



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“John’s Doubts About Jesus’ Messiahship,”– Matthew 11:1-19 TRANSCRIPT

Will you turn with me to Matthew chapter 11 for the Scripture reading? Matthew chapter 11 for the Scripture reading. We want to read the first 19 verses of the 11th chapter.

“And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities. Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, ‘Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?’ Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.’ And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, ‘What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what went ye out for to

see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”

May the Lord’s blessing rest upon the reading of his word.

The subject for today is “John’s Doubts About Jesus’ Messiahship.” In one of his books, Donald Gray Barnhouse wrote, “Any writer discussing the life of George Washington would have to consider the great difference animating all his actions from the moment he cast his lot with the Revolution. This transition period took him out of the role of private citizen and placed him the spotlight of the most publicized position in the country. It is just as possible to retrace the history in the recorded life of the Lord Jesus Christ, which changed his ministry from that of the national Messiah, presenting his claims only to Israel, to that of the world Savior, offering heaven to each individual of the race, willing to accept him as sacrificial substitute.”

There are, in my opinion, a few infelicitous expressions in that quotation from Dr. Barnhouse’s book, but essentially what he said is true. We do notice in the Gospel of Matthew, that in the earliest stages of this ministry, the Lord Jesus himself went only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and as we read in the 10th chapter of our study last week, he sent the Twelve only to the house of Israel, urging them to command of them not to go to the Gentiles or to the Samaritans.

But then, when the book concludes, we have commissioning the disciples and the apostles to give the gospel to all of the Gentiles in the world, so there is a transition and a transformation in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and one can discern that change of mood in this 11th chapter, a part of which we want to study now.

In almost any kind of endeavor that is true, and when one studies, even, the Civil War, there was a great transition in the fortunes of the South when Stonewall Jackson was murdered or slain by his own men in accident. The fortunes of the South began to change after that event.

I have some good friends – I think I’ve referred to it before – but I have some good friends who claim that what was really happening was that it was decreed, according to the decretive will of God that the North should win in the War Between the States. But Stonewall Jackson had become such a problem for the decretive will of God that it was necessary to call a committee meeting in heaven to do something about Stonewall, and so they determined that he should be killed accidentally by one of his own men in order that the decretive will of God might be accomplished. [Laughter] Now that is not in the Bible, I assure you [more laughter], but I think it is true that when we study the history of the War Between the States, one of the transitional points was the death of Stonewall Jackson.

The 11th chapter is a pivotal chapter in the Gospel of Matthew, and it is here that we see it is evident that the Lord Jesus is not going to be received in his ministry by that generation to whom God had sent him. In just a few paragraphs, he will speaking to the

multitudes in parables. He will no longer speak to them directly, but he will speak to them in veiled speech.

And as Matthew puts it in chapter 13 verse 10 through verse 13, “And the disciples came and said unto him, ‘Why speakest thou unto them in parables?’ He answered and said unto them, ‘Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables, because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.’” And he goes on to speak about as a result of their refusal to hear the message concerning the Lord Jesus, God has found it necessary to deal with that generation in retributive judgment, and blindness has begun to set in.

So in the 11th chapter we will notice, as we go through, that this transitional period is upon us in the study of the Gospel of Matthew. Of course, there are also important practical lessons that are set forth in this section, and some attention we want to give to them, not the least of which is the example of the possibility of wavering faith in the strongest of believers.

Sometimes Christians obtain the idea – I don’t know where, really, they obtain it – that a strong believer in the Lord Jesus Christ never has any doubts. But that is not true to Christian experience, and it is really not true to the word of God. If you turn to the Old Testament and read the Psalms, for example, you’ll discover that even in the same Psalm, the Psalmist often expresses great confidence in God, and then in the next verse or two, he is expressing in the words that he utters that his own faith has begun to waver and fluctuate, so that it is entirely possible and really true to our experience for us to have a fluctuation in our trust in God.

