

Style Versus Substance 9-26-04

Matthew 11:1-19 (NIV)

¹ After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. ² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" ⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." ⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear. ¹⁶ "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ¹⁷ "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹ 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."' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

We are continuing our walk through the Gospel of Matthew. This first verse would have fit better in the last chapter. In chapter ten, Jesus gave His 12 disciples their instructions and sent them out to teach, preach, and heal (Matthew 10:1). Verse one of chapter 11 tells us that while they went out exercising their new authority and call, Jesus continued His teaching and preaching by Himself. The disciples needed this experience of telling about Christ without Him physically present, for they would soon have to say "goodbye" to His physical presence. (John 16:7) Man finds comfort in being in a group that has the same opinion. However, Jesus gave up the presence of His disciples when it was in the best interest of their training and preparation. There are times in our walk with Him that we will find ourselves alone. (2 Timothy 4:16) Even when we are surrounded with loved ones, we will find ourselves at a place in our walk with the Lord in which no one really knows our isolation and loneliness. It is in these times that we come to know the comfort of the Holy Spirit and the companionship that He alone can give, in a deeper way. (John 16:32)

After verse 2, we hear of some doubts that John the Baptist had.

² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Commented [notes1]: 1 He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Matthew 10:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 7 But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. John 16:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 2 Timothy 4:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 32 "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. John 16:32 (NIV)

What was it that John heard? Was it that Jesus sent out the 12 instead of clinging to them? Or was it about the style of Jesus' ministry? I tend to see the context of the passage as pointing to the latter. John the Baptist was an austere man who lived in the desert on wild foods. He preached a relentless message of repentance. (Matthew 3:1-2) When he baptized Jesus, he knew Jesus was the Messiah. The Spirit had given John a confirming sign of the dove; that was fulfilled. (John 1:32-33) So why question if Jesus was the One?

I think there may have been a number of factors. John may have had the mindset of the nation of Israel that the Messiah would be a military deliverer. If that was the case, why wasn't Jesus coming to rescue John? Why wasn't Jesus amassing an army? Jesus just wasn't fitting some of the preconceived ideas of what the Messiah should look like. The Jews thought many of the descriptions of the Second Coming should have taken place at this time. It was a mystery to them. The other factor is Jesus' style. That is what Jesus seems to focus on in the rest of the passage.

Doesn't the same thing happen to us? We misunderstand the truth presented in the word and have expectations that simply are not a correct understanding of God's nature and truth. (John 6:60-61) We, too, are so easily offended by the style of our brothers in Christ. Because they do not live out their Christianity in the style we do, we are offended and doubt if they really have a correct understanding of Truth.

To answer John's doubts, Jesus is gentle and gracious as He is with us.

⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Jesus told the disciples of John to go back and report the facts. John knew some of the Scriptures and the promises that were to be fulfilled in the Messiah. Jesus told the disciples to tell John that He was fulfilling Isaiah 61:1-2, the same passage He had preached in His hometown synagogue. No one has ever come close to doing the sheer number and variety of miracles that Jesus performed. (John 20:30) No one else fulfills the predictions of what the Messiah would do. You might explain away the spiritual side of these claims, arguing that spiritual sight did not really take place, but their was no arguing the fact that people who were born blind, lame, or deaf were healed. There was no arguing the cleansed leper or the dead raised to life. Jesus was performing these miracles in the presence of John's disciples.

Sometimes we need a confirmation that what we believe is indeed real. (John 4:48) A friend of mine realized there was something wrong with him internally. He prayed and asked the Lord to show him which doctor to go to, and added, "Since I'm so dense at hearing Your voice, I'll take the one who can see me first." His regular doctor could not see him for 2 weeks. He called another doctor, and an old friend answered the phone. To his surprise, she was this doctor's secretary. But they could not get him in any sooner. Ten minutes after he hung up, she called back. There was a cancellation the next day. That is just the beginning. After he learned the diagnosis was a severe form of colon cancer, a man called him to repair one of the pieces of art he had sold. This customer happened to be a leading surgeon in that field. He could get him in for surgery in a

Commented [notes5]: 1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Matthew 3:1-2 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 32 Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 33 I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." John 1:32-33 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" 61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? John 6:60-61 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, Isaiah 61:1-2 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. John 20:30 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 48 "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." John 4:48 (NIV)

week. Everything came together in an incredible answer to prayer. I do not know the outcome, because this just happened, but the point is that whatever the outcome, he knows Jesus is with him and is overseeing his situation. That should be enough for any of us. God had given him a sign in answer to his prayer. (Isaiah 43:2)

That is what John needed to know. "Why am I in prison when the Messianic Age has come? Does Jesus know? Is my belief correct?" All John needed was to hear that Jesus was fulfilling the Scriptures. That should be enough for us, too. We may need some physical signs, like my friend, and in a sense, that is what John got as well. The healings are the proof that Jesus' claims are authentic. I love the fact that Jesus was so patient and understanding with John. He did not rebuke him for his doubts, but gave him just what he needed to confirm his faith, and He will do the same for us.

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?"⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

Jesus is cutting to the heart of the issue. I think that He said these things as the disciples of John were leaving so they could hear and consider. Why had everyone gone out to see and hear John? Was he just a reed blowing in the desert wind, a nobody? Was he some famous wealthy politician? What drew them was his message from God. What drew them was the anointing of God upon his life. The style was not the emphasis; the message was the important thing. He was fulfilling Malachi 3:1. John's God given words were making a way in their hearts for the life and salvation of Jesus. In the same way, people could be offended by Jesus' style, but the emphasis is the mission and fulfillment of prophecy. (John 6:63)

¹¹ "I tell you the truth:" (Jesus said) "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

This is a confusing verse for many, but actually, it is not such a mystery. John was born filled with the Spirit. (Luke 1:15) He was created for a purpose and he fulfilled that purpose wonderfully. He was at the end of an age in which people looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. Now, the kingdom had come to those who would choose to accept Jesus as their Savior. They could see and understand the mystery hidden for ages past; the mystery that even John did not fully see, and at this point in the story even had doubts about. (Ephesians 3:9) Those entering the kingdom were going to see the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus! (Luke 10:23) They were going to understand how He fulfilled all the law and the prophets. John was the last prophet of the Old Testament prophetic office. How much greater to be in the kingdom and understand redemption!

Jesus was trying to help them see that things were changing in a wonderfully exciting way. Watch how He tries to get them to see it in the next verses.

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

Commented [notes11]: 2 When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
Isaiah 43:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 1 "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.
Malachi 3:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.
John 6:63 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.
Luke 1:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.
Ephesians 3:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 23 And he turned him unto his disciples, and said privately, Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see:
Luke 10:22-23 (KJV)

The kingdom has come! It is taking over the hearts of men. (Luke 17:21) People are surrendering their lives to Jesus as their King. They are standing up to the kingdom of darkness, saying, "No!" to their selfish inclinations, and dying to themselves in order to submit to righteousness. That is a soldier of the cross, a forceful person laying hold of the kingdom and bringing it to those who are captives. While Jesus spoke, His disciples were doing that very thing. They were out proclaiming the kingdom was near. (Matthew 10:7) Are you a forceful person? Have you laid hold of the kingdom? (1 Timothy 6:12) Are you offering liberty to the captives of the kingdom of darkness? Please excuse the Schwarzenegger language, but there are no "girlie men" in the kingdom. Kingdom men grab hold of the truth and stand firm against sin. They refuse to slide back into complacency and bondage to sin.

¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.

Do you see that vast difference between what was before and what had come? People had the cold hard rules of the Law and those harsh words of the prophets right up through John the Baptist. They both pointed to the day that had now come. John is the last person to hold the office of prophet in the sense that they were the mediators between God and man. Now the Mediator had come, Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5-6) He would give the gift of prophecy to some, but no one will stand between man and God except the man Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 4:11) One era had ended, and the forcefully advancing kingdom had come. This was the turning point of all history. How man related to God would forever be changed.

¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear.

Some folks would like to go back to those days. "If someone would hear from God for me and just tell me what I'm supposed to do it would be easier." Not so! History says that just is not true. Moses heard from God for Israel, and yet they rebelled. We have the wonderful opportunity to hear from our King on an ongoing basis and commune with Him. (John 10:3) Are you doing that each day? If you are coming to church to hear from the Lord once a week, you are in the Old Testament era of worship. (2 Kings 17:13) If you are coming because of your living relationship with the Lord, to add your individual worship with the saints in corporate worship, to hear the Word speak to you personally, then you are a forceful person who has laid hold of the kingdom. You have ears to hear!

¹⁶ "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ¹⁷ "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

Children of that day used to play a game something like children play house today. The most exciting times in a child's life were festivals and funerals. Each was a total break from the daily routine. Children would imitate their parents playing a happy flute tune for a festival and dance and sing. Observers would often join in to encourage the children. Or they would play funeral in which they all wailed and sang funeral songs. Jesus said, "Either way, you don't want to play along."

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹ 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." But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

Commented [notes17]: 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."
Luke 17:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 7 As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'
Matthew 10:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.
1 Timothy 6:12 (KJV)

Commented [notes20]: 5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,
6 who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time.
1 Timothy 2:5-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,
Ephesians 4:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 3 The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.
John 10:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: 13 The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."
2 Kings 17:13 (NIV)

It did not matter what style they expressed; the people would ridicule either. The people would make an excuse to go about their lives as usual. No style would be free of criticism. Friends, it is not about style. Please hear me. Our complaints about style are really our rejection of the substance. (John 15:20-21)

John was just as orthodox as one could be. They said he had a demon. Jesus was almost as casual, approachable, and friendly as one could be. They said he was a glutton, drunkard, and friend of tax collectors and sinners. When people do not like the substance, when the substance challenges their complacency, they attack the messenger's style. The fact of the matter is, they would find fault with any style that brought the same message. John did not have a demon, and Jesus was not a glutton or drunkard. Their accusations are merely lying excuses to justify refusal to accept the message. But forceful men lay hold of the message. Forceful men say, "This is truth, and by the grace of God I will allow it to transform my life!" Forceful men say, "I won't settle for a life in bondage to apathy! I will follow Jesus wherever He leads. I will be a servant of the King of kings! I'll lose my life in order to find it in Him."

I think John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask about looking for another because Jesus' style was so radically different from his own. Yet, the substance was they same. (Matthew 3:1-2; Matthew 4:17)) They both preached that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, but Jesus' style confused John. John the Baptist stood between two eras, and Jesus graciously helped him over his aversion to His style by pointing him to the substance of His ministry. "Wisdom is proved right by her actions." People can put on all kinds of masks, but if you watch long enough, the fruit of their actions will reveal where their heart is. (Matthew 7:20)

What should we learn from this lesson from Jesus to the disciples of John? Focus on the substance, not the style. Focus on the fruit, not the method. Do not judge something because it is not the way you did it. Reserve your judgment until you see the outcome of the action. If it is from a good source, the fruit will be good. Nor can we judge our own life by the style or form. What matters is the substance that comes out of that style. Get down to the substance of what your life is about. For John, it was about Jesus. (John 3:30) For Jesus, it was about His Father, God. (John 17:4) What is the substance of your life? What are you really about? The style can fool us all, but the substance will eventually be known. Are you a forceful person, laying hold of the Kingdom, or just a person trying out the style of a Christian, style without substance?

Do not center your life around one command of the Lord Jesus, or a style of living, center it around Jesus. His death showed us salvation from wrath. His life shows us salvation from this present evil world. (Galatians 1:4) It is not a style of life. It is the substance of new life in Him. Christianity is about Jesus, the person, the incarnate God, who will walk and talk with us and even live through us if we will be those forceful people who lay hold of the Kingdom. May God help us to live lives that demonstrate Jesus is the substance, our sustenance, our breath, our light and life! Then when people are offended by our style, they can look beyond to the substance of our life and see the person of Jesus Christ for whom we live.

Commented [notes24]: 20 Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. 21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. John 15:20-21 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: 1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Matthew 3:1-2 (KJV)

Commented [notes26]: 17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Matthew 4:17 (KJV)

Commented [notes27]: 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew 7:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes28]: 30 He must become greater; I must become less. John 3:30 (NIV)

Commented [notes29]: 4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. John 17:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes30]: 4 Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father: Galatians 1:4 (KJV)