

Matthew 11:2-11 "The Question that drops with a Dull Thud"

Read Matthew 3:1-12; 11:2-11; 14:1-12. This is the full account of the story of John the Baptist which I think will help us understand the larger picture out of which his question arises.

1. (Matthew 3) What were John the Baptist's expectations of Messiah Jesus?

John expected Jesus to have a winnowing fork in his hand. To separate the wheat and the chaff. To separate the righteous from the unrighteous.

John expected Jesus to come with the Holy Spirit and Fire. To fill the righteous with the power and work of the Spirit. To burn up the unrighteous in fire.

John expected Jesus to come in fire. To wipe the earth of everything that is wrong with it all at once, right away, right now.

John expected Jesus to come with an axe to the tree. To cut down the empires of the world that are standing in opposition to the justice and mercy of the Lord.

2. (Matthew 11, 14) What do you think lies behind John's question? Do similar realities lie under our own doubts?

John had a theological framework that gave him certain expectations of what Messiah was meant to do (see above). He sees Jesus spending time with the unrighteous (sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes). It is they who are being welcomed in, they who are being restored, healed, forgiven. They who are being touched with the Spirit. Where is the fire? The wrath? The axe?

There is also a personal piece to his doubt. He is in prison. Perhaps been there about a year. He can hear the drunken debauchery above him. Why am I in prison while this despot King sits on the throne? Is this any way to treat God's messenger?

It was Darryl Johnson who said that underneath almost all theological anguish and doubt is personal hurt.

I would suspect that our theological frameworks create in our minds certain expectations of God. When those expectations are not met we doubt. Perhaps there would be wisdom to question our theological framework?

I would also suspect that personal hurt lies behind our own doubts as well.

As it is often the case that doubts are not all that welcome in faith communities. There is a question later in the study that is meant to undermine that perspective but given this reality there would I think be wisdom in you as a leader having an

answer ready so that you sharing your own doubt fosters a healthy environment for others to share.

Read Isaiah 35:4-6, Isaiah 61:1-3

3. Jesus' answer to John's question is pointing to two passages from Isaiah that speak of Messiah's reign. God's judgement and vengeance plays an important role in each of these passages. Why do you think Jesus makes no mention of it in his response to John?

This question is meant to go to the theological framework that John had for Messiah that shaped his expectations. In many ways his expectations are true, rooted deeply in scripture. The issue here is one of timing. He expected God's judgement to come right now right away. Jesus in his teaching pointed to his coming again in judgment to make everything new.

Jesus is taking the prophetic words of Messiah's reign and separating them out. Now is the time for the power and work of the Spirit. Now is the time for the world to receive him as King. It will be at his second coming where he will wipe all evil and injustice from the earth and set up an eternal Kingdom.

In other words - This is not the end this is only the beginning of the end.

4. In his doubt Jesus wants John to focus on Him. "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Where do you find Jesus most offensive? How can sitting with that offense, working through that offense, lead to a blessedness borne of deepening trust?

The "offense" is often caused by our expectations of God. As with John who had a theological framework that gave him certain expectations. We are often more apt to doubt God rather than question the truthfulness of our theological framework. If we sit with the offense, we are given the opportunity to reflect on the true person of Jesus and offer up the expectations of our theological frameworks for revision.

The story of Elisabeth Eliot from the sermon may be a helpful place to go as she expresses that much of our doubt and disappointment with God arises from our treating Him like an assistant. That it is his job to "assist" us in achieving the goals and aims of our lives. But that is not God. God is infinitely and immeasurably beyond our wildest notions of what he is up to.

5. Jesus praises John the Baptist regardless of his doubt. What does this tell us about doubt in the life of faith?

As stated earlier it is often the case that expressions of doubt are not welcome in the community of faith. As a result we will often hide them, be ashamed of them, ignore them.

John the Baptist invites us to take our doubt directly to God. To bring them before him with as much honesty as we possibly can and be attentive to his leading.

That Jesus praises him in spite of the doubt should reveal to us that doubt is part and parcel of a life of faith and is no indication that we are outside of the "household of faith". Jesus welcomes our doubt and will hear it and address it.

6. Jesus affirms that the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. What does this tell us about who we are in Jesus?

John was considered the greatest who ever lived as up until that point he was the one who pointed with the most clarity to Messiah, to his rule, to his Kingdom. That is why John is considered great.

To say that the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist is to say that the one who is filled with the Spirit, the one who is a follower of Jesus points with greater clarity than John the Baptist did to Messiah Jesus, his kingdom, his way.

In Jesus we are filled with the Spirit so that we may point to His Kingdom justice, truth, love, and mercy in all we do and say and pray.