The firmest faith may at one time falter, and of course by God’s grace, even in our most convinced moods, we need to call upon him to hold us that we cleave to him in

faith. So there is a great practical lesson in John’s response to the ministry of the Lord Jesus in prison.

Now you know, of course, the circumstances of John’s imprisonment. More details will be given us later in the book. But Herod Antipas, who was ruler in Galilee, had taken a trip to Rome. And while in Rome, he had seduced the wife of his brother. And as a result of this seduction, he had put away his wife in the land, and then had married the woman that he had seduced.

John, the ambassador of the Lord Jesus, was not a man to rebuke only privately. And so he publicly rebuked Herod for the sin that he had done. Now, it is not safe to rebuke an Eastern despot. I am reminded of today that it is not safe to rebuke some of the village despots of our day. But it was not safe in those days to rebuke an Eastern despot, and as a result, John was thrown into prison, actually into a dungeon at Maquiras. And there, John in the prison, became troubled about the progress of the ministry of the word through the Lord Jesus.

And so, beginning to wonder about the force of the ministry of the Lord Jesus—the one, incidentally, whom he had called, earlier, “The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,” of whom had testified that he had seen the Holy Spirit coming as a dove and alighting upon him, the one of whom that he had great confidence that he was the Messiah earlier—John sent two of his disciples to the Lord Jesus to ask him a question. The question that he asked, through his disciples, the Lord Jesus was, “Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?”

Now this question is a very interesting question, and without any lengthy explanation, I think we can say without any doubt at all that it was the question that mean, simply, “Are you the Messiah?” The term, “the coming one,” was a term that was used both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and used in the language of the people of that time for the Messianic king who would come, so when he said, art

thou he that should come, or do we look for another, he meant, “Are you the promised Messiah that we have read about in the Scriptures?”

There are three explanations that have been given of John’s question. Some have claimed that John asked the question for the sake of the disciples and not really for himself, that John’s faith didn’t waver. His faith didn’t fluctuate. How can the faith of the ambassador of the king fluctuate, the man of whom the Lord Jesus would say in a moment, “Among those born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist”? But when the answer comes to the question, the answer to the question comes directly to John and not to the disciples. So I would gather from this that John did not ask this question for the benefit of the disciples. He asked it for his own benefit.

Others have said, well, John asked out of a failing patience, not from a failing faith. John knew that the Lord Jesus was to come and ultimately set up a kingdom upon the earth. And in setting up the kingdom upon the earth, it would be necessary for him to exhibit a show of Messianic power. And by this Messianic power which he would exhibit, he would put down the nations and exalt Israel to the headship over the nations, and bring in the kingdom of God upon the earth.

But everything seemed to be going along very slowly, and so John, losing patience with the speed of the Messianic ministry of the Lord Jesus, decided that he would call upon the Lord to show his hand. And so, he sends two messengers to ask, are you the one who is to come or do we look for someone else, hoping that he would, as a result of this, make a show of power and demonstrate that he really was the Messianic king and go on about his task of bringing in that kingdom.

Again, I do not think that the passage is really in harmony with that interpretation. And I’m rather inclined to believe that the great number of the students of Matthew who believe that John’s faith did fail are right.

If you remember where he was, I think you can understand this. John had come saying that he was the ambassador of the king, that he was not even worthy to hold the

shoelaces of the king who was to come, that he would baptize with water, but the king would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He had been at the baptism of the Lord Jesus, and he had recognized his deity. He had said, “I should not be baptizing you; you should be baptizing me.” He had spoken of him as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, and specifically he had said you will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

He knew that there would be two aspects to the ministry of the Lord Jesus. There would be an aspect of judgment, and there would be an aspect of mercy, with the Holy Spirit and with fire. But due to the course of events, he became disturbed, because, after all, if the king is to come and establish his kingdom, showing his power, his mighty power within it, why should his forerunner be in prison? Why should everything seem to be going wrong? And so as he reflected upon his own condition—and it’s never a happy condition to be in prison; I know. Never having been in prison myself, I can imagine that it’s a rather discouraging thing to be in prison. And if you think the Mexican prisons are bad, why the Mexican prisons are nothing like the prisons in those days.

So I think I can understand how John, in the course of being in prison, looking at the course of the Messianic ministry, seeing no real manifestation of the power of the Messiah, should become disturbed and begun to ask questions arising from his inner man: is it really true that he’s the Messiah after all? I really thought so. I said, “Behold the Lamb of God which taketh the sin of the world.” I seemed to preach with power, and many people did come to be baptized. But, I do not hear of him assuming the throne. Perhaps I’m wrong.

Was Jesus really the Messiah? And so he sent in order to find out for certain out of a fluctuating faith. Now this, I think is very important for us in a practical way. As I mentioned in the introduction to the message, it is sometimes thought by believers that when we come to believe in Jesus Christ, to have any kind of wavering of faith is totally unnatural to the Christian faith. That is not true.

I’m not suggesting, of course, that you should look for ways in which your faith might fluctuate and waiver. But nevertheless it is true that in the Christian experience, because we are men, because we possess a nature that is an old, sinful nature, it is only natural to expect that at times our faith should fail. I think it would have been much wiser of commentators, instead of trying to save John’s credit at the cost of straining the narrative, should have recognized the psychological truths of the plain story of his wavering conviction and have learned its lesson of self-distrust.

In the final analysis, there is only one man who ever lived who never flagged in faith, and that was the Lord Jesus himself. He never had any self-doubts. He never had any questions about who he was or what he was to do. But he was the sinless Son of God.

Now in John’s case, it was different. So, I conclude that John’s question does arise from perplexity produced by wavering faith. Now the response of the Lord Jesus is very direct. I want you to go back to John, and I want you to say to John, and say to him, these are the things that the Messiah is doing. Show John the things which you hear and see. The blind are receiving their sight. The lame are walking. The lepers are being cleansed. The deaf are hearing. The dead are being raised from the dead, and then, surprisingly – the climactic evidence of the Messianic work – the poor are having the gospel preached to them.

Now, as I’ve been saying about three or four times in the course of our exposition of the Gospel of Matthew, the things that the Messiah was to do encompass these very points. And the words that are given in answer to the two disciples from John are the words taken from the Old Testament Scriptures, specifically the Book of Isaiah chapter 29 and chapter 35. The Lord Jesus just reaches back into the Bible itself, and takes these passages out of the Bible using the very phraseology of the word of God, and says, go tell John that these things are happening. Because he knew that John was a student of the word of God and would reflect upon the prophecy of Isaiah, and if these things were

taking place that was the best answer to the question, are you the coming one or do we look for someone else?

The most amazing fact that I want to comment upon is that last statement, “the poor have the gospel preached to them,” was something that was rather unique. Today, of course, we think of that as one of the characteristics of the ministry of the word of God. Our message is for all people, and it is for the poor. We are thinking from the standpoint of 1900 years of Christian activity. We should never forget that when the Lord Jesus said this, it was not at all a common thing for the gospel to be preached to the poor. As a matter of fact, the preaching of the gospel specifically to the poor was unknown in Judaism. And so this statement is a remarkable statement that our Lord gives in response to the question.

And their works are arranged in the order of their might by pairs, and the greatest work is evidently this preaching of the gospel to the poor. And then he addresses directly to John, for the “he” of verse 6 is singular. “And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.” John, take a look at my ministry, and take a look at the things that are happening, and then answer your own question by comparing what the Scriptures say and what I am doing, and blessed is the man who, when he looks at me and sees my ministry does not stumble over the fact that I am not doing what you might expect at the moment: bring in the kingdom with an outward show of power.

