

March 26, 2017

## “His Response to Our Responses - Part One”

### Matthew 11:1-15

**FCF:** Longing and needing to be known

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Jesus responds to us in ways fitted to our response to Him.

(magnet) We need to carefully consider this.

#### **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Astronomers recently discovered a star about 40 light-years from Earth with seven Earth-sized planets orbiting it. *Three may have life.* When NASA announced this, headlines exploded. *They may be the right density and terrestrial. They may even have water. There could be life.*

But here’s the thing. To support life, there are over 150 variables in play. That, with a few other factors, means that the odds of life anywhere are about 1:10<sup>50</sup> - meaning a one with fifty zeroes. That’s the kind of fine-tuning needed. So it’s unlikely E.T. is there. Or anywhere.

That said, there’s something worth saying about these types of headlines. It speaks to the determination of the search and the willingness to make leaps in the conclusions. Which tells us a bit of the deep longing to know we’re not alone. We want to connect. We want to be known.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Matthew 11:1-24](#) (vv.1-15)

#### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

#### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

The Postal Service and I have a troubled relationship. For the past week, my mail has been rerouted to UT-Chattanooga, where our son is at school. That coincided with his recently filling out a change of address form. So, you see the pieces. But how do they fit? It’s as if we’d been merged into one. Which is just it. He’s Richard A. Schwartz. I’m Richard T. Schwartz. The Postal Service can’t distinguish between us and wound up treating us as one and the same.

Which is maddening. And it raised a question for me. Is God like a federal bureaucracy? Does He distinguish between us? Does He lump us into categories too broad to be helpful? Thankfully, the answers are all no. He really knows us - individually. And treats us that way.

Now to our text. The disciples have been sent out on a mission. While they were gone, messengers from John the Baptist came to Jesus with a question. That set in motion what we see in chapter 11, which has to do with His responses to people, including us. These responses are not flat and bland but nuanced and personal. There are two responses here - first to the doubter and then to the skeptic. We’re looking at the first of those today. And what we see is that Jesus responds to us in ways fitted to our responses to Him. We need to carefully consider this. For what do we have? Two things. First, John’s response to Jesus. Then, Jesus’ response to John.

#### **I. JOHN’S RESPONSE TO JESUS**

So, first, we see John the Baptist’s response to Jesus ([READ Matthew 11:1-3](#)).

A) *What He Said*

What's going on here? Let's start with breaking down what John says to Jesus.

1. The question

God had spoken through the prophets of the Messiah to come. He was to usher in an age of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. "Much has been seen and said of you. But are you really him?"

2. The surprise

Coming from John, such a question is a bit surprising. What has Matthew told us of John thus far? (READ Matthew 3:1-3; 13-15) That's chapter three. But things are different by chapter 11.

B) *Why He Said It*

What's going on here? Why the sharp turn in John's sentiments and statements?

1. His expectations

Let's start with his expectations (READ Matthew 3:11-12). John is looking for blessing on those who repent and judgment on those who refuse. And immediately. But that's not what happened.

2. His experience

Those are his expectations. Then there was his experience. John was in prison. Herod Antipas had seduced and married his brother's wife. John had confronted Herod about this and Herod locked him up. Josephus tells us he was held at the fortress Machaerus, near the Dead Sea.

3. His response

John's response was one of confusion and consternation. He didn't understand what was going on. "Why is this taking so long?" And Matthew highlights this for us (READ Matthew 11:2).

John's response to Jesus is one of doubt. And we have much to learn about that.

*Illustration:*

North Korea has been much in the news lately - a rocket test, a UN inquiry into human rights abuses, and, possibly, their part in a \$81 million Bangladesh cyberheist. Of course, if you think of North Korea, one of the things that comes to mind is the DMZ, the demilitarized zone separating it from South Korea. It's the most militarized border on earth. A nature refuge with barbed wire, tank traps, and an active mine field. It's a no man's land that no one wants to be in.

*Application:*

Much like doubt. It's not the opposite of faith. Unbelief is the opposite of faith. Doubt is the no man's land, the DMZ between the two - a divided heart, torn between what we want to believe and what we see. How does it come about? It can be complex, more than one thing at work. It can be intellectual - misunderstanding and misconceptions. It can be affectional - we want something denied to us or we don't want something forced upon us. It can be emotional - stemming from fear, anger, or grief. It can have its roots in any of those soils. Or more than one.

And who does it strike? Obviously, prophets. And psalmists. And history would tell us pretty much anyone. So we're not alone. What lessons then do we learn? The need all the more to stay grounded in the Word and prayer. And to stay in community with other believers.

