WHAT THE MESSIAH DOES

Matthew 11:1-19

Key Verse: 11:5

“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”

In today’s passage, we see the convergence of two ministries—that of John the Baptist and Jesus. John was in prison and his ministry was diminishing, while Jesus was working hard to give life and his ministry was flourishing. Not only were ministries converging, but two different views of the Messiah were converging as well. John expected the Messiah to bring justice to the world. Jesus showed what the Messiah was doing, based on Isaiah’s prophecy. We need to have a right view of the Messiah. Depending on our view of the Messiah we can either stumble in doubt, or be blessed abundantly. Let’s learn who Jesus is and what he does so that we may have a right view of the Messiah and be blessed.

First, Jesus’ life-giving work (1-6). After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee (1). Out of his great compassion, Jesus continued the ministry of God’s word to people who were thirsty for the truth. Wherever Jesus went, he taught the word of God and took care of people. Wherever Jesus was, there was a great life-giving work. As Jesus was working, John—who was in prison—heard about the deeds of the Messiah. Jesus’ teaching and miracles were so powerful that people all over the country were talking about it. Then he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (2) John had already introduced Jesus as the Messiah publicly to Israel. Why was he now asking if Jesus was the Messiah? We need to understand John’s situation and condition. John had been put in prison by Herod the tetrarch, who became angry when John rebuked his sin of taking his brother’s wife (14:3-4). John might have expected that Jesus would bring a fiery judgment on wicked people like Herod. However, there was no sign of judgment. Rather, Jesus seemed to spend all his time with marginalized and needy people. John also wondered why the one who set the prisoners free did not get him out of jail. Jesus had not even visited him in prison, though he was the forerunner of the Messiah. John needed clarification and reassurance.

When we review chapter 3 we can find John’s view of the Messiah. In introducing Jesus, he said, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (3:11b-12). It was a clear message of salvation and judgment. Accordingly, John expected those who rejected the Messiah to be judged and cast into unquenchable fire. He had an eschatological view of the Messiah, who will bring justice on earth. It is easy for us to have the same view. When we see the injustice of the world, we can think, “Why isn’t Jesus doing something about this?” About 605 B.C., the prophet Habakkuk had a similar question: “Why are the Israelites being punished by the Babylonians, who are more wicked than us?” He wondered how the holy God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, could bear such totally corrupted people. When he brought this problem to God in prayer, God answered: “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab 2:4, ESV). It meant that God would surely punish the proud Babylonians after he had used them for his purpose. But it was a process. God wanted his people to trust in him, and said, “the righteous will live by faith.” After accepting this, Habakkuk confessed, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Hab 3:17-18). Though we cannot understand everything, when we trust God, we can rejoice in God himself in any situation, without visible fruit. We can say that “the Sovereign Lord is our strength” (Hab 3:19).

Here we learn that how we view the Messiah is very important. If we have an eschatological view that he will bring justice on earth right away, and we don’t see justice being done, we become discouraged and stumble. If we have a prosperity gospel view, that Jesus will make us rich, healthy and successful in every aspect of our lives, and we experience suffering and loss, we fall into doubt and stumble. If we have a relativistic view that Jesus is just one of many messiahs, when he calls us to deny ourselves and follow him, it is hard to do so. The Bible tells us very clearly about the suffering Messiah, whose glory will follow. Suffering first, and then glory. Those who participate in Christ’s suffering will surely participate in his glory. Participating in Christ’s suffering has great meaning. It is the way God works to refine our faith and mold our character to be like Jesus. This suffering is temporal, but the glory that follows is everlasting. Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Ro 8:18).

How did Jesus help John to have a right view of the Messiah? Let’s read verses 4-5. “Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” Jesus did not say directly, “I am the Messiah.” Instead, he showed that he was doing the work of the Messiah exactly as prophesied (Isa 35:5-6; 42:7; 61:1). He proved that he was the Messiah by his deeds. Jesus taught John the Biblical view of the Messiah. The Messiah’s ministry was not characterized by political reform, social justice or economic prosperity. It was characterized by life-giving work among the needy and the preaching of the good news.

In what ways was the Messiah’s work life-giving? Let’s see. Blindness thwarts and frustrates people. Not long ago, my glasses were scratched in the places where the eyes focus. I could not see clearly and was frustrated. How much more does a blind person suffer when they cannot see at all. Even more debilitating than this is spiritual blindness. Nicodemus had everything in this world: money, social status, fame, power and so on. Yet when he was spiritually blind, he suffered terribly in his meaninglessness. Jesus said to him, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (Jn 3:3).  Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). Since lame people cannot walk, they cannot keep up with basic tasks and live normal lives as others do. Sometimes, life seems to pass them by. Powerlessness frustrates them. Spiritually speaking, people are too weak to do the good they want to do. What is worse, they are powerless to break the grip of sin in their lives. Jesus forgives our sins and empowers us to walk in the newness of life by the Holy Spirit. “Then will the lame leap like a deer” (Isa 35:6).

People with leprosy carry that fatal disease in their bodies; they are unclean and cannot live normal lives in society. In the same way, sinsickness ravages the soul and leaves people feeling guilty, dirty and shameful. Jesus is willing to cleanse us by his precious blood. Jesus can cleanse our consciences and enable us to serve the living God (Heb 9:14). There is one very mature, great, spiritual, and talented man who is willing to serve God in many ways. But when I asked him to serve as a group Bible study leader, he declined because he cannot hear well. I can only imagine how frustrating that is. How much more serious it is when we do not hear God’s word. When Jesus opens our ears, we hear the lifegiving word of God which revives our souls. Another important work of the Messiah is to raise the dead. When we are dead, we can do nothing. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.” Paul tells us that in the past, we were dead in our transgressions and sins in which we used to live when we followed the ways of this world, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts (Eph 2:1-3). Yet because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ; it is by grace we have been saved (Eph 2:4-5). The work of the Messiah is indeed life-giving!

