

Negative Responses to Jesus, Part 2: Frivolous Criticism

Matthew 11:7-19

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Introduction:

Last week, we began a new section in Matthew's Gospel.

- This section is found in chapter 11 and 12.
- In these two chapters, Matthew focuses on the negative responses of the multitudes to Jesus.
 - Jesus was simply not what many of them had wanted or expected the Messiah to be.
 - Last week, we saw how even John the Baptist (or at least his disciples) were struggling with doubt, so much so, that John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus:
 - "Are you the coming One, or do we look for another?"
 - Either John (who was then in prison) or his disciples, were starting to question whether Jesus really was the Messiah!
 - He was not doing what they expected the Messiah to do!
 - Instead of kings bowing down to him, John was shut up in prison!
 - And though it is a disturbing thing to see such doubts coming from John or those who followed him,
 - I showed you that John did the right thing to send these doubts to Jesus...
 - This is a pattern for what you should do when you have doubts...
 - Bring them all to the Lord to have them resolved—
 - Although you can't send someone to speak to Jesus in the flesh,
 - You can come to Him by coming to the Bible with prayer.
 - In the Bible, we have His will for us fully revealed.
 - In coming to the Lord with your doubts, you will find what John's disciples found...
 - The Lord will not always answer you as directly and clearly as you might like...
 - But His answer will be one that will lead you into a deeper knowledge of Himself—and of His salvation.
 - But the thing you must never do is leave your doubt to fester without searching them out...

- If you do, they may very well grow into offences...
- Things that will keep you from trusting the Lord and loving Him as you should and that will cause you to stumble.

TRANS> John's question to Jesus provides the background for our text today, Matthew 11:7-19.

Here we find that as soon as John's disciples departed,

- Jesus immediately began to speak to the on-looking crowd about John.
 - He knew that there were many among the people that were already trying to pit John against Him...
 - These detractors had noted how John was austere and lived in the wilderness, denying himself of all the creature-comforts of this life...
 - And how Jesus went about among the people and feasted with them, not only with the clean, but also with tax collectors and sinners,
 - and how he and His disciples never seemed to fast.
 - Jesus knew they would use the question of doubt that John had sent to call into question John's whole ministry and connection with Him.
 - Jesus therefore speaks with the highest approbation of His faithful servant and friend before any rumour can start.
 - There is something very comforting about this for us—
 - for though we often struggle and have doubts,
 - Jesus is always loyal to us and speaks highly of us to our critics and detractors.
 - It is quite encouraging to see how God speaks of His OT servants in the NT—
 - We read the OT and we see their flaws, but how the Lord praises them now that they are with Him!
 - And of course we read this morning in Numbers 12 how God dealt severely with Miriam and Aaron for speaking against Moses.
- And so in verses 7-19, we have Jesus affirming John and his ministry as from God before anyone has a chance to raise the question.
 - Jesus does this not only for John,
 - but also to protect the multitudes against the poison of frivolous criticism!
 - Frivolous criticism is very dangerous because even though it is irrelevant, it is nevertheless used as a reason to reject something that should not be rejected!

- Take Betty as an example...
 - Betty and her husband go over to Jane's house for supper...
 - Afterward, Betty's husband comments on how excellent the supper was and Betty responds:
 - "The place-mats she used didn't match the table cloth,"
 - Whether Betty is jealous or resentful toward Jane, her criticism is rather frivolous...
 - She is using this frivolous criticism as a reason to reject the claim that Jane had served an excellent meal!
- You hear this kind of thing all the time when you talk to people about the Lord...
 - You will tell someone about Him and about what He has done for sinners and they will say,
 - Well the church is filled with hypocrites.
 - Your answer should be "So...."
 - What does that have to do with the Lord Jesus?
 - Are you going to allow the behaviour of false disciples to keep you from the eternal salvation He offers to all who will repent and believe?
- Or look at how believers will use frivolous criticism to detract from the worship of God...
 - The people at that church were too friendly—or they were not friendly enough...
 - but the blessedness of our common life in Christ was overlooked!
 - The message was too long—
 - but the whole content of the message is forgotten!
 - The singing was too fast—or too slow.
 - but the God we are praising was not noticed!
- Now I hope you get my point!
 - I don't mean to say that such observations should never be made!
 - But what a shame when we miss the glorious importance of what we are doing because we are so focused on something peripheral.
 - The problem occurs when something trivial becomes the centre of focus in such a way that the essential thing is forgotten.
- This is exactly what Jesus saw the multitude doing concerning John!
 - They were criticising John for trivialities and missing the glorious purpose for which God had sent him!

