

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Section 25

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COME TO HIM (11:20-30)

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Section 24

JESUS RECEIVES A QUESTION FROM
JOHN AND PREACHES A
SERMON ON JOHN

(Parallel: Luke 7:18-35)

TEXT: 11:2-19

2. Now when John heard in the prison the works of the Christ, he sent by his disciples
3. and said unto him, Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?

4. and Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and tell John the things which ye hear and see:
5. the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good tidings preached to them.
6. And blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me.
7. And as these went their way, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes, concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to behold? a reed shaken with the wind?
8. But what went ye out to see? a man clothed in soft *raiment*? Behold, they that wear soft *raiment* are in king's houses.
9. But wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.
10. This is he, of whom it is written,
Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
Who shall prepare thy way before thee.
11. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist: yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
12. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force.
13. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.
14. And if ye are willing to receive *it*, this is Elijah, that is to come.
15. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.
16. But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces, who call unto their fellows
17. and say, We piped unto you, and ye did not dance; we wailed, and ye did not mourn.
18. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a demon.
19. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! And wisdom is justified by her works.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. If John is shut up in prison, how is it that he is so free in prison to send messengers to Jesus?
- b. If you had been preaching fiery judgment upon Israel, warning the people that the Messiah would come with a threshing shovel in His hand to separate the wicked from the righteous and threat-

ening the wicked by saying that the ax is ready at the foot of the trees to hew down the wicked that produced no fruit,—if this had been YOUR message, and yet the Messiah came along watering the trees, what would have been your reaction? You had preached judgment, but He proclaims mercy and the grace of God. What kind of questions would YOU have had?

- c. Some commentators feel that John was not asking this great question for himself but rather for his disciples. Do you think this is correct? If so, on what basis do you agree? If no, why not?
- d. Why, would you say, do questions hurt men worse than torture?
- e. Do you think it is God's will to torture men with agonizing questions? If not, then why does not God answer their questions? If so, then how do you harmonize His goodness with this permission that lets such questions continue to harass the minds of His creatures, yes, even the minds of such great men as John the Baptist?
- f. How do you account for the true greatness of John the Baptist?
- g. Do you feel that people would be more godly today if they imitated John's general manner of life, his austere food and clothing? If not, what should they imitate? If so, how would this imitation better the moral quality of society?
- h. When a man is shut up in prison for a period of time, one begins to see the real fiber of which his character is made. That confinement of his body and that limitation of the free expression of his spirit is more than many a man can bear. What expressions of faith and high moral character does John yet reveal now while in the imprisonment?
- i. What do you hold to be the secret of John's greatness?
- j. What do you hold to be the reason why John was actually greater than other prophets?
- k. In what respect is "the least in the kingdom of heaven greater than he"? Explain how John, the greatest man ever born, could be less than the least in God's kingdom.
- l. How can John the Baptist be "the Elijah who is to come," whereas John himself denied being Elijah? (See Jn. 1:21)
- m. Why do you think Jesus keeps saying in so many of His sermons: "He who has ears to hear with, let him hear"? Were the people of His time short on ears? Or were they just not using the equipment they had? Explain what Jesus meant by that pithy admonition.
- n. Do you think that this question John asked was painful to Jesus, since He was surrounded by multitudes who surely must have heard

John's messengers pose the question? Was it not a latent lack of confidence in the evidence that Jesus had already given of His identity and consequent authority?

- o. Explain how God's kingdom had suffered violence and how violent men were taking it by force, even since the beginning of John's preaching.
- p. What evidence should have already convinced John once and for all that Jesus was everything that John had predicted Him to be? What evidence did Jesus send back to John to persuade him this time?
- q. Jesus describes the personal habits of John the Baptist as those of an ascetic or a recluse, "eating no bread and drinking no wine." He describes His own habits as those of one who mixed well with people "eating and drinking." Now, discounting as exaggerations the slanders that the Jews levelled at John and Jesus both ("He has a demon." "Behold, a glutton and wine-drinker"), yet is there any basis of fact in the inference drawn from Jesus' own statement, that Jesus certainly drank wine? On what basis do you answer as you do?
- r. How is the intended slander levelled against Jesus, "a friend of taxcollectors and sinners," in a higher sense, His glory and finest proof that He is really God come in the flesh?
- s. Standing this side of the cross, John Hallett can teach us to sing, "There's no disappointment in Jesus, He's all that He promised to be . . ." Ideally, of course, this is true. Yet, John the Baptist stood in grave danger of being "disappointed in Jesus." What one ingredient, common to our human predicament, would put you personally in the prison of perplexity and cause you too to be shocked and even infuriated that Jesus is not what you thought Him to be?
- t. Now, having answered the preceding question, what is there in Jesus' answer to John that attenuates your perplexity too, comforts your disappointment or, at least, makes it not nearly so important as it had seemed? In what frame of reference is it possible to sing: "His love and His care comfort me everywhere; He is no disappointment to me"?
- u. Is it completely true that we must never become a stumbling-block for our neighbors? Jesus knew fully well that His message, ministry and manners were a terrible scandal to His own people, and yet He did not alter His program or character nor tailor His gospel on that account. To what extent then are we to adjust to

our environment so as not to give an occasion of sin to our fellows without compromising our Gospel and to what extent must we never change regardless of how many fall? (Study Mt. 18:5-10; 1 Co. 8; 10:23-33 in contrast with 1 Co. 1:18-25 esp. v. 23; 1 Pet. 2:4-8)

- v. Puzzle of puzzles, why did not Jesus liberate John by a blazing word of miraculous power? Why did He permit him to die what looks like a senseless death, with a silly dancing-girl and her scheming, wicked mother managing the whole thing?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

It was while John the Baptist was in prison that he heard about all the things Jesus was doing. His disciples came to him and reported the deeds Jesus Christ was accomplishing. Selecting two of his followers, he sent the Lord a message by these men, asking, "Are you really the Messiah, or are we to keep on waiting for and expecting someone else to be the one?"

So when these two men arrived where Jesus was, they repeated John's question: "John the Baptist has sent us to ask you, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we going to have to look for someone else who will do the job?'"

Right then and there Jesus cured many sick people who had all kinds of diseases and evil spirits. To many that were blind He gave their sight.

Then Jesus made this reply to John's question, "You go tell John exactly what you have just seen and heard today: how the blind recovered their sight, the lame are walking again. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf can now hear. I have raised the dead to life again. Even people who could never afford to pay for it are getting to hear the Good News! John, you will be a happy man indeed, if you can trust me implicitly. Do not be shocked or hurt over what you do not understand of my ministry that does not seem to match your concept of what it should be."

It was later, when the messengers of John had left to report to him this answer, that Jesus began to address the crowds concerning John the Baptist:

"What spectacle drew you out into the wilderness? A reed easily bent by the wind? A weak, trembling man disturbed by the slightest rumor of danger? No? Then why did you go out there? To see someone clad in silks and satins? Of course not! The dapper dressers

with their soft, elegant garments and their life of luxury are to be found in royal court circles, not in kings' prisons! Tell me now, why did you really go out there anyway? To see a prophet? Let me tell you this: you saw someone far more than an ordinary prophet! This is the very man about whom Malachi penned the ancient lines (3:1):

'Behold my herald whom I am sending on ahead of you:

He shall prepare your way for you.'

I tell you this: there has never yet been born on earth the mother's son that can excel John the Baptist! And yet, paradoxically, the humblest member of God's Kingdom is a greater man than John!

"Ever since the appearance of John the Baptist until today God's Kingdom has been subjected to violence. Violent men, like the Zealots, try to seize control of it. Until John came, only the Law of Moses and the prophets represented God's Word to men. However, if your mind is open to receive this information, I would say that John is the great 'Elijah' that Malachi (4:5) promised would come. Pay close attention to the meaning of what I am saying!

"When the common people heard John, they all, even the most notoriously wicked among them—even the tax collectors—agreed that God's plan was just. They showed this by being immersed in harmony with the rite preached by John. All the people, did this, that is, except the Pharisees and the lawyers. These latter rejected God's eternal purpose for them, as far as they personally were concerned, because they refused to be immersed by John the Baptist."

Jesus went on: "But what description adequately reflects the mentality of the people of today? They are like a group of children sitting in the marketplace, protesting to their playmates, 'We wanted to play wedding, so we piped to you and you refused to dance. Then we tried playing funeral. So we wailed, but you did not cooperate: you did not mourn nor weep! What DO you want to play?' I tell you this, because John lived an ascetic life, neither eating common food nor drinking wine like a normal person would. But you slander him, saying, 'Something must be wrong with a man like that! He has a demon—he's mad!' Then I came along, living the normal life, eating and drinking like anyone else, and what do you say? 'Look at that glutton! He's a drinker and a party-goer! He certainly knows how to pick his friends too: outsiders, tramps, no one with whom any respectable person should have anything to do!' Nevertheless, despite your unreasonableness, real wisdom is proved true and right by what it produces! The ultimate verdict about the wisdom of our different

approaches lies not with you contrary critics, but with the results John and I produce."

SUMMARY

When John the Baptist learned of the merciful ministry of Jesus, he determined to learn the real meaning of the difference between his own fiery predictions and what Jesus was planning. His two messengers relayed his question to Jesus. Rather than answer them directly, Jesus continued to give evidence of His true identity by doing God's work in the presence of John's envoys. Then, in messianic language drawn from Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus summarized His ministry and evidence to give John reasons to continue to trust Him. John's messengers then reported this message back to John.

After they departed, Jesus eulogized John's greatness as God's prophet, calling him the greatest man who ever lived, the great herald of the Messiah, the promised prophet whose coming immediately preceded the great day of the Lord. Further, those simple people who accepted John's message vindicated God by accepting the word of His prophet in obedience, whereas the religious leaders of the nation frustrated God's plans for them. Worse, the majority of Jesus' contemporaries rejected John because he was too serious, not human enough, but rejected Jesus because He was too human, not holy enough. But the course chosen by each will be vindicated by the ultimate results each achieves.

NOTES

I. CHALLENGING THE CHRIST TO CHANGE (11:2, 3)

11:2 **Now when John heard in the prison**, taken as introductory to this section, does not affirm that this event has even the slightest connection with the foregoing material in Matthew's chapter 10. The time reference is most general: **Now when John heard** (*ho de Ioánnēs akoúsas*). The aorist participle indicates no time relationship at all, except that related to the main verb of the sentence, *eipen* (said), another aorist that views the action as a mere past event without stating any connection or continuity with what preceded it. It is Luke who informs us both of the more precise chronological connections, how it was that John was informed and what specific deeds of Christ were most likely the subject of John's musings: "The disciples of John told him of all these things." (Lk. 7:18) Very likely, the disciples' report included the curing of the

Centurion's slave and the resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain and many other signs. (Lk. 7:1-17) Details of John's imprisonment are available from many sources (Mt. 4:12; 14:3-5; Mk. 6:17-20; Lk. 3:19, 20; cf. also Josephus' *Antiquities*, XVIII, 5, 2). Had we only Matthew's Gospel, we would be puzzled by the very access John's disciples had to their master who was very clearly bound in prison under lock and key (cf. *édesēn* and *katékleisen* of Mt. 14:3; Lk. 3:20) by Herod who ultimately murdered him there. The enigma is solved by Mark, who, although he does not record the incident of John's question, yet furnishes the explanation by inserting a fact in quite another context that explains John's liberty to send the message to Jesus: "Herodias had a grudge against him and would willingly have executed him but she could not do it, for Herod had a deep respect for John, knowing him to be a good and holy man, so he protected him. When he listened to him he was greatly disturbed, yet he enjoyed hearing him." (Mk. 6:19, 20) From these sources we may conclude that in Herod's border-castle, Machaerus, near the northeast end of the Dead Sea, was the site where John spent his last days. The puppet-king Herod Antipas merely shut the wilderness preacher in the fort, but did not ill-treat him. The imprisonment, while politically necessary from Herod's view, must have been half-hearted, because the king's troubled conscience clearly accused him. Antipas knew where the path of truth and righteousness lay. Though he must often have conversed with the Baptist, he did not repent. (See notes on Mt. 14:1-12) In this frame of mind, he conceded John the visits of his disciples. Later, these followers were permitted to bury their leader after his execution. (Mt. 14:12)

An even greater perplexity is to be found in the expression "John's disciples." After the revelation of the Messiah's identity at His baptism, why did not John just drop everything to become Jesus' personal disciple? Was it further necessary to make disciples on his own? Why did these men remain attached to John after their master had unequivocally indicated the Nazarene to be the "Lamb of God," "the Son of God," "the Bridegroom"? Further, how could John be satisfied when his understudies remain under his tutelage? Or is the answer to be found in the intermeshing of the events in their time-sequence? That is, was there too little time to conclude his own work and join Jesus before Herod got him? If so, John would be in prison almost a year now when he sends this query to Jesus. (Cf. the connections between the events recorded in Jesus' early ministry immediately preceding John's arrest: Mt. 3, 4; Mk. 1;

Lk. 3; Jn. 2-4.) If the 40 days of Jesus' temptation be added to the period He spent in Galilee (Jn. 2:1, 12) before the first Passover of His public ministry (Jn. 2:13ff), and if His ministry in Sychar of Samaria were concluded "four months before harvest" (Jn. 4:35, supposing this to be a calendar reference used as the basis for spiritual teaching), and supposing His trip north through Samaria to have been occasioned by pressure from the Pharisees (Jn. 4:1-3) as much as by the imprisonment of John (Mt. 4:12), we conclude that there were as much as four summer months between John's first identification of Jesus as the Messiah before his fatal imprisonment. But before we condemn John for not swinging the entire bloc of his movement behind Jesus, let us recall the state of communications of that period. While he may have been able to immerse many pilgrims from many lands on their way to the great national feasts, he would not see most of them until the next feast, nor they him. Apparently some of them never heard about Jesus even years after Pentecost. (Cf. Ac. 18:24, 25; 19:1-4) Now if John could publish no communiques for nationwide distribution prior to his incarceration, how much less could he influence his own followers after Herod held him practically incommunicado, isolated from the center of national life and influence!

John heard in prison the works of the Christ. Matthew writes what it was that John heard described to him, but did John hear it just this way, i.e. the works are those of Jesus the Messiah? Or is Matthew's personal faith just coming through this narrative, seen in the choice of words he uses? If John heard that Jesus was Christ known by His works, he is the more in error for forming the question he does. For, from whatever motive, who could propound such a query, once he is firmly convinced that Jesus is indeed the Messiah with all the divine authority that this involves? He who fully understands that the Messiah is to be God Himself come in human form, could hardly bring himself to presume to challenge Him about any portion of His program. But did John grasp this? As Jesus will show later (11:11), John's life was lived out in an era before the full-orbed revelation was given.

Before proceeding to the problem why John should have asked such a dangerous question, we must ask who is this **John . . . in prison?** Who was he as a prophet and as a man?

1. His own divine inspiration and calling by God cannot be doubted. (Lk. 3:2; Jn. 1:6; 5:33)
2. At Jesus' baptism, John heard the voice of God indicating

Him as "the Son of God," and saw the coming of the Spirit upon Him. (Mt. 3:13-17; Jn. 1:29-34)

3. His description of Jesus as "the Lamb of God" indicates a profound revelation of the mission of Jesus. (Jn. 1:29, 36) Did he understand what it meant to be God's "Lamb"?
4. Further, the prophecies of the OT received significant confirmation in the revelation God made to John at the baptism of the Lord. (Cf. Ps. 2:7 with Mt. 3:17; Isa. 61:1; 11:1-5 with Mt. 3:16)
5. There is great moral comprehension of his own relative unimportance expressed in the magnanimous declaration: "He must increase and I must decrease!" (Jn. 3:26-30; cf. Mt. 3:11)
6. Immediately prior to this question sent to Jesus, he had heard men speak of the works of the Christ, i.e. as well as His general mode of operation. (Mt. 11:2; Lk. 7:18)

But John was human too. Before "the word of God came to John" (Lk. 3:2) he had been just plain John. Before "there was a man sent from God," (Jn. 1:6) he had been a man, and that man, now trapped in Herod's prison where his life will be tragically snuffed out, must learn a fundamental lesson facing all true prophets. Simply stated, the lesson is that once an unquestionably inspired prophet or apostle has delivered his God-breathed message, that man of God must then submit himself with faithful allegiance and unswerving personal obedience to that message, even though he may not have had revealed to him all the other explanations of God's will that may bear directly on what the prophet already knows. God does not have to explain everything to a man, not even to a prophet. But God will always give grounds for faith that that man may trust Him, leaving the unexplained in God's hands to reveal them as He chooses. Or, to state his quandary differently, what did John NOT know? His divine commission and past inspiration did not also guarantee him omniscience as well. John had preached a message of judgment, of threshing fans, of axes laid at the foot of trees and of unquenchable fire (Mt. 3:10-12), but Jesus keeps watering the trees, trying to save them! (Cf. Lk. 13:6-9) John could not see how Jesus' merciful ministry could fulfill his own divine predictions about that ministry. Abuses were everywhere; sin was going unchallenged. Judgment was needed! John could not see how the Christ was seeking, in the goodness of God, to sow the seeds of faith upon which the great, ultimate judgment of humanity would be based. Was **John in prison** meditating on Malachi 3:1-4:6? Was he reflecting on the messages he had

thundered to the nation, shaking it out of its lethargy and indifference? Certainly the passion for righteousness still blazed like a prophetic fire in his breast.