The point of the Messiah’s life-giving work was to proclaim to us the good news of the gospel. Why is the gospel good news? It is the only way of salvation from the power of sin and death. What does it mean that the gospel is preached to the poor? Generally, poor people realize that they lack something, and are humble enough to ask for help. But not all of them are like this. Here, the poor are spiritually needy people. Matthew said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (5:3). Those who are poor in spirit acknowledge that they are sinners who need a Savior. When they commit sin, they feel shame and guilt. However, the proud feel no sense of shame or guilt when they sin. The poor in spirit humbly come to Jesus and repent sincerely, and receive his forgiveness of sins and new life. They can experience the kingdom of heaven in their lives. They grow and bear good fruit and become a blessing. The gospel is not mere words, it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Ro 1:16).

In verse 6 Jesus said, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” This means that anyone who follows Jesus to the end will be blessed. The word “anyone” implies that even John the Baptist was vulnerable. How much more the rest of us. Here to stumble means that when our expectations of the Messiah are not met, we become discouraged and stop following Jesus. It is especially easy to be discouraged when we don’t see any visible fruit. But that is the very time that we must put our faith in Jesus alone, and not in what Jesus gives us. Let’s pray that we may not stumble, but keep our faith to the end.

Second, whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John (7-19). As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John (7a). John had been in prison for a long time, and had revealed weakness in his faith. Jesus saw that the people could misunderstand him and look down on him. But Jesus recognized him as the greatest man of God who was ever born. In verses 7b-9 we can find three kinds of people. The first are the people like reeds swayed by the wind (7b). Reeds are weak and hollow. That is why they are easily swayed by the wind. Some people do not have a clear identity or value system. They are easily influenced by the people around them and change according to the situation and their feelings. John was not like that. He had a clear identity as God’s servant and testified to the truth in any situation. When he became very popular, and was even considered to be the Messiah, he clearly denied it, saying, “I am not the Christ. No” (Jn 1:19-21). He knew that although he was the voice through which God spoke, the Messiah Jesus was the focus of God’s message. He taught his disciples, “He [the Messiah Jesus] must become greater and I must become less” (Jn 3:30).

The second kind of people are those who enjoy fine clothes, living in luxurious palaces (8). They always travel first class, eat the most expensive foods, and wear the finest designer clothes. Even their pets are well treated with gourmet food, fine clothes and air-conditioned houses. They are not concerned about the suffering of those around them. They are fully occupied with pursuing fun and indulging in sin. But John was quite different. He wore clothing made of itchy camel’s hair in every season. His menu was always locusts and wild honey which he could catch on the run.

The third kind of people Jesus refers to are prophets (9a). They are spiritual. They do not follow the pattern of this world; they are truth seekers. They resist the deception and corruption of the world. They are the conscience of their society. Without them, there is no concept of right and wrong, or good and evil. They stand on the truth and teach the truth even though it is costly. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. John was this kind of person. But he was more than that. Jesus said about him, “Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet” (9b). In what sense was he more than a prophet? It is because he received and carried God’s mission to be the forerunner of the Messiah (10). Now John’s mission was completed successfully. It was time for him to become a glorious martyr. He lived a short but great life and had a tremendous influence. Jesus recognized him as the greatest man of those born of women (11a).

Jesus did not stop with the recognition of John; he went on to show how John’s life and ministry were related to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said, “…yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (11b). This means that anyone who accepts the gospel and lives for Jesus and his kingdom is greater than those in the Old Testament. John lived a great life by preparing the way for the Messiah. However, he belonged to the Old Testament era. He did not see Jesus’ death, which gives forgiveness of sins or Jesus’ glorious resurrection, which conquered the power of death, or the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In that respect, those who live in the New Testament era, even the least one, is greater than John.

While John was the last Old Testament prophet, he was also the first to introduce the new era of the Messiah. In verse 12, Jesus explained how the kingdom of heaven was misunderstood and attacked by evil people. For example, the religious leaders refused to repent and be baptized by John (Lk 7:29-30). They opposed the ministries of both John and Jesus. They did not acknowledge God’s way of working through John and Jesus. They became God’s enemies. Nevertheless, God’s work had continued through the Law and the Prophets until John the Baptist (13). Jesus referred to John as the Elijah who was to come, meaning he was the forerunner of the Messiah (14). Not everyone would understand the spiritual meaning of Jesus’ words, but only those who were humble enough to hear the truth (15).

Jesus tried to help the religious leaders because their influence was so strong upon their nation. They should have been responsible for their generation. Under their bad influence, people had become spiritually dull and wicked. Jesus compared them to children in the marketplace, calling out to others: ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (16-17). This refers to a children’s game in which there were two teams. One team wants to play a wedding game, so they play the pipe. But the other team did not dance. So, they changed to a funeral game and sang a dirge. Still, the other team did not mourn. Based on this game, Jesus explained the response of the people of his generation. “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’” (18-19a). They wanted a messiah who would satisfy their desires and meet their expectations. When he did not do this, they refused to accept him as the Messiah. They had their own concept of the Messiah which was not based on the Bible’s teaching. Each person has their own view of the Messiah and expects something that they want. When this expectation is not met, they do not respond properly. We need to examine our hearts. If we have our own expectations, we need to repent. Let’s have a Biblical view of the Messiah.