- What God had revealed through John was completely lost upon them.
- Jesus is trying to wake them up to what is really important.
 - Let us look at what He says and learn from Him.

First of all, when frivolous criticism I flying about,

I. You need to learn to keep your focus on what is important, namely, hearing the Word of God

A. Jesus begins by asking the multitude some very fundamental questions about their focus when they went into the wilderness to see John...

1. What did you go out to see?

- a. The idea is, “What did you go all the way out into the wilderness for?”
- Going to the wilderness required a great deal of effort—
 - They had to prepare for the journey, take time off work, and then make the journey...
 - Yet, we are told that hoards of people had gone to this trouble to hear John!
 - In Matthew 3:5, we were told that Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him.
 - People were coming from far and wide to hear him. He was the talk of all Israel.
 - But what was it for?
 - Jesus says, “What were you trying to see?”

b. Then He gives some rather ridiculous suggestions...

1) In verse 5 He says, “Were you going to see a reed shaken in the wind?”

a) Was John a vacillating man who was always going back and forth?

- Did you go to see what sort of strange new idea he would have come up with this week?
- Are you going to see how he changes his message to please the people...
 - Always looking to find out what will please them?
 - What new thing will entertain them and make them come back for more?

b) Of course when they thought about that, they knew that John was not like that at all.

- John had a very pointed message and very focused purpose.
 - He was there to tell everyone to repent in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.
- It didn't matter who it was that came... He feared no one!
 - Was it rowdy soldiers of a common sort?
 - He told them to stop complaining about their wages.
 - Was it highly esteemed teachers and religious leaders?
 - He told them to repent and stop relying on their pedigree.
 - Was it King Herod?
 - John told him to break off his incestuous adulterous relationship.
- No one went out to see him because he was a vacillating man!
 - A reed shaken in the wind!

2) Well Jesus says, perhaps you were drawn out to see all the finery of his situation...

- A man in soft clothing living in palace-like surroundings...
 - Is that what you went to see?
 - Were you like the Queen of Sheba when she went to see the glory of Solomon?
 - the beautiful palace He had built?
 - the clothing that he wore?
 - the fine table He set?
 - the arrangement and beautiful order of his servants?
- Of course, nothing was farther from the truth about John!
 - Matthew 3:4 tells us of the very rustic condition in which John was surrounded:
 - Matt 3:4: And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.
 - Nobody had gone out to John to enjoy the resort-like surroundings!
 - This was not hot tub religion!

2. "So if not that, what did you go out to see? A prophet?"

a. Of course that is the reason they went all the way out to the wilderness.

- Almost everyone considered John to be a prophet...
 - Israel had the highest esteem for prophets!
 - It was this that made them stand apart as a people—God had spoken to them through prophets and they knew it.
- b. Consider that it had been 400 years since a prophet had arisen in Israel.
 - Yet, the time had come when everyone was expecting the Messiah to appear according to the prophecy of Daniel—
 - which showed Him coming after the Roman empire had risen to power and pride.
 - There was a great air of excitement!
 - It seemed that God was visiting His people to redeem them!
 - They had gone out to hear the word of God!
 - They had gone for the right reasons!

