

“Matthew”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 13

“Matthew 11:1-30”

Objective: To understand the message that Matthew meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21st century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context, in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis upon application.

Materials: I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Matthew, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, various modern translations, and any other sources relevant to the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding, help us make application to our current situation.

Procedures

1. We will begin by examining the text from the Greek text.
2. We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural, and social settings, in order to understand the message Matthew intended and that God still intends for us.
3. From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the words of Matthew, for the early disciples, then to our modern contextual framework as disciples of Jesus.
4. We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes and thoughts in order to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Lesson

As we come to chapter eleven, Matthew reports that Jesus “finished” teaching his twelve disciples and then He went on to teach and preach in their cities. This verse acts as a transition from one section to another. It concludes the previous section and introduces the section that follows. It is of note that Matthew does not seem to be interested in the mission of the apostles as he gives no report regarding the outcome of their mission or its happenings. The focus remains upon the mission of Jesus here just as it had before this chapter. It will only be after the resurrection of Jesus (28:19-20) that we will find Matthew giving any real focus to the disciples going out on their own. It appears that when Jesus preaches and teaches the disciples are with Jesus.¹

At 11:2, we are fully into the next part of the narrative. We are told that John the Baptist heard about what Jesus was doing, and sent word by his disciples asking Jesus if He was the one, or if they should look for another? What happens here will set the

¹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in The New International Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 416-417.

stage for the discussion that will come in chapter 13. The parables which make up chapter 13 focus upon the divided responses that people have to the word of God, and it will highlight the problems of discerning the reality of the kingship of God in a world where this truth is not universally acknowledged. The parables of chapter 13, which make up that discourse will speak to the divided responses that are possible when hearing the word of God, and the problem of discerning the reality of God's kingship in the world for one's life. This means that in chapters 11-12 Matthew will introduce His readers to a variety of people who are responding in differing ways to what they are seeing and hearing. There are different ways that people respond to the coming of the Messiah and each of these ways receives a different response from God.²

People have been given the ability to discern, to decide, to act upon the truth. At the beginning of this account, we are introduced to the puzzled John the Baptist, who is wanting to believe, but is as yet unsure (11:3).³ John sent his question via his disciples to investigate, to make sure of, what he as yet, only

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 417.

³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 418.

hoped, to be true. John remains one who still seeks the path of truth, who seeks after the path of God. Surely this is a noble calling that all of us should pursue. We should continue to seek the truth throughout all the days of our lives. This is often very hard work and requires a tremendous amount of effort on the part of the seeker. Are you a seeker after truth? What are some ways that you seek after the truth of God for your life?

At 11:4-6, we find the response of Jesus as He tells the disciples of John to go back and to report to John what they hear and see. The answer of Jesus summarizes a variety of Old Testament descriptions of the time for the salvation promised by God.⁴ This response appears to have been understood by the disciples of John as the answer that they were to convey back to their master so at 11:7 we are informed that they left. When they had done so Jesus asks the crowd, “What did you go out to the

⁴ Isaiah 35:5-6 **Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be cleared. 6 Then the lame will leap like the deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing. Waters will spring up in the desert, and streams in the wilderness.** CEB. 26:19 **Your dead will live, their corpses will rise, and those who dwell in the dust will shout for joy. Your shadow is a shadow of light, but you will bring down the ghosts into the underworld.** CEB. 29:18-19 **On that day: The deaf will hear the words of a scroll and, freed from dimness and darkness, the eyes of the blind will see. 19 The poor will again find joy in the LORD, and the neediest of people will rejoice in the holy one of Israel.** CEB. 61:1 **The LORD God’s spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners,....** CEB.

wilderness to see?”⁵ Have you ever wondered what it was that caused people to walk for miles out into the wilderness just to hear a man poorly dressed, who obviously had not heard of the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. What was it about John that appealed to people?

Jesus indicates that John was a prophet and more than just a prophet. He was the one who was to come before the *Messiah*, the one who was expected. Jesus makes this clear by quoting from: Malachi 3:1.⁶ What God had spoken through the prophet has now been fulfilled in the coming of John.⁷ For those who were listening and searching for the coming of the Messiah this was the affirmation that God was fulfilling His word in Jesus. Generations of people had waited for this moment. Can you imagine the feeling that those hearing these words from Jesus must have had upon those who first heard them? This was a pivotal moment in history. This was confirmation that the Messiah had indeed come.

⁵ CEB.

⁶ Malachi 3:1 **Behold, I am sending my messenger, and he will oversee the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to the shrine. And the messenger of the covenant whom you want—behold, he is coming, says the Lord Almighty.** NET.

⁷ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 427.

At 11:11, Jesus continues speaking about John indicating that “no one ever born is greater than John the Baptist.”⁸ High praise indeed. John is the greatest human to be born so far. It is the case that, in this context, the focus of Jesus has been upon John’s role as a prophet, but surprisingly Jesus declares him not the greatest of prophets, but the greatest of all people (even Abraham, Moses, David?). The words of Jesus regarding John reflect the great importance of his pivotal role in the eschatological drama. The words of Jesus never cease to startle and challenge us as He goes on to say that among those born of women he is the greatest. Even here, Jesus contrasts the striking contrast that exists between those born of women and the members of the kingdom of heaven. The contrast is between the two eras, the two kingdoms. John was part of the preparation that now culminates in the new era, the new kingdom is now initiated by Jesus.⁹

The issue that Jesus addresses here is not the salvation of John, but of John’s place in salvation history. John, along with all the prophets, and godly people of the Old Testament, belongs to

⁸ CEB.

⁹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 428.

the old era. This does not mean that he, nor the others of his era, are excluded from the messianic salvation. At 11:12, Jesus adds a clarifying statement that can very often seem puzzling to us today.¹⁰ Needless to say the interpretation of this verse has proven controversial and fraught with a great many interpretations.¹¹ Davies and Allison say of this verse, “Mt 11.12 par. is without a doubt one of the NT’s great conundrums.”¹² One of the matters of interpretation is whether to interpret the verb **βιάζεται** - *biadzetai* as a passive, or as middle voice. To translate it as a passive is easier, but may not actually be correct here.

Taking the verb as passive does not then do away with the difficulty of what to do with **βίασται** - *biastai* (the violent) which follows. It is particularly difficult to understand “violent persons” here in a positive sense. In the three occurrences of this word in reference to human beings, or rather its close cognates, this word is only used negatively of human beings in Christian literature.¹³

The middle voice is here, considered by Davies and Allison to be

¹⁰ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 429.

¹¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 33A (Dallas TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1993), pp. 306-307.

¹² W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, in A Critical and Exegetical Commentary series, Vol. II (London: T & T Clark, 1991), p. 254.

¹³ BAGD 141. Violent or impetuous man.

excluded because, “...although ‘the kingdom of God breaks in with power, with force’, may be a possible translation, βιάζεται¹⁴ is naturally taken as parallel to βιασταὶ ἀρπάζουσιν,¹⁵ and the latter clearly refers to action of which the kingdom is the object. (We assume that the parallelism is roughly synonymous.)”¹⁶

The best evidence points to the fact that βιάζεται - *biadzetai* is best taken as a passive verb here; thus indicating that the kingdom of God is being violently attacked, hampered, and opposed. “Mt 11.12 thus declares that violent men forcibly take the kingdom, which permits the second half of the saying because violent men forcibly seize it.”¹⁷ As you can see it is possible to translate the words and still struggle with the meaning. The proposals for the translation of the words are indeed the best that can be offered at present and yet still we are left wondering what this in fact means?

Davies and Allison put forward three considerations that perhaps move us to suggest that both Jesus, and Matthew,

¹⁴ *biadzetai*

¹⁵ *biastai harpadzousin*

¹⁶ W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, pp. 255-256.

¹⁷ W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 256.

understood the saying to be something along the lines that the subject is to be understood as the eschatological trial that was to come at the juncture between the ages and that those who, through their opposition to the heralds of the kingdom, close that kingdom to others. The first consideration in favor of this perspective is that both Jesus and Matthew interpreted their time as belonging to the time of eschatological birth pangs, the birth pangs of a new age, a new kingdom. The second is that we are aware that the hymnist that authored 1QH 2 described himself as being oppressed at the hands of those that were violent ones in the eschatological period of distress.¹⁸ This text is the closest parallel to the enigmatic saying that we find in the synoptic saying. “At Qumran, the time immediately before the new age was one of conflict and struggle, the time when violent ones oppressed the pious and their leaders.”¹⁹

¹⁸ C.f. 1QH 10:10-11; 21-22. “¹⁰ You have set me as a reproach and a mockery of traitors, foundation of truth and of knowledge for those on the straight path. *Blank* On account of the offence of the wicked ¹¹ I have been the target of slander in the mouth of violent men, and the scoffers grind their teeth. You have made me into a laughing-stock for sinners ²¹ and have protected me from all traps of the pit, for vicious men have ambushed my soul ²² when I relied on your covenant. They are a council of futility, a devilish assembly. They do not know that through you I subsist” Florentino García Martínez, trans. by Wilfred G. E. Watson, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, Second Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), p. 329.

