

FIRST THOUGHTS

Doubts and decisions don't go well together. Whether in business or the military, people want leaders who are decisive. Yet, we often struggle with decisions as questions flood our minds. Often, we're not debating the merits or truth of a matter. Rather, we're doubting ourselves. Have we considered all the possibilities? Is this the right thing to do or merely what we want to do? What will happen if we make the commitment or if we do not? Jesus demands a decision to trust and follow Him. He understands human frailty, but He does not humor our doubts. Instead, He helps us overcome them. Ultimately, each person must decide if we believe that Jesus is who He claims to be. If so, we have to determine if we are willing to deny ourselves, take up the cross of self-denial, and follow Him. We choose the commitment of discipleship. Skepticism abounds! It has been almost fifty-seven years since Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, yet there are still people who believe it was a hoax. Nearly every news story today will elicit skepticism concerning the facts. Doubt and skepticism are good if they force us to investigate the truth. They can be disastrous when they lead to denial of truth. Such was the case with Jesus. Skepticism led many to miss the life He offered.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT (Matthew 11:1-30)

Doubts often creep in from the least expected sources. John the Baptist had testified that Jesus was the Messiah. Some of his followers became disciples of Jesus after John pointed Him out as the Lamb of God. Yet, after being imprisoned for speaking against Herod's immoral behavior, John needed reassurance. Was Jesus indeed the One? Should they keep looking? As Jesus went about the towns preaching the gospel of the kingdom, John sent messengers to question Him. Jesus did not rebuke John or the messengers. He gently pointed out what they had witnessed as He ministered. Sick people were healed. Dead people were raised. Poor people heard the gospel. Jesus's miracles should be testimony enough for John. His record should satisfy our doubts as well. Turning His attention to the people watching this encounter, Jesus affirmed John and his ministry. The crowds had not sought John in the wilderness because He looked nice or spoke well. They went because he was a prophet. In fact, if they could receive it, John fulfilled the prophecies about the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus knew the fickleness of human nature. Some of the people listening to Him had criticized John for his strange behavior. They wanted a prophet, but they couldn't understand John's rugged self-denial. In contrast, Jesus's lifestyle was more normal. He ate in their homes and shared their company. But they complained about Him as well. The problem was not John or Jesus. The problem was people who rejected the message and the messengers of God. We tend to want validation by prophets who look and sound more like ourselves. We often want them to tell us what we want to hear. And we want to make God in our image rather than being remade to reflect Him. Considering the cities where He spent the most time and performed the most miracles, Jesus issued stern warnings. Places like Capernaum and Bethsaida should have been bastions of belief. Instead, the people's doubts led them toward destruction. Rather than repenting and following Jesus, most sought the benefit of His power without accepting His authority. Turning His face toward heaven, Jesus offered thanks to the Father who revealed gospel truth to the innocent while hiding it from those who were self-satisfied. Looking again to the crowd, He invited those who were tired, needy, and weary to come to Him. He was humble, but no man was bolder. He was lowly, but no man was stronger. By yoking themselves to Him, they would find rest for their souls.

Key Doctrine – Last Things – The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See Luke 16:19-26; 2 Peter 3:7-13.)

UNCERTAINTY (Matt. 11:1-6)

• We may experience honest doubts, but confessing our doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith.

(v. 1) After **giving instructions to his twelve disciples**, Jesus **moved on** to a new location. He followed their preparation by going into **their towns** to **teach and preach**. The phrase "their towns" referred either to the hometowns of the disciples or possibly the towns where they were sent to minister. The text distinguishes between Jesus's teaching and His preaching. His teaching involved instruction, while His preaching exhorted people to accept and act upon the message of God's kingdom. Jesus wanted the people to know God's truth confidently and obey it without reservation.

(v. 2) **Now when** introduced Jesus's dialogue with the **disciples** of John the Baptist. This exchange occurred while John was **in prison**. Herod arrested John because the prophet did what prophets do. He declared God's judgment against an immoral king (Matt. 14:3-4). Although imprisoned, John could interact with his followers. Possibly through them, John **heard . . . what the Christ was doing**. However he learned about Jesus's ministry, John **sent a message** to Jesus **through his disciples**.

(v. 3) John's query was curious: **Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?** The phrase "one who is to come" referred to the Messiah. John had identified Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:29-36), and some scholars believe imprisonment caused him to waver. However, his knowledge of Jesus's ministry was based on his followers' reports. They may have been biased because Christ's ministry was so different from John's work (Matt. 9:14).

(vv. 4-5) Jesus's response demonstrated His respect for John. Instead of rebuking John's followers, He merely **replied** to them, a term without strong emotions. Jesus told them to **report to John** what they heard and saw from Jesus. Some interpreters translate this phrase as "tell John." Some writers suggest this includes what Jesus taught as well as the wonders He performed. Jesus's works involved miraculous healing, such as restoring eyesight to **the blind** and strength to **the lame**. People with **leprosy are cleansed**, and those who were **deaf** could hear again. Beyond that, He did what no healer had done: the **dead are raised** (Matt. 9:18-26). These acts fulfilled messianic prophecies, such as Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:5-6. Even more important, **the poor** were hearing **the good news** of God's kingdom. Taking this message to the oppressed and downtrodden also fulfilled messianic prophecy (Isa. 61:1).

(v. 6) Almost as an epilogue, Jesus added a personal word for John and his disciples: **Blessed is the one who isn't offended by me.** "Blessed" can be rendered as "happy." Some commentators think John's imprisonment led him to succumb to the popular notion that the Messiah should be a political liberator. If this were true, John might be offended that Jesus's work did not extend to freeing him from prison. However, this view is doubtful since John previously told his followers Jesus was greater (John 1:30). Later, when John's disciples reported that more people were following Jesus, John replied that Jesus must increase while he (John) must decrease (3:23-30). The term "offended" also can be rendered "scandalized" or "embarrassed." Rather than being disappointed by Him, happy (blessed) individuals see in Jesus the fulfillment of their hopes for the Messiah. We may experience honest doubts about Jesus, but confessing those doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith and affirming the truth (16:13).

CYNICISM (Matt. 11:16-19)

• We are to be sensitive to the fact that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations.

(vv. 16-17) After speaking to John's disciples, Jesus turned to the crowds and expressed His high regard for John the Baptist and his ministry (vv. 7-15). He reminded them that they had sought John because He was a true prophet of God. In fact, John had fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal. 3:1). Jesus understood the cynical nature of human beings. So, He offered a broad, rhetorical question: **To what should I compare this generation?** While Jesus likely was referring to His contemporary population of Israel, His remarks could apply to any generation. They were like **children sitting in the marketplaces**. In most towns, the market was not just a place to buy food and goods. It was the center of the community. While adults bargained over purchases, the children sat or played. Jesus compared this generation to children who would **call out to other children**, asking them to join in their games. In this case, nothing the hypothetical group did seemed to satisfy the others. If one group **played the flute**, the others refused to **dance**. This metaphor describes a merry scene of music, possibly like a wedding. If the joyful music got no response, they **sang a lament**, a song of sorrow as at a funeral. Yet, the other children **didn't mourn**. Children's games often imitate scenes observed in the lives of adults. This scene wasn't intended to portray an actual wedding or funeral, but a pretend one.

(vv. 18-19) Jesus's purpose in the short analogy was to show the cynicism of the general population. John the Baptist lived an ascetic lifestyle, **neither eating nor drinking**. This statement did not mean that John never ate or drank anything, but he did live the life of a Nazirite, drinking neither wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15). Living primarily in isolation, his garments included a coarse and crude camels' hair coat and a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). These were not the actions of a normal person in society. While many people came to John's baptism, many others simply dismissed him as having a **demon**. In contrast, **the Son of Man came eating and drinking**. The title "Son of Man" was understood by most Jews as referring to the Messiah. Though used in the third person, it's clear Jesus was speaking of Himself. Again, the phrase "eating and drinking" does not suggest that Jesus was a **glutton and a drunkard**. Unlike John, He merely joined in normal social engagements. The problem for the critics had nothing to do with how much Jesus ate or drank. Instead, it was about the company He kept. **Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners**. He socialized with them, and that raised serious questions in the minds of those devoted to the first-century Jewish religious establishment. Using a proverb, Jesus judged this cynical attitude by noting **wisdom is vindicated by her deeds**. "Vindicated" means to show something is correct. In this case, genuine wisdom is revealed by what it produces. Some scholars read this statement as indicating that the truth of a matter is known by the facts seen in life. We are to be sensitive to the truth that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations. Instead of being cynical about matters we don't understand, we need to be open to learning and applying biblical truth.

DENIAL (Matt. 11:20-24)

• Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus.

(v. 20) People who constantly doubt the truth about Christ ultimately deny Him altogether. In this case, some of those people **lived in towns where most of his miracles were done**. Jesus **proceeded to denounce** these places and their non-believing residents. The word "denounce" suggests a strong reprimand. Instead of praising God for Jesus's miracles, the people cynically dismissed Him and refused to **repent**. Those who refuse to turn from their sin are already under condemnation for their lack of faith in Christ (John 3:18-19).

(v. 21) Using a strong expression of grief (**woe**), Jesus compared Jewish towns like •**Chorazin** and •**Bethsaida** to Gentile cities like •**Tyre** and •**Sidon**. Jesus performed **miracles** in the first pair of cities. The four Gospels do not mention much about Chorazin, but its proximity to Bethsaida and Capernaum suggests its residents also witnessed Jesus's miracles. The residents should have believed and repented readily. In contrast, Tyre and Sidon were rich, coastal trade centers in Phoenicia, but they were spiritually impoverished. Isaiah and other prophets had foretold their ruin because of their haughty idolatry (Isa. 23:1-5; Ezek. 26:1-4ff). Yet, Jesus said these Gentiles would have **repented in sackcloth and ashes** if they had seen the wonders performed around Chorazin and Bethsaida. People put on sackcloth, a coarse uncomfortable cloth, as a sign of mourning or grief. As they wailed, they often tossed ashes over their heads.

(v. 22) Jesus warned about the coming **day of judgment**. Sometimes termed "the day of the Lord," this phrase described final reckoning before God's throne (1 John 4:17; Rev. 20:11-15). Prophets described it as a harsh punishment for unbelievers (Zeph. 1:15; Jer. 46:10). Jesus said it would be **more tolerable** for those who had not seen His glory. This does not mean they will somehow be pardoned. Rather, it suggests degrees of punishment.

(vv. 23-24) Even **Capernaum** would face stricter judgment. As the largest village on the Sea of Galilee's northern coast, Capernaum was a major trade center. But the people apparently thought they should be **exalted to heaven**, a euphemism for the highest praise. Instead, Jesus said unbelievers would **go down to •Hades**. Hades referred to the place of the dead where unbelievers are tormented (Luke 16:23). Despite seeing Jesus's **miracles**, the people had not repented. As in verse 21, the word for "miracles" also can be rendered "power." Jesus compared Capernaum to •Sodom. Perhaps no city was considered more wicked than **Sodom**. Yet, the evil residents of that infamous city **would have remained until today** if they had seen what the residents of Capernaum saw. On that judgment day, punishment would be **more tolerable** for Sodom than for Capernaum. Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus. We have no excuse for not following Him in faith.