B. Now these questions that Jesus asks are very helpful for you, my dear hearers!

1. You need to ask yourself, “Why do I go out to church?”
 - a. “Do I go out to see a reed shaken in the wind?”
 - 1) “Do I go to see how the minister will adapt the word to God to make it relevant to our modern society?
 - How he will speak soothing words make us feel good about ourselves and realise how much potential we have?
 - How he will give us a pep talk that if we just follow our instincts, we will be successful and happy?
 - How he will give us advice to deal with all the abuse we get in this world?”
 - 2) Of course, there are some people that do go to church for these reasons.
 - They are not there to hear from the God of the Bible,
 - they just want to have their ears tickled.

TRANS> Then again, you might ask yourself...

- b. Do I go out to see a man wearing soft clothing— in other words, is it the lovely surroundings that attract me?
 - Is it that I love the beautiful music or the beautiful church building?
 - Do I go to be entertained by the church program?

- Or do I go to see all my friends and so may children can have good kids to hang out with?
- Is it that church is the one place where I can feel loved and accepted?
- Or is it that place where I am important and appreciated because of all the service I do?

TRANS> There are many that go for some of these reasons.

- But these are not the right reasons to go.

2. The reason you **should** go is to meet with God...

- a. To hear His word and receive it through preaching, singing, scripture reading, sacrament, and benediction...
 - And to pray to Him, praise Him, give thanks to Him, and to confess His name.
 - It is especially in the public assembly that we should look for God to speak to us through His ordinances...
 - And you need to ask yourself if that is what you are looking for!
 - Would you go somewhere for social reasons even though the doctrine was not sound?
- b. It was pretty obvious that in John's case, people were not going to see a reed shaken or a man in soft clothing because John offered nothing like that!
 - They were going because John was a prophet.
 - I do not mean that their motives were altogether pure—
 - they did not go out with a readiness and believe and obey what God said through John...
 - but they did go primarily because he was considered a prophet and they wanted to hear what he would say.

TRANS> And now if you agree that the reason you should go to worship is to hear from God,

- I want you to consider next how precious God's revelation to us is!
 - To think that He should reveal saving mercy to sinners like us!
 - When frivolous criticism is flying about (in the people around you or in your own mind), bring your thoughts back to consider that God has spoken to us!

II. Jesus shows us how excellent God's revelation to us is!

A. He points out that John was much more than a prophet!

1. By sending John, God was actually beginning to bring in His kingdom!
 - a. Unlike all the other prophets before him,
 - John was not simply telling us about God's kingdom that would come...
 - He was actually the herald who went before the king and announced that He was here!
 - John was not just a prophet, but also the fulfilment of the prophecy concerning the new age that God was inaugurating!
 - His coming was like the cloud that arose over the horizon when God was finally ending the three-year drought!
 - It was not the rain, but the rising of that cloud held the promise of rain.
 - That cloud was the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise to send rain!
 - b. And so it is that in v. 10, Jesus quotes from Malachi where John is spoken of as the forerunner of Christ:
 - Jesus says:
 - Matthew 11:10: For this is *he* of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.'
2. And then Jesus tells us what an important place John has in redemptive history
 - a. In Matthew 11:11, He says"
 - Matt 11:11: "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist;"
 - With these words, Jesus puts him even above Moses!
 - He is the greatest person who had ever lived up until that time!
 - And to make sure we know He really means it, Jesus adds the word "Assuredly."
 - This makes it an oath!
 - b. But what is it that makes John so great?
 - Understand that it is this:
 - John is the greatest man who ever lived because he is that messenger of God who brings the people of God nearer to their redeemer than ever before!
 - All the prophets wanted to bring God's people as near to God as they could...

- Remember how Moses longed to see His glory... He wanted to show God's glory to the people...
 - And so all the prophets revealed to the people all that God had given to them concerning Himself and His salvation.
 - But John, through the revelation given to him, is able to reveal more about God than anyone before Him had ever done!
 - He was able to point to Jesus who is the fullness of God's revelation to sinful man...
 - The other prophets spoke of Him through signs and shadows...
 - but John pointed to Him with his own finger and said:
 - There He is! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!
 - He was the greatest of all the prophets!
- B. But you will notice that Jesus adds something to this acclamation of John that especially pertains to us!
- After saying that John is the greatest man who ever lived up until that time, He adds,
 - “But he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he!”
1. My Christian brothers and sisters, that's talking about you!
 - The “kingdom of Heaven” is what Jesus came to establish.
 - You who believe today are members of that marvellous kingdom.
 - This kingdom of heaven was established when Jesus took His throne in heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit.
 - Jesus says that the lowliest, most insignificant member of this kingdom is greater than John the Baptist!
 - What a wonderful privilege!
 2. But how can this be? How are you greater than John the Baptist?
 - a. It is this—the revelation you have received about God in Jesus Christ is far greater than the revelation John had!
 - John brought people nearer to God than ever before, but you have been brought much nearer still!
 - b. John preached a greater repentance than anyone before him because he was preparing the Church (God's people) to meet the Son of God on earth!

- And the people were able to look where John's finger pointed and see the Son of God living among us, doing gracious works of healing and forgiveness wherever He went!
 - There was need for a deeper repentance and a deeper joy than what had ever been before because we were nearer to God than ever before...
- c. But now the ministers of gospel preach a crucified resurrected Jesus who is seated at God's right hand in the heavenlies!
- We preach the Son of God who went to Hell for us when He suffered on the cross and whose sacrifice for us was accepted when God raised Him from the dead!
 - We see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, openly revealed!
 - By this we are brought nearer to God than ever before!
 - Jesus has made a complete and eternal satisfaction for our sins so that our conscience is purged... there is no sin to keep us from God!
 - He has conquered death for us so that there is nothing to separate us from God's love....
 - He has pulled back the veil so that we might see the holiness of God in what was done for our salvation in a way it was never seen before—
 - God's holiness was revealed on earth in a shadowy way at Sinai with thunder and earthquake...
 - But now you see His consuming fire each Lord's Day when the cross is preached!
 - We are brought before God in the heavenly sanctuary by the blood of the cross!
 - The least believer has far more revelation of the glory of God and is brought far nearer to Him than Moses on the mount who spoke face to face or John who saw Him when He came to earth.
 - Brothers and sisters, we are most privileged indeed!
 - From us is due...
 - a greater humility, for we have seen what the Son of God had to do for our sins...
 - a greater gratitude, for we have seen what the Son of God **did** do for our sins...
 - a greater love for our neighbour, for we are called to show our love to Christ upon our neighbour...
 - a greater measure of holiness, for we are brought before God's throne in heaven!

TRANS> And so having learned from our text thus far:

- First, that hearing from God is the most important thing of all...
- And second, that the revelation of God to us is most precious and excellent...
- I want you to see thirdly that...

III. You need to respond appropriately to God's most excellent revelation!

- Jesus shows responses to the more excellent relation that came through John the Baptist—
 - How much more should we respond to that still more excellent revelation that comes to us now that Christ has completed His work for us!
 - Lets look at these three responses.

A. First, the more excellent revelation should to lead us to press earnestly into God's kingdom...

1. In verse 12, Jesus speaks of the response that people had to John's ministry.

- He says:
 - Matt 11:12: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force."
- a. Now the language of this verse makes it somewhat difficult to understand and translate...
 - But the one thing that is clear is that the revelation of John produced a very strong reaction among his hearers—a violent reaction!
- b. The difficulty is to determine whether this violent reaction was one of persons violently pressing into God's kingdom or violently opposing it.
 - It is quite impossible to tell from the grammar.
 - But there is a sense in which we can't go wrong with either interpretation because we know from scripture as a whole that the more God is revealed, the stronger people's reaction is in both ways...
 - The gospel, when people see what it really is, polarises...
 - It sets the reprobate in strong opposition and the elect in strong support so that Jesus says truly that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

TRANS> And so, for our purposes today, I am taking Matthew 11:12 to mean that

2. God's greater revelation through John caused people to violently press their way into God's kingdom.

- a. When you see that God Almighty has come near with salvation and calls you to repent of your sin and turn to Him...
 - It causes you to run to Him with violence!
 - You become desperate!
 - You see the glory of heaven and the horror of Hell and you must have heaven!
 - And what's more, you see that God has made a way to heaven—that heaven is in reach—and so you have hope to leave all for His way!