Now then, what shall we say about John? What’s the matter with John? Well, the trouble with John is that John has an incomplete view of the truth. He lived before the time of the cross. He lived before the writing of the rest of the New Testament, and so he did not know one simple truth that everyone in this auditorium who has ever read the New Testament knows, and it’s this: that there are two comings of the Messiah; a first coming in which he comes and carries out his saving work in ministry and shedding his blood on the cross; and a second coming separated from that first coming now by 1900-plus years at which he will execute judgment upon the earth and establish his kingdom.

These two aspects of the Lord Jesus were not known to John yet, because history had not unfolded the full significance of those passages in the Old Testament. They read the passages in the Old Testament, and they said the Messiah would suffer and the Messiah would experience glories. But they were not clearly told that there was a lengthy period of time between them. And so they tended to look off to them, as Crisostom said hundreds of years ago, “As a mountain range, and thus saw the peaks of the mercy ministry and the judgment ministry, but did not see the valleys between the peaks.”

And so that was John’s difficulty. He had to learn that atonement is a prerequisite to reigning as king, that the shedding of blood is necessary before the Lord Jesus can come back and execute judgment upon the earth. The king must come to his throne through the blood of the cross, and the proper sequence is always redemption by blood and then redemption by power.

It’s beautifully illustrated in the Passover. When the children of Israel were in Egypt, they were told by Moses, who got his word from God, there was going to be a great judgment, and the firstborn of every family would be lost, destroyed by a destroying angel if they did not place blood on the top of the doorposts and the two sides. And so the children of Israel slew the lamb and placed blood on the doorposts, and when the destroying angel came through, God said, if you put blood, I will hover over that door—that’s the meaning of that Hebrew word—I will hover over it so that when the destroying angel comes through, the destroying angel will not be able to enter into the home that has the blood on the doorpost, because the firstborn is kept by the power of God.

Now, the destroying angel came, and as a result the children of Israel were saved from judgment, but the Egyptians lost their firstborn sons, and there was a great cry in the land and a cry of judgment. Then the children of Israel were led out to the Red Sea, and God, in a mighty work of power, parted the Red Sea and the children of Israel were delivered from Pharaoh and his hosts, and went on in to the wilderness land thereafter.

They were saved by blood and by power. And it is only first the blood, for the blood signifies the bearing of the penalty and guilt and judgment of sin, and then the mighty power of God is able to work on the basis of the blood that was shed. So John needed to reflect again on the fact that redemption is by blood, and then by power.

This truth is very important, I think, and needs some emphasis today, because there are some people who preach that when the Lord Jesus came, he offered a kingdom to the Nation Israel apart from the blood of the cross. They somehow or other have read the New Testament as if to preach that this could be possible that a kingdom should be offered to the Nation Israel apart from the cross. That is impossible.

Then there are those who believe that there is not going to be any earthly kingdom at all, that he came simply to die on a cross, and that’s all. And I think the truth lies between these two extremes. The Lord Jesus came to offer a kingdom through a cross, a kingdom through suffering. It is an earthly kingdom that he offers, but it is an earthly kingdom that he offers through the shedding of the precious blood. Not a kingdom apart from a cross, or a cross apart from an earthly kingdom, but an earthly kingdom through the cross. And that is the force of the ministry, and that, of course, is what John the Baptist has not yet fully grasped.

The second movement of the four movements of this passage follows in the next few verses, beginning at the 7th verse. As the crowds begin to depart, the Lord Jesus began to say the multitudes, he spoke to them in interrogations, asking them a few questions. He said, “What went ye out into the wilderness to see? (Did you go out to see) a reed shaken with the wind?” Now, a reed shaken with the wind, characteristic of the weed, is that it does not have its position, ever. It is this way, this way, this way—it was a figure of speech designed to suggest vacillation. Did you expect, when you went to hear John the Baptist preach, that you would hear a vacillator? If there was one thing that was characteristic of John the Baptist, it was that he told it like it is. There are very

few men who really tell it like it is, and John the Baptist is one of those few men. He told it like it is.