## II. JESUS' RESPONSE TO JOHN

John responds to Jesus with doubt. But how does Jesus respond to John? Jesus responds to John in a way fitted to his response to Him. Which is good for doubters to see, then and now.

### A) *His Words to John*

Jesus' response is broken in two parts - His words to John and then His words about John.

#### 1. A reminder

His words to John begin with a reminder (**READ Matthew 11:4-5**). Jesus is harkening back to the words of the prophets, reminding John of just what "the deeds of the Christ" were to be. And there's something subtle about this. These citations are from passages in a context of judgment. So the idea may well then be, "John, I have not forgotten. But that fulfillment is yet to come."

#### 2. A challenge

Jesus begins with a reminder. And then gives a challenge (**READ Matthew 11:6**). This is a mild but needed rebuke. "You need to re-examine not me but your assumptions about me." But note that this rebuke is not a withering blast but a loving challenge. With a good reminder of truth.

### B) *His Words about John*

So those are Jesus' words to John. Then come His words to the crowds about John.

#### 1. Affirmation

And these are strong words of affirmation, meant to build up the man's reputation among them.

##### a) More than a prophet

(**READ Matthew 11:7-9**) This man is not weak or soft. He is not even just a prophet.

##### b) The messenger

(**READ Matthew 11:10-11**) He is more than prophet. He is the subject of prophecy himself. He is standing right on the threshold of the coming of the kingdom and the King he has heralded.

##### c) Elijah

(**READ Matthew 11:12-14**) He is the fulfillment of the prophecies of an Elijah-like figure. And this opposition you see to the kingdom and to its messengers is nothing new. That's what is happening with Herod and his imprisoning of John. And that is a sign of yet more such to come.

#### 2. Emphasis

So we hear Jesus' strong words of affirmation. And then an emphasis (**READ Matthew 11:15**). What is Jesus doing? He is emphatically defending not Himself in the wake of John's public doubts but John himself. Jesus is not in any way attacking John. He is gladly defending him.

Jesus' response to John in the midst of his doubts is nothing but one of compassion.

### *Application:*

As it is with all who doubt, with all who earnestly struggle with their faith in the DMZ - then and now. This is such good news, such encouragement to us in our doubts. To doubt does not necessarily mean that you are lost. It may well mean that you are growing. To doubt is not

to say that faith is dead. Yes, it may be a warning sign. But it may also be a hopeful sign - not of faith on its last legs but alive, kicking, on the verge of being stronger than before. Oh, my friends, please hear me. Having faith does not eliminate the possibility of having doubt. In fact, every believer in Jesus is sure to have such doubts. And strength can come on the other side.

So there is great encouragement to us in our doubts. And I should add this - a great challenge to us as well, the challenge to be patient and humble with others in their doubts. How should we engage with those in the DMZ of doubt? How? Do we need to ask? How did Jesus?

Jesus responds to us in ways fitted to our response to Him. We need to consider this.

### **CONCLUSION:**

It's worth considering the root of our doubts. Tracing it to its source, back to where and when it all began, we see the Fall - a real event in time and space with real consequences. Right there, we see Satan deceiving our first parents into doubting the wisdom and goodness of God. Imagine someone dropping a rock into a pool with ripples going out from the center. That's the source of all the divisions, separations, and disruptions - the rifts between us and God, ourselves, one another, and creation. Every part of the human person impacted - mind, body, and spirit.

Into this comes Jesus, the Great Physician. He treats each area as needed, each person as a person. Something like a doctor who refuses to settle for just treating the symptoms, one who recognizes that each person is an individual and there are far too many variables to take a cookie-cutter approach. The patient is not viewed as just another machine. Each person is treated as a person. That may sound cutting edge to you but Jesus has been working that way a long time.

Think of His resurrection appearances as recorded in John 20. Look over that chapter when you get home. Not a bad thing to do in this season of Lent. Jesus comes and has four separate encounters with four separate groups of people and treats them in four separate ways. Why? Four separate sets of needs. Mary was grieving and He comforts her. Peter and John arrive needing evidence of the news. The disciples are fearful and He gives them courage. And Thomas, well, Thomas is offered his proof. "Here are the wounds. Touch them." Do you see? Each was struggling as an individual. And Jesus met them and cared for them accordingly.

It's what we see here. One way for the doubter. Next week, we'll see yet another for the skeptic. Jesus responds to us in ways fitted to our response to Him. We need to consider this.

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