

Matthew 11:1-11 The greatest disciple.

This section of Matthew tells several stories of Jesus having to sharply contradict other peoples ideas of who he is and what his mission is all about. Sometimes this is just a misunderstanding but other times it is people trying to use Jesus for their own agenda. Yet Christ does not buckle or change his purpose one little bit. He resolutely confronts misunderstandings and challenges people to consider how his agenda is bigger and better than any ideas they may have for him.

- Have you ever spoken to someone who had strange ideas about Jesus and his mission? What are some of the ways your own understanding of Jesus has had to change?

You may remember that John the Baptist was actually a cousin of Jesus. Even someone so close to him, who was also blessed with spiritual insight about who he was began to have doubts.

- Is doubt wrong? What attitude does Jesus display to John? Or others you might think of like doubting Thomas.

What were the issues that might have led to John's doubting? Compare his prophetic preparation for Jesus in Matthew 3:7-11 with Jesus own description of his ministry. (*see who can do the best dramatic imitation of John's fiery preaching*)

A serious question that John was no doubt hinting at was why don't you come and free me from prison and restore the kingdom now? How many times have the followers of Jesus asked this same question about a circumstance in their own lives. Why didn't Jesus free John? Why doesn't he come and set all our issues right when we want him to?

Matt 11:6 is a gentle verse with a hard edge. "Do it my way" or "I am Lord". Yet although Jesus will not yield this right to be Lord he invites us with blessing to follow. How much this reveals the gentle nature of God.

Then Jesus turns to the crowd to defend John. He is the prophet who himself was prophesied about (v10).

So John is a great man indeed. But he did not do anything as dramatic as survive the flood like Noah, lead out the nation like Moses, rule like King David or call down fire from heaven like Elijah. So what is so important about John's ministry?

The point of all this is that Jesus is offering a new way of understanding God's timetable. In a few simple words, he is telling his hearers that Israel's long history, from Abraham and Moses through the prophets to the present moment, was one long preparation, one long getting-ready time. Now the preparation was over, and the reality had dawned.

Jesus teases the crowds into thinking harder about who John was – and who, therefore, Jesus himself must be. John wasn't like the royalty they knew. He was nothing like Herod (whose emblem, on his coins, was a Galilean reed waving in the wind). He wasn't dressed in the sort of fine clothes that rich and famous people, especially royalty, would wear. John was different: he was a prophet. Not just any old prophet, either, but the prophet that previous prophets had spoken about: he was the one destined to get the path ready for God's Messiah to walk along when he arrived.

The point is this: Jesus isn't just telling the crowds about John. He's telling them about himself – but doing so obliquely. To come out and declare his own messiahship would be both dangerous and, in a strange way, all wrong. Precisely because of the sort of Messiah Jesus is trying to be, he doesn't want to force himself on people. They have to work it out for themselves.

So no one is greater than John the Baptist because he points to Jesus. And because we can point to Jesus and his purpose in a fuller way than John could we in the Kingdom can be greater than he.

It's so simple. Just point to Jesus. But how? What does this look like? What sort of thing could I say without being silly?

Brainstorm in your group how you could do this better. Even include any Church ministries you're involved with.