¹⁹ W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 256.

Thirdly, we find that elsewhere, the synoptic tradition uses violent images to depict the messianic woes, which are already being experienced.²⁰ “To sum up, then: for Jesus and for Matthew, as for the apocalyptic literature in general, the great redemption must be preceded by a conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil (cf. 1 En. 91.5-6). Further, this conflict has already been joined, from the days of John the Baptist until now.”²¹ Such a warning would seem to be in line with the previous warnings that Jesus has given about what might be expected. The old kingdom, the old age seeks to resist the changes that are coming and in that resisting uses the weapons of evil, of violence, and of hatred, to resist the changes that must surely come with the breaking in of the kingdom of heaven.

At verse 13, Matthew will deliver to us another short saying that will underline the pivotal place that John holds in the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Here, we once again find Matthew’s overriding sense that the tale he recounts explains how John and

²⁰ Cf. Matthew 10:34-36 “**Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword. 35 I’ve come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 People’s enemies are members of their own households.**” CEB. Luke 12:49-50 “**I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! 50 I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it’s completed!**” CEB.

²¹ W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 256.

Jesus are fulfilling Scripture. Until the time of John, the Hebrew Scriptures pointed forward to a time of fulfillment (a prophesying); after the time of John that fulfillment has now become reality, not some point off in the future. What Matthew writes here related to the Law and the Prophets, which had a purpose. That purpose is now fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Therefore, it is not only the prophets who foretold what was to come it was also the Law that prophesied His coming. “With the coming of John, the last and greatest of the prophets, that forward-pointing role is complete.”²²

Verse 14 then speaks to the eschatological expectation that before the coming of the Messiah Elijah must return. This expectation is derived from Malachi 4:5-6.²³ This expectation was taken up by the rabbis and by the time of Jesus was taken as a given expectation that was to be a sign of the coming Messiah. “To accept that John is the returning Elijah is to embrace a whole package of eschatological fulfillment in Jesus for which clearly most of those who heard him were not ready — cf. the


²² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 431.

²³ **Look, I am sending Elijah the prophet to you, before the great and terrifying day of the LORD arrives. 6 Turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to their parents. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.** CEB.

unresponsiveness of “this generation” which will be condemned in vv. 16-19.”²⁴ For those that were carefully searching for the truth John was a powerful sign of the change of eras. However, for those that doubted and searched for absolute surety, this sign of the coming Messiah failed to impress them. At verse 15, Jesus will challenge those listening to comprehend what is taking place.

In 11:16-19, Jesus will speak words of challenge, but also words of truth, regarding His mission to the Jews. Jesus calls for them, pleads with them, shows them signs of who He is, and yet they fail to listen to Him, to respond to His message, or to the message of John. They accuse John of having a demon and they accuse Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus then says something surprising and unexpected. He will speak of “wisdom” personified as is common in ancient Hebrew literature, and in these words makes the accusation that the people of this generation are making an unwise choice in rejecting He and John. In the end, however, wisdom will be proven correct and they will have been shown to have failed to make a “wise” choice here.

²⁴ Cf. Luke 1:17 **He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** CEB.



In 11:20-24, it is apparent that the response, of the people in the cities where Jesus had done His greatest miracles, was not what He had hoped for. The response that He hoped for, was that they would “change their hearts and lives.”²⁵ This is the reason that Matthew wrote His Gospel account. He hopes that if people see and understand the message of Jesus Christ they will change their hearts and lives. He did not write his Gospel account simply to inform, or to entertain, he wrote it to encourage people to make the decision to change, to transform their thinking and their actions. People must change in order to have a part in the kingdom of heaven. Without a change of heart, people can have no part in the kingdom of heaven. Without this change simply changing the environment, or the circumstances, the kingdom of heaven would be no different than the kingdom of this world as it would still be filled with sin and sinful people. Jesus came to initiate the change that was necessary to ensure that the will of the Father is done on earth as it is in heaven. When that happens, justice will reign, love will reign, and evil will ultimately be extinguished.

