Lesson: Wisdom’s Vindication  

Text: Matthew 11:7-19

I. Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN how the different actions of Jesus and John the Baptist both displayed divine wisdom, FEEL encouraged to behave in ways that follow Jesus even when they are contrary to people’s expectations, and REVIEW our own behavior to determine whether it reflects godly wisdom.

Unifying Principle—Wisdom in Action. People often label unusual or unexpected behavior as eccentric, foolish, or even wrong, and the people who act in such unusual ways are vilified. What should our assessment be when someone’s behavior is unexpected? In Matthew, Jesus says His behavior and John’s, while unusual in their day, will eventually be proven wise by their subsequent deeds.

Key Verse—“The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children” (Matthew 11:19, KJV).

People Places and Times

John the Baptist. Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, preached a message of repentance. John was called to be a spokesman for God’s truth. By living in the wilderness, he kept himself apart from the daily distractions of others and devoted himself to prayer and meditation. When he came out among the crowds to deliver his message, those who heard him were mesmerized by his words. John was careful not to draw attention to himself, a temptation that would compromise lesser men. He kept his attention focused on his mission—to announce the coming of the Messiah.

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II. Background

By the time we reach Matthew 11, Jesus has just told his disciples to go first among the Jewish people, preaching the coming of the kingdom of heaven. One recurring theme in the Gospels, however, is the hardness of heart of the people who hear the good news of Christ’s coming, an outcome similar to what Isaiah experienced in his prophetic ministry. When Jesus utters the words of Matthew 11:7–19 to the crowd, He does so immediately after responding to John’s inquiry about His identity. At this point, John the Baptist is in prison, and he sends a disciple to ask Christ whether He is the Messiah. Jesus responds by saying that He is
the fulfillment of Isaiah 35:5–6, which is as close to an affirmative response as John is going to get. Jesus then proceeds to discuss the relationship between his and John the Baptist’s ministry, explaining John’s role as the forerunner of the Messiah.

All of this takes place to reshape the people’s view of what kind of Messiah they ought to expect. Many, especially those associated with the Zealot political party, expected the Messiah to be a military hero, ready and willing to violently free God’s people from oppression. Jesus in His ministry continually subverts such expectations.

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The Lesson At-A-Glance…
1. What Did You Expect? (Matthew 11:7–11)
2. Rebellion Breeds Foolishness (vv. 12–19)

III. In Depth with More Light on the Text
John the Baptist was incarcerated for six months. Doubtlessly he wondered why the Messiah—his cousin—had not rescued him. His disciples, who saw him as the priestly Messiah—given the two Messiah concept that originated during the intertestamental period—had created doubt in his mind since their messianic expectations were not being met by Jesus whom John had announced as Messiah. To verify the truth, John sent two disciples to Jesus. Rather than answering them, Jesus performed miracles fulfilling Isaiah 61:1 then sent them to tell John what they had seen and heard. As John’s disciples were leaving, the events of our passage begin.

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7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? 8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.

During the intertestamental period, God sent no prophets. This made the appearance of John noticeable, and thus people flocked to him to hear the renewed voice of God. Yet, since many did not accept him and Herod had not incarcerated him, Jesus asked what they went to see. “A reed shaken by the wind?” In the region of the Jordan where John preached grew reeds—tall slender cane grass. The imagery of them shaking and bending in the wind was common and became proverbial for a weak vacillator who was easily swayed.

Verse 8 shows Jesus following up from another perspective. If that wasn’t your outlook, did you anticipate seeing a character clothed in soft luxurious attire? Only in the king’s court would such characters be found and John neither wore nor promised material wealth. Our motives for following God or His representatives are important. We ought to seek God because He is good and right, not because His messenger puts on a flashy show, or because we hope to get something out of it.
9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Jesus follows up asking if they went to see a “prophet.” In Greek prophetes (pro-FAY-tace) is a compound from the words pro “before” and phemi (fay-ME) “to say.” Though some stress the predictive aspect of the prophetic role and others the proclamation, the prophet’s work actually consisted of three elements—foretelling (predictions), for-telling (speaking for God) and forth-telling (proclamation). Primarily then, a prophet was a fearless spokesperson for God and, by that very nature, will not always meet human expectations, as was the case with John. They can only speak for and say what God wants them to say.