Bunyan has Mr. Pliable in his great allegory, and Mr. Pliable was the kind of man who could agree with almost anything. You will not find Mr. Pliables in prison as martyrs for the truth. But that was John the Baptist. He was not an individual who was a vacillator. He always spoke as if he had a message from God, and he spoke with authority, and he really did tell it as it is.

The Lord Jesus then asks, “But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment?” No, John the Baptist was not dressed in clothes that were fashioned by Hart, Schaffner and Marx. He was the kind of man who went out and wore the strangest kind of garments, and ate the strangest kinds of food: locusts and wild honey. What a strange fare John the Baptist had.

“They that wear (fine clothing or) soft clothing are in kings’ houses,” the Lord Jesus points out. “But what went ye out to see? A prophet? Yes, a prophet; and I tell you this, that John the Baptist was more than a prophet.” There is something characteristic about John the Baptist that should be characteristic of all preachers, and that is that there is no suspicion whatsoever about the thrust of the ministry of John the Baptist. It was a ministry in which faithfulness to God and his word were paramount, and it seems to me that is something that we today really lack in the ministry of the word of God.

Now, the Lord Jesus has something to say about John, and he goes on to say, “More than a prophet, for this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.” In other words, John the Baptist is a prophet and furthermore, he is one prophesied in the Old Testament. In Malachi chapter 3 and verse 1 is the text that the Lord Jesus cites, and there is an interesting change in the text. And it illustrates again the remarkable claims that the Lord Jesus was making.

For in the Malachi text, the reference is to Yahweh himself. And he says he is going to send his messenger before his face. The Lord Jesus looks at that passage, says it is of John the Baptist, for he is the messenger, and that he is to be sent before thy face, applying that to himself. He changes the “my” to “thy,” making the reference to the Messianic king, Yahweh the second person of the Trinity. In other words, he looks at the passage in the Old Testament that has to do with the Lord of Hosts and says, the Lord of Hosts is I. An amazing thing, an amazing claim. John the Baptist has been sent to go before the face of Jehovah of Hosts, I AM Jehovah of Hosts. It’s one of those very explicit claims that he is completely deity.

Now there is another thing that I think it important. The Lord Jesus goes on to say about John, “Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.” Now, you can see the Lord Jesus has another standard of greatness entirely from the standard that we use to judge greatness. What would you say if I were to ask you a question, who is the greatest man of the 20th Century? What would you say?

Well, I imagine some of you would say, well, I think Winston Churchill was the greatest man of the 20th Century. A lot of people would think Mr. Churchill was, especially those of us that remember the days of World War II and the leadership that he provided. There would even be some who would say Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the greatest man of the 20th Century. There would be some who would think that Dwight Eisenhower was the greatest man of the 20th Century. And then others may speak of men in different spheres of life, and some might even speak of some women in their spheres of life.

But isn’t it interesting that when the Lord Jesus speaks of greatness here, he doesn’t say anything about the world leaders of the day. He doesn’t say, John is greater than anybody but Caesar, and after all, there were some great men in the days of our Lord. But he states that John the Baptist is the greatest man born of women. What was

John the Baptist? Why, he was a man who grew up out in the deserts of Judea. He had these strange clothes and he had this strange diet, and he went around telling people that they ought to repent. He preached about their sin, and he told them that the kingdom of the heavens was at hand. That was essentially his ministry. He was very faithful to it. Crowds flocked out to hear him.

But greatness? How can you call that greatness in comparison with Augustus Caesar, or some of the other great men of that time, much less down through the centuries? Why would the word place John the Baptist on the list of the great men of the last twenty or thirty centuries? I would imagine that John wouldn’t even appear on the lists of most men.

But from our Lord Jesus, he has a different standard of greatness, and evidently the different standard of greatness with the Lord Jesus is the relationship of a person to God, or to the will of God, or to the Lord Jesus himself. And of all the men born of women, John the Baptist stands at the top of the scale. Now I would think, then, that if that is true, then a true evaluation of the great men of the 20th Century would begin with men who are the preachers of the word of God, and theologians of the grace of God.

