

Questions, Doubt, and Disbelief

Matthew 11:1-24

January 7th, 2017

Big idea: Deal honestly with doubts and questions, but beware of hard-hearted disbelief that rejects evidence.

Intro –

In Mark 9 a man replies to Jesus, “I do believe; help my unbelief.” Many find themselves saying like the man to Jesus, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

Perhaps after a tragedy or a series of tragedies

Perhaps after an argument is raised to which they don’t have an immediate answer

Perhaps after encountering a passage of scripture that is troubling or runs counter to your preconceived understanding of God.

What do you do with your doubt and questions?

Suppress them? Ignore them?

Indulge them?

Or is there a better approach? Yes. I think we see a better approach with John the Baptist in Matthew 11. He finds himself doubting, but we can learn from what he does with his doubts.

1. **Doubt** can pop up when God doesn’t meet a person’s **expectations**. (Matthew 11:1-6)
 - a. Verse 1 is the turning point into our 3rd major section of Matthew.
 - i. Intro (1-2)
 - ii. 3-7
 - iii. 8-10
 - iv. 11-near the end of 13
 - b. John was imprisoned for confronting Herod about an immoral relationship with his brother’s wife.
 - i. Matthew 4:12 makes mention of John’s imprisonment; Mark 6 gives more detail
 - ii. **Mark 6:17-18** For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."
 - iii. Courage, boldness – these characterize John’s ministry.
 - c. John’s ministry was striking, bold, and stark. He called people to repent and pointed to the one who would come after Him.
 - i. **Matthew 3:8-10** "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; ¹⁰ "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
 - ii. **Matthew 3:11-12** "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but **He who is coming after** me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His

threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

- iii. **John 1:29-30** The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"³⁰ "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'
 - iv. **John 3:30** "He must increase, but I must decrease.
- d. What would cause John to now send a message to Jesus with the question, "are you the Messiah?"
- i. Perhaps didn't meet his expectations.
 1. You could imagine him thinking, "Yes! Bring the axe! Bring God's vengeance and justice!"
 - ii. John maybe expected one who would bring freedom to the captives, but instead he ended up a captive and soon he would lose his head because of a foolish promise of a foolish king. John is suffering, languishing in prison, perhaps for a year.
 - iii. "The axe is laid at the foot of the tree" but then hears that Jesus is eating with sinners and healing the people and teaching things like "blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" and "don't be surprised when you suffer persecution."
 - iv. Jesus doesn't meet his expectations, so John doubts.
- e. Perhaps you've experienced that kind of doubt.
- i. Life is going well, evidence of God's blessings, saying amen to the sermons and songs, and then life takes a hard turn. And God appears to be doing something that you didn't think He would do – allow you to suffer. You understand that others suffer, but now it's personal.
 - ii. Or you assume God will answer your prayer, and He doesn't.
 - iii. Or you have theological expectations you have developed about God that are true but not complete, and you are shaken when you see something in scripture that doesn't meet your expectation about God.
 1. Believe in free will, but encounter a passage like:
 - a. **John 6:44** "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him
 2. Or you read about the love of God, and that seems great, but then you are working through a one year Bible reading plan and you make it to Joshua and the accounts of divine sanctioned conquests, and it troubles you.
- f. Jesus responds gently by pointing to the evidence – what they have heard and seen – the message and the miracles.
- i. Blind, lame, lepers, deaf, dead – chapters 8-9
 - ii. The poor have the gospel preached to them – good news for the downtrodden.
 1. **Isaiah 35:5** Then the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
 2. **Isaiah 61:1** The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted;

3. **Isaiah 35:4** "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you."
 4. **Isaiah 61:2** To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD And the day of vengeance of our God;
- g. In other words, "John, you know what the Bible says about the Messiah. You were focusing on God's vengeance, and that will come, but right now I'm healing and giving good news. Don't take offense at Me." He corrects Him by the evidence and the Word of God.
- i. It could be that your doubt comes from a lack of correct information about God.

What might the crowd be thinking about John? Will they think Jesus is mad at John for asking these questions? I think Jesus clarifies.

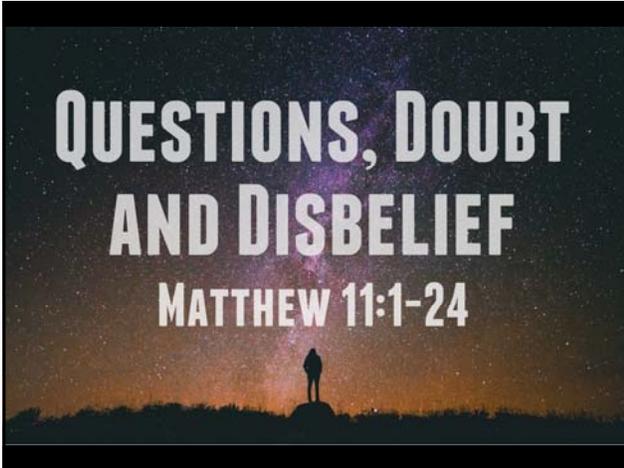
2. The greatness of **John** and the greater greatness of those in the **kingdom** (11:7-15)
 - a. They were drawn to John because they recognized him as a prophet, shattering 400 years of silence since the last prophet.
 - i. He wasn't fickle and shaky (reed in the wind) – which they might have wondered after this question.
 - ii. He wasn't someone there to entertain them or wear fancy clothes – he wasn't weak – which they may have wondered also.
 - iii. He was a prophet and even more than that because he was the subject of prophecy himself.
 1. Quotes from Malachi 3:1
 - b. John was the greatest human ever born – high praise.
 - i. "born of a woman" was a poetic phrase to refer to people (Job 14:1)
 - ii. So why is the least in the kingdom of heaven greater than him?
 1. My experience in Alaska with an older man who couldn't get past this verse – "if John is the greatest and we have to be greater than him to get into the kingdom, what hope is there for me?"
 - iii. Greater privilege – John saw and proclaimed the coming King, but he was the last of the OT prophets.
 1. Connected to the way in which John is greater than the prophets – he was the forerunner to the Messiah! Those in the kingdom will be even greater because they will experience or live after the events of the life, death, resurrection of Jesus.
 2. They are part of a better covenant – the New Covenant
 - a. **Hebrews 8:6** But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.
 - c. Violent people have tried to destroy the kingdom (v. 12)
 - i. King Herod had every boy under the age of 2 in the area of Bethlehem killed, trying to destroy the one born king of the Jews.
 - ii. John has been arrested.

- iii. Opposition is rising against Jesus. Attempts will be made on His life in Nazareth (Luke 4:29)
 - d. But this opposition is because the prophesied kingdom is coming! (v. 13-15)
- 3. Hard-hearted **disbelief** rejects or is apathetic towards the evidence. (11:16-24)
 - a. John had some doubts, and Jesus dealt gently with him by directing him to truth. But His tone is different with “this generation.”
 - b. They rejected John and Jesus for opposite reasons, showing the problem was internal. (vv. 16-19)
 - i. Analogy of children at play - Two common games kids would play as they pretended – wedding and funeral – because those are events they would see in their communities.
 - 1. “I don’t want to play the wedding game, it’s too happy. I don’t want to play the funeral game, it’s too sad.”
 - ii. John stayed isolated in the wilderness – no good. Jesus pursued people who needed the good news – no good.
 - iii. The problem was John or Jesus or lack of information, it was internal.
 - c. He had stronger words for 3 cities that saw his miracles but refused to repent. (vv. 20-24)
 - i. Here we see the difference between doubt and disbelief. John was shaken a bit because things weren’t turning out as he expected. But he took those questions to Jesus and (presumably) looked at the evidence Jesus presented. Disbelief looks at the evidence square in the face and refuses. Doubt Jesus dealt with gently. Hard hearted disbelief brought a strong warning of judgment.
 - d. Kids – it’s ok to ask hard questions but lean in for answers. It’s ok to ask, “my parents believe this but do I believe this?”
 - i. One long-time Sunday school teacher recently told me how he has seen this in different kids over the years. Some engaged, asked hard questions, pushed back at things he said, but it didn’t bother him because it was obvious that they wanted to know what the Bible said and were honestly wrestling with things. Others were combative but with a different spirit or simply apathetic. Not to seek truth but just to argue or reject. Mostly what bothered him was apathy.
 - ii. Don’t be apathetic! - Meh
 - iii. Apathy can put you in the same category as these cities. Plenty of access to truth – believing parents, raised in church where people love you and are teaching you the Word, inviting you to engage, explore, and consider, and yet you still reject and don’t even consider. There’s a warning from Jesus in this passage about that.
 - e. If you’re new here or perhaps checking us out for the first time, I’m not threatened by questions and wondering. I would be happy to talk with you.
 - i. You hear people say, “I went to my church leaders with questions and they told me not to question.” You won’t find that here.
 - f. Pastor friend who talked about a conversation with a man he knew well who went to church as a child, pulled away as a teenager and adult, and then walked away from Christianity because he believed the evidence was against Christianity.