 - b. With what eagerness do people come when they understand!
 - You hate father and mother for Christ's sake in whatever way father and mother would keep you from Christ!
 - You hate your own life also, and are ready to call yourself a filthy wretched sinner who deserves nothing but Hell because you see that all your hope is found in Christ who died...
 - And you turn with vengeance on what you are to become what God has called you to be, that by the grace of the Spirit you might become like Jesus.

 - c. If the revelation of John produced a violent respond so that men left all to follow Christ before He was crucified,
 - How much more ought the gospel to produce such a reaction in you!
 - If you see Hell for what it is and salvation for what it is, surely you will cast off with violence everything that would keep you from Christ!
 - Do not be a fool,
 - nothing else makes sense!
- B. Secondly, the more excellent revelation we now have ought to cause us to listen eagerly to what God says...
1. In verses 13-15, Jesus explains that in John, the law and the prophets have reached their apex.
 - Jesus shows on no uncertain terms that John is that Elijah that was to come as the forerunner of the Messiah.
 - The fullness of time has come, and God has sent the forerunner because God has come in His Son to redeem the world and establish His eternal kingdom.
 - When Jesus adds, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear,"
 - He is saying, "People, don't miss what God is doing in your day!"

- The coming of John signals my coming and the coming of my kingdom!”
 - Don’t miss this!
 - He who has ears to hear, let him hear!
2. But Jesus said this because there were indeed many that were missing the significance of what God was doing in their day!
- a. Or maybe it is better to say, they were unwilling to deal with it!
 - John’s ministry demanded a response one way or the other!
 - He commanded everyone to repent and be baptised.
 - You couldn’t remain ambivalent—
 - You couldn’t just sit on the fence!
 - But there were many who had not obeyed John...
 - b. Jesus says, “What should I compare these people to? Here the revelation of God comes like never before, and they reject it!”
 - 1) “They are like children in the marketplace calling to their friends...”
 - When parents were working or shopping at the market, the children would play in the courtyard.
 - And often they would quarrel, as children do, about what game to play.
 - First they tried to play funeral with all the wailing and mourning music that was characteristic of funerals in those days, but their friends would not...
 - Then they tried to play wedding...with all the dancing and merry making—but again the friends refused.
 - 2) Jesus says that those who would not hear God’s precious revelation that John brought were just like those peevish, sullen little children who refuse to co-operate with what is going on!
 - They criticised John because he was too austere, living in the wilderness and away from the real world...
 - And Jesus they criticised because He was too sociable—going to feasts and eating and drinking wine, and that even with publicans and sinners!
 - They were full of frivolous criticism!
 - c. And through their criticism, they completely missed what God was doing through John and Jesus!

- 1) You see, John's ministry was supposed to be in the wilderness because John was teaching God's people about the barrenness of their lives!
 - They could of themselves produce no fruit, no joy, no holiness.
 - This is what the law and the prophets teach us—all the while pointing us to Christ who offers Himself to save us...
 - John's ministry was all about repenting of what we are and turning to God for His promised salvation!
 - His was the funeral—calling us to die that we might live.

- 2) Jesus, on the other hand, came as the bridegroom!
 - He came to sweep us off our feet and carry us to heaven by His grace!
 - He was the one that John and all the prophets had promised for so long and finally He had come to redeem us!
 - It was time for feasting and joy!
 - There were healings and resurrections and good news proclaimed!
 - Thus, Jesus earthly ministry was not characterised by the fasting of those who were yearning for Him to come (that is why the Jews had fasted)—it was about rejoicing that He was here!

- 3) But these frivolous critics could not see why John behaved one way and Jesus another way...
 - All they could see was the outward behaviour...
 - They completely missed the big picture of what God was doing in all this!
 - When the repentance of John was preached, they could not mourn because they thought they were alive without Christ...
 - When the salvation of Jesus was preached, they could not rejoice because it was not the salvation they were looking for...
 - Jesus promised salvation from sin.
 - but they were looking for salvation from the Roman domination—
 - What was there to mourn about?
 - What was there to rejoice about?
 - All they could see was one man mourning for no good reason, and another feasting for no good reason.

3. Now brothers and sisters, I see a lot of this today!
- a. It is very evident that in North America, we are under God's hand of judgement and chastisement...
 - There are storms and terrorist attacks and social problems and economic problems...
 - These things always increase when God is displeased, but we are totally deaf to what His Spirit says to us.
 - Instead of repenting when these troubles come,
 - we look at ourselves as poor innocent victims!
 - b. And, at the same time there is cause for fasting, we have always the gospel of Christ which is cause for great rejoicing...
 - Even though we are judged,
 - we rejoice because we know that there is a saviour who will deliver us from all these things and who gives all who trust in Him eternal life...
 - But too often we will not hear this—
 - We do not see what there is to rejoice about when our bank account is low and our marriage is sour.
 - c. And so you see that we do not seem to have ears to hear what God is saying to us!
 - When He calls for mourning, we do not lament...
 - When He calls for rejoicing, we do not dance.
 - Instead we criticise those that do.
 - Think about it—who was it that received the most scathing criticism at 9/11?
 - Even worse than the terrorists themselves?
 - Was it not those who, according to God's word, declared that God had sent this trouble upon us to chasten us and call us to repentance?
 - And who is it that is looked at like a three-headed monster?
 - Is it not those who rejoice in a salvation that to the people around them is invisible?
 - A people who have hope in promised kingdom that the world thinks is only a dream?
 - Indeed, they criticise, because they do not hear what God is doing.

TRANS> How you ought to listen all the more earnestly now that we have a fuller, more complete revelation!

- Rather than criticising those who are rightly responding to God,
 - open your ears to what He is doing and respond accordingly.
 - Criticism is too often an excuse to keep you from hearing from God.
 - You criticise the delivery of the sermon and miss the Saviour who was proclaimed in it.
 - You reject church because there are too many hypocrites and end up missing salvation.
 - How earnestly you should be listening to God's Word so that you might hear what He is saying.

C. Thirdly, the more excellent revelation we now have will cause us to vindicate God's wisdom.

1. Jesus sums up His discourse with the words:

- "But wisdom is justified by her children."
 - a. The children of wisdom are those who follow wisdom...
 - When God's prophet is calling them to mourn and repent, they mourn and repent...
 - When God's Son is calling them to rejoice in His salvation, they rejoice.
 - b. And wisdom's children will justify wisdom...
 - Once you see why they are mourning, those who criticise them look very foolish...
 - And once you see why they are rejoicing, it makes perfect sense.

2. On the day of judgement, everything will be brought to light.

- On that day, wisdom will be vindicated.
 - a. Think about it!
 - When we stand before the glorious majesty and holiness of God...
 - Who will think those who mourned over sin were fools?
 - And who will snicker at those who rejoiced in the appearing of Christ?
 - b. Do you see how deadly frivolous criticism can be?
 - It can cause you to miss the things that really matter!

- God has set a beautiful table of salvation and it is full of the most excellent meats and choice wines.
- What? Are you going to stay away from the feast because you don't like the way one of his servant's greets the guests?
- Or are you going to burn in Hell because you didn't like the place-mats?
- Oh dear hearer,
 - Don't get stuck on some triviality!
 - Behold what God has done in His Son and come to the feast!
 - Don't stand to criticise, come and dine!