QUESTIONS HURT MEN WORSE THAN TORTURE

- a. Remember Job's cries, "Why? Why?" (see Job 3:11-23; 7:19-21)
- b. Consider Habakkuk's complaint: "Why are you not doing something about this wicked people, Israel?" (Hab. 1:1-4) God answers: "I am doing something! I am rousing the Chaldeans for Israel's punishment." (Hab. 1:5-11) "But God, how can you use vile idolators to punish a nation more relatively righteous than they?" (Hab. 1:12-17) God's famous reply is paraphrased: "By definition, a 'righteous man' is one who lives by his confidence that I know what I am doing. Habakkuk, you can trust me, even though you see what appear to you to be deep, far-reaching contradictions in the arrangement of my plans!" (Hab. 2:2-4) There is sweet submission in Habakkuk's prayer as he admits the justice of God's punishment upon Israel. Though it meant personal and immediate trial for him and other righteous men in Israel (Hab. 3:16, 17), yet he can rest in God who is Himself the answer to Habakkuk's complaint (Hab. 3:18, 19).
- c. Out of Paul's experience in praying three times that his "thorn in the flesh" might be removed, he learned true strength. (2 Co. 12:8-10) With many good and sufficient justifications Paul could have importuned God by arguing how much more effective a work he could be doing without this weakness: "Why, Father, must I, your Apostle to the Gentiles, be so hampered?" But after revealing Christ's message to others, Paul must also submit himself to the daily discipline as any other believer.
- d. Peter, after preaching the universality of God's grace "unto as many as the Lord our God shall call unto Him" (Ac. 2:39), still did not grasp the fact that this must also mean Gentiles too. (Ac. 10, 11; Gal. 2)

Examples could be multiplied of divinely inspired men whose torturing, unanswered questions, which could reasonably be expected of thinking men, remained to disturb their minds. These all, John the Baptist included, could and must rest in

the confidence that God knew what He was doing, even though His reasons were not immediately evident.

John's peculiar problem probably lay in his own concepts and expectations regarding the Messiah, which, in turn, were likely not wholly uninfluenced by the popular concepts of the times, even though greatly molded by his own inspired preaching. To him had not been revealed, for example, the time-distances between the appearance of the Messiah immediately after John's own ministry and the farther baptism by the Christ in the Holy Spirit and the still more distant judgment by fire. (Cf. Mt. 3:9-12) The burden of the prophetic message of John had depicted a Messiah that would have brought to Israel an immediate, inescapable punishment upon the wicked. But it seemed to John that Jesus was doing nothing but help the wicked, even going to the unthinkable lengths of eating and drinking with them, while trying to redeem them! Because of Jesus' actions, it seemed to John that He was not fulfilling the messianic concept that John himself had predicted. So he needed an explanation both of the mission and purposes of the Lord, since neither was clear to him. (Remember 1 Pet. 1:10-12; Mt. 13:16, 17)

11:3 and said unto him, **Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?** John's choice of words implies "Do we await **one of another** kind?" (*hétéron*) Although Luke (7:20) has *allon* ("another of the same kind"), despite the fact that good MSS have *hétéron*, even *allon* must imply "another somewhat different" and not an exact twin. Otherwise, a Messiah exactly like Jesus would not accomplish all that John dreamed. **He that cometh** (*ho erchómenos*), in John's mouth here, means "the Christ." Was this a fixed phrase, or, a technical term, used by the Greek-speaking Jews, at least, to mean "the Messiah?" (Cf. Ps. 118:26; Hab. 2:3; Mal. 3:1; Dan. 7:13 with Mt. 21:9 and parallels; 23:39; Lu. 13:35; Jn. 1:15[?]; 3:31; 6:14; 11:27; Heb. 10:37; Rev. 1:4, or are these merely coincidences in Greek that prove nothing?) Edersheim, (*Life*, I, 668) thinks it not too likely, since Jewish thought ran more to the coming age ushered in by the Christ. But that John's question rings with messianic emphasis is demonstrated by the fact that Jesus' answer, for those who have ears to hear it, definitely affirmed Him to be the Christ. (See below on 11:4-6)

Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another? The meaning of this surprising question is bound up in the motivation behind it, so inextricably interwoven with it that one is incomprehensible without the other. While the obvious import of John's

question is whether Jesus be "the Christ" in an absolute sense, on what rational basis could the Baptist even consider possible the existence of a second "Coming One," somehow different from Jesus? Were two Messiahs conceivable in Jewish thought? Indeed, such a double-Messiah concept was entirely possible to any Jew who had not yet seen the full-blown revelation of the union in one person of all the many-sided characteristics to be found in the Son of God, the Son of David, the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, the Prophet, the High Priest of Melchizedek's Order, etc. John has too much evidence to disregard, or refuse, Jesus as the Christ in at least some wonderful sense. But since He did not seem to aspire to the positions usually assigned to the Messiah by popular Jewish expectations, or even by John's own reflections on the subject, perhaps John arrived at the alternate theory of not one unique Messiah, but two. Accordingly, Jesus would then be partially Messiah in one significant sense, because He brought to fruition some of the ancient prophecies, but (so John may have reasoned) another Coming One would be required to fulfil the balance of the prophecies. Jesus is unique, and only a long-range view of His total ministry would have unveiled what John could not see.

But before criticizing John for having too low a view of Jesus, let us appreciate this striking paradox: the Lord of the Universe who is coming for us, will be so different from the Jesus of Nazareth remembered by any who knew Him in the flesh that we may almost describe Him as "Another (of a different kind)!" When we contrast His past humiliation, His lowly service, His apparent defeats with majesty and glorious judgment as King who will finally bring to pass the second phase of John's wonderful predictions, we too begin to perceive that we also believe that the earthly history of Jesus of Nazareth is not the whole story, for we, like John, have seen only His first coming. As in the case of John, so also in ours, the time element between the first and second comings of Jesus has not been revealed. But John perished before discovering what we know, who live after Jesus' first coming: that Jesus did not intend to fulfil all of John's predictions on His first coming. Ironically, we too are scanning the heavens for that very "other Christ" about whom John queried the Lord, that other Messiah who will one day swing the axe into fruitless trees, purge His threshing floor, gather His grain and blash the chaff with inextinguishable fire! (Cf. Phil. 2:20, 21; Col. 3:4; 1 Th. 1:10; 3:13; 4:13-18; 2 Th. 1:7-10; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 7:24-28; 9:27, 28; 1 Jn. 3:2, 3)

If that be the meaning of John's question, what could be the motivation behind it? The Baptist's following included widely-scattered men of deep commitments like Jesus' early disciples, Apollos of Alexandria and others. (Cf. Jn. 1:35ff.; Ac. 18:24—19:7) So the great influence wielded by John over Israel in earlier months could not now be ignored as his question is dropped like a live hand grenade in this public assembly around Jesus. (see Lk. 7:21) If it be true that John and Jesus were preaching by the same Spirit, as they had led others to believe, why is it that one poses this seemingly embarrassing problem to the Other? Is this now a break in the monolithic system that these two had hitherto represented? Two authentic spokesmen for the same God cannot contradict each other or call into doubt the other's message or identity. John's perplexed "Are you the Christ—or not?" rumbled with ominous significance. Embarrassed disciples of Jesus must have fumed at this surprise attack from an unexpected quarter, even as embarrassed commentators today seek an explanation for this incongruous perplexity tearing at the heart of John. Why did John ask it?

1. Did he wish perhaps to confirm to his disciples what he himself had claimed for Jesus?
 - a. One writer (*PHC*, XXII, 265) exclaims: "But even so, it is surprising that his disciples should have such doubts to clear up. To think that he should have to send them to the Saviour Himself to settle their minds about Him. What had been the aim of his preaching amongst those disciples? What the subject . . . power . . . the effect? Apparently the very message he came to teach has been so taught by him as not yet to be learned!" This could be important, since his disciples had not left him to follow Jesus as they should have done long before. (See on Mt. 9:14-17) On the other hand, in fairness to them, it must be said that the fact that he continued to have disciples may only imply that he continued his work so long as he was free to make devoted followers whom he could mold for Jesus. But had they truly understood John, they would not have crystallized his movement into a permanent sect during his imprisonment. Perhaps they tended to do that earlier, but now that he is thrown into prison for his courageous preaching, his rating in their estimation zoomed to heroic proportions. Their zeal for his cause and their personal affection made it all the more

imperative that they NOT leave him at this crisis. Their dogged unwillingness to leave him now, though appreciated for its human worth, marked the furthest limit of their progress and sealed his failure. His imprisonment leaves them without a shepherd capable of guiding them into further truth or checking their excessive zeal toward sectarianism. There was none but Jesus Himself who could help them now. According to this view, then, John, finding himself totally frustrated, unable to continue his converting people to follow Jesus, sends two of his most reliable men directly to the Lord in the hope that He be able to convince them to follow Him.

b. Objections to this view have been suggested:

- (1) There is no necessary evidence that the disciples, on leaving Jesus to carry the message back to John, even understood their message. This is not to say that Jesus' cryptic words were incomprehensible to the average person, since we who live in the full light of His total revelation may draw colossal encouragements from them. But those who lived in a period not yet enlightened by this exposition of truth may not have grasped His meaning at all very quickly. The reply itself is better understood upon reflection and by those steeped in OT Scripture who could evaluate the evidences herein offered.
- (2) Christ's reply was addressed not to the disciples but
 - (a) "Go and tell John" (Mt. 11:4)
 - (b) The blessing is stated in the singular "Blessed is he" (*makários estin hós. . .*), as if deliberately levelled at John. Admittedly, this singular can be a universal blessing, as the commentary below will show.
 - (c) Neither Jesus nor John are pretending either to ask or answer this question. That is, this is John's own question, not one put by him in the mouths of his followers that would express their doubts. (See Lk. 7:20) Nor does Jesus pretend to go along with the game by feigning to answer John while really answering the Baptist's representatives then in His presence.

(d) The psychological need for Jesus' discourse about John (11:7-19) demands explanation if only a few of his disciples were seeming to waver in their convictions about Jesus. Jesus' defense of John is only plausible on the basis that John himself needed the defense.

2. Was John beginning to doubt?

- a. The psychological justification for this view is strong, since a man facing death cannot afford to be tortured by questions. He must be certain. He is not afraid to die but does not intend to die for the wrong thing. Greater anguish than death is torturing his mind now. Had John become so discouraged, so humiliated by his imprisonment that he needed further proof of Jesus' identity that would serve to verify even his own ministry to himself? Ederheim (*Life*, I, 661) seems to hear those stabbing doubts.

Was this the Kingdom he had come to announce as near at hand; for which he had longed, prayed, toiled, suffered, utterly denied himself and all that made life pleasant. . . . Where was the Christ? Was He the Christ? What was He doing? Was He eating and drinking all this while with publicans and sinners, when he, the Baptist, was suffering for Him? . . . had he succeeded in anything? . . . What if, after all, there had been some terrible mistake on his part? At any rate the logic of events was against him. He was now the fast prisoner of that Herod, to whom he had spoken with authority; in the power of that bold adulteress, Herodias. . . . It must have been a terrible hour. . . . At the end of one's life . . . to have such a question meeting him as: Art Thou He; or do we wait for another? Am I right, or in error and leading others into error? must have been truly awful.

- b. While this view is psychologically possible in light of "questions that try men's souls," nevertheless John's stern wilderness preparation, his being inured to hardship by his lonely vigils in the wilds of Judah, compounded with the positive identification of Jesus as the Messiah by God, combine together to render the case too certain to be

surrendered by doubt now. Nor is John likely to be disloyal or lose courage because he suddenly lost the freedom to stride up and down the Jordan valley preaching, since just such persecutions had awaited the great prophets before him. He was not unaware of the price for being a prophet in a wicked and turbulent age. It would be a greater psychological quirk in John to imagine that he had forgotten the events of no more than one year previous, which had signalled to him the identity of Jesus, or that these events were so utterly insignificant to him as to permit him to entertain such doubts as would mark a shattering of his faith in the Nazarene. Note:

- (1) He shows great faith by sending to JESUS for information, willing to accept whatever answer He gave.
 - (2) He perhaps doubted his own conclusions and asks Jesus in real humility how his own message about Jesus could harmonize with Jesus' actual fulfilment of that message.
 - (3) He surely knew that a false Christ would never admit to being an imposter.
 - (4) John may be a bit impatient with Jesus' slow, gentle ministry, wishing He would make more obvious progress but John's very approach proves John's extreme confidence in Jesus: Jesus would answer this question well and must answer in such a way as to bring action.
 - (5) John's last public word eloquently declares his faith from his prison cell: "Go ask JESUS! He knows the answers that can save us!"
3. Or perhaps the Lord's herald longed for clarification of something in the mission of Jesus that was not at all clear to him.
- a. Inspiration on some subjects, after all, does not mean omniscience on all. The possession of great visions or the ability to work miracles does not override the power to reason. This question, accordingly, is not a failure of confidence or of John's personal faith, since John sends his disciples directly to Jesus and to no one else. The main thrust of his evangelism had been a call to repentance in view of the coming judgment at the hands of the Messiah. Jesus, although indubitably marked as God's Anointed One, was using methods clearly (to John)

contrasting with, if not contradicting, his predictions. Further, while certain features of the Lord's first and second comings were revealed to and through John, yet the Baptist's recorded messages give no hint that the Messiah was actually to appear two times on earth, at times separated as widely as several milleniums. (Cf. Mt. 3:1-12; Mk. 1:2-8; Lk. 3:1-18; Jn. 1:19-34; 3:25-36) If these facts were disclosed only by later revelations, it is not surprising that this caged lion did not know them, hence needed clarifications on many points. (Cf. Ac. 1:6)

- b. Objection to this view is seen in the exceeding (if not, exaggerated) forcefulness of John's phrasing. The imperious, almost judicial tone of John demands that his inquiry be interpreted as something more than a simple, gentle request for information. How could a humble, trusting disciple, like John is here supposed to be, even dare to admit his own inner turmoil by comparing Jesus with "another (that cometh)"? No, there is too much bite, too much ill-disguised impatience with Jesus, in that phrasing. Interestingly enough, Jesus' reply provides John with no new information that would clarify Jesus' program which had so puzzled the prisoner. Rather he calls John back to reconsider the old evidence furnished by the miracles, the ancient prophecies and the responsibility to trust God despite one's own incomplete understanding.

4. Was John impatient?

- a. This is a young man's reaction: John was burning to see some action! (He was only six months older than the Lord Himself. Cf. Lk. 1:36, 56; 2:1-7) Absolutely convinced that his Cousin was God's Messiah, John could not fathom why Jesus was not making more progress, why He was not claiming a more indisputably prominent position, why He had not yet destroyed such iniquitous chaff as Herod Antipas and Herodias. How futilely inconsistent it seemed to John for Jesus to do "the works of the Christ" and not establish a Messianic throne in Zion! Even though John himself had predicted the great messianic works of grace ("Holy Spirit," Mt. 3:11; "gather wheat into garner" Mt. 3:12; show all men "the salvation of God" Lk. 3:6), yet Jesus' actual service seemed all grace and no judgment, so John was impatient. Just a single

word from Jesus could destroy the wicked rulers, unite the righteous, free John and usher in the kingdom of God! His question, then, may be paraphrased with the rude expression: "Are you really the Christ, or are we going to have to find someone else to do the job?" With this kind of prodding, John determined to pressure Jesus into changing the fundamental nature of His program from a slow, gentle ministry of patient mercy to one of fiery judgment. This reveals John's tactical reason for making this question and, consequently, its answer, as public as possible. Had the disciples asked Jesus the same question privately, it would not have had the same psychological pressure to force Him to answer it decisively, as it did publicly. John could foresee that both friends and critics would hear it, would be intensely interested in His reply and move in closer to see and hear how Jesus reacted. The result would be increased pressure on Jesus to declare Himself openly and, presumably, get on with the business of bringing in the messianic kingdom.

- b. Objections to this view are not easy, since this explanation combines the fierce love of John for Jesus, his total confidence in His ability, his imperious familiarity (he felt that he could talk to Jesus that way and get away with it), his zeal for God's Kingdom and righteousness. One objection to this as the exclusive meaning of John's question, is the fact that Jesus' answer is adaptable to all four possibilities in one way or another. (See below under "the evidential value of this section.")

