

Introductory

Matthew (11: 2-19) also talks about this conversation between Jesus and the disciples of John. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that John sent his people to ask of Him the million-dollar question; “Are you He who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus’ response, and under inspiration record similar and different words.

The Matthew text (11:2-10) is appointed to be read on Advent 3 in the TLH one-year lectionary and Matthew 11: 12-15 for Reformation. In LW, Matthew 11:2-11 is read on Advent 3A, but not for Reformation. In LSB Matthew 11: 2-15 is appointed for Advent 3A, and 11: 12-19 is given the “or” spot on Reformation Day for every year.

It might be a good idea to tell your hearers that John had disciples, and what that means. The word comes down to us in the vernacular; people will talk about such and such as a “disciple” of such and such. In the NT, the Apostles are a sub-group of disciples. They are personally chosen by Jesus to be one, and they are much more consistent and permanent fixtures around Jesus.

John B is very prominent in Luke, and he gets a lot of ink from the doctor. Like Mark

Textual Notes

18. John had disciples, people who were being taught by him, and “ἀπήγγειλαν Ἰωάννῃ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ περὶ πάντων τούτων – The disciples of John told him all these things.” The verb is used to describe the work of one who delivers a message to another. It does not indicate that they had actually seen any of the things they were reporting to John. Likely they hadn’t.

The last “all these things” on which they reported was the raising of the widow’s son at Nain. Before that, He had healed the Centurion’s servant, and before that parables and miscellaneous healings. The response of the healing of the widow’s son is that they feared, they proclaimed Jesus to be a prophet, and they declared that God has visited His people.

That verse (17) ends with this “report” – it’s a different word – about Him spreading widely. Jesus is in one place, John is in another place, and his disciples are with him, and we have no textual evidence to indicate that they had been with Jesus immediately previous to this or ever. We would expect them to be with John, who is about to send two of them on an errand.

We ought not to think of “all these things” as being done in a clandestine manner. To the contrary, they were done and said very publicly. Nor ought we to think that the doings and even the sayings of Jesus were commonplace. To the contrary, both His words and His deeds were very unusual, and that’s one of the reasons why He is still talked about today.

19. It is because of what is being said about Jesus, because of the word on the street about Him, because the sayings and doings of Jesus had been reported to him by his trusted disciples, in order to seek confirmation of the report that “προσκαλεσάμενος δύο τινὰς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ὁ Ἰωάννης – John called a certain two of his disciples” to run that errand.

John “ἔπεμψεν πρὸς τὸν Κύριον λέγων Σὺ εἶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, ἢ ἄλλον προσδοκῶμεν – sent the to the Lord, saying, ‘if you are the coming one, or we anticipate another?’” The question is open-ended, expecting neither a negative nor an affirmative answer. John and they do have a dog in this fight, and John is in prison, and they need to know if Jesu is the Messiah.

That term “the coming one” makes the question into a messianic inquiry. The participle “λέγων – saying” is in the nominative masculine singular form; the two disciples may be the voice that Jesus heard, but these two only speak in John’s stead and at his behest. Perhaps this is why Luke throws in the seemingly other meaningless trivia that there were two ambassadors.

Likewise, since Greek is an inflected language, and the verb form tells us that person and number of the subject, the pronoun “Σὺ - you” is not necessary to understand the sentence. The speaker or writer puts it in there to emphasize that we’re talking to *you* about *you*. The entire question is constructed to give the query all earnestness. They all have a stake in this game.

Exegetes, theologians, and Bible Scholars both actual and not debate whether or not this question means that John was having second thoughts about Jesus. Clearly, he was. Saints like John are not required to be perfect, but only exemplary and faithful. John is both of these things, but he is not perfect, and the question is legitimate, and prison often does things to people.

20. Following John’s instructions, the men went and found Jesus, and told Him that John had sent them to Him. Like good messengers, acting as John’s mouthpiece, they use the exact same words in the exact same order; the exact same sentence their master had given them. This is the task of all Christians, and especially of all pastors; you are merely the mouthpiece for Jesus.

The trip to Jesus from where John was being kept would have taken a day or two to complete. Josephus tells us that when John was arrested, he “was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fort previously mentioned, and there put to death” (Antiquities 18.5.2). The LKA for Jesus was Nain, just south of Nazareth, about fifty miles from Machaerus.