²⁵ 11:20b CEB.

If we do not begin the process of allowing God to transform and extinguish the evil, the self-centeredness, the small-mindedness, from the core of our being we cannot participate in the kingdom of heaven. At 11:21, Jesus will begin to highlight the consequences of failure to engage in transformation. At verse 23, He indicates that such people will be thrown down to the place of the dead (*ᾗδου - hadou, i.e. Hades*). He uses the strongest language that He can to indicate the necessity of repentance, for the change of heart, for the need to trust in God and to focus our allegiance in a different place than in ourselves and our own wisdom and understanding. At verse 24, Jesus speaks of the promised “Day of Judgment,” and without change, without transformation, that day will not go well for people. Change will come, it is inevitable, because God will initiate that change, it must come. The call of the Gospel expressed the truth that we all need to embrace that change as it will bring about the Golden Age, when the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus goes on in 11:25, and following, to praise His Father in Heaven because He has hidden these things from those that are considered by this world to be the “wise” the “intelligent,” and

instead He has made His plan, His will, known to babies, to infants. Jesus indicates that God has done this because that is His choice; He has decided that it will be this way.²⁶ At verse 27, Jesus will highlight the importance of what He imparts to the world. The source of the insight, the knowledge of Jesus, is from the Father. No one has that special knowledge except for Jesus. This is unique knowledge that can only come through the channel of God's choice, which is Jesus Christ. It cannot be discovered through scientific investigation, philosophical exploration, or through some form of psychological investigation. There is only one source of this knowledge and that is through God's chosen Son, Jesus Christ. As much as the world may reject this truth it is nonetheless the Truth. Only those to whom Jesus chooses to reveal this truth can know this truth. No amount of effort on the part of human beings can reveal this truth; it cannot come apart from the revelation that comes through Jesus. We are called to respond to this truth in faith and trust.


In 11:28-30, Jesus speaks of an understanding of wisdom and of the following of a master, a teacher, a rabbi, in a manner

²⁶ **Yes, Father, such was your choice.** REB.

that was patently Jewish. In Judaism, when a master took on a disciple, it was said that that student took on the “yoke” of that master. This “yoke” was meant to guide the pupil and to harness their efforts in a positive and useful fashion. Just as one would “yoke” an ox, or another animal, to accomplish a task such as the plowing of a field, so too Jesus can accomplish a great task if we will take on His “yoke.” He can accomplish the task of redeeming our soul, of transferring us into the kingdom of heaven. Without this “yoke” of Jesus, we are simply like a great lumbering animal that makes no real progress in accomplishing the will of God; no real progress on the path to entering the kingdom of heaven.²⁷ God is no mule-skinner. He is not harsh and burdensome to those who take on His “yoke.” He does not dig in the spurs, or use the whip, He is “gentle and He is humble in heart.”²⁸ God does not force us to choose, He sets the choice before us. We choose our own destiny. God allows this. Maybe one of the reasons that God so values humility is that it is a trait of His own heart. We, as those called to bear His image, are called to be “humble” because this is

²⁷ Genesis 2:15 **The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and look after it.** REB.

²⁸ 11:29.



in fact a trait of God Himself; this is who He is. We are called to be like Him in this way, and in every other way. We are meant to demonstrate to all of creation what God looks like, we are to bear the image of God. We have not done a good job at this.

When we go against the ways of God life becomes hard and in that struggle we are worn out, we experience loneliness and we feel can often abandoned. Jesus came to change all of that; He came to call His children home. In the long run, resisting God, working against God, will wear a person out, wear them down. A part of the way legal systems work in our world is to wear down criminals so that they realize that life is easier if they follow the laws and do what is lawful, and proper. Where do you think we got such an idea? God wears us down through continually reaching out to us, continually challenging us to be what we were intended to be, His image-bearers, to be like Jesus, who bore His image perfectly.


Jesus here pleads with, reasons with, performs miracles for, those would hear because He seeks to persuade them of a better way, of the way into the kingdom of heaven. He will not drag people kicking and screaming, but He will pour out His life to

convince people to make the right choice, the choice of life, real life, life with God in the kingdom of heaven. The challenge was for them in their day and the challenge still stands for us today. Will we choose to follow Jesus and enter the kingdom of heaven, or will we choose our own path, a path that leads to *Hades* and away from the rule and reign of God?