There would be men like Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield. There would be men like Billy Graham. There would be men like Chafer who would contend for the title of “Greatest Man in the Sight of God.” This lets us know, you know, that there are different standards of greatness. And it is much better to be in tune with the standard of greatness of the Lord Jesus than with other standards of the world.

What is meant by the words, “notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”? How strange to say that John the Baptist is the greatest of men and then say that everybody else in the kingdom is greater than John. You might look at it, and your first thought might be, well, perhaps he’s saying that John wasn’t even a Christian. John wasn’t even saved. He’s the greatest among men born of women, but everybody born again into the kingdom is greater than John. Of course, if John were not

saved in the sight of God, that would be true. But who could ever contend from the word of God that John the Baptist was not one of the dearest men of God. So that couldn’t be the meaning.

Perhaps it means that the littlest person in the kingdom is greater than John in the sense that he has greater privileges than John. That is, he understands things that John did not understand. Well, there may be some truth in that. As I said a minute ago, we understand some things that John did not understand, but I must confess as I look out over the saints of God, I think there are a lot of things John the Baptist understood that the saints of God don’t understand yet today.

I know as far as I’m concerned that John has a deeper sense of human sin than I have, and I have a hunch that he knew a great deal more about what it was to walk closely with the Lord than I do. And so to suggest that I have greater privileges or understand more than John, well that seems to me to be a very unworthy interpretation of these words, and that is the interpretation that has been put upon it by some men.

I’m more inclined to think that what is meant is that the position of John, before the time of the cross and before the institution of the kingdom of God, that John’s position is less than that of the position of the simplest believer who is in the kingdom of the heavens. There is going to come a kingdom of God upon the earth, and compared with the position of John outside the kingdom at that time with the position of the person who is in the kingdom, the state or position of that man is greater than John the Baptist. And every man who has believed upon the Lord Jesus and who eventually reaches the kingdom of God will be in a situation or in a position that is greater than John the Baptist’s position at the time this was spoken.

Now John’s going to be in that kingdom, too. And of course, this is not meant to be a denigration of John, as John is going to be as great as we, but he is speaking about John, then, so that the believer in the future, in the kingdom, is greater than John at that time. I think that is what he has in mind.

Well, there comes a third movement, then. And the Lord Jesus, in the 12th verse, goes on to say, “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” Three interpretations have been suggested of it. I personally think with the great mass of the commentators that what is meant here is simply that the Lord Jesus is referring to the fact that the Jewish rulers at this time were seeking to take the kingdom by violence and make it conform to their ideas of the kingdom.

And the evidence of that is that John was thrown into prison at that time, and the Lord Jesus Christ’s ministry had been rejected. “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.” John was a change in direction. Until that time the prophets of the Old Testament had said the kingdom is coming. But John, when he came on the scene, he was authorized by God to say the kingdom is at hand—not just coming, but at hand. And so John’s ministry made a definite change in the program of God. When the ambassador of the king came, things began to differ.

And he goes on to say in the 14th verse, “And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah which was for to come.” The Scriptures tell us that Elijah is going to come again before the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus. Isn’t that a strange thing? Won’t say anything more about it because it comes up again in the 17th chapter in more detail, and we’ll save it for that.

The Jewish people believe this because it’s found in Malachi chapter 4, the prophecy of Elijah coming again. And so every time the Passover is celebrated properly among the Jews, there is a vacant chair in the Passover service. And that chair that is vacant, if you ask a Jew about it, why he’ll say that chair is for Elijah who will come again before the Messiah’s time. So they believe that because it was taught in Scripture.

Now John, it is said, came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He was not Elijah, but he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He came with a message about the kingdom, and he called on Israel to repent. And the Lord Jesus is saying if you will receive it, this is

Elijah who was for to come. If the nation, humanly speaking, had responded, then it would it not be necessary for Elijah to come because the kingdom would come following the cross and the tribulation period.

In other words, there is a kind of contingent character about the kingdom of God; contingent, not in the sense that the fact of the kingdom’s coming is contingent, but the time of its coming. Since Israel was disobedient, the kingdom now has been put off, and Gentiles have been grafted into the olive tree, and you and I have been invited to come partake of salvation as the result of the disobedience of that generation upon the earth at the time the Lord was speaking.

Now finally, in the last movement of this section, the Lord then begins to ask what this generation is like. “Whereunto shall I liken this generation?” And he likens them to a group of children who are playing charades.

Dr. Donald Gray Barnhouse, in the same book that I cited earlier, said that one day he was walking along the street in Philadelphia, and he heard a little girl who was about eight call out to another one to come over and play. And her companion came over calling out, what are you going to play? And she said, “Oh, I’ve got a swell game. Let’s play house, and you will be father, and you’ll come home late at night, and I’ll pitch into you something terrible” [laughter]. And the little girl said, no, she didn’t want to play that game [more laughter].

Now that’s what our Lord is speaking about here when he says, “It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.” It’s like little children who say, let’s play like at weddings, and I’ll be the groom and you be the wife, and you be the preacher, and so on. And then there were two or three others who said, no, we don’t want to play that. We don’t like to play those happy games.

Alright, let’s play at funerals then. And I’ll be the funeral director, and you be the corpse, and so on. [Laughter] And they say, no, we don’t want to play that, either. That’s what he’s saying.

You’re just like that. John the Baptist came, and he came with a solemn message of repentance, calling upon you to be sorry for your sin, to recognize that you have sinned against God, to turn from your sin. He called for repentance, and you said, “He’s got a demon.”

And so the Lord Jesus comes, and he comes with an entirely different kind of message. His message appears to be a message of sociability and joy and happiness and grace. But instead of that, you refused that. So you object to John and you object to Jesus. Your trouble is, your hearts are wrong. And he adds, “Wisdom is justified of her children.” The fact that the messages of John and Jesus were correct is shown by the results. John had a fruitful ministry, and of course, our Lord has, too.

Now it’s about time to stop, and I want to make just a comment about one last thing. Will you notice that word that they used to describe the Lord Jesus? “The Son of man came eating and drinking and they say, “Behold, a man gluttonous and a winebibber; a friend of publicans and of sinners.” Now, remember that’s their witness to the Lord Jesus. It’s not his witness to himself; it’s their witness to him. It’s what they said about the Lord. They said that he was a friend of publicans and sinners. Now what does that mean?

Well it means that they regarded him, evidently, as an individual who was a friend of sinful men. They saw in him a revelation of the love of God for men, and it’s their own testimony to it. There was no softening of his attitudes toward sin. He was just as stringent in his evaluation of sin as John the Baptist. But they saw the Lord Jesus as a man who loved sinners and as a representative of God who loves sinners.

And it also suggests that he had hope for the hopeless. He was a friend of the publicans and sinners—the elect may even be found among them. And finally, it says that

gross sin does not exclude anyone from the blessing of God. He’s a friend of publicans and sinners. But at the same time it also indicates that if we do not understand our sin, that is the one thing that prevents us from entering in and experiencing the salvation of Jesus Christ.

And so I call upon you today, if you have never believed in the Lord Jesus. By the grace of God, if you have been brought to a knowledge of your sin, then you’re a candidate for the salvation of God through Christ. May God the Holy Spirit speak to your heart. These are very solemn words that are found in the word of God, and I hope you will treat them as the solemn words that they are. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the ministry of Thy word. And we are thankful for the ministry of John the Baptist. We praise Thee for the ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through whom salvation is offered to men. We thank Thee that he is the Passover lamb whose blood has inaugurated a New Covenant, by which we have forgiveness of sins.

And Father, for those who are in our audience who have never responded to him, give them no rest until they do. May the Holy Spirit reveal to them very plainly the condition of their hearts, and may they receive the free gift of everlasting life. May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.