While it is not easy to reject absolutely any of these suggestions, because a plausible case can be made for each, yet the psychological probabilities lie more clearly with the last one.

EVIDENTIAL VALUE OF THIS SECTION

The significance of the presence of this very incident in the Bible lies in two directions:

1. The internal value: Could this narrative be the unmasking of a cunning devised fable? It would be presumed that the great messianic herald could not have become so thoroughly disappointed in Jesus as to pose Him this impatient question! Which part is true then: the narrative of John's earlier testimony to Jesus' Messiahship, or this one which tells of his misgivings? But this very record, which bares the weakness

of this strong man, could have no sense except in light of his previous witness to Jesus. This ignorance, this impatience is precisely what we should expect from one who said all that John had previously preached. Edersheim, (*Life*, I, 668) notes:

When he sent his disciples with this question straight to Christ, he had already conquered; for such a question addressed to a possibly false Messiah has no meaning.

So this astounding question harmonizes perfectly with what is known of John earlier, and the testimony of Scripture which contains both accounts stands so much stronger for including both in the narrative.

2. This question posed by John is our question too! Is Jesus the final revelation of God, or not? Is there someone else besides Jesus with whom we shall have to do? Whether we need help in convincing others, or whether we are plagued with doubts of our own, whether we think that we need clarification when we should rather trust Him despite our limited knowledge, or whether we are impatient for God to do something about evil in the world, whatever our perplexity, Jesus' answer fits our need perfectly! John's perplexity furnished the occasion for Jesus to answer the heart-cry of all thinking men: "Are you God's last word, the ultimate reality, or must we turn to Another for the satisfaction of our soul's deepest need?"
3. One other detail that portrays the stark realism in this section was noticed by Foster (*SLC*, 1955, 404):

We do not envy those two disciples the task which had been assigned to them. As they stood in the great throng and watched the amazing miracles of Jesus and heard His thrilling sermon, they must have found it very difficult to persuade themselves to move to the front and actually ask Jesus such questions that challenged His whole campaign. But their devotion to John and the recollection of his command in prison and the certainty of his imminent death, if Christ did not come to his rescue, made them bold to speak. . . . These were the questions uppermost in the minds of all the people. They must have been stirred to the depths of their hearts as they heard John's disciples ask these questions.

They must have pressed a little closer to hear the discussion, for these were the very things they themselves wanted to know.

II. CHRIST CONVINCES AND CAUTIONS HIS CAPTIVE COMRADE (11:4-6)

However anguishing this question must have been to Jesus, coming as it does from a man who, given his extraordinary privileges to know more than others, should have responded better, yet with inimitable gentleness, understanding and sympathy, the Lord formed His reply to John. He grasped perfectly the torture of the Gethsemane out of which His famous cousin cried. He knew every hour of anguish John was then enduring down in the dank cell of Machaerus. Though this impatient question challenges Jesus' whole course of action, though curious, critical crowds by their very presence add to the pressure on Him, the Lord is Master of Himself! With consummate patience and wisdom He worded His strongly suggestive yet modest answer. As to the substance He provided a decisive conclusion to John's query, while not directly committing Himself on this crucial issue. This fact, however, suggests another mystery: Why did not Jesus just say, "Yes, John, I am the Christ" and be done with it?

1. Because to respond directly to THIS question in the presence of THESE multitudes (Mt. 11:7), would have meant that Jesus must openly declare Himself to be the Messiah (was John counting upon that eventuality?), even though the popular crowd would not have understood the true, spiritual meaning that the Lord would have wanted to communicate by that term. The crowd would have accepted Him as Jewish Messiah and crowned Him to be such a king as they desired. But this very act would have turned Him into their slave, reducing His grand mission to a rule over a tiny, insignificant kingdom and would have made Him dependent upon their extremely restricted conception of the true Messiahship as God had intended it. Jesus could not have answered John's question directly and openly before that mob, because to have done so would have instantly compromised His entire spiritual mission.
2. He did not answer John with a simple affirmation unsupported by ulterior evidences, because to have done this would still have left doubts in the mind of John. Any imposter could have claimed, "Yes, I am the Christ."

3. Jesus answered the way He did, because John's true need was not for an answer that would have made him believe in Jesus on the basis of a mathematical certainty. John needed to trust Jesus on the basis of the firmly established evidences already available to him. John did not at this point need intellectual debate or overwhelming argument that forced him to have a helpless confidence in Jesus' program. He must now stand fast, confident of the proofs already given, and so experience the real meaning of faith.

Luke, at this point, includes a striking detail that serves as background for Jesus' proof: "In that hour He cured many of diseases, plagues and evil spirits. On many that were blind he bestowed sight." (Lk. 7:21) Did Jesus do this on purpose with the specific end in view to make John's disciples eyewitnesses? Did He make John's disciples wait for His reply while, unperturbed, He continued His healing? If so, Jesus' self-mastery is thrown into even greater relief, since He deliberately lets John's question float lazily over that excited crowd while, all unruffled, Jesus calmly goes about His work as if nothing at all had occurred, but fully knowing that the tension in the crowd is growing to fever pitch: they too must hear the full answer to that question. Instead of shouting to get their attention, as was sometimes necessary (see Mt. 15:10; Mk. 8:34), He lets John's explosive demand agitate the crowds into moving in closer and quieting down to hear. When they were fully ready He made His move:

11:4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and tell John the things which ye hear and see:

11:5 The blind receive their sight,

and the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed,

and the deaf hear,

and the dead are raised up,

and the poor have good tidings preached to them.

THIS is a fit answer for the fuming campaigner down in Herod's prison? Here he had expected a drastic change in the Messiah's program which would violently overthrow God's enemies and get the Messiah's Kingdom underway, and this is the best excuse the Messiah Himself can give for His amazing lack of progress in that direction! His response is almost anticlimatic for people who were aching for a positive statement. But let their tempers cool, let them examine the indisputable evidence to feel the force of this brilliant argumenta-

tion! Jesus' proof of His identity is all the stronger because He is deliberately understating His evidence! Notice further that He sends no list of philosophical arguments why John (or anyone else) should believe Him to be the unique Messiah fully in control of His proper mission. Rather, He orders the two messengers to report to John what is happening, what He himself is doing. Jesus unconditionally applies to Himself, and invites John to subject Him to, the acid test of deeds and results, a test He will later (see on v. 19b) put into the hands of His critics. The Lord wished to be measured not only by the power of His talk. He constantly pointed to His "works," His deeds which identify Him to be God's final representative. (Cf. Jn. 14:10, 11; 10:37, 38) In other words, Jesus repeats for John the Baptist the very same evidences given to everyone. The Lord is not partial, giving to some special help not also available to any other. This fact is crucial, since the answer of Jesus will contain the all-sufficient proof that should identify Him to any man anywhere. What is this answer?

1. EVIDENCE of His identity and consequent right to expect unwavering allegiance: the miracles.
 - a. Done in the presence of hundreds of eyewitnesses, including John's disciples, they could not be gainsaid. (Lk. 7:21) They were not a matter of hear-say evidence.
 - b. Jesus claimed to work miracles. (Mt. 11:4, 5; Lk. 7:21, 22) The fact that He states only what occurs to the afflicted, leaving it to John's disciples to add that Jesus is actually working these prodigious miracles, does not detract from this emphatic declaration. Let those eclectics who think they believe Jesus' words but, ironically, reject His miracles, consider this affirmation! (See the special study on Miracles.) The impressive list of miracles cited argues how extensive and how commonly known was the proof Jesus had provided the nation as a foundation for settling just such a question as now stood before Him!
 - c. The impact of this evidence lies in the fact that the miracles could only have been done by the power and with the approval of God. They became, thus, the authenticating stamp of approval upon the precise course followed by Jesus. This fact alone rebukes both doubt and impatience.
 - d. For the doubters of our age it is well to remember with Plummer (*Luke*, 203) that

It is clear, not only that Luke and Matthew understand Jesus to refer to bodily and not spiritual healings, but that they are right in doing so. John's messengers had not "seen and heard" Christ healing the spiritually blind and the morally leprous. Moreover, what need to add *ptōchoi euaggelizontai*, if all that precedes refers to the preaching of the good tidings? It is unnatural to express the same fact, first by a series of metaphors, and then literally. All the clauses should be taken literally.

e. While it is true that the works of healing would prove no more than Jesus was a great prophet, nevertheless they were not unexplained wonders unconnected from a well-known schema of revelation that runs through the OT right up to Christ. Nor were they unconnected from what Jesus was saying about Himself. As proof, they do not make Jesus' claims or His teaching true, but they are the attestation of God that His claims are well-founded and His teaching God's. Since, then, Jesus claimed to be more than merely a great Prophet, His miracles attest God's approval of Jesus' affirmations about Himself. His wonders and signs are God's way of testifying that Jesus' highest claims are true. (Cf. Jn. 4:25, 26, 42; 8:12, 24, 31, 32 etc.)

2. EVIDENCE by implication from the nature of the miracles themselves. Because Jesus' miracles are directly linked to God's preparation for His coming, worked out in the OT prophets, it is not surprising to hear Him describe His ministry by using snatches of prophetic passages. (Cf. Isa. 29:18, 19; 35:5-7; 61:1-3 with Lk. 4:18-21) Jesus' choice of words are no mere recitation of facts, made more singular by the fact that He omits explicit mention of His own great part in this. His recital concludes with the most sublimely cryptic words, that would have almost no meaning for someone not in tune with OT prophecies: "The poor have good tidings preached to them." But to the man well-read in Isaiah, this simple phrase speaks volumes: "Reexamine what the prophets had predicted the Christ would do!" By implication Jesus is saying that the OT prophets had predicted just such a ministry as that in which He was then engaged. So doing, the Lord drives John right back to his Bible to reconsider the prophets'

message in order to see the perfect harmony between His program and their predictions concerning the Messiah.

3. **EVIDENCE** from the unworldly nature of His ministry: **The poor have good tidings preached to them.** John had already heard of the miracles (11:2) and much of His procedure (Lk. 7:18), so much of Jesus' present answer was not new to him. But it was superbly Messianic and unfortunately new that the impoverished, the afflicted, the meek, the humble, the "inferior," in short, the common people should be the special object of divine care. This concern for the weak, those who do not count, who cannot pay, whose voice is too weak to cry aloud for help, this genuine concern that brings a Royal Gospel to these without money or price, is remarkable proof of its divine origin. (Cf. Isa. 11:4; 29:19; 32:7; 55:1ff.; Rev. 21:6; 22:17) To borrow Plummer's vivid expression (*Luke*, 203), "The poor, whom the Greek despised and the Roman trampled on, and who the priests and the Levite left on one side," commonly neglected or exploited as worthless and ignorant, are now, by God's special choice and the Messiah's efforts, brought into the Kingdom of God. (Cf. Jas. 2:5, 6; Lk. 6:20) This simple phrase ("the poor receive the Gospel") measures the distance that separated Jesus' messiahship from the common Jewish concept, and demonstrates how completely Jesus was proceeding in perfect harmony with God's plans.

Several commentators note that Jesus' rehearsal of His Messianic accomplishments rises dramatically from common miracles of healing to (what would seem to us to be) the crowning miracle, resurrection of the dead. What could be higher or of more value than this? But Jesus continues in climactic fashion, finishing by estimating the proclamation of the gospel to the poor as above all miracles generally, superior even to the power to resurrect the dead! If this be correct, from an apologetic standpoint, it is most interesting. Among peoples whose sacred literature abounds in unexplained wonders and to whom miracles in legends is the rule rather than the exception, as well as among skeptical peoples who have lived to see the exposure of counterfeits and frauds, there is especially needed one other crowning proof of the divine origin of the message of Christ. Here the Master furnishes that critical proof. The sheer genius behind His

choice of this evidence is the fact that, while miracles and signs can be counterfeited by any pretended prophet, it is not likely that human selfishness in the prophet himself would permit him to counterfeit a tender, long-suffering sympathy for helpless sufferers who can in no way remunerate Him. Compassion of this kind does not belong to this world. It marks itself instantly as divine.

Here again, Jesus submits Himself to the test of time. He is willing not only to point to His miraculous works which already tell us so much about Him. More than this, He underlines the value of the long-range estimate of His life and ministry. It is as though Jesus had said, "My miracles identify my Messiahship as truly divine; my concern for the poor marks my ministry as humane in its highest sense."

The Lord Jesus fully understood the absolute essentiality of all three proofs of the divine authenticity of His message and mission, and His Church ignores any one of them to her peril! Church history is spotted with overemphasis or crass ignorance of one or more of these evidences: miracles, prophecy or genuine humanity to man in its highest sense. Later (15:1-20) Jesus will thunder to the Pharisees a lesson we can learn here: "No religion, regardless of its pretended origin and miraculous proofs, can call itself divine if it makes a man mean, inhuman, or indifferent to the weak!"

In this answer returned to John, significant for its absence is any reference to judgment and vengeance. (Cf. Isa. 35:4) This omission is meaningful, since John must have been straining to hear just these very words. His silence on this subject says to John, "Be patient: I am proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor now. One day I will announce the day of the vengeance of our God. But not yet." Even though He breathes not a word to John about the fiery vengeance of the Messiah upon the wicked, He not only refuses to side-step the issue, but solemnly declares Himself openly to the multitudes. (See on 11:20-24)

11:6 And blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me. There is something strangely ominous about this tender beatitude. While it possesses all the gentle persuasion of a blessing, its gentleness lies in its form not its content! Expressed as a benediction, its antithesis is clear: "Woe be to the man who is so disappointed by me that he ceases to trust me and so is lost!" So certain is Jesus that He would become a "stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall," and misunderstood by the

majority of the people, that He issues this warning sheathed in a blessing. (Cf. 1 Pet. 2:8; Isa. 8:14, 15; Mt. 8:34; 13:57; 26:31; Jn. 6:60, 61; 1 Co. 1:22-25) What kind of Messiah is Jesus going to be, if not to be shocked by Him is seen as something especially blessed? But the very reason for framing His warning in the form of a blessing at this point, points to the very need of John and everyone else who would be scandalized by Jesus. Even the most satisfyingly persuasive miracle will fail to convince anyone unless his mind is open, willing to be won over, unless his prejudices are laid aside in favor of a new love. This appealing gentleness of Jesus is deliberately calculated to open the mind and close the sale. This approach is the more psychologically sound and effective because of the long-standing preconceived notions men have about what God's Messiah has to say and be. Rather than shout and pound His fist, ramming His point home (as was sometimes the case and necessarily so), the Lord intentionally uses "soft-sell," understating His evidence, weakening His cause in the eyes of all neo-Maccabeans, quietly closing with a patient refusal to change anything.

How could John the Baptist, of all people, possibly have been scandalized by Him? That this is no remote possibility is amply proven by considering what evidence John had already been given, evidence that should have sufficed to allay any doubts and calm all impatience. John is seriously tempted to ignore the clear voice of God speaking directly to him from heaven and the visible descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Master. What greater evidence could another Christ give, if these were the credentials that certified Jesus? What in John would cause such profound dissatisfaction with Jesus that lowered Jesus in his esteem to be something less than the Coming One? These perplexities may be resolved by posing another question: Why should any person be disappointed in Jesus?

1. The Lord failed the Zealots by not forming a liberation army against the Romans.
2. Jesus did not interest the rich, self-sufficient Sadducees because of His humble birth, lack of proper rabbinical accreditation and because of (ultimately) unpopular religious, social and political views.
3. He turned off all the popular enthusiasts, since His entire program failed to support commonly held preconceptions.
4. He shocked the leaders of established religion, the Pharisees, by opposing the rabbis, whose position was held in maximum reverence by the Hebrews themselves.

5. He lost the ear of the grand majority by not blessing what they wanted, did not do what they pleased, nor catered to their whims.

Another (PHC, XXII, 273), adhering more closely to John's personal problem, analyzes the reasons for being offended by Jesus:

1. The peculiarities of early education often give rise to this temptation of offence in Christ. . . . We too have the prejudices of our own special education and standpoint.

2. This temptation is sometimes connected with the fact that Christ seems to abandon His friends to the most cruel suffering and oppression. The unbelief that starts in suffering, rather than in a syllogism of the scribe has a special claim to sympathy and patient love. . . . Do we not sometimes fall into the temptation of thinking that Christ under-estimates our temporal well-being?

3. The limitations that hem in our love of the excitements and activities of public service often give rise to this peril. . . . Possibly we feel within us a capacity for effective religious enterprise, from the exercise of which we are cut off by some embarrassing condition in our lives.

4. This peril sometimes springs up because our knowledge of Christ comes through indirect and prejudiced channels. . . . This offence may arise in us because we have to view Christ, in some of His relations, through crude, ignoble, small-minded representatives.