Synopsis

John sends his disciples to ask Jesus if He is the Messiah or if he should in fact expect another. He does this while Jesus is preaching and teaching in the towns of Galilee. The answer that Jesus gives is that they should report to John that the deaf hear, the blind see, people are cured of their diseases, the dead are raised. After hearing this answer, and I am sure seeing some of these things happening, they left to go and report back to John.

When they had left Jesus will ask the crowds what they hoped to see when they went out into the wilderness to hear the words of John. He will then go onto reveal that John was indeed the messenger, the precursor, of the Messiah. He was the harbinger of a new age of man, he was the expected Elijah. He then challenges them to listen carefully and to apply what they hear. He expresses deep concern regarding their response to the Good News. He scolds them for the response they have given to His great miracles. He challenges them to change their hearts and their lives. He warns them of impending judgement if they do not respond affirmatively to His preaching by changing their hearts



and lives. He warns them that failure to respond will result in dire consequences for them.

He then praises God because He has revealed these things to infants, to those that the world considers unwise and inexperienced. He then goes on to highlight His strategic, and critical role in the revelation of the things of God. He challenges those who hear Him to respond in faith, following Him so that they will find rest for themselves. He calls them to the kingdom of heaven.

Main Points

- Jesus came to issue God's calling to enter into the dominion of the "kingdom of heaven."
- Jesus fulfills the purpose of God foretold by the Law and the Prophets.
- Jesus challenges His audience to hear His words and to act upon them.
- Failure to respond to the message of Jesus will have consequences.
- Jesus reveals the nature of God.
- Jesus came to bring rest and true purpose to those who would follow Him.

Questions

1. What are some things that you have learned about living your life from Jesus?
2. What are some ways that you deal with doubts in your life?
3. What are some ways that you distinguish between good and evil?
4. What are some things that cause people to stumble and fall in this life?
5. What is it about Jesus that draws people toward Him?
6. What are some ways that you seek to know more about Jesus?
7. What does the phrase, “kingdom of heaven” mean to you?
8. What do you think the purpose of the “Law and the Prophets” was?
9. How does violence relate to the “kingdom of heaven?”
10. Can one gain access to the “kingdom of heaven” through means of violence? Why, or why not?
11. What do you think defines “greatness” in the “kingdom of heaven?”
12. How do you know if someone has listened to what you say?
13. What are some ways that we demonstrate that we have listened to God?
14. What is the purpose of prophecy?
15. What does it mean to say that, “wisdom is proved to be right

by her works?”

16. What are some things that you need in order to continually encourage you to change and answer the call of Jesus?

17. What do you think the change that Jesus calls for, from those who hear Him, looks like?

18. What do you think it means to be thrown down to the dead (Hades)?

19. How would you describe “Judgment Day?”

20. How would you define “wisdom?”

21. What does it mean to be “gentle and humble?”

22. What are some ways that you learn from Jesus?

23. What do you think life will be like in the “kingdom of heaven?”

24. What is the most important lesson that you have learned so far from the Gospel of Matthew?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that the mission of Jesus, and that of His apostles, and disciples, is to initiate quantum change. Sometimes people want just enough of Jesus to be comfortable and they certainly want others to be more like the way they often seek to envision Jesus to be; as tame and easy to handle. Nothing could be further from the truth as Jesus comes to bring massive change and with that change there will seldom, if ever, time to relax and just coast through life. What are some of the ways that the message of Jesus challenges you to take action?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words reaching out to His creation in a way that reflects His humility and gentleness. Often the act of creation can be violent and certainly those who are arrogant often create their own vision of their best reality. This is not the way of God, as it is not His nature. Throughout the Bible God calls to His creation in gentleness and in humility and yet still these attributes of God are so often missed. What are some of the ways that the “gentleness and humility” of God challenge you to approach life differently?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The calling of God is to all of creation and not just a part of it. Some will answer, and some will refuse to answer. The truth is, no one will ultimately be able to resist the will and the vision of God. Though some will remain defiant, they will in the end bear the consequences of their defiance. What are some of the ways that you seek to understand the will of God for your life?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling for His creation to become the best possible version of itself. This calling does not just go out to the world as some form of generic broadcast it is personal and intimate. God especially calls each of His children, each of His creations, to fulfill their greatest destiny: that for which they were created. Mankind was created to bear the image of God in the world. What are some ways that you seek to bear the image of God?