Machaerus is no longer there but the hill upon which it was built is still there, and we know where it was. It was located east of the Dead Sea on a location that afforded a great view to spot

approaching armies and the like. First built in 90 B.C., then destroyed, it had been rebuilt by Herod the Great in 30 B.C. It was one of several homes occupied by the current Herod.

21. He answers their question about His identity not with words, but with a great display of power, a demonstration of His ability to do miracles, a great number and a wide variety of miracles. The words “ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ - in that very hour” make it clear that He did what He did while these two disciples of John were present, evidence that He is “The Coming One.”

22. So they ask the question, Jesus does a slew of miracles, and having done that, for the first time He now speaks, “ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς – answering, He said to them.” The verb is used when one is engaged in conversation, when the speaker is responding to something that has been said by somebody else. So, first question, then display of power interlude, now words.

He responds by telling them to go and use words to “ἀπαγγείλατε Ἰωάννῃ ἃ εἶδετε καὶ ἠκούσατε – report to John what you saw and what you heard” just now. The verb is the word often used to describe the work of a messenger. This is a matter between John and Jesus, who are joined at the hip, and the “disciples” of both are like e-mails or cell phones.

The things He tells them to tell John correspond to the things they have just seen Him do, with these two exceptions; “νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται, πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται – the dead are raised, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.” The first plural indicates that others – besides the boy at Nain – have also been raised from the dead. Resurrection is a little bit profound.

The second plural indicates that the Gospel has been preached to many people, which does not seem to be that profound. But upon further examination, the preaching and hearing of the Good News is perhaps the most profound of all. It is through this preaching and hearing that a person becomes and remains a Christian, and without that, no one would.

23. At whom were the words “καὶ μακάριός ἐστιν ὃς ἐὰν μὴ σκανδαλισθῇ ἐν ἐμοί – and blessed is he who does not lose faith in Me” directed? Surely not at the disciples of John, who were the messengers only, and the number is singular, not plural. They are the final words of Jesus to John and are directed at John, in response to his question to Jesus.

Once again, the translators take the word “σκανδαλίζω,” which means something, and replaced it with a word that means nothing. The word “offense” used to mean something; Merriam-Webster says “*obsolete*: an act of stumbling” and has etymology “from Anglo-French *offense*, borrowed from Latin *offensa* “encounter with an obstacle, injury, wrong.”

By “*obsolete*,” they mean that in KJV times, the word “offended” meant stumbling over an obstacle. But now the word “offended” is one of the most common, and most surely one of the most meaningless of all contemporary words. But LBT keeps it, but not all are LBT. Some use words like “stumble, turn away, fall away, reject, scandalized” by Jesus.

The winner is God's Word, with "Whoever doesn't lose his faith in me." That is the person who can most certainly be said to be "blessed," and those who don't have or who lose faith in Him are "cursed." These words from Jesus to John are a caution and a warning to him not to let this thing in prison or even impending death shake his faith in Him.

24. Now and only now does Jesus direct His words at other than those two disciples of John; "Ἀπελθόντων δὲ τῶν ἀγγέλων Ἰωάννου ἤρξατο λέγειν πρὸς τοὺς ὄχλους περὶ Ἰωάννου – When the messengers of John left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John." The previous words had been private. The words that follow are for public consumption.

The presumption of His rhetorical question is that the crowds not only knew about John, but they had gone to where he had been, "Τί ἐξήλθατε εἰς τὴν ἔρημον θεάσασθαι; κάλαμον ὑπὸ ἀνέμου σαλευόμενον – what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" Of course, it had not been a shaking reed that caused them to go where they went.

To be sure, there were reeds shaking in the wind in that wilderness, but that's not why they journeyed to there. They didn't need to go all the way out there, there were places closer, and many of them could have stayed home and seen reeds moving in the breeze. It was not the commonplace things of nature that took them out there.

25. Nor did they go into the wilderness to see "ἄνθρωπον ἐν μαλακοῖς ἱματίοις ἡμφιεσμένον – a man dressed in fine clothing." The adjective "μαλακοῖς" occurs only four times in the NT, and it has connotations of "effeminate." If we recall the description of John while in the wilderness, his clothing was sort of the opposite of "μαλακοῖς."

The description of "οἱ ἐν ἱματισμῷ ἐνδόξῳ καὶ τρυφῇ ὑπάρχοντες ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις εἰσὶν – those in glorious clothing and living luxuriously are in the palaces" as well sound like the opposite of John. The word "τρυφῇ" also has connotations of "effeminate," and if you think of the Twelve, you don't think of any of them as being at all effeminate. Just the opposite.

26. Indeed, the reason why they went out into the wilderness to see "προφήτην; ναί, λέγω ὑμῖν, καὶ περισσότερον προφήτου – a prophet, yes, I say to you, and more abundant than a prophet." A prophet is primarily one who preaches the Word of God, and secondarily one who predicts things. The comparative adjective "περισσότερον" is difficult.

It correctly appears in Vine under the word "abundant," not "great" or "greater," but exactly does it mean that John was an abundant "over and above" prophet? It means that he was pretty good, but it means more than that. We call John the last OT and the first NT prophet, and it was in fact he who first proclaimed Jesus The Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

If you do the maths, a large portion of the eighty verse first chapter of Luke is about John and his family, and a little bit about Mary and her pregnancy. In particular, read what the "angel of the

Lord” has to say to Zacharia about his son. No such thing was ever said before of a prophet, and no such thing has been said about one since.

In particular, John will be “great before the Lord...,” he will be “filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb, and he will turn many...” to the Lord. Furthermore, He will “go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah...” and will “make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” And when the two pregnant mothers met, John leaped “for joy” in the womb on account of Jesus.

27. John was a big deal, and a lot of people went to hear what he had to say and to be baptized by him. He was such a big deal that he had been talked about several hundreds of years before he was born. Malachi had talked about how God would “ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου – send my messenger,” the same verb used when Jesus sent Apostles.

The messenger of God would be “πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου ἔμπροσθέν σου – in front of your face, who will prepare the way of you in front of you.” Not everybody did that. Only John prepared the way for Jesus, and John is about to die at the hand of Herod for being a faithful prophet. Jesus would later die for the same reason.

28. He concludes this very complimentary homily, “λέγω ὑμῖν, μείζων ἐν γεννητοῖς γυναικῶν Ἰωάννου οὐδεὶς ἐστίν – I say to you, among those born of women, not is greater than John.” The adjective “μείζων” is a comparative, not a superlative, but when you say that there is no one who is greater than John, it functionally and emphatically becomes a superlative, the greatest.

Having said that, He adds that “ὁ δὲ μικρότερος ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ μείζων αὐτοῦ ἐστίν – the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than him.” The adjective “μικρότερος” is likewise a comparative, and the point of comparison is clear; John is the greatest, but the least Christian is greater than John, and just what does that mean?

Robertson (WP) says that Jesus “surely means that John is greater than all others in character, but that the least in the kingdom of heaven surpasses him in privilege.” A novel idea; maybe when Jesus is here referring to “the least,” He is going third person; speaking of self. He speaks of those “γεννητοῖς γυναικῶν – born of women,” which He was.

Pulpit Commentary at biblehub.com has a lot to say about that idea, which is not novel.

But many of the wisest and best of the Fathers of the Church - amongst others Chrysostom, Augustine, Hilary, and Theophylact - find grave difficulty in accepting this too sweeping and facile explanation of a hard saying. They suggest what seems to the writer of this Exposition a more reverential meaning to the Lord's words here. By "the least" we prefer, then, with Chrysostom and other ancient Fathers, to understand Jesus himself. The literal meaning of the Greek μικρότερος is "the lesser," not "least" (in the Revised Version, in the text we find "he that is but little," but in the margin "lesser"). By "lesser" or "little"

Chrysostom supposes that the Saviour refers to himself as less than John in age and according to the opinions of many. "Thus, then, among the sons of men no prophet greater than John the Baptist has arisen; yet there is one among you lesser in age and perhaps in public estimation, - in the kingdom of God, though, greater than he." Wordsworth strengthens the above interpretation by his comment on the words, "among those that are born of women." "No one among those born of human parents had appeared greater than this John the Baptist; but do not suppose that he is greater than I. I am not γεννητὸς γυναικῶν, but Θεοῦ, and though after him in the gospel because he is my precursor, yet I am greater than he." This great expositor, while on the whole preferring the usual interpretation, yet considers that the explanation which refers "he that is least" to Christ, is not lightly to be set aside.

As for me, I think I'm all in.

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa