given to His ministry (Mr. 16:14-17). It was Christ, as the Word, who saw Lucifer fall from heaven after his angelic rebellion. It was just as lightning falls to the earth. We read in Isaiah 14:12 when that happened: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning. How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations."

Jesus reveals another truth--His disciples' names are written in heaven. This refers to having their names written in the Book of Life. Paul also refers to the names written in the Book of Life in Philippians 4:3, "And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life." Yet, the Bible also shows that a person's name can be erased from the Book of Life if he doesn't persevere to the end (Rev. 3:5).

Christ thanks God for having called them and not the high, wise or mighty. He said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight" (Mt. 11:25). We see that the Church would not be composed of the "wise" of the world, but ordinary people, so no one will later boast in His sight (1 Cor. 1:29).

Even if one gathers much knowledge that the world can provide, including philosophy and theology, it is only God who can truly reveal spiritual truth. Jesus affirms, "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one to whom the Son wills to reveal*" (Mt. 11:27).

Only God can call and open a person's heart and mind, and it is *the greatest privilege and miracle* He can do for a person. But the road is long and hard, and it takes faith and perseverance to finish the race. Also notice Jesus doesn't mention a third person like a Holy Spirit being involved in this process of being called. Jesus only talks about that relationship being between God the Father and Him. If the Holy Spirit were a person, it would be an insult not to include it in this vital role.

Now Christ contrasts the heavy religious burdens the Jewish leaders had imposed on the people with the light yoke of following Him. He had no set of stern religious traditions such as the Pharisees had wrongly established. He said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Mt. 11:28-29).

Barclay explains, "For the orthodox Jew, religion was a thing of burdens. Jesus said of the Scribes and Pharisees: 'They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders' (Mt. 23:4). To the Jew, religion was a thing of endless rules. A man lived his life in a forest of regulations which dictated every action of his life. He must listen forever to a voice which said, 'Thou shalt not' ...He says, 'My yoke is easy.' The word 'easy' is in the Greek *chrestos*, which can mean well-fitting. In Palestine, ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken....the yoke was carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and not gall the neck of the patient beast. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox....Jesus says, 'My yoke fits well.' What He means is, 'The life I give you is not a burden to gall you; your task is made to measure to fit you.' Whatever God sends us is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly." Christ now illustrates how His yoke is much lighter than the Pharisaic teachings using two examples of Sabbath keeping. Barclay

says, "The Scribes and the Pharisees saw with growing suspicion a teacher who was prepared to allow his followers to disregard the minutia of the Sabbath Law. This was the kind of thing which could not be allowed to spread unchecked."

We read, "At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. But He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only of the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests to the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mt. 12:1-8)

Expositor's explains, "The Jewish rules of conduct about Sabbath were extremely detailed; and it was wryly admitted that 'the rules about the Sabbath...are as mountains hanging by a hair, for [the teaching of] Scripture is scanty and the rules many' (M *Hagigah* 1:8)....The Pharisees' charge that the disciples were breaking the law was based, not on their picking grain in someone else's field, but on the fact that picking grain--i.e. "reaping" (cf. j. *Shabbath* 7.2,9.c)--was one of thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath (M *Shabbath* 7:2) under prevailing Halakah." They had 1521 rules about the Sabbath.

Jesus Christ was restoring God's law to its original intent. Picking and eating some grain on the Sabbath does not violate the Fourth Commandment. The disciples were not working on that day, and they could very well have been either going or coming back from Sabbath services. The point is—don't make the Sabbath into a day filled with man-made regulations. Isaiah 58:13-14 provides the true intent of the Sabbath day that Jesus was showing how to restore to its original meaning and proper respect.