A man will always be discouraged with Jesus if he thinks that he himself knows best. Unless we hold lightly and tentatively our views about what the Kingdom of God has to be, unless there is a definitely humble willingness to learn from Jesus, an intelligent flexibility and intellectual honesty about our own great ignorance, when Jesus Christ cuts across OUR ideas, we are in for a shock! So John, too, could have been scandalized by holding tenaciously to his own concept of the Messiah. But like any prejudice, his concept represented only a partial vision of the truth. Had John known all the truth about Jesus, he probably would not have dashed off this question. Nevertheless, it was this PARTIAL vision, this INADEQUATE understanding which would cause John to disbelieve, if he clung blindly to it. Not only John, but any man, definitely stands in danger of stumbling into the same fatal error of rejecting the claims of Jesus because they do not suit his own views.

To him and to all, Jesus would say, "Though I may not seem to be moving rapidly enough in the right directions to suit the views, tastes and ambitions of many people, I know where I am going. I know best how to plan my Kingdom. I do not intend to change my pace or my course, even though this will mean that many, who are unwilling to trust me to know what I am about, will be left shaken, will walk away in disgust and never come back. Happy is the man who can stand the shock when my methods, my manners, my message and my mission collide with his opinions about them. Blessed indeed is the man who can trust me perfectly, who can see me for what I really am, *accept me for what I am really doing, even though he does not understand why,—who can do all that and not doubt!*"

This simple beatitude is a call to trust Jesus to know what He is doing, for only this unhesitating childlike confidence will keep us from falling (see on 11:25). Only a disciple can keep from falling; the wise and understanding, who know too much to accept things as Jesus presents them, will always stumble.

The Bible writers do not provide us the sequel to this incident, leaving us thus with unanswered questions: how did John react to the mysterious message repeated to him by his couriers? Did he plummet into further despair at what must have seemed (humanly speaking) to be the failure of his attempt to get answers and action out of Jesus? In light of the Judge's praise (see on 11:7-19), it is more probable that he plunged into profounder reflection upon the whole burden of the prophetic message, and, like the very prophets themselves whom he read, bowed his head in perplexity, struggling with the meaning of it all. (1 Pet. 1:10, 11) In a world of limited knowledge, vast ignorance and imperfect justice, ruled by a patient God who will have all men come to repentance, John had to learn what it means to cry: "Not my will but thine be done!" It required a *sinewy, tough-minded trust* to hold John steady as he lay in his dungeon, captive, doomed and alone, yes, but blessed, and not offended by Jesus.

Offended. Jesus' personal example speaks volumes on the subject of causing one's neighbor to stumble. He was the greatest stumbling-block the Jews were ever to know. (Cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-8; 1 Co. 1:23) His mode of life, His message of mercy, the speed and direction with which He conducted His ministry, His view of the Messiahship were all good things that definitely caused many of His own people so utterly to fall that they never rose again to believe Him or follow Him further. Nevertheless, the Lord did not change one iota of

His program or life-style in order to keep that from happening. No one was more sensitive to the weaknesses of the little ones than He, yet He did not swerve from the path of righteousness, even though He knew this to be a collision course with popular error. He also knew that He could not win over everyone, but this realization did not at all lessen the heartbreak nor keep Him from trying. (Cf. Mt. 7:13, 14 with 23:37) But this beatitude (11:6) by its very existence represents a hard look at the probabilities and marks as particularly blessed those remarkable individuals who trust Him enough to swallow their disappointment and remain His disciples.

III. CHRIST'S CHARITABLE COMMENDATION OF THE CONSCIENTIOUS CHAMPION (11:7-11)

11:7 **And as these went their way, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes . . .** Observe how Jesus permits John's messengers to get well out of earshot before taking up the line of thought that follows. He may have done this deliberately for two reasons:

1. The multitude themselves needed to reflect deeply on (what must have seemed to them) the mysterious message sent to the Baptist. It is as if Jesus were feeding them in two courses, giving ample time to digest the information, before giving them more.
2. Further, had John's messengers overheard Christ's high praise for John and reported it to him, this might have tended to cancel the effectiveness of the evidence Jesus gave him. So it is best that they not hear this commendation. Many men are very tough-skinned against all manner of abuse or reviling, but have no effective defense against the negative effects of praise. They immediately puff up, their eyes swell shut, hindering them from seeing themselves objectively in light of that praise.

If Jesus' message to John contained any rebuke or suggestion that the Baptist were less praiseworthy, then Plummer's remark (*Matthew*, 161) is to the point:

In society men are commonly praised to their face or the faces of their friends, and blamed behind their backs. Jesus does the opposite. . . .

Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John . . . It was **John**, not his disciples or anyone else in particular, who had fired that explosive question. It was **John** to whom Jesus

returned a simple, conclusive answer. Now it is **John** concerning whom the Lord addresses the crowds. But why did Jesus feel He needed to speak about His herald in THIS way at THIS time?

1. Because John's question might have caused the multitudes to feel that the great prophet was having a crisis of faith if he is driven to ask this question so ambiguously full of doubt. Is John himself now failing? If so, the people would certainly be tempted to reevaluate, and perhaps even reject, John's message upon which Jesus' own mission was based. Although Jesus had refused to answer John's impatient demand directly, and although His veiled rebuke might be interpreted by some to mean that the desert preacher is no longer worthy of notice or honor, Jesus immediately corrects such a notion. Although one doubt, if strongly held, can unmake a character, and although a bossy impatience can destroy childlike trust and humble service, yet neither one doubt nor zealous impatience mean that John has fallen. Jesus leaps immediately to his defense, clearing him of unwarranted suspicion. In fact, He does more: He sought to sustain their former confidence in John and rekindle their initial admiration for him.
2. Because Jesus needed to attenuate the apparent difference between the view of John the Baptist and His own with regard to the Messiahship. The crowds, ignorant of the real relationship existing between John and Jesus (Jesus is John's Lord), might have tended to misinterpret this rift as merely the schism between two equal teachers. Jesus must now defend the God-given mission of John, show its limitation and its difference from His own mission, and then push the crowds to decide about both. Note how some of the implications of this text demand of Jesus that He possess absolute divine authority in order for Him to make the statements He does. This fact could not have escaped the notice of at least some in the crowd.
3. The impatient, somewhat critical undercurrent of the Baptist's question could not help but stimulate people to take a serious, more critical look at John or Jesus or both. Perhaps Jesus, who knows men's hearts could read the unfriendly criticism and honest puzzling written there: "Say, John's right: if Jesus be the Messiah, then why does He move forward so meekly, enduring the reviling and the murderous scheming of His enemies? And how could He leave John to rot in Herod's

dungeon; When is He going to get this Kingdom of God moving, claim the Messianic throne for Himself and begin to rule the world?" The anguished question out of this dungeon turned the multitude to examining the claims of Jesus, since the phrasing of the question concentrates all the various aspects of the mission of Jesus into one burning issue to be resolved immediately without embarrassment or hesitation. It became an instant issue to be dealt with by visible proof and cogent argument that would justify all that Jesus had been claiming for Himself. The comprehension and conscience of the people was thus thrown into crisis, since they too needed to decide about this same issue.

4. Jesus could never have deprecated the mission of John without at the same time undermining His own ministry, since John's work preparatory to Christ's coming had been perfectly valid for its purpose. Jesus came not to destroy the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, and John was the last of the great prophets! (11:13; see on Mt. 5:17;20) John had initiated this exciting discussion by asking, in effect: "Who are you?" but Jesus fully answers this question before the multitudes by demanding, "Who is John the Baptist?" For only those who accept John the Baptist at full value can truly appreciate who Jesus is. (See on 11:14, 15)

Who was John the Baptist? While many had dismissed him from their minds as an ill-dressed, brassy-voiced, low-country evangelist, the Son of God has quite another estimate. With a mighty barrage of thought-provoking questions, He provides a strong rebuttal to any criticisms of John's person or ministry entertained by the crowds.

What went ye out into the wilderness to behold? Why did Jesus begin His message on John with a series of questions?

1. Because questions arouse in the listeners an interest in what Jesus will say later. An affirmation does not engross the attention quite so well as does a short barrage of questions. Yet, since these are rhetorical questions, Jesus is making a series of most striking observations.
2. Even though these are rhetorical questions, yet by their very nature they make the audience take a position about John and about themselves. They ask "What was it in you yourselves that prompted you to trek out into the wastelands of Judea? What was it about John that so stirred your souls?"

From Jesus' use of past tense verbs (*exēlibete*, all three times, translated "you went out") it becomes obvious that He is hammering on the folks' memory of what they saw at the time they originally went out to hear John at the Jordan River. These questions, then, refer to what John was at that time. Further, since Jesus makes no exceptions or reservations about him, He definitely implies that John never has been, or has yet become, anything else but what they have always known him to be, a towering rock of spiritual power, moral courage and unwavering godliness. It is clear that this is Jesus' evaluation. The mere fact that the Baptist is now perplexed about the program of the Master in no way reduces that estimate. The fact that he is in prison and is not whining for miraculous release as the price for his trust in Jesus re-doubles the force of this impression.

The Lord's praise for the forerunner and his work, given especially at this juncture, is excellent evidence of the authenticity of the fact itself, as Edersheim (*Life*, I, 669) has it:

He to Whom John had formerly borne testimony, now bore testimony to him; and that, not in the hour when John had testified for Him, but when his testimony had wavered and almost failed. This is the opposite of what one might expect, if the narrative had been a fiction, while it is exactly what we might expect if the narrative be true.

The Master nurtured a deep respect for His herald, ever speaking of him with generous appreciation. (Cf. Jn. 5:30-35) Bruce (*Training*, 71) comments:

John reciprocated these kindly feelings, and had no sympathy with the petty jealousies in which his disciples sometimes indulged. The two great ones, both of them censured for different reasons by their degenerate contemporaries, ever spoke of each other to their disciples and to the public in terms of affectionate respect; the lesser light magnanimously confessing his inferiority, the greater magnifying the worth of His humble fellow-servant. What a refreshing contrast was thus presented to the mean passions of envy, prejudice and detraction in other quarters, under whose malign influence men of whom better things might have been expected spoke of John as a madman, and of Jesus as immoral and profane!

But this battery of questions is most impressive. As the Lord probes for an answer, offering alternatives, He is making the multitudes answer that question: "What did you go out to see?" As a master

orator, Jesus punches out a simple outline, eliminating unworthy alternatives: "Not this, not this, but that, and even more than that." Study His outline: "Who is John the Baptist?"

1. Certainly not a fickle sychophant (v. 7)
2. Certainly not a dapper courtier living luxuriously (v. 8)
3. But rather a prophet of God (v. 9)
4. More than this, he's the personal messenger of Jahveh (v. 10)
5. He is the greatest of the race (v. 11a)
6. Transition to Jesus' revelations on the Kingdom: "Yet he's inferior to the humblest Christians." (v. 11b)

So doing, He zooms in one one major worthwhile reason for commending John. Having confirmed it, He used it as a springboard from which to launch His revelations concerning the true office and ministry of the Baptist. But before He could do this, He must assure Himself of the crowd's sharing the same footing, the same fundamental appreciation of John.

A. A CHANGELING'S CHARACTER?

His first question cracks like a rifle-shot: **a reed shaken with the wind?** Is Jesus flaying their present criticisms, doubts and worldly ambitions with withering scorn and sarcasm, or is this a calm, reasoned defense? Some take Jesus' words literally; others, metaphorically:

1. *Literally*: "You would have found many such canes out there in the desert along the Jordan River, but would a tall reed waving and bent by every wind have really so attracted your attention so fixedly as to drive you out there to see it?" Tall reeds are the most common sight along the Jordan River, but are not so marvellous as to lure crowds out into the wilderness. The very fact that people did go out proves the extraordinariness of John. People would hardly cross the street to see the kind of person they could meet any day, not to mention trekking miles through wilderness country.
2. *Figuratively*: The very fact that Jesus offers this obvious metaphor for weakness and instability indicates that He really advocates the opposite: "No, you went out into the wilderness because you expected and found a rock of a man, a giant of unswerving fidelity and moral power in the face of great personal difficulties. No fickleness of spirit would have so commanded your attention. That man dared stand firm against the Pharisees and unmasked their hypocrisy! He fearlessly

rebuked sin, though the king himself were the sinner, even when his own freedom, yes, his own life hung in the balance!"

The audience's moral sense was awakened. If John had been a man who easily yielded to popular opinion, bending with it because he has no solid convictions of his own, then why is he at this very minute down in Herod's prison? He is there because he would not compromise, because he could not shut his eyes to what the Jewish religionists had not the moral stamina to denounce and about which the silent majority stayed silent, because they were just plain afraid.

But Jesus is not merely defending John here; His attack is also aimed at the weakness and failure of the whole nation. The whole Jewish nation was made up of reeds swaying before popular currents, but John did not sway! Here is written the quality of the moral fiber of his real faith and piety. His was a non-conformity in things that count.

B. A COURTIER'S COSTUME?

11:8 **But what went ye out to see? a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft raiment are in kings' houses.** While His audience is still reeling under the first salvo, Jesus rams home another. Again His words have been taken,

1. *Literally*: "You might have been attracted to the wilderness to see such a man. But let's be frank: you would not have found such a man where John was actually preaching! Dapper courtiers are to be found in kings' palaces, not in the badlands of Judea. Realistically, a wilderness pilgrimage is totally unnecessary for those who would see luxurious worldlings. You would not have had to go very far to observe pliant, flattering courtiers fawning before Herod." Jesus' sparkling figure of speech is the very antithesis of John's actual manner: his austere diet and desert dress and personal discipline, his entire renunciation of self, even in things entirely legitimate, damn the heresy that ease of living is life's highest expression and goal. With no thought for his own personal comfort or advancement, his whole life was concentrated on being a "Voice crying in the wilderness."
2. *Figuratively*: The phrases, **soft raiment, king's houses (or courts)** and **live in luxury** (Lk. 7:25), strongly suggest a person who knows the courtier's art of flattering kings whereby one secures to himself **royal favor and promotions**. The irony of Jesus' words would strike hard at the conscience of the wavering multitudes, since they had humbly and joyously

accepted John's coming and message precisely because John was NOT a yes-man for any earthly ruler. He stood head and shoulders above common man, attracting admiration because he could not be bought by royal favors. His unswerving fidelity to God and to His Word drove him as God's ambassador to take up the dangerous occupation of telling the truth to kings.

The crowd knew that John had not yielded either to the popularity craze or to the craving for luxury, riches and comfort. They also knew how many self-styled spiritual leaders were even then bending in every direction of the compass as the pressure of flattery or threats was applied to them. They also knew that pliable preachers and those craving the praise of men and the riches of the world as ultimate objectives do not end in prisons as martyrs for the truth. The collective conscience of the audience must have been deeply stirred as Jesus poured searing scorn upon their own worldly dreams, because if Jesus is (by implication) praising the very opposite of what they thought fine and worthy of their ambitions, His is a challenge to the most excruciating self-examination. Who among them did not fully expect that the Messiah Himself would be **clothed in soft raiment, live in luxury in kings' houses?** Who among them did not aspire to the same sort of treatment?

C. A COLOSSAL COMMUNICATOR

11:9 **But wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet?** After eliminating other unworthy alternatives, Jesus expresses the image that was forcing itself into the mind of His hearers: **a prophet!** As the Jews had cried for release from their oppressors and the establishment of the Messiah's reign, they had faced the horrible possibility that God had abandoned His people, for the heavens had remained silent now for 400 years. Almost any voice that cried with the old familiar ring of the prophets could not help but cause the Hebrew pulse to race with unwonted excitement: God has again visited His people! (Cf. Lk. 1:68, 78; 7:16) They had eagerly flocked to the Jordan, knowing that "the Lord God will do nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets." (Amos 3:7) It stood to reason that the Almighty was about to act, for there on the banks of the Jordan stood His prophet. (See notes on 3:1-12, Vol. I)

Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. Thus, the multitudes had been correct in their estimate of John, but

they had not set their evaluation high enough. Jesus gives it as His own emphatic judgment that they had seen more than they intended to see. But how is it possible that anyone could be **more than a prophet**? Besides combining in himself all the usual functions of the prophetic office, John was assigned the task not only of prophesying about the Messiah, but also of preparing the way for Him and announcing Him to the world as having come. Jesus enlarges upon this declaration:

11:10 **This is he, of whom it is written,**

**Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
Who shall prepare thy way before thee.**

In short, John the Baptist is the personal herald of Jehovah Himself who will shortly appear. (Mal. 3:1—4:6) For the Hebrew in whose heart burned Malachi's words, Jesus' quiet, but terribly significant, assertion must have been His most thrilling revelation up to this point. In this restrained disclosure are inherent three assumptions:

1. Jesus Christ depends upon the divine origin and trustworthiness of the OT prophecy, citing it here as indirect proof of His own identity and direct evidence of John's. For what cannot be known today of Malachi's prophecy, we are indebted to Jesus, who does not hesitate for a moment to quote textually the ancient prophet.
2. Christ declares the exact fulfilment of Malachi's words, pointing to John the Baptist as their unique fulfilment: "**This is he!**" (See also on 11:14) Not only is predictive prophecy a possibility, but we have here a specific case in point of its actual occurrence and fulfilment.
3. Since Jesus is the One for whom John the Baptist had prepared, He hereby declares Himself to be the Lord God in Person come to His Temple. This is equivalent to a claim to deity on the part of Christ Himself.