Jesus then identified John as a prophet yet more than a prophet. He was more than a prophet for he was unique. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets, while at the same time the first of the New Testament prophets. He was more than a prophet because he alone was the forerunner of the Messiah as the quote from Malachi authenticates (v. 10; Malachi 3:1).

11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least 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 the violent take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. 14 And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. 15 He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Starting here is Jesus’ own evaluation of John. John was the greatest of the prophets. We have already seen some reasons for this avowal but there’s more. His character, conviction, and faithfulness were impeccable. Also, he was made great by the privilege of being the only person to have been possessed by the Holy Spirit prenatally (Luke 1:41). He had the awesome opportunity, too, of being the personal proclaimer of Jesus the Messiah. John’s role was great due to the greatness of the One he announced. Yet, as great as John was, Jesus said, “The least important in the kingdom of heaven is more important than” John. Jesus spoke of the kingdom as future (Matthew 6:10; Luke 13:29), as eschatological (Matthew 25:34), and as present (Matthew 16:28; Luke 11:20; 17:20). The reference here is to the kingdom as present. What Jesus was saying is that the least of those experiencing the soteriological aspect (i.e., the salvation aspect) of the kingdom were greater than John, for while they were in it experiencing the blessings, John heralded it but didn’t enter or experience it. In this sense, he is like Moses who led the children of Israel to the Promised Land but did not have the privilege of entering it himself. Both John and Moses led others to the door and were at the door but were not privileged to enter.

The next words of Jesus have caused problems for scholars. The Greek word biazo (bee-ODD-zo, “suffereth violence”) means to use or apply force. How can the kingdom of God suffer violence from humans? Some see a reference to the same kind of sentiment that incited the crowd’s attempt following the feeding of the 5,000 to take Jesus by force and make Him king over the nation in keeping with their idea of a Messiah. The kingdom has certainly been persecuted in its time, but it does not make sense for Jesus to mention this as He praises John and his ministry. When Jesus refers to “all the prophets and the law,” He means the entire Old Testament. The Jewish scriptures are divided into three sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings. Sometimes Jews would use any two to reference all—law and prophets or law and writings. Here it is referenced as “the prophets and the law.” The implication is that the Old Testament scriptures pointed to John who culminated the last of the Old Testament prophets while at the same time inaugurating the new dispensation. He was the Elijah to come and so fulfilled the last
Old Testament prophecy. Jesus further confirmed this notion (v. 14). What Jesus was saying here is that John was indeed the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy. He was indeed the Elijah to come.

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16 But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, 17 And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

In this section, Jesus turned from the people’s thinking of and reaction to John’s person and mission to their reaction to Him and His own mission. The generation can be compared to children playing in the streets. They are divided into two groups—the performers and the complainers. Nothing the performers do is acceptable to the other side. They neither dance to wedding music that is piped nor lament at funeral dirges. They fall somewhere on a continuum between being hard to please and wanting to have their own way. Jesus ties this analogy back to John’s ministry in the following verses.

18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. 19 The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

They rejected John the Baptist who came as a recluse living in the wilderness, preaching repentance and without social interactions. But they also rejected Jesus who lived among them and had social interactions with everyone. They said John had a devil, while Jesus was a glutton and a drunk (KJV: “winebibber”) who ate with publicans and sinners. Criticizing one for one action and criticizing the other for the opposite action reflects a lack of wisdom.

Instructively then, the problem was neither with Jesus nor John. It was with the generation and its leaders—the scribes and Pharisees. They received neither John nor Jesus and like perverse children refused to be satisfied with any proposition offered them. They, like us, need to realize that God uses various messengers to accomplish varied missions. It is not ours to question why but rather to accept them all to fulfill God’s purposes.

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Liberating Lesson & Application for Activation—see Sunday School book

Vocabulary Words You Should Know...
A. Eschatological—Occurring in the end times, after the Final Judgment.
B. Soteriological—Relating to the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ.