

Christianity in America 2025

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If you have your Bibles, would you please turn with me to Matthew and we'll be reading today from verses two through six.

Starting in verse two.

Now, John, and this is John the Baptizer, not John the Apostle. When John heard in prison about the deeds of Jesus Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them, go and tell John what you hear and see the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Let's pray.

Father God, we thank you for your holy Word, and especially on this occasion, for the great privilege it is to be able to gather in safety to hear it. I pray for a movement of the Holy Spirit tonight in all of us, because the purpose of being here is ultimately to worship you in truth and in spirit.

In Jesus name, Amen.

Now, this might seem like a little bit of an unusual choice of scripture for a service that's oriented toward thanks to God for his kindness and provision to us, and especially for what he's done for us, and raising up men and women with the character and the courage to protect our nation. It would be a lot more obvious for us to look for the sacrifices of military service. Point them out and then point to Christ as the anti type of all sacrifices. And of course, the great sacrifice, the only perfect sacrifice that reconciled men to God. Or maybe we could talk about David and Goliath or some other heroic person in Scripture, and that would be pretty apt and fitting. What the Lord impressed on me for today. There was something a little bit different, and that is to provoke this thought that the only difference between a Christian serving in the military and any other hero who serves in the military is that the glory that accrues to the service of a nonbeliever fundamentally stops with him or her, or their units, or their parents, or perhaps their families, preserving a legacy for some time.

By comparison, every act of a Christian in the military thought of every, every, all of their service ought to and almost has to do, even if they've only vaguely got a visible witness accrue to Christ. And that has eternal value. So I think they're fundamentally two different things. And that put a different spin on this passage, forming and kept bringing to mind John the Baptist declaration in

John one verse 21, which after he had all these accolades and people wondered if he was the Christ, he made this declaration, and I am not the Christ.

It helps us to remember that, I think. But everywhere that this particular hero, John the Baptizer, appears in Scripture, we see him receive praise with humility, telling people that it doesn't belong to him but to Jesus Christ. Now, like many of you, I'm sure you saw the same thing, but I saw this in the Christians I served with.

Dan mentioned I was saved in the military by others serving there, and it was very powerful in my own spiritual development, obviously. And that's I think what led me to this reflection today instead of something else that was more directly applicable. So John had declared, I'm not the Christ. John the Baptizer declared it in John the Apostle's book.

But in the passage we're looking at today, he ends by asking Jesus, are you? I am not the Christ in John. In Matthew are you? It's hard to imagine a question like this coming from John the Baptizer, I think because there's never been a person on this earth who never should have been more convinced that Jesus was the Christ than John the Baptizer.

Scripture proves us. If you flip to Luke three, you'll learn about John's birth, which was itself a miracle. Luke records that the priest Zechariah and many of you will recall this was serving in the temple, and that he and his wife were said to be righteous people before the Lord. But childless and past childbearing, years. The situation was a lot like that of Abraham and Sarah, and only the direct intervention of God could change the situation. The angel Gabriel, you'll recall, appeared to Zechariah and told him that his wife was going to bear a son and his name was going to be John. And then he struck him dumb. John was set aside for a special purpose for which he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. The scriptures say, even from the womb. Verses 16 and 17 say, he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. So Zechariah was struck dumb and unable to speak, and Elizabeth subsequently conceived a child. The passage tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, came to visit. Jesus wasn't born yet, and when she greeted Elizabeth, the child inside her womb leapt for joy. Then Elizabeth said this blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? John was later born, obviously, and Zechariah was finally freed to speak, and he sang this prophetic song that said, what John's purpose in life was. It said, and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of God.

So the first reason that it seems like John's faith would be unshakable is because he was directly created by God for this very purpose to which he was put. His mission was prophesied. His

name was given by an angel, and he was born to people to whom it was physically impossible to conceive. John had to know all this.

I mean, can you imagine a family where they don't tell the great things that have happened in the family? I mean, I do, and most of the ones I heard growing up were lies. This one was true. The, you know, everybody rehearses this stuff for their children, don't they? They talk about the great things that have happened.

So it's almost inconceivable that John would not have known that he was. He was, that an angel announced that he was going to be born, that his father was struck dead. And all of these other things that we just read.

So next, if we skip to chapter one, verse two, we see that the word of John came to excuse me. The word of God came to John in the wilderness, and he went public all around the region of the Jordan doing this, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And doing this, of course, he was also fulfilling a prophecy from Isaiah as the one who had come to prepare the way of the Lord, and he was fierce about it. If you read in verse seven it says, you brood of vipers. This will be familiar to a lot of you who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham. In other words, you're going to suffer the wrath of God. Your action, your actions don't match your words and your legalists. You think that sharing Abraham's DNA is going to save you, but you're wrong in everything you believe. And then we see this as the people were in expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the Christ.

John answered them all, saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And then the first chapter of the book of John adds this. The next day he, John the Baptizer, saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

This is he of whom I said, after me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me. I saw the spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. And the next day, again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, behold, the Lamb of God.

The two disciples heard him say this, and they left and followed Jesus. So the second reason that we think that John's faith is unshakable was that he testified like this about the coming Christ. He had a high degree of certainty. He baptized Jesus with water and watched the spirit descend on him and he confirmed to the people all around that Jesus was the Messiah.

So given all of that, why in the world did John send his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Christ? In our passage from Matthew? Had he been out establishing that fact all over the area, and we just read scripture for the support there, there wasn't any adlibbing. He was everywhere in the area talking about Jesus Christ, the one to come, and that Jesus Christ was the Messiah.

He pointed him out. His disciples went and took off after Jesus. Well, there's really only two possibilities here. I think either John sent these disciples to go ask Jesus a question that he already knew the answer to, or he had actually become uncertain of his testimony. If it was the first thing that John sent the disciples to ask a question, he already knew the answer to that this is the Christ.

Then. Then it was. It's only possible that that it wasn't for him that he asked it was to benefit somebody else, either these disciples that he sent or the crowd, or maybe future generations like us. But it doesn't make sense to read this passage that way. That way, John himself had not become uncertain. Instead, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Christ in order to shore up their faith, or so that we can have this testimony today.

And some credible commentators say that that is the right and fair way to read it. Here's one John Gill. He says John had seen the Spirit of God descending on him at his baptism, heard a voice from heaven declaring him the Son of God, and had so often pointed him out to others and had borne frequent testimonies that he was the Lamb of God and Bridegroom of his church.

So this question was put not upon his own account, that is, not on the account of John the Baptizer, but for his disciples that they might have from the mouth of Christ a full and satisfactory answer, which would remove all their doubts and scruples, and attach them to Christ. Now that he was about to die, and leave them.

He's saying that John sent his disciples to see Jesus solely for his benefit and not theirs. Another commentator says the opinion entertained by some that he sent them partly on his own account, is exceedingly foolish, as if he had not been fully convinced or obtained distinct information that Jesus is the Christ. It's strong, isn't it? Those two are contending that John's faith could not possibly have wavered, and he sent his two disciples to go, asked Jesus if he was the Christ.

One more thing. If we read past Matthew 11 and verse six where we went today, we see that Jesus himself spoke about the character of John. In fact, Jesus called John the greatest man who ever lived. That puts him above Adam, above Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, above all the prophets and kings. Even David. He says he's the greatest man that ever lived.

And that's a pretty strong endorsement of John's character, isn't it? By the only unimpeachable witness that ever existed, it was Jesus saying it. But if we want to agree that John's faith was not

shaken at all, and that he sent his disciples solely on their behalf for the behalf of the crowd and or on behalf of future generations like ours, then we'd have to

Not that he should have been firm in his faith, but something else. The first is what we've just done. We give the background of John from Scripture and the history of his activities to show how strong is foundation was. We've satisfactorily done that. I think we'd all agree that that stuff was true, I'd imagine. But the second thing you'd have to do is show that Jesus is answer to the question, are you?

The Christ confirms the immutability of John's faith.

But it's one thing to be the best man who ever lived, and it's another thing to have perfect faith. Now let's look back at the passage from Matthew 11. John had heard in prison of the deeds of Christ already. More than that, Luke four tells us that the whole countryside had heard of the deeds of Jesus. And we've just read that John pointed out Jesus to some of his disciples and said, and call Jesus the Lamb of God, who comes to take away the sin of the world.

On its face. It certainly seems like John sent his disciples to ask a question that he already knew it, the answer to which is what the men I cited are saying. But we read this passage and Jesus does not give a yes or no answer. Does he? Instead, he essentially response to this question are you the Christ by saying, go tell John what everybody already knows in fact, go tell John what you already know.

That's the substance of his response. So if the purpose of sending of John sending these disciples was get a yes or no, that simply didn't happen. But ultimately, the idea that this was about the disciples or about us, and that John hasn't faltered in his faith, has a very critical flaw. And that's this. If John has not become uncertain in some way, and legitimately sent these disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Christ, what does it say?

It says that John's faith is perfect, that it doesn't need anything else, and it sets Jesus Christ up as the foil to John, who needs nothing. But that's not possible, is it? Reading the passage as if John's faith is immutable is the exact opposite, not only of what happened here, but it's the opposite of the fundamental truth of all of Scripture.

Perfect faith belongs to Jesus Christ alone. We rest on his merit and not on our own for salvation. Our ability to persevere in the faith doesn't come about as a result of our own moral strength or our own will, in that we don't persevere so much as we are persevered by God. Similarly, our assurance of salvation doesn't come about as the result of our will to do good, but as the result of his will being perfectly good.

John was the greatest man who ever lived. Jesus said, but he still wasn't perfect, and therefore neither was his faith. It's almost ironic, isn't it? That understanding that John is uncertain puts

him in a position of doing what he'd always been doing, which is to point to the greater than me? Now, this was a moment of weakness for John, showing that his faith, just like ours, could only be made perfect in Christ.

But that might have been a little bit hard to follow for some of us, especially the younger folks in here. I mean, the children. but so let me make it easier. We don't have to work that hard to see that fighting to preserve John's certainty is, a wrong reading of the passage, because Jesus himself tells us why John's really asking the question.

You only have to read the answer. Look at verse six with me again. Blessed is he who is not offended by me. John had asked, are you the one? And Jesus ended his response with, blessed is he who is not offended by me. This isn't a non-sequitur. It's not some aphorism or a stylistic thing that Jesus likes to do when he's done talking.

No, it means something and what it means is that John was offended. Now, how was he offended? Well, think for a moment how you get offended. I think it's the same for everybody, isn't it? First, it always takes other people, and it always means they haven't met our expectations in some way. All offense is like that. You expect something and it doesn't happen.

John's no different. He's offended because he had some kind of an expectation of Jesus that didn't fit with what he was experiencing there in prison. It may help to know that for about 100 years, up to the time of Jesus, God had excited a lot of religious activity in that area. Different groups were baptizing for all kinds of different reasons, and all kinds of messianic expectations were stirred up.

You'll have read about some of those, some groups expected a purely spiritual messiah. some. And thought you'd be a great prophet. You know, some expected him to be a king, a temporal messiah who would conquer and unite and rule. And it's fair to say that there were people whose beliefs spanned every point within those two poles.

John had expectations of the Messiah. Two, we know some of them recall from the passages that I summarized that he was preaching repentance and judgment, a winnowing of the wheat from the chaff which would be burned up and destroyed. Of course, he was right in that he got the message right, because that's certainly going to happen. And he got the person right.

But instead of judging, rewarding and destroying, instead of wielding power in the way John expected, Jesus took a different path. He was out dealing with sick and maimed people, even dead ones, and delivering a gospel to the poor. He didn't take the path of power. He took the path of weakness and demonstrated the gospel as much as he explained it.

The poor, a rich, he showed us the weak or strong, and the King of heaven stoops to serve. This was not the Messiah that John thought he would seek. His expectations hadn't quite been met

in some way, and his sense of offense caused him to falter in his faith. John was questioning and he needed comfort. And I wondered for a long time why Jesus didn't encourage John in this passage.

If he did, I didn't see that he did. Why? He didn't offer him some kind of kindness or something. I mean, after all, John lived in privation his entire life for a six month long ministry. He did everything God put in front of him and it landed him in prison. He knew he was probably going to die over all of this.

Why didn't Jesus send word back to John? Not to worry that everything was under control. It was all going to be okay. Then I realized that not only did Jesus reassure John, but he removed the thing that caused him to stumble. When Jesus said, the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

He was not just reporting facts, he was effectively Saint John. And I'm not putting words in the mouth of Jesus. I'm merely summarizing. He was effectively saying, John, you're asking me now if I'm the one? Because I haven't met? Your expectations and doubt has crept in, but that's because you're thinking too small. Kings can maim, any king can maim, they can kill, they can vanquish lands.

But I heal the maimed and I raise the dead. I'm doing what no other king can do. And I bring good news that lasts. The Messiah, you imagine, could break you out of prison. But the one that God conceived is going to give you eternal freedom from sin and death, which is the prison that really matters. See the implications of the answer.

If this is the real Jesus, prison doesn't mean a thing to John. He wasn't going to be freed from prison just to die. He was going to be freed from prison to live forever. So Jesus did send John the word of comfort by making it possible for John to exchange the Christ he expected with the Christ, who is, in the end, John's question remains a great one, because it's kind of the only question that any person ultimately needs to have the answer to.

All of us have to ask, are you the one? And all of us have to recognize how we're offended by Jesus? What our fault the expectations are so we can come to know him. But I've talked to brothers about this kind of thing, and maybe like some of them, you're thinking, well, I'm not offended by Jesus, and I never have been.

That's probably worth a private conversation, because it's usually the case that anybody who seriously considers Jesus Christ is going to be offended in some way. Maybe it's the simplicity of the gospel or the claims by Christ that he is God. if you're one way, you'll probably struggle with Jesus because he's too licentious and in the other he's too legalistic.

You know, maybe you're offended by his claims of exclusivity. He says, I'm the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father, but by me. That offends some people who believe that God loves everybody and that there are many ways to heaven. If you're another way, it probably puts you up the wall. When Jesus does other kinds of things, like siding with an adulterous woman, look what she did.

Why doesn't Jesus rebuke her? But we have to come to the point where we realize that Jesus defines Jesus and we don't. We have to see that what he does is perfect and that our expectations don't and can't define him. With John, we should glorify Christ in our actions, pointing to him even in privation or sacrifice. Dare I say, even when we're being lauded and appreciated, always remembering that I am not the Christ.

That's why this up with one last thing. John's disciples in this passage didn't just say, are you the one? Did they? They said, or shall we look for another? Anybody who asks the question, are you the one and who doesn't find the answer in Jesus Christ? It's going to inevitably keep looking for something or someone to fulfill them.

This is why false gospels proliferate, and why we have so many people who are trapped by depression or drugs, or the desire for fame and approval and all the rest. It's why we make idols of things and idols of people. Jesus gave John's disciples a strong answer. They did not need to look further, and neither the way.

Let's pray.

Father God in Heaven, we thank you so much again for your Holy Word. I thank you so much that you have passages like passages like this that, that have a clarity that that where you declare the truth, where you show us what you did, where you show us what you've done. And I thank you, father, that some of them take a little thinking through. I thank you, father, that in this passage you take the greatest man who ever lived. And you say, and it's not better than you. And we thank you, father, that in Jesus Christ we're made perfect even there. Even though for anybody here there's none of us who's better than anybody else. Father, your grace and redemption is a gift that we just can't appreciate again tonight.

Father, we want to thank you for what you've done for us and your provision through the US military and the sacrifice of all these people here. I pray, Father God, in everything that they do, that they do what those men and women did for me when I was newly saved in the Marine Corps and always take every honor, take every bit of praise and everything else that's good and pointed at you.

In Jesus name,

Amen.