The earth-shaking importance of this citation of Malachi's prophecy by Jesus can best be appreciated by studying the prophet's own words in their context. About them Keil (*Minor Prophets*, II, 456ff.) notes:

To the question, 'Where is the God of Judgment?' the Lord Himself replies that He will suddenly come to His temple, but that before His coming He will send a messenger to prepare the way for Him. The announcement of this messenger rests upon the prophecy in Isa. 40:3ff., as the expression ("prepare the way") which is borrowed from that passage, clearly shows.

The person whose voice Isaiah heard calling to make the way of Jehovah in the desert, that the glory of the Lord might be revealed to all flesh, is here described as *maleâch*, whom Jehovah will send before Him, i.e. before His coming. This *maleâch* ("messenger") is not a heavenly messenger or spiritual being . . . nor the angel of Jehovah *kat'exochên* (*par excellence*), who is mentioned afterwards and called *maleâch babberith*, but an earthly messenger of the Lord, and indeed the same who is called the prophet Elijah in ver. 23 (4:5 in some versions), and therefore not "an ideal person, viz. the whole choir of divine messengers, who are to prepare the way for the coming of salvation, and open the door for the future grace" (Hengstenburg) but a concrete personality—messenger who was really sent to the nation in John the Baptist immediately before the coming of the Lord. The ideal view is precluded not only by the historical fact, that not a single prophet arose in Israel during the whole period between Malachi and John, but also by the context of the passage before us, according to which the sending of the messenger was to take place immediately before the coming of the Lord to His temple. . . .

Preparing the way (an expression peculiar to Isaiah: cf. Isa. 40:3; 57:14 and 62:10) by clearing away impediments lying in the road, denotes the removal of all that retards the coming of the Lord to His people, i.e. the taking away of enmity to God and of ungodliness by the preaching of repentance and the conversion of sinners. The announcement of this messenger therefore implied, that the nation in its existing moral condition was not yet prepared for the reception of the Lord, and therefore had no ground for murmuring at the delay of the manifestation of the divine glory, but ought rather to murmur at its own sin and estrangement from God. When the way shall have been prepared, the Lord will suddenly come. . . . The Lord (*h'âdôn*) is God; this is evident both from the fact that He comes to *His* temple, i.e. the temple of Jehovah, and also from the relative clause "whom ye seek," which points back to the question, "Where is the God of judgment?" (ch. 2:17). . . . This promise was fulfilled in the coming of Christ, in whom the angel of the covenant, the Logos, became flesh, and in the sending of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Him.

With the coming of the Lord the judgment will also begin; not the judgment upon the heathen, however, for which the ungodly nation was longing, but the judgment upon the godless members of the covenant nation. . . .

But compare Malachi's original words with the uniform NT quotation of them (Mal. 3:1; Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 7:27):

Malachi:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me.

New Testament

Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, Who shall prepare thy way before thee.

While it may be true (and should be noticed therefore) that all the Synoptics concur on this rendering independent of either the Hebrew text or the LXX, as if they were citing a popular form of this prophecy extant in no manuscript remaining to our time, this version of Malachi's words is interpretative. The interpretation in the mouth of Christian Apostles is not suspect, however, and could be perfectly Jewish and stereotyped in this form long before the Evangelists made use of it.

The reason for this is obvious and commonplace in prophecy: what Jehovah does through agents He may be said to do for Himself: In Malachi's prophecy God Himself prepares to come in judgment to Israel. But even in the Hebrew text (represented in our English versions) Malachi represents God as changing from first person singular, "I," "my," and "me," to the third person singular: "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." To the attentive reader, Jewish or Christian, this change may mean a distinction in personages between the God who intends to reveal Himself and the actual Person through whom He makes Himself known. (Study what appears to be a similar case in Ezek. 34:11-24) Therefore, in light of the distinction in Persons between Jehovah who inhabits eternity and His actual manifestation in time, a Jewish scholar might read back into God's words the proper personal pronouns that would clarify that distinction. Further, since this interpretative translation is particularly irreprehensible in view of the distinction between the Persons of Jesus the Son and God the Father, a distinction borne out in the fulfillment of

the prophecy in question, the Christian Evangelists would find this popular rendering especially suitable

The change of wording bears the stamp of approval of inspired men who quote Malachi's words ONLY in this form, providing thus one more evidence for the conclusion we already knew from many other sources: "The coming of Christ is the coming of God."

11:11 **Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist. Among them that are born of women,** as Plummer (*Luke*, 205) has it, is "a solemn periphrase for the whole human race." (Cf. Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4) Who are the real giants of this world? Kings? Generals? Statesmen? Philosophers? How differently God measures the greatness of a man! History, too, gauges a man quite differently. Who would have ever heard of Herod today, had he not laid violent hands on John the Baptist. Pilate, too, would have been a non-entity, had he not been partially responsible for crucifying Jesus Christ. Further, had the Lord Himself polled His audience that day, seeking their responses to the one question, "Whom do you consider to be the greatest man who have ever lived?" the replies would have exhausted the pages of OT history: "Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel!" However significant a role those men may have played in the scenes of the history of God's revelation, God's Son places the laurel on another brow. His decision is final and inclusive: **There hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist.** In the estimate of earth's Judge, John is the greatest of the race, greater even than the prophets ("more than a prophet") But in what sense?

1. Certainly not absolutely, since Jesus proceeds immediately to amend His seemingly universal declaration. And, if our interpretation of 11:12-15 be correct, then the Lord limits John's superiority to great men who lived before the Cross. Of those, then, he is relatively the greatest.
2. His personal character was positively noteworthy; humble, self-denying and courageous. God's interest in John is a specimen of real piety and practical zeal for righteousness indicates that He is not so much interested in counting men, as in finding men who will count! In seeking men who can be what John was, God might be paraphrased as saying, "I would that I had as many soldiers as I have men!" Though the Father is not willing that any should perish, and so is pleased with numbers of godly men, yet His heart is touched by the con-

centrated power of a singleminded individual whose whole life stands out in a wilderness of indifferentism, unbelief and doubt, and who is willing to spend his whole life in God's service, calling men back to God.

3. John's superiority also lay in the function he performed in the Messianic planning. His was the unique glory of being the immediate forerunner of the Messiah. Though a great prophet like Moses and Elijah, he not only prophesied, but lived to see and point out to others the Messiah of whom he had spoken.

Note how calmly Jesus waves aside all other judgments, all other pretenders to the claim of human greatness. A man would have to be God to dare pinpoint a decision so precise, so historically justifiable as this! Jesus' judgments are so much more striking, because He does not often append to them a bald, apologetic statement of His right to make them. He simply acts in character as earth's Judge, letting His signs identify to men His right to say what He does. (However, study John 5 where He outlines the evidence of His divine authority to judge.)

Yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. This bewildering amendment, attached to the foregoing encomium, is a beautiful paradox and deliberately calculated to keep His audience seeking its meaning for a long time to come. Our vantage point on this side of the Cross, the empty Tomb and Pentecost not only removes the mystery in His apparent inconsistency, but also proves the truth of His assertion. Three major questions need clarification:

1. What phase of **the kingdom of heaven** is meant here?
 - a. If by the **kingdom of heaven** (or *of God*) we mean "the rule of God," then in no sense can John the Baptist be excluded from **the kingdom**, and it becomes nonsense to say that he was never in the kingdom, having died before its inception, for there never was a servant of God who more embodied the fundamental principle of humble service to God, upon which **the kingdom of heaven** was founded. But the antithesis of Jesus must be sought elsewhere than in this sense, because John's greatness is obviously contrasted with that of the most insignificant person **in the kingdom**, a contrast that cannot help but suggest that, in some special sense, John is not to be considered as being **in the kingdom**.

- b. The **kingdom of heaven**, of which Jesus here speaks, is metonymy on a grand scale, the cause put for the effect. The Church of Jesus Christ is the highest earthly expression of the Government of God, so that one might well say that, wherever the Church goes, there is the Kingdom of God in action. While no thoughtful person will confuse the Church for the Kingdom, yet there is this important, undeniable sense in which the whole program of Jesus Christ, otherwise known as His Church, may, indeed, must be called **the kingdom of heaven**. Since, in this sense, **the kingdom** was established on the Day of Pentecost (see notes on Mt. 16:18, 19, 28; cf. Lk. 19:11; 24:46-49; Ac. 1:3-8; 2:1-42; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; Col. 1:13 etc.), then John would not, of course, have lived to participate in what would be the common privileges of anyone **in the kingdom**.
2. Who is **he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven**?
- a. Some have suggested that Jesus refers to Himself. Accordingly, He would be seen as describing Himself as someone who was then less important than John, but who would soon appear in His true glory, hence far more important than he, when He would have revealed Himself as the King. Objection to this view arises from the fact that at Jesus' baptism, John himself recognized the immeasurable superiority of the Lord by yielding to His requests. Further, John consistently proclaimed Jesus' Lordly preeminence. (Mt. 3:11, 12; Jn. 1:26-34; 3:28-36) Jesus' own position is not at issue here.
- b. Jesus is talking about His own disciples, those who would live to participate in the privileges and enjoy the joyous revelations that would be the common possession of any Christian.
3. How is it possible for John to be inferior to the humblest Christian?
- a. His inferiority is not calculated in reference to his personal confidence in Jesus or dependence upon God, as if he were to be thought of as a man of vacillating faith merely because of his impatient question sent to Jesus. The problem here centers not around his faith but upon his function, his position in the messianic scheme of things.

- b. Plummer (*Luke*, 205) states the principle of distinction best: "The lower members of a higher class are above the highest members of a lower class." The contrasts between the class to which John belongs and that of which Christians are members may be set forth thus;

John the Baptist:	Any Christian
—lived and died in the era of preparation for the coming of the Christ;	—Lives and dies in the era of realization of the prophets' messages in a present Christ;
—Lived as a servant of God; Was the Bridegroom's friend;	—Lives as a son of God; Is the Bride of Christ;
—For all his reflection, could not fathom truths hinted to him by prophetic insight;	—Grasps these truths as elementary knowledge and as part of being a Christian;
—Lived under the law and dispensation of Moses	—Lives under the reign of grace, superior spiritual privileges

So the interesting paradox is true: "He that is less than John is greater than John." John, though a prophet of the Almighty, hence, because of this office or function, would be more highly regarded than the common godly man, yet, because he was fated to surrender his life before the new era of the risen Christ, he would not be privileged to know the advantages of even the humblest Christian. It is as McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 283) has it: "The least born of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 1:12, 13; 3:5) is greater than the greatest born of women", who, for whatever hindering reason, does not know the most elementary principles of the Kingdom of God. All believers in Christ now know the great treasures of revelation given to them by God, because anyone who has lived this side of Pentecost knows of Jesus' great victories over disease, death, and the Devil. They know of His accession to the throne of God and coming in glory. Only in this sense may it be said that we have clearer comprehension of the Kingdom of God than any of the ancient prophets or even John himself. Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 7) puts this succinctly:

What is it that the Christian has that John could never have? . . . John had never seen the Cross, and therefore

one thing John could never know was the full revelation of the love of God. The holiness of God he might know; the justice of God he might declare; but the love of God in all its fulness he could never know. . . . It is possible for us to know more about the heart of God than Isaiah or Jeremiah or any other of that godly company. The man who has seen the Cross has seen the heart of God in a way that no man who lived before the Cross could ever see it . . .

IV. CHRIST'S CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE KINGDOM

(11:12-15)

At this point in His sermon on John, Jesus turns slightly aside from defending John to make appropriate observations about the kingdom of heaven just mentioned (11:11). He seems to be answering the burning question: If John the Baptist is so important a prophet, being the very Herald of the Messiah and harbinger of the Kingdom of God, then how is the time-schedule proceeding with the actual establishment of the Kingdom? To this question Jesus responds, in general, that this is a turbulent period for God's Kingdom due to the violent misunderstanding of the true nature of the Kingdom and its King, but since the Messiah's forerunner has already appeared (see on 11:14), the Messiah Himself cannot be too far behind, and with Him the kingdom comes.

11:12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force. Two views are generally held regarding Jesus' meaning:

1. In a good sense, only violent men could gain entrance to, or possession of the Kingdom of God, i.e., men who seek it with burning zeal and having found it, force their way into it. (Cf. Lk. 16:16; see Arndt-Gingrich, *biázō* for bibliography.) They give all they have to enter it, a struggle that is viewed favorably by the King.
 - a. On the phrase *hē basileia tōn ouranōn biázetai*, it should be remarked in favor of this view that the verb *biázomai*, when taken as a
 - (1) transitive passive verb, may be interpreted in a good sense to mean "the kingdom of heaven is sought with burning zeal." (Arndt-Gingrich, 140)
 - (2) intransitive verb, may be translated: "the kingdom makes its way with triumphant force." (Arndt-

Gingrich, 140) despite hindrances of every sort which are raised against it.

- b. Lenski (*Matthew*, 437) sees John and Jesus as the agents (*biastai*) who forcefully bring forward the Kingdom:

The correspondence between *biazetai* and *biastai* is obvious, being a play on words. The energy and the force with which the kingdom comes (or is brought) instills a similar energy and force in those whom the kingdom wins for itself. They are not 'forceful' by nature and thus better than others; but the kingdom itself with all its gifts, treasures and blessings puts power and courage into them 'to snatch' . . . it all . . . The trend of the entire discourse deals, not with violence against the kingdom, but with the indifference and the dis-satisfaction that hinder men from entering it with zest.

2. In a bad sense, the Kingdom actually suffers (undesireable) violence, is violently treated, contrary to the will or desires of the King.
- a. This comes about through hindrances raised against its establishment and continuation. Jesus would be saying, "There will always be wicked men who struggle to seize control of and destroy my Kingdom through violence." (Cf. Mt. 16:18, 21; Jn. 16:1-4)
- b. This comes about through the efforts of unauthorized persons who mistakenly imagined that its coming could be compelled by force, as, for example, the Zealots and all who ultimately sympathized with their philosophy of military overthrow and rule by the sword. (That the Zealots had many sympathizers is most clearly seen in the reasonable supposition that had not the Zealots represented such a strong popular undercurrent of political feeling they would not have been able to carry the nation with them in their last bid for political independence that so disastrously ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Israel.) Although the Master could comprehend the impetuous, excited thronging about Him of multitudes full of preconceived ideas about the Messiah and His kingdom, and although He recognized in their eagerness as much unhealthy fanaticism as deep conviction, yet His under-

standing did not blind Him to the need to take steps to counteract the violence these impassioned disciples were doing to His Kingdom. Count the times He had to avoid the crowds and strictly forbade any publicity of His healings. (Cf. Mt. 8:4; 9:30; 14:22 with Jn. 6:15; Mk. 1:34, 37, 38, 45; 3:12; 6:43; 8:36, etc.) **The kingdom of God suffered violence when men of violence took it by force**, much as would a bud suffer at the hands of a person who in his eagerness to experience its fragrance tries with his fingers to force it to bloom. Was John the Baptist even now himself trying to force the Kingdom by means of his impatient question?

- c. This could come about by the efforts of men who try to effect an entrance into the Kingdom on their own terms, while ignoring the will of the King. (Cf. Jn. 10:1ff.) This is the perpetual attitude of men who, however unconscious, nevertheless in practice, say, "We will not have this man to reign over us." When Luke (16:16) quotes Jesus: "And every one enters it violently" (*kai pás eis autên bidzetai*), the "everyone" (*pás*) cannot mean, contrary to Plummer (*Luke*, 389), everyone in contrast to Jewish exclusiveness. This is rather a hyperbole for the great majority of people who are deeply interested in the Kingdom for a multitude of wrong reasons. They are simply trying to fashion the kingdom after their own preconceived notions and create the King in their own image.

Perhaps it is neither important nor necessary to choose between these two views.

Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 9) attempts a harmony of these two concepts:

"Always my Kingdom will suffer violence; always savage men will try to break it up and snatch it away and destroy it; and therefore only the man who is desperately in earnest, only the man in whom the violence of devotion matches and defeats the violence of persecution will in the end enter into it." It may well be that this saying of Jesus was originally at one and the same time a warning of violence to come and a challenge to produce a devotion which would be even stronger than the violence.