- i. “You’re not being honest with yourself. You put a little boy’s faith against a grown man’s questions.”
- g. There’s a difference between that and refusing the evidence because you want to run your own show. That still doesn’t offend me, but that does put you in an adversarial relationship with God.

4. Key ideas

- a. Deal with doubt **honestly**.
 - i. **Evaluate** your expectations and preconceptions.
 - 1. Don’t ignore or suppress your doubts. Consider why you have questions though – what am I expecting from God that I’m not getting? Is my perspective wrong?
 - ii. **Talk** to your parents, youth leaders, pastors, or other strong Christians.
 - 1. Believe it or not, you’re not that original. If there is a question bouncing around your head, chances are someone else has asked the same question.
 - iii. Be willing to do some **hard work**.
 - 1. Don’t remain in a perpetual state of agnosticism – I don’t know, no one can know, I’ll just keep an open mind and not commit.
 - 2. Are there content issues about the Christian message that you don’t understand or agree with?
 - iv. Recognize that you might not be to have **every question** answered.
 - 1. Faith isn’t the absence of doubt; it is a decision based on the evidence at hand. (Ken Boa)
 - 2. Doubt doesn’t have to hold you back from trusting in Christ.
 - a. Analogy – two men are equally afraid of flying because they have doubts about their safety. A special job opportunity comes up for both them but it requires regular flights to another city. One decides that in spite of his doubt, he will get on the plane. But the other stays behind. He made a choice, a decision, and didn’t let his doubt hold him back.
 - 3. Tim Keller –
 - a. Imagine you are on a high cliff and you lose your footing and begin to fall. Just beside you as you fall is a branch sticking out of the very edge of the cliff. It is your only hope and it is more than strong enough to support your weight. How can it save you? If your mind is filled with intellectual certainty that the branch can support you, but you don’t actually reach out and grab it, you are lost. If your mind is instead filled with doubts and uncertainty that the branch can hold you, but you reach out and grab it anyways, you will be saved. Why? It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.
- b. Beware of **disbelief** and **apathy**.



1. Doubt can pop up when God doesn't meet a person's expectations. (11:1-6)

Mark 6:17-18 For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

1. Doubt can pop up when God doesn't meet a person's expectations. (11:1-6)

Matthew 3:8-10 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; ¹⁰ "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

1. Doubt can pop up when God doesn't meet a person's expectations. (11:1-6)

Matthew 3:11-12 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

1. **Doubt** can pop up when God doesn't meet a person's **expectations**. (11:1-6)

John 1:29-30 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'

John 3:30 "He must increase, but I must decrease.

1. **Doubt** can pop up when God doesn't meet a person's **expectations**. (11:1-6)

Isaiah 35:5 Then the eyes of the **blind** will be opened And the ears of the **deaf** will be unstopped.

Isaiah 61:1b ...the LORD has anointed me To bring **good news** to the afflicted;

Isaiah 35:4a "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come *with* **vengeance** ...

Isaiah 61:2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD And the day of **vengeance** of our God

2. The greatness of **John** and the greater greatness of those in the **kingdom** (11:7-15)

Hebrews 8:6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.

3. Hard-hearted **disbelief** rejects or is apathetic towards the evidence. (11:16-24)

4. Key ideas

- a. Deal with doubt *honestly*.
 - i. *Evaluate* your expectations and preconceptions.
 - ii. *Talk* to your parents, youth leaders, pastors, or other strong Christians.
 - iii. Be willing to do some *hard work*.
 - iv. Recognize that you might not be able to have *every question* answered.

4. Key ideas

- b. Beware of *disbelief* and *apathy*.