

WISDOM'S VINDICATION

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 11:1–19

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” (Matt. 11:19)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In this unit, our study moves to the Gospels, giving us glimpses of Jesus and his wisdom. As our lessons trace a path through all four Gospels, the passages chosen will show how each Gospel writer described Jesus in ways that made sense for the context of the original audience. Scholars date the Gospel of Matthew somewhere in the last quarter of the first century of the Common Era, likely in the 80s. Fifty years had gone by since the Resurrection. Matthew draws from the Gospel of Mark, written around the year 70 CE, from a collection of sayings (Q) used in both Matthew and Luke, and from other material unique to this Gospel. Matthew was written in Greek, so it may have been written somewhere in Galilee or in Antioch of Syria.

It is important to remember that in 70 CE, Roman forces destroyed not only the Temple but also the city of Jerusalem. A substantial portion of the population died during the siege, and the traumatized survivors dispersed and resettled elsewhere in the region, disconnected from their holy city. The early followers of Jesus were themselves Jewish and tried to remain in the synagogue community; those tensions with local religious leaders are echoed in the Gospel. By the mid-80s, they had withdrawn and were developing a new identity. Beginning with the genealogy in Chapter 1, the Gospel of Matthew equipped its first hearers and readers to draw a scriptural connection between their historic faith and the Savior whose way they chose to follow, affirming that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

Gracious God, as we turn to the Gospels, help us to make connections that offer deeper insight and wider viewpoints about the world of the early Christians and the world in which we live today. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Matthew 11:7-19

11:7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵Let anyone with ears listen!

¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD ABOUT PROPHETS

From the safe remove of thousands of years, we read the biblical prophets and appreciate the poetry of Isaiah and Jeremiah, or cushion ourselves against the dramatic exclamations of Ezekiel and Hosea, but almost nobody likes to hear from prophets in the present tense. Their task is too often to bring us bad news about our own behavior, what it causes in the world, and how it affects our relationship with God. In his prophetic career, Elijah alienated the political leaders around him and ended up hiding in a cave to escape his enemies. Yet in the past tense, he is remembered and praised for being closer to God than other people could ever be, having been taken up into heaven while

still living (2 Kgs. 2). Malachi 4:5 promises Elijah will return before the Day of the Lord. Alongside Moses, Elijah appears in the New Testament during the Transfiguration, the two of them representing the Law and the Prophets. While being compared to Elijah would be an honor for a prophetic voice, it will not make a person popular, because it is the job of a prophet to name the uncomfortable truth.


In the first session of a thoughtfully prepared Sunday school class on peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness, which included all ages, from sixth grade to senior citizens, participants broke into small groups and shared the names of people we thought of as truly good. I was pleased when my sixth-grader named the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and then saddened to hear one of his trusted adult friends respond, “He was good, but he was not perfect.”

This was going to be the further point of the discussion—we are all in need of God’s grace—but I felt frustrated that an adult would administer that kind of corrective to the one student in our group. No one questioned any other suggestions, and when the full class shared ideas, my son whispered, “Don’t say it. Don’t say it.”

Later, as we sat in our pew before worship, he picked up the bulletin and saw a quote on the cover.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
Only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate;
Only love can do that.¹

He pointed out the words and the name to me and said, “I wasn’t wrong!” No, son, you were not wrong; but thus it has ever been with prophets, even the ones in sixth-grade.

 **How does it feel when you hear an uncomfortable truth? How do you respond? Who would you call a prophet in our time?**

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

If you have ever been the person who recommended a candidate for pastor, or a medical specialist, or a piano teacher, or a landscaper whose work did not turn out as expected, you will sympathize with John the Baptist. Sitting in a jail cell in Matthew


1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 86.

11, he worried about whether he had put in a good word for the wrong guy. After building his reputation on living in the wilderness, dressing in and eating only what he could scavenge from the land, John must have been getting some questions from his followers about Jesus and his different approach to both teaching and living. How could John justify his support of a so-called Messiah who spent his time eating dinner with people no one would ever call righteous?

He sent his followers out with the question he could not ask in person. “Are you the one who is to come?” The subtext is clear. John is in trouble, in jail, at risk of losing his life because he followed God’s call; was it all for nothing? If we have read the first ten chapters of Matthew, we may wonder why John is so dubious. We might point to the evidence of the Sermon on the Mount, and many stories of healings, and John’s own acclamation. If Jesus is on the wrong side of the religious authorities too, that should satisfy John. Jesus tells John’s emissaries to report what they have heard and seen: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt. 11:6).

Jesus, surrounded by crowds, then begins to teach in his style. He starts by affirming John as the prophet described in Isaiah, the messenger who comes ahead of the Savior, and even “Elijah who is to come,” as described by the prophet Malachi. God’s great day is coming, and John is the one who pointed to it. Jesus has no problem with John.

But the people have a problem with both John and Jesus. They think John is strange for living in a manner that is almost aggressively simple, but they also think Jesus is careless about his social connections, sitting down to eat with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus points the crowd back to the same evidence he offered to John’s disciples. We can recognize wisdom by the results it brings in our lives and in the world. Wisdom brings healing, new life, and good news for people on the margins. “Let anyone with ears listen!” (v. 15).

 If Jesus came into the world today, how would you expect him to appear and behave?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

When Jesus speaks of “this generation,” we can fairly read ourselves into the story, because every generation seems to

struggle with understanding him. We tend to seek a version of Jesus who does what we want rather than forming ourselves based on what he asks of us. If we take away nothing else, we can reflect on the last thing Jesus says in today's passage, which can be translated differently. Instead of "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," it can also be read as "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her children." Vindication is the kind of win that gets you out of trouble by proving you were innocent all along. The world will know whether we were wise by the results of our actions.

Nonprofit organizations depend on donations, and large nonprofits rely on the gifts of wealthy people. In May of 2019, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City announced that it would no longer accept gifts from the Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma. A few months earlier, the company had settled a lawsuit over complaints that Purdue marketed opioid drugs and offered doctors incentives to prescribe them despite knowing about the harm they cause. Leadership of the Met and other museums such as the Guggenheim and the Tate in London noted that money earned in harmful ways is tainted and cannot be made good simply by the donation of a portion to worthy causes. These three museums made a first step in evaluating what might make money too corrupted to accept and took a stand against what amounts to a kind of moral money-laundering.

What is good? What is right? On this Independence Sunday, in a presidential election year, those questions are actively before us. We may fear having the topic of politics come up at our family barbecues and company picnics because people we love, or people with whom we work, may see things differently than we do. If our values conflict, how do we come to an understanding?

The priority for those who follow Jesus cannot be what is good for "me and mine" but rather what is good for all people who do not have the advantages of health, education, social position, and economic resources. Jesus demonstrated his care both through his actions and through his teaching. If wisdom is vindicated by her children, then Christians will want to consider the legacy we leave to our families, our communities, and the world. Will people look back at us and call us wise? They will if we act in a way that honors Jesus.



How does your church bring good news to the poor? How could you do more?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

7. Matthew 11:10 is drawn from Malachi 3:1 and is also reflected in Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27.
8. A translation problem in Matthew 11:12 concerns whether the verb βιάζεται should be rendered as middle voice ("been forcefully advancing," NIV footnote) or as passive voice ("has suffered violence," NRSV).
9. Jesus expected John the Baptist to recognize Jesus' identity as Messiah from the wise actions Jesus had been performing (Matthew 11:2–5). In Luke 4:16–21 Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, who describes such acts as those of the Messiah and proclaims their fulfillment in him. Malachi 4:5 indicates that Elijah was to return to prepare the Messiah's way. John the Baptist does not recognize himself in that role, at least in John 1:19–21, but Jesus ascribes it to him (Matthew 11:14).
10. Jesus intimates that wisdom means recognizing what is fitting, such as playing wedding music for a wedding, and what is not, playing funeral music instead.
11. Luke 7:35 remembers Jesus' statement in Matthew 11:19 as "wisdom is vindicated by her children," suggesting the link between John, Jesus, and their disciples.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Jul. 6	Everything Has Its Time and Season	Ecclesiastes 3:2–8
T	Jul. 7	Perform Your God-Given Task	Ecclesiastes 3:9–15
W	Jul. 8	The Firstborn Belong to God	Numbers 3:11–13
Th	Jul. 9	Jesus Presented to the Lord	Luke 2:21–24
F	Jul. 10	Simeon Praises God for the Child	Luke 2:25–35
Sa	Jul. 11	Anna Speaks about the Christ Child	Luke 2:36–38