A. B. Bruce (*PHC*, XXII, 275ff.) extends his harmonic attempt even further:

The storming of the kingdom.—In employing words suggesting the idea of violence, Jesus, though certainly not intending to express personal disapproval, did mean to point at features of the new movement which made it an object of aversion, astonishment, or at least of doubt, to others. It may be well to particularize some aspects of the work of the kingdom which would, not unnaturally wear an aspect of violence to minds not able to regard them with Christ's eyes, though to Christ Himself they were the bright and hopeful side of an evil time.

- I. We may mention, first, that which most readily occurs to one's thoughts, viz. the passionate earnestness with which men sought to get into the kingdom, heralded by John and preached by Jesus; an earnestness not free from questionable elements, as few popular enthusiasms are; associated with misconceptions of the nature of the kingdom, and, in many cases, fervent rather than deep, therefore likely to prove transient — still a powerful, impressive, august movement of the human soul Godwards. (See Luke 16:16 RV)
- II. From the volcanic bursting forth of religious earnestness in the popular mind, we may naturally pass to speak of another respect in which the kingdom of heaven may be said to have suffered violence, viz. the kind of people that had most prominently to do with it.—Publicans, sinners, harlots, the moral scum and refuse of society, such were the persons, who in greatest numbers were pressing into the kingdom, to the astonishment and scandal of respectable, "righteous," religious, well-conducted, and self-respecting people. Why it was a *revolution*, society turned upside down, as great an overturn in principle, if not in extent, as when in France, in the eighteenth century, bishops, aristocrats, princes and kings were sent adrift, and sans-culottism reigned triumphant, believing itself to be in possession of a veritable kingdom of God. What wonder if wise and prudent ones looked on in wistful, doubting mood, and sanctimonious men held up their hands in pious horror, and exclaimed, Call you this a kingdom of God? Blasphemy!
- III. The kingdom of God as it actually showed itself in connection with the work of Christ, differed widely from,

did violence, we may say, to preconceived notions of what it would be.—Not a few of those who actually entered the kingdom, in so far as they understood its true character, had to do violence to their own prejudices before they took the step. There were conversions, not unaccompanied with inward pain, not merely from sin to righteousness, but from ideals mistaken to rectified notions of the kingdom of God, from political dreams, noble, but destined never to be fulfilled, to spiritual realities.

IV. The kingdom of heaven may be said to have suffered violence in so far as its coming was promoted by the use of irregular methods and agencies.—In this respect John and Jesus were themselves stormers, though in different ways, to the scandalizing of a custom-ridden generation. Let us make one or two reflections, suggested by the saying we have been studying, concerning Him who uttered it.

1. It is very evident that the one who spoke thus had a very clear conception of the deep significance of the movement denoted by the phrase: "the kingdom of heaven." Christ knew well that a new world was beginning to be.
2. How calmly He takes it all.
3. Yet how magnanimously He bears Himself towards the doubters. "Violence"—the very word is an excuse for their doubts.

If, without violence to Jesus' original thought, we may reverse the order of verses 12 and 13, and we have an interesting revelation:

13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

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

The justification for this reversal lies in Jesus' use of the word **for** which serves to introduce the rational basis for His previous assertion, hence, logically, comes first in His mind. Jesus reveals an important time-relationship here: "**until John . . . from the days of John until now.**" **Prophesied** means that the **Law and Prophets** spoke authoritatively for God, revealing His message to Israel. The era of the **Law and Prophets** finds its culmination and fulfillment in the ministry of John, the last of the great prophets, who prepares

the ground for a completely new, *different* age, that of the Messiah. Luke (16:16) on this same subject, wrote:

The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently.

Be this an exact parallel or not, this is the finest interpretation of our text. **The days of John the Baptist** are no longer a period of "prophesying" in the classical sense, i.e. predictive description of great events in the distant future, because John's appearance ushered in a transition period of announcement of the near arrival of the Kingdom of God itself. **Until John**, as a phrase describing the authoritative prophetic revelations of the mind of God, marks a definite end to this function, inasmuch as that for which **all the prophets and the law** had made preparation, has now begun to arrive. Luke's expression (Lk. 16:16) must mean, then, that John's revelations and Jesus' preaching (prior to His ascension) were intended to be a description of the nature and citizenship of the Kingdom and the identification of the King, since the actual ascension to the throne of God did not take place during Jesus' earthly sojourn. Throughout the ministry of Jesus we will notice various occasions on which Jesus made drastic, far-reaching changes in fundamental concepts that were integral parts of Mosaic Law. (See on 9:14-17; 12:1-14; cf. Mk. 7:19; Jn. 4:21-24) Further, when He fulfilled the predictions of the prophets, He took all the uncertainty from their meaning, and removed all of the expectancy created by their searching the future. All their shadowy references, when concentrated in Him who is their entire fulfillment, need be heeded no further as if some other Christ should come, identical to Jesus. So, with the fulfillment of the great purposes and predictions of **all the prophets and the law** came to a brilliant, successful conclusion their ministry as the (until then) unique revealers of God. Nevertheless, their functions did overlap with the ministry of Jesus and early life of the Church for two important reasons:

1. Jesus' establishment of the new rule of God, the Kingdom of God, the Church, did not take place until the coming of the Holy Spirit. (See Mt. 28:19, 20; Lk. 24:46-47; Ac. 1:3-8; and the special study "The Coming of the Son of Man" after Matthew 10) Therefore His own ministry took place during the last days of the old era.
2. Even after the clear revelation of Jesus' coronation and the vindication of His rule, still many did not grasp the reality that the old system of the Law and the accrued traditions

were completely done away. The Epistles bear witness to this confusion in the mind of many people both within and outside the Church.

This "change in administration" from that of the Law and prophets to that of the Messiah Himself is not so surprising, since such a change would have been expected by the Jews, even though they would have visualized this change in terms of Jewish categories, even as we expect heaven to reflect the limited knowledge represented in our Christian categories. This Jewish expectation is reflected in the nature of the argument Jesus offers next.

G. C. Morgan (*Matthew*, 114) makes the interesting suggestion that this expression (11:13) is intended as further explication of the superior greatness of the least in the kingdom of God. The prophets and the law, including John's ministry, represented a ministry of anticipation, not one of personal experience of the things prophesied. Just five minutes of real experience of the thing awaited is worth so much more than all the centuries of anticipating it. So it is that anyone, even the most hesitant beginner in the Kingdom walks in more actual light that was available in all the long centuries before Jesus completed His revelation. There were facts that the Law, prophets and John could not know, methods they could not fathom, primarily due to their individual position in the progress of the revelation up to their time.

11:14 And if ye are willing to receive it, this is Elijah, that is to come. In this seemingly obscure verse, lying half-hidden among so much more famous material, rests the most fundamental issue of real religion and, ultimately, the judgment of the race: **if you are willing to receive it.** The willingness to be taught is the key of this entire chapter, the crux of John's problem, (11:1-6) the failure of the Jewish people in general (11:16-19) and the favored cities in particular (11:20), and finally, the only way to grasp God's revelation (11:25-30). Teachableness is not a matter of the understanding as though the meaning of the revelation were unclear, but a question of the will. (Jn. 5:40; 7:17; Mt. 23:37; Rev. 22:17d) **If ye are willing** cannot mean that Jesus' audience could take His revelation or leave it without serious consequences, as if this declaration did not much matter. Jesus merely challenges their willingness to face the truth hereby introduced. Many would be most unwilling. But the Lord did not force them to acknowledge these truths against their will. But He warns them against neglecting this manifest fulfillment of prophecy, for, having made their choice they must then

face the consequences thereof. So, it matters very much how they decide, as 11:15 demonstrates.

This is Elijah, that is to come. Reference here is Malachi's prediction (3:1; 4:5, 6) that, in a period destitute of faith and true fear of Jehovah, God would raise up a prophet who would lead the ungodly generation back to the God of the fathers. The appearance of this great prophet must shortly precede some "great and terrible day of the Lord" who will come with terrible judgment upon the nation. But Malachi named that great messenger "Elijah the prophet." It was at this point that the Jewish interpreter's problem arose: does Malachi mean that Elijah himself, who had been caught up to heaven, would personally reappear on earth, or that someone else who because of his power and energy with which that future prophet would labor, would call to mind the vigorous old Tishbite? Is Malachi speaking literally or metaphorically? ("That coming prophet will be another 'Elijah.'") Most of the rabbis had apparently opted for the literal interpretation. (Cf. Jn. 1:21; Mt. 17:10) For a rapid survey of rabbinic traditions about Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, see Edersheim's *Life*, Vol. II, Appendix VIII, 706ff. The apologetic nature of Edersheim's article renders it extremely valuable in that he shows the wide divergence between the commonly held Jewish views about the coming Elijah, and the actual Christian Elijah seen in John the Baptist. This divergency of theory and reality once more demonstrates the fundamental difference between Judaism and the true origins of the message and views of Christ. Though Christianity was born in the bosom of Judaism, the secret of her life lay in her divine message from God, not in the perfection here and there of rabbinic views. But that the literal view was not necessary, is illustrated by Keil (*Minor Prophets*, II, 471ff.):

But this view is proved to be erroneous by such passages as Hosea 3:5; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24, and Jer. 30:9, where the sending of David the king as the true shepherd of Israel is promised. Just as in these passages we cannot think of the return or resurrection of the David who had long been dead; but a king is meant who will reign over the nation of God in the mind and spirit of David; so the Elijah to be sent can only be a prophet with the spirit or power of Elijah the Tishbite. The second David was indeed to spring from the family of David, because to the seed of David there had been promised the eternal possession of the throne. The prophetic calling, on the other hand, was not hereditary in the

prophet's house, but rested solely upon divine choice and endowment with the Spirit of God; and consequently by Elijah we are not to understand a lineal descendent of the Tishbite, but simply a prophet in whom the spirit and power of Elijah are revived.

Keil's argument is not conclusive, since he argues from analogy, but the value of an argument from analogy is that it shows the possible existence of what seems to be a parallel case, which, in turn, should have teased Jewish minds into looking for other, different evidence that would prove the figurative nature of the great Elijah prophecy.

In all fairness to the Jews it must be remembered that God might not have given any other evidence that would have solved the quandry before its actual fulfillment with the appearance of John. Also, if the rabbinic representatives from Jerusalem knew John the Baptist's personal name to be "John," then why did they ask him if he were "Elijah"? (Cf. Jn. 1:21) Did they suppose him to have two names, the one commonly known to all, the other to be revealed at some future moment? Their question, as interpreted by John himself, cannot be construed as a concession to the figurative view, since he obviously understands them to mean, "Are you Elijah in person come back to earth in the flesh?" and answers them accordingly.

He is Elijah (*autōs estin Elias*), not literally, but indeed the person intended by Malachi. The angel who announced John's conception promised: "He will go before (the Lord their God) in the spirit and power of Elijah." (Lk. 1:17) With this dramatic assertion Jesus intends to say two things:

1. Malachi's prediction has been fulfilled. Any argument that Jesus could not be the Messiah, based on the assumption that Elijah must first come before the appearance of the Christ and that he had not done so, is hereby rendered invalid. The long-awaited Elijah had indeed come in the person and ministry of John the Baptist.
2. As a necessary consequence of this fulfillment of the great Elijah prophecy by John, the Kingdom of God must shortly appear in the person of the Christ Himself who would usher in the Messianic age. Further, since John's great question had centered around the identity and mission of the Messiah and Jesus' answer clustered together proofs of His divine identity

in the works of the Messiah, Jesus' audience should have been able to conclude, without His asserting it, that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Christ, and should therefore be believed for what He says about the Kingdom.

So it was that the coming of John presaged the conclusion of the OT era, since the Messiah was sure to be right behind the appearance of the coming "Elijah."

But to take John seriously by recognizing him as the Elijah predicted by Malachi would mean that people would have to admit John's right to preach his unwelcome truth. Not only had he demanded repentance and conduct consistent with it, not only had he denied that physical descent from Abraham could give special rights to admission into God's Kingdom, but he had distinctly pointed out Jesus as God's Son, God's Lamb to take away the world's sin. So, to take John seriously demands of the multitudes that they take Jesus seriously.

11:15 He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. This exclamation implies the willful guilt of people whose ears were made to hear and understand what Jesus had been saying, but were deliberately inattentive. Sensing how much would instantly be lost through inattention and how much trouble afterwards the Jews would bring upon themselves by not having listened to Him, the Lord pleads with them to fix these ideas firmly in mind. This psychological attention-getter is good oratory, but more than this, it is a passionate cry for a hearing, arising as it does in the breast of Israel's truest Son. He sees not only the immediate information drain that their neglect of His revelation would foster. He could discern the outcome that only the final judgment would reveal.

This is amply demonstrated by the fact that Luke (7:29, 30) inserts here the following theological comment:

When they heard *this* all the people and the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John; but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.

Two small problems of interpretation arise:

1. Is this a parenthetical remark by the Evangelist himself, inserted into the middle of Christ's words without any indication that it is a comment of Luke's own, or is this a part of Christ's message on John? The remark itself seems to begin as a mere historical notice, but almost instantly becomes highly theological, too theological, in fact, to be merely a historical allusion

reported by Luke. Further, there is no possible way of excising it from Jesus' own words, inasmuch as Luke uses no device so to distinguish it. Because of its meaning, it fits admirably into Jesus' own argument.

2. What is the exact historical allusion here? What was it that the people heard? When did they hear it? And when did they justify God? In answer it should be noticed that in Luke's Greek sentence, no object is specified (*kaì pás ho laòs akouásas kaì hoi telónai edikaíōsan . . .*), being left to be supplied by seeing what caused the people to act as they did. The question as to the time when they heard it is also relative to their obedience by which they justified God, i.e. when they were baptized by John.

All the people, the tax collectors, the harlots (see Mt. 21:31, 32) on the one hand, the Pharisees and the lawyers on the other—all had heard the preaching of the Baptist. For the former, their accepting John's message and his baptism meant their acknowledgement of God's justice in making these claims upon them. For the latter, their haughty refusal to repent meant the frustration of God's purpose to save them by granting them the opportunity to repent. God's counsel had been delivered by his humble servant John, but the proud Pharisees had, in their rejection of the servant, also rejected John's Lord and there would be no escaping His wrath. (Mt. 21:31, 32; 23:33)

This passage, while coming before the stated conclusion of this section ("Wisdom is justified by her deeds"), surely serves as a fitting illustration and commentary upon that principle. Those who had rejected John could justify themselves and their conduct by the slander that no thinking man would follow a mad-man like John. Likewise, they were able to dismiss Jesus, justifying themselves all the while. (Ironically, those who accepted God's messenger are described as "justifying God!") In each case they considered the results of their decisions to be satisfactory, since in neither case did they have to make any changes in their present conduct. Unfortunately, however, it is possible for the pragmatic test to fail badly, especially if one decides on the workability of a given conclusion before all the evidence is in. Worse yet, thinking that all the evidence has been weighed, when in reality one has seen only a small portion of it, will deceive one into relaxing, confident of his own wisdom. But the far-sighted Lord looks into the judgments of eternity and declares the final verdict on these choices made on earth: "The people, the tax collectors justified God;

the Pharisees and lawyers rejected and frustrated the purpose of God for themselves!" (Cf. Prov. 12:15; "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." In the long run, who were the wise here?) It is just better not to be so "wise in (our) own eyes" (Rom. 12:16b), i.e. so sure of our own conclusions that we no longer remain open to correction by the force of the evidence that is offered us to cause us to change. The so-called "ignorant masses," the notorious sinners admitted that God was right, knew that they needed whole-souled moral reformation and did what was necessary to begin it. They did not choke on their respectability and rationalizations, as did the learned doctors of the law. Jesus' observation merely puts into words John's experience (and that of any other experienced personal evangelist): "One just cannot save those who, determinedly unaware of their peril, refuse to be rescued."

V. CHRIST CONDEMNS THE CONTRARY CRITICS' CONTEMPTUOUS CARICATURES (11:16-19)

A master speaker, Jesus outlines this portion of His message on John thus: First, He describes a picture easily understood by any parent or child in His audience, making a brief parable of it by saying, "This generation is like this." Next, the Lord supplies two antithetic illustrations of the parable's meaning. Concluding this portion of His message, He enunciates a principle that not only rightly concludes the foregoing remarks, but also becomes a subtle warning to those who were guilty of repeating the very insults Jesus brings into the open here. The principle becomes also the test by which any man who has not yet decided about John and Jesus may come to a right conclusion.

A. A CAMEO (11:16, 17)

11:16 And whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places, who call unto their fellows and say, We piped unto you, and ye did not dance; we wailed, and ye did not mourn. The cameo-like quality of this illustration lies in the fact that Jesus drew the outline of the features clearly while leaving the details, depth and dimension somewhat unclear and puzzling. His meaning is clear: "You people are impossible to satisfy, since you do not recognize the divine wisdom under which John and I follow different manners of life and work, but in both cases our diverse methods of operation are certain to be justified by the end result of each." Interpreters have puzzled over which group of children represent the men of **this generation** and

which represent John and Jesus, as well as the resultant meaning of the refusal to play the games suggested. It is generally presumed that verses 18 and 19 are Jesus' own application of this germ-parable, since He begins the application with a conjunction used to express cause, inference, or to explain: *For* (*gàr*). But Jesus' order in those verses must be noticed, since He mentions John first and then Himself. Is the Lord Himself following a normal order, applying the first part of His parable, then the second, or is He, on the other hand, reversing the application hence, using a chiasmic order? Graphically, the problem is this:

REGULAR ORDER	
The story:	Application:
The Jews pipe; John did not dance	John was ascetic; Jews re- jected him
The Jews wailed; Jesus did not mourn	Jesus was normal; Jews re- jected Him
CHIASTIC ORDER	
The story:	Application:
The Jews did not dance; when Jesus piped	John was ascetic; Jews re- jected him
The Jews did not mourn. when John wailed	Jesus was normal; Jews re- jected Him

The problem is just when do we apply the chiasm to determine Jesus' meaning behind His story? Do we take His application and use it to interpret the parts of His story, even if it requires a chiasmic order? Or do we interpret first the story and then go on to Jesus' application? Or, to put the problem another way, who is doing the piping and to whom? who wails and to whom? There are two groups of children who try to suggest games to their playmates (Cf. Matthew's *tôis betérois* and Luke's *allélois*). Which children are here blamed by Jesus? Commentators suggest two ways:

1. Following the normal order of the text, the neighborhood children playing in the square, who pettishly criticize their companions, are the Jews. John had come to them with his severe mode of life and his stern call to repentance, but they demand that he drop his austerity and join them in the gaity

of festive occasions. When it became clear that he refused to surrender his ascetic severity, they petulantly nag him: "We piped to you and you did not dance!" Accordingly, when Jesus appeared among them as a normal individual with a wholesome enjoyment of life, who could delight in a pleasant meal and relish the company of any person, the Jews contended that He ought to be playing at funerals, i.e. fasting (cf. 9:14), rigorous Sabbath observance (cf. 12:1-14; Jn. 5:1-18), etc. But when He maintained His own course, they howl: "We wailed and you did not mourn!"

a. This interpretation offers two advantages:

- (1) It sees **the men of this generation** (cf. Lk. 7:31), i.e. the Jews, as the fickle children who complain and are not satisfied to let others follow their own chosen course.
- (2) It also lists the two objections in chronological order, not only in order of Jesus' application (11:18, 19), but also in order of John's and Jesus' actual appearance on the scene in Israel.

b. But this interpretation ignores the fact that "ye" and "you" in the mouth of the children is plural, hence, out of place when directed only at John alone and then at Jesus alone, unless the children's plural "ye" refers to John and Jesus as a group of two, while the specific complaints refer first to the one and then the other. Consider Edersheim's (*Life*, I, 670) comment:

The children of that generation expected quite another Elijah and quite another Christ, and disbelieved and complained, because the real Elijah and Christ did not meet their foolish thoughts. . . . 'We have expected Messianic glory and national exaltation, and ye have not responded ('we have piped unto you, and ye have not danced'); we have looked for deliverance from our national sufferings, and they stirred not your sympathies nor brought your help ('we have mourned to you, and ye have not lamented.')

Or, if we may not read so much into the children's expressions as Edersheim feels to be there, at least we may hear them complaining to God's messengers as a group,

first to John and then to Jesus. This would allow the plural to stand.

2. Following the chiasitic order (i.e. applying first what came second in the story, and what came first, second, thus forming an "X" or Greek *Chi*, rather than parallels), we see the children, who suggest to the others to play with them first joyously and also at mournful games, stand for Jesus and John. Their fellows, who contrarily resist becoming involved in either game are the Jews who follow the lead of their own religious hierarchy. (Cf. Lk. 7:29, 30) The quoted words then become those of John and Jesus, taken as a committee of two, representing God's call to righteousness: "Whatever our approach—whether deep-felt sorrow for sin or the joyous freedom of the Gospel—you refused both."

a. This interpretation has

- (1) the advantage of harmonizing more satisfactorily the plural pronouns, *we* and *you*, since they much more suitably describe two well-defined groups, whereas the other view tries to apply these plurals to individuals.
- (2) the advantage of reflecting the historic facts involved. It is McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 285) who notes that it was

God in His messengers—His prophets and His Son—who came to set the world right. It was these messengers who took the initiative and who demanded the changes. It was the people who sulked and refused to comply with the divine overtures. The whole tenor of Christ's teaching—the parables of the suppers, etc.—represents the Jews as being invited and refusing the invitation. It was John and Jesus who preached repentance, but there is no instance where any called on them to (change) . . .

- (3) Though the story does not follow the chronological appearance of first John, and then Jesus, as does the application in either view (11:18, 19), it may be urged that chronological order might not have been uppermost in Jesus' mind anyway. Thus, He presented Himself first in the story, but second in the application, placing John second in the story but first

application. The reason for this emphasis on Himself is to be found in the fact that the question of the day is "Are you the Christ—or do we expect another?" and "Blessed is he who is not offended in me." Jesus will conclude this message by drawing maximum attention to Himself, to His identity and ministry to the whole race.

- b. The disadvantage of this view is that, while it has been astutely argued by McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 285) that "Jesus means that the men of this generation are like the *entire picture* presented and does not intend that they shall be taken as the subjects of the leading verbs of the sentence," yet this is not what Luke wrote. The version of Luke clearly asserts that "they (the men of this generation) are like children seated in the agora." (Lk. 7:32) Is it proper under this latter view to exclude John and Jesus from that comprehensive phrase "the men of this generation"? To include them in the meaning of this phrase would indeed free the true meaning of this story from appearing to be at variance with its opening words. Under either view, Jesus and John are two of the "children seated in the agora." Even McGarvey admits that Jesus and John were the children who urged their companions to join them first in dances and then in dirges. Since it is highly unlikely that Jesus would have included Himself and John among the men of **this generation**, in light of His usual condemnation of this group (cf. Mt. 12:39, 41, 45; 16:4; 17:17; [23:36; 24:34?]; Mk. 8:38; 9:19; Lk. 9:41; 11:29-32; 17:25; see also Ac. 2:40; Phil. 2:15; Heb. 3:10), one would wonder how it be justifiable to think of His having included Himself here. The answer may be that the **men of this generation** create the same sort of situation as that faced by children playing in the marketplace who scold their fickle playmates.

Despite the tortuous attempt at getting at the proper interpretation of Jesus' parable, its meaning is evident. It is a picture of that selfish stubbornness, or stubborn selfishness, that always wants its own way. The Pharisees, scribes and their followers were fundamentally unwilling to act upon the ideas and leadership of another. They wanted to rule, not surrender the government of their lives. This is the basic explanation for their exterior fickleness and is the cause of it. They could

not be satisfied with what was offered, not because of the character of the game suggested, but because they were determined to make no response. When this is the case, people sit sullenly and obstinately unresponsive, regardless of what offer is made them. Barclay reminds us that

The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they will easily enough find an excuse for not listening to it. They do not even try to be consistent in their criticisms; they will criticize the same person and the same institution from quite opposite grounds and reasons.

The fault of the people's dissatisfaction lay, not in the fact that Jesus or John offered questionable alternatives, but in the fact that anything that varied from the preconceived notions of their detractors was suspect. Thus it was easy to question whether John be a real prophet of God, or whether Jesus be the Christ, since neither neatly fit into the common prejudices.

This simple illustration brilliantly demonstrates how shrewd a grasp Jesus had of His age. The smiling, applauding crowds did not deceive Him. Although He did not intentionally annoy them by refusing to go along with their wishes, He knew that these fickle crowds would ultimately oppose Him, because He would not merely please, entertain and feed them indefinitely.

This bright little picture of **children sitting in the village square** makes us ask how often had Jesus Himself played these children's games as a boy? This is probably not just a good illustration, but an experience lived by this keen Observer of children. Jesus had time to stop to watch children's play. Had He heard these same complaints uttered by His brothers and sisters?

B. A CONTRAST IN CARICATURES (11:18, 19)

Here Jesus exposes their fickleness by showing how they required of John what they condemned in Him and demanded of Him what they had condemned in John.

11:18 **For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a demon.** Luke (7:33) has "eating no bread and drinking no wine." Since these items were the common food of common people, these who object to John are complaining about his abstinence from things entirely normal and legitimate. **Eating no bread** but only what he could scrounge from the wilderness itself, **nor drinking** any normal beverage, just water. (See on Mt. 3:1, 4) But this ascetic way of life was John's sagacious adaptation of himself

to his particular mission to bring repentance to Israel. Before Jesus' revelation of the compatibility between deep-felt repentance and carrying on a normal life, perhaps the popular mind in Israel would not have been willing to accept John's stern message from a man who, himself, were a person living a normal life, eating common food. This very striking difference, to which Jesus had alluded earlier, had caught and held the nation's attention. And for a short while, John too had been the idol of the populace. In those days his hardy life, his simple, course garments and his desert fare had not at all hurt his public image; rather, it would have tended to enhance it. Later, however, though people had streamed to him in droves, they slunk away rather than repent. Their comment: "Too strait-laced for us!"

He has a demon. (cf. Jn. 7:20; 8:48, 49; 10:20 later said of Jesus) This violent slander is what is necessary to justify those who utter it to cover their rejection of God's counsel. It is not too likely that anyone really thought John to be actually possessed by a demon. This vilification probably only means to discredit John as a crank or a fanatic. One of the master strokes of Jesus' style is to state the accusation in its most blatant form. He does not even try to offer any defense against so infamous a charge. The lives of both John and Jesus were so above reproach that these low vilifications were doomed to topple of their own weight.

11:19 The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. The psychological impact of this application of Jesus' parable of the playing children lies in the fact that it ends with Jewish rejection of Jesus, for this is the real issue. Although their repudiation of John held a menace to their ultimate salvation, since they were likely to reject John's God-inspired testimony to Jesus, still the final judgment is decided, not on "What will you do with John the Baptist?", but "What will you do with Jesus?" Putting Himself last in the application, the Savior leaves this latter question in the mind of His audience, stabbing their conscience.

Eating and drinking could be taken two ways, depending upon the mentality of those who laid this objection to Jesus:

1. From the standpoint of the extremely ascetic themselves, or of those whose view of piety would have been affected by them, the fact that Jesus ate normal food ("bread and wine" of verse 18; cf. Lk. 7:33) would be offensive, since piety, in their view, must express itself in frequent fasts. (Cf. Mt. 9:9-17 and parallels)

2. From the point of view of those living a normal life themselves, i.e. eating normal food, going to feasts and associating with common people, this accusation labels the Lord as a constant party-goer, known by the company He keeps.

During the entire course of His earthly mission, Jesus is recorded as having gone to a number of banquets, parties, and private meals. (Cf. The Cana wedding, Jn. 2:1-11; Matthew's farewell, Mt. 9:10-13; Lk. 5:29; The Pharisee Simon's house, Lk. 7:36ff.; Another Pharisee, Lk. 11:37ff.; A Pharisee Ruler, Lk. 14:1-24; Zacchaeus, Lk. 19:1-10) Even if these are merely a few of His many social contacts, He is damned by the carping detractors for not being "holy" enough.

Ironically, there was just enough truth in the sneers of the crowds to make these insults plausible: the libel lay in the exaggeration each phrase represents:

1. **gluttonous man.** (*phágos*) As indicated above, Jesus ate normal food and appreciated a pleasant meal. Since His mission was aimed at not one area of human life, but addressed to all aspects, Jesus could not follow habits peculiar to only one area. Rather, His manner of life reflected an even balance in all things, including His food and drink.
2. **winebibber.** (*oinopóitēs*) Did Jesus drink wine? He says He did. This is no great surprise. The greater surprise, especially in THIS context, would be to learn that He did NOT drink! The conduct of Jesus is thrown into deliberate contrast with that of a man who, for religious reasons, deliberately abstained from this very thing. The very affirmation, that the Son of man has come eating (bread) and drinking (wine), is found in a context where His moderation is neatly placed half-way between both extremes,—with teetotal abstinence in John's case, and with excess in the slander that He was a wino among other things. (See special study: "Should Jesus Drink Wine?")

Should anyone object that any "wine" that Jesus might have drunk would have been a non-alcoholic drink made of water mixed with cooked grape syrup, then the objector must explain the accusation of Jesus' critics. While it is true that the most unreasonable charges can be levelled against a man who has no dealings at all with that on which the charges are supposedly based, yet there has to be some shred of truth (however badly distorted) that makes the

charge even credible. If the "wine" here referred to is merely a non-alcoholic beverage, then what is the point of calling Jesus "a soft-drink man"? After all, the *oinos* of Lk. 7:33, which Jesus says He drinks, and the *oinos* of *oinopōtēs* in Mt. 11:19, of which the slanderers say He takes too much, is the same *oinos*.

3. **friend of publicans and sinners.** The slanderers insinuated that "a man is known by the company he keeps." But what the opposition intended as detraction, Jesus transformed into one of His most glorious titles. Because Jesus is, in the highest and best sense, "the friend of publicans and sinners," He is able to help untold millions of us publicans and sinners! (See notes on Mt. 9:12, 13)

C. A CONFIDENT CONCLUSION (11:19b)

And wisdom is justified by her works. (Lk 7:35: "Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.") Without seeking an allegory behind these words, whereby Wisdom is seen as a divine mother who produces children which, in turn, represent the faithful minority who have welcomed the Baptist and the Christ, or even these two themselves, it is much simpler to see Jesus as applying the pragmatic test to the ministries both of John and of Himself. He is saying, then, "The wisdom of any course of action is tested and approved, or justified, by the results it produces, the deeds issuing from it, its natural fruit or offspring." While there were critics enough who stood around ready to sneer at the different approaches used by John and Jesus, the Lord is willing to submit both to the judgment of ultimate results and final fruits. Thoughtful men over the centuries have recognized the real wisdom behind the differing, but inwardly harmonious, courses of action followed by Jesus and John, so harshly and, ultimately, foolishly, censured by their contemporaries. The very number of transformed lives, because John had been willing to be nothing but a "Voice crying in the wilderness," and because Jesus was "the friend of sinners," justifies beyond a shadow of a doubt the wisdom of their chosen course. But the natural result of this pragmatic success of the separate ministries of John and Jesus is the conclusion that they who rejected them are fools! Men of real wisdom justify the two great men of God. Feel the real tragedy of Jn. 1:11-13, as well as its triumph.

is justified. Lenski (*Matthew*, 444) feels that, because this verb is aorist (*edikaiōthē*), Jesus refers to actions performed in the

past, John's career now ended and Jesus' deeds now slandered. However, though the verb is aorist passive, it need not be taken merely as a past tense, since it can be interpreted as a gnomic aorist, stating a general truth: "Wisdom is (and always will be) vindicated by her deeds, works, outcome, results, etc." The same view is arrived at, following the approach of Plummer, (*Matthew*, 163): "It is *certain* to be justified . . . the event is regarded as so sure to happen that it is spoken of as past." The pragmatic success of John and Jesus is noted by Barclay, (*Matthew*, II, 11):

The Jews might criticize John for his lonely isolation, but John had moved men's hearts to God as they had not moved for centuries; the Jews might criticize Jesus for mixing too much in ordinary life and with ordinary people, but in Him people were finding a new life and a new goodness and a new power to live as they ought and a new access to God.

While the pragmatic test is not a final one whereby men, limited as they are by time and space, may know the truth or falsity of philosophy, since they cannot know ALL the long-range effects of the theory, yet, given all other evidences for the validity of a theory, it is of no use whatever unless it also works! Jesus is not pinning the ultimate truthfulness of His entire message on its workability, since its authenticity is proved by His signs, or miracles. (See on 11:4, 5) But if "the proof of the pudding is in the eating," then the real significance of Jesus' ministry lies in His ability really to make men over. Should it be possible that His miracles identified His message as divine and yet that message fail to give men transforming power, of what use would the miracles be? Worse still, His message would be suspect, worse than useless. But the best part about the ministry of John who prepared the way, and that of Jesus, is that they did not merely flash their divine authority to speak, but actually produced the results that they were sent to accomplish. John actually brought men to repentance and to Jesus. Jesus actually brought men to forgiveness and the new birth, and made them fit for the presence of God.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. How did John in prison learn about the deeds of Jesus?
2. According to Matthew, about what, exactly, did John hear? the works of _____.
3. In what general context does Luke place this incident? What were some of the deeds of Jesus to which Luke thus alludes? Why, then,

does Matthew place this incident in some other context? Harmonize this apparent contradiction in fact.

4. State the exact point of John's question to Jesus. Affirm or deny the following proposition and tell why: "John in prison was weakening in faith in Jesus as the Messiah."
5. State the reasons why John may have propounded such a question to Jesus.
6. State and explain the answer that Jesus sent back to John. Show how Jesus' answer fulfills prophecies regarding the Christ, hence identifies Jesus as the Messiah to all who had eyes to see it.
7. State the evidence that Jesus gave John. Was this evidence different in kind from the evidence Jesus provided other people? What does your answer to this question indicate about the nature of the evidence that God gives to help all people believe Him?
8. What Old Testament prophet did Jesus cite in reference to John?
9. Give specific illustrations of Jesus' miracles to which He made reference in His answer to John. For example, name some of the dead raised to life prior to the arrival of John's question.
10. Explain the traits of character referred to in the figurative expressions: "a reed shaken with the wind", "a man clothed in soft raiment".
11. What is meant by the phrase: "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and men of violence take it by force"? Are there other possible translations of this expression, that would affect the interpretation? What are the problems of interpretation? Write the sentence in such a way as to show which way you interpret and apply what Jesus meant.
12. Explain how John the Baptist both *was* and *was not* the Elijah who was to come. (See Lk. 1:17; Jn. 1:21)
13. In Jesus' illustration of His generation, to what games of children does He make reference? What is the exact point of comparison in the illustration to which He draws attention?
14. Explain how "wisdom is justified by her works (or children)." To whose wisdom does Jesus refer: His own, John's, or that of the Jews of His day?
15. What two outstanding proclaimers of God's Kingdom suffered violence during their life and ministry and whose lives ended in violent death?
16. What did the Jews of Jesus' day do with the message of John and Jesus? Be careful, they did not all do the same thing.
17. Did Jesus "eat bread and drink wine", like any other Jew of His

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time? Some object to the idea that Jesus drank wine. What does this passage say regarding Jesus' personal practice, if anything? State what you know of Jewish customs of that period that might help answer this question.

SPECIAL STUDY: SHOULD JESUS DRINK WINE?

Without hesitation many Christians respond in the negative without examining the reasons for their conclusion. If pushed for a reason, they might reply, "The Bible forbids its use." To this a skeptic might raise the challenge: "Always? Unconditionally?" At this point the teetotaler might object, "But Jesus is my example, and I KNOW that He would not drink. For me, His example is conclusive."

But is the presupposition on which this conclusion is drawn a correct one? That is, is it true that "Jesus would not drink"? Instead of supposing what a person might or might not have done, is it not better to ask the person himself, to learn what his practice really was? Why not ask Jesus, "Lord, what is your personal practice regarding wine? How does your practice compare with that of your contemporaries, or how does it differ?"

To this, Jesus made reply: "John the Baptist came eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has an evil spirit.' The Son of man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look! A greedy fellow and a drinker, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.' Yet wisdom is proved right by all her children." (Luke 7:33-35)

The life-style of Jesus revealed in this text is probably quite different from that expected of Him by ascetics of every age. Yet what this text actually says proves that their desire to use the Son of man as a champion for the cause of total abstinence on the question of alcohol is based on other considerations and not on the example of Jesus. Note the importance of this text as it relates to this question:

1. *Jesus affirmed that He normally and habitually drank wine.*

This is not a conclusion drawn by scholars or the consensus of critics, but the unabashed statement of the Lord Himself as He comments on His own way of life. The question at issue in this context is the immediate contrast between the fundamental wisdom behind the way of life practiced by John the Baptist and Jesus, and the fundamental folly of

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those who perversely refused to accept the life, message, ministry and mission of either. However, it is worthy of note that Jesus did not change His life-style merely because it laid Him open to the criticism of being a "glutton and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.

2. Jesus affirmed that He habitually drank wine *and said so in a context where His meaning is clear, His practice being sharply contrasted with that of the abstainers on the one hand, and that of the drunkards on the other.*
 - a. Jesus was not an abstainer, as evidenced by the contrast with the life-long habits of John the Baptist whose well-known asceticism was common knowledge and the basis for the baseless criticism of him by fickle people.
 - b. Jesus was no drunkard or glutton, since He Himself borrows these slanders from the mouth of His detractors, not from those who objectively try to describe His real manner of life. His matchless life and sinless character unmask these vilifications for what they are.
 - c. Therefore, Jesus' practice, by His own statement, clarified by His stated antitheses, stands exactly halfway between both extremes. His is neither the teetotaler's abstinence nor the drunkard's excess, but the moderate's evenness of balance in all things.
3. Jesus affirmed that He habitually drank wine, *saying so to a people accustomed to think of wine as a blessing.*
 - a. That the Jews knew wine and other strong drink to be a dangerous curse, goes without saying, as many texts testify. (Cf. Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:10, 21; 23:29-35, etc.)
 - b. But the Jews knew wine to be the generous blessing from the Lord. (Gen. 27:28; Psa. 104:15; Isa. 55:1; Hos. 2:8, 9, 22; Joel 2:19-24; Amos 9:13, 14)
 - (1) They spoke of bread and wine as the staple articles of diet. (Gen. 27:25, 37; Dt. 11:14; Num. 6:20; Judg. 19:19-21; 2 Sam. 16:1, 2; 2 Chron. 11:11, etc.)
 - (2) Consequently, they were required to put wine on the grocery list of provisions for the priesthood (Num. 18:12; Dt. 18:4; 1 Chron. 9:29, etc.)
 - (3) Wine appeared as a normal expression of ordinary hospitality. (Gen. 14:18; Judg. 19:19-21; 1 Sam. 16:20; 25:18; 1 Chron. 12:40; Jn. 2:3-10)

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- (4) Wine was commanded as a drink offering to God (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5, 7, 10), probably because it was in common use and therefore had practical value to the Jews. This made it a proper thing that could be offered in sacrifice to God.
 - (5) Wine was consumed by the Israelites even at their religious festivals. (Dt. 14:22-26; 12:17, 18; Isa. 62:8, 9)
 - (6) The Jews knew of its value as an anesthetic (Prov. 31:6, 7; Lk. 10:34) as well as its necessity in case of bad water or stomach infermities (1 Tim 5:23)
- c. So, for Jesus to confess to eating bread and drinking wine to a Jewish audience, is no more than to confess to living a quite normal life. As an accurate reading of the circumstances in this text (Luke 7:33-35 and Mt. 11:18, 19) will show, it was this very normalness about Jesus' conduct that drew fire from the cynics. In collision with the popular view as to what a "holy man" should be, Jesus wore no hair shirt, fasted so secretly that no one ever knew about it (if He ever did), ate common food, drank common drink and made no extraordinary effort to let His real holiness appear in a superficial manner. But His real character was so well attested, that He did not need to dignify the accusation of being a "winebibber and a glutton" by even bothering to answer it. The facts people knew about His life spoke for themselves.

So, the real question is not "Should Jesus drink wine?" as our tongue-in-cheek title would have it, for, as a matter of fact, He did. But this is not the point to be discussed with the modern Christian, disturbed by the excess in certain areas surrounding the use of wine or other forms of alcohol. The question is really "Should a Christian follow his Lord's example in drinking wine today?"

Although the apostolic doctrine is replete with stern denunciations of "drunkenness wherein is riot and excess," yet the Apostles do not enjoin unconditional and perpetual abstinence as the way around over-indulgence. Theirs too is the route of habitual moderation in all things (1 Co. 9:25), since they are suspicious of any doctrine that promotes rigor of devotion, self-abasement and severity to the body through negative regulations that God did not give. Such

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prohibitions might have an appearance of wisdom, but are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. (Col. 2:16-23)

Beyond his disparaging of drunkenness and other forms of excess connected with the attitudes and activities under the influence of alcohol, the Apostle Paul, for instance, can find no rational basis for abstaining either from meat or wine in normal practice, since he knows that all God's gifts (the context is food) are to be received with thanksgiving. (1 Tim. 4:1-5) However, under special circumstances Paul could conceivably dispense with ANY given food, for instance, if it caused a brother to stumble. (Ro. 14:21) But contextually, it is obvious that the Apostle viewed this abstinence only as necessary in reference to the weaker Christian who had some scruple against that particular food. (See Ro. 14:1—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12-20; 8 all; 10:23-33) This is a necessary conclusion, since Paul could delineate no objective or absolute principle whereby wine or any food should be proscribed under any and all circumstances.

Further, in seeking qualified personnel for the highest tasks in the Church, the Apostle demanded that no excessive drinkers be tolerated in the eldership or in the diaconate. (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Tit. 1:7) In giving directions for producing Christlike piety in the Church, he only urges Titus (2:3) to bid older women not to be slaves to drink. However, in neither case does he suggest abstinence as a necessary quality. Rather, when he felt called upon to give his advice to a young abstainer, Paul counselled Timothy specifically in favor of wine, as opposed to water. (1 Tim. 5:23)

"Should Jesus Drink Wine?" may be an amusing question, but it will stand for serious reflection. Jesus was a Jew living in first-century Palestine. Out of proper moral consideration for the needs and views of His people, He ate and drank the food common to His people. It is a fair question whether He would follow His first-century practice while living, say, among twentieth-century Americans, whose history and attitudes toward alcohol may well be quite different than that of first-century Jews. But here it may be objected that twentieth-century Americans may need instruction by the Son of God, so that their (mistaken?) conscience be edified, i.e. formed along entirely different lines.

"WHEN IN ROME, DO AS THE ROMANS"?

Lest some, caught up in the confusing currents of a relativistic

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age and maddened by the spineless morality of situation ethics, mistake this position taken here to be the same drivel, let it be vigorously denied that situation ethics has anything to do with Christianity.

The assertions made earlier that Jesus did in fact drink wine in His own situation in the first century, primarily because He chose to conform His practice with that of His own people, the Jews, cannot be construed in any fashion to justify the character-rotting influence of that immorality passing under the current name of "situation ethics." "Situation ethics," as I understand the phrase in its popular use, refers to a life guided by NO ABSOLUTE moral principle. There is no absolute morality, that is, except for the pervasive rule of thumb that each situation must be dealt with as a separate entity without any necessary reference to any other situation. According to its various practitioners, each moral decision must be made without reference to the (im)moral standard of reference of the individuals involved, be it hedonism, opportunism or whatever.

There is a chasmic contrast between this view of ethical decisions and that practiced by Jesus of Nazareth and expected of His disciples. Whereas "situation ethics" has no fixed code of absolutes within the sphere of which ethical judgments are made, Christ's doctrine proclaims a rigid standard of inflexible righteousness. This standard outlines clearly what is meant by drunkenness, fornication, theft, lying, etc. By forbidding these and commanding their ethical opposites, i.e. temperance, purity, integrity, etc., Jesus unveiled a code of absolutes as demanding as the very character of God Himself! (See "Jesus' Purpose For Preaching This Sermon", notes on the Sermon on the Mount, Vol. I, 188ff.) What is NOT spelled out in regard to these standards is how they are to be applied in every case. To a certain degree every situation faced by Jesus' disciple will be different from every other. So, instead of writing new rules of conduct for each new situation, Jesus placed into the hands of His disciple a few simple directives by which he may decide how to act ethically in each situation. (There directives may be gleaned from great blocks of Scripture on this subject, such as Ro. 14:1—15:7; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; chap. 8; 10:23-33; 16:14; 1 Jn. 3, etc.)

Thus it is that the Christ and His disciples are armed, not with some self-seeking, self-serving philosophy, but girded with the revelations of the living God in an enlightened conscience, face each situation and decide what each must do (1) to please the Father, and (2) to serve his fellow man best in that situation, and (3) what will achieve his own highest goal.

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Now to return: should Jesus (or His disciple) drink wine? But to ask this question is to see another: what other moral considerations were weighed into His decision which brought Him to act as He did in that given situation? If we fail to see these, we should badly interpret why He pursued that course, and, as a natural consequence, we would misapply His example in our own period.

He drank wine in an age that knew no automobiles racing along a narrow ribbon of concrete within a cubit of oncoming traffic. He drank wine in a society not yet pressed for time, where the need for ready reflexes to operate fast-moving machinery was small. He lived in an age that moved in terms of the sun, not the timeclock. His was an era of walkers, not riders, to whom sedentary living was less a problem. But He also lived in an age as profligate as any other, an age that sought its amusements in the arms of Bacchus, an age when many a party devolved into revelry. Even so, Jesus could trace a clear line of godly conduct between asceticism and excess. In our own highly industrialized machine age, common sense considerations of safety may cause the Lord to counsel against alcohol in any situation where consideration for others and one's own safety is compromised by slower reflexes.

In light of Jesus' practice, another interesting, if unsolvable, puzzle is the question why the Lord did not concern Himself greatly with the long-term effect of alcohol on the brain about which modern research has so much to say. Is it possible that Jesus' answer to this query might be: "Do not drink to excess, and you need not fear the adverse effects of alcohol on your brain"? After all, is not His practice somewhat indicative of the conclusion that a moderate use of alcohol by a God-oriented man need not fear long-range negative effects on any part of his body, presuming that this man eats, sleeps and exercises normally? Or to state the problem differently, would not Jesus, Revealer of God and Creator of man, surely have revealed something of the lethal danger of drinking what is held to be a poison? Is it too much to argue that His silence on the subject and His personal practice, taken together, argue that our body chemistry can absorb and profitably use a certain amount of alcohol?

IS ALCOHOLISM A SICKNESS?

Another ramification of the conclusion that Jesus Himself drank wine, though never to excess (a conclusion drawn from His unanswerable denunciation of drunkenness as sin and from His own unimpeach-

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able character, Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15), is the dilemma: should we consider the alcoholic a sinner or a sick man? To put the question in other terms: did Jesus escape alcoholism by righteousness (moderation), by maintaining a healthy body, or both?

While modern research has tended to demonstrate the direct connection between long-term embibing and many mental and physical debilities, sicknesses to which both psychological and medical cures must be applied, what is the meaning of the statement: "The alcoholic is a sick man"? This declaration, while declaring an objective reality, is often made with emotional overtones that suggest that the alcoholic can no more be charged with the responsibility for his condition than would a child suffering from measles. On the other hand, some religionists talk as if the alcoholic could be transformed into a proper citizen simply by immediate and permanent swearing off of alcohol, without any recourse to medical or psychological help to repair the damage that has been done to his body, mind, life, as if correcting the alcoholic's responsibility for his weakened condition were the whole of his rehabilitation.

Before we hasten to decide whether the alcoholic is *either* a sick *or* a sinful man, let us remember that some dilemmas are badly stated, including this one. There is a third alternative: the alcoholic may be *both* a sick *and* a sinful man. His sin has made him a sick man. Forgiveness of his sin will not make him a well man. Making him a well man in body and mind, insofar as modern science is able to effect this, will not make him acceptable to God. He must be both saved and healed. His rehabilitation in both these respects may require much time and may witness many set-backs, but it must take place in both areas, i.e. healing of the body and purifying the conscience and reinforcing the will, if the whole man is to be brought back to normalcy.

There is one sad, tragic fact that may face the alcoholic which, repent as he might, he cannot change: damage to his body as the natural consequence of alcohol's ruinous effects. A man may repent a thousand times of his carelessness in handling a powersaw, but his tears and his undoubted change for the good cannot give him back his right arm sawn away in the accident. If this analogy applies to the alcoholic in any way, it becomes a stern warning to any who drink, that alcohol is capable of bringing upon him a blight that no amount of repentance can correct.

Numerous are the instances where Jesus performed this very healing of both body and soul by curing the body and forgiving the

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sin. He not only purified the conscience but also provided the Gospel whereby the whole man can be transformed into a strong, stable character. What is most remarkable is that Jesus held all sinners responsible for the mess into which they get themselves (Cf. Jn. 5:14; Mt. 12:45), especially drunkards (Lk. 21:34; Ro. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18). Accordingly, if people were merely sick due to some physical weakness related to causes not dependent upon their choice, then, presumably, Jesus could not justly hold them responsible for the bad results of their actions. So, the fact that He judges men responsible for their drunkenness, lays the charge for failure, not merely upon constitutional weaknesses, but upon the quality of the heart of the individual. Rather than become a scientist or a doctor to heal all mankind by giving out useful remedies or advice on physical health, He dealt with man's fundamental problem: his relation with God and man. If THIS problem be not solved, physical or mental healing if only to live a few more years in constant danger of being corrupted again, solves nothing.

HOW DID JESUS ESCAPE BECOMING AN ALCOHOLIC?

As completely out of place as this query may seem, yet to answer it may lead us to grasp something of the answer to our other question, "Should Jesus' disciple drink wine?" How is it possible to harmonize the potentially catastrophic danger that alcohol represents both to the individual and to society, with Jesus' practice of taking wine? The secret lies in being guided by all the moral directives that prompted Jesus. By taking His view of the world, by having a conscience molded by the will of God and by showing the same forthright obedience to the Father as did He, by knowing no other dependence than upon the daily provision of the Father, one will be pleased to learn that he is not troubled by those diseases that excess and indulgence bring in their wake.

Section 25

JESUS CONDEMNS UNBELIEVING CITIES AND INVITES "BABES" TO COME TO HIM