Encouragement When We Struggle with Doubt
Matthew 11:1-15

Doubt is one of those universal experiences of humans. A doubt includes some unbelief – we don’t believe a statement is true. Doubts come from being unsure of what we should do. And doubts come from confusion – things don’t seem to fit together.

Doubt started with the very first humans as satan tried to get them to doubt the goodness of God’s commands. In one of the earliest books of the Old Testament, we see the faithful Job beginning to doubt God’s care after a long time of suffering. At Christmas, we saw Zechariah doubt his wife could become pregnant & have John the Baptist as the angel announced.

It doesn’t matter how long we have been a Christian, how strong we seem to be in faith, or how diligent we are in doing God’s work – there comes a time when we struggle with doubt. Is God’s word really true in this particular area? Is God good? Is heaven real? Will God do anything about the injustice in this world? When we struggle with doubt we struggle with 2 contradictory thoughts.

Of course, doubt is found in other areas of life. Parents can doubt that they are doing the right things. Spouses can doubt their partner loves them. Friends can doubt those they have known the best. We can doubt whether we will succeed, finish a task, or overcome an obstacle. We can even doubt whether Spring will come in a few months, even though it always does!

During January, we are doing a short miniseries on encouragements Jesus gave to His followers in the book of Matthew. Today we want to consider how Jesus encourages when we doubt. We are going to see how Jesus dealt with the doubt of one of the greatest prophets of all time – John the Baptist.

PROPOSITION: Jesus is regularly answering our doubts in a way that will bring greater faith, encouragement & character when we believe it.

I. As humans even the most faithful will hit times of doubt

A. Discouraged, second thoughts, doubts arise

READ v 2-3. John here is John the Baptist. He was the one who came to prepare the way for the Messiah and specifically introduced Jesus AS that person. As John sits confined unfairly in prison some doubts, confusion or second thoughts have arisen in his mind. These clearly revolve around what John the Baptist was hearing that Jesus was doing. Notice the phrase “heard about the deeds of Messiah”. This really stands out in Matthew’s gospel, because he usually refers to Jesus by name – but here he refers to Jesus by title (Messiah or Christ – they are the same word in two different languages). So clearly it is the DEEDS or ACTIONS of Jesus that do not fit what John expected. So he sends some followers to ask if Jesus is the Messiah. Wow! That’s quite a change from announcing Jesus as the Christ to the whole world.
B. Very special spiritually  

This is not just some uninterested person doubting that the Red Sox could ever win a World Series or an atheist doubting there is a God. John’s birth was announced by an angel, his conception required a miracle of God, John showed evidence of the infilling of the Holy Spirit while he was still in his mother’s womb, and Jesus confirms in v 14 that he was prophesied in the Old Testament. His ministry was incredible as he spiritually woke up the country in less than a year’s time and he did that from the wilderness and without performing a single miracle. He bravely confronted the autocratic king & powerful, called occupying soldiers to repent, and religious leaders to let go of their false beliefs. John was hyper dedicated as he willingly lived in poverty, harsh conditions and totally reliant on God’s protection.

NOW this very godly, super committed, and divinely appointed believer is suddenly doubting Jesus is the Christ. John the Baptist is doubting what he believed, publicly proclaimed and sacrificially stood for. Do you really think any of us is immune to doubt? And this isn’t coming from torture or unstoppable pain – yes, definite hardships and let-downs as he is in prison and unable to minister but many believers in both the OT and NT suffered more than he did at this point. Like most of us, a key part of his doubt is not BECAUSE of the outside pressures, but because of a faulty view of God and His truth which those outward pressures unveil. Turn back to Matthew chapter 3.

C. Wrong understanding of scripture (or God’s ways)  

READ 3:11-12. Notice the picture of the Messiah, or Christ, John has...

- **Powerful** – v 11 “after me comes one who is more powerful than I” – more powerful than John who was calling rich & poor, strong & weak to repentance without any miraculous outward proof & the whole country is paying attention!
- **Exalted** – v 11 “whose sandals I am not worthy to carry”. The Christ will be so exalted that the most dedicated believer of his day is not worthy to carry out the lowest of slave actions
- **Directly connected to God** – v 11 “He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.” He is going to immerse believers in the very Spirit of God.

Those are all true so where is the misunderstanding? John seems to understand the Christ better than we do? Let’s continue in v 12. READ. This image of a winnowing fork describes how farmers of the day separated the useful wheat kernels from the chaff, the stuff that is inedible. This was a common picture of God’s judgement – separating the righteous from the unrighteous – believers from unbelievers. John expected the Messiah to bring in that final judgement which will get rid of evil in the world and usher in paradise. **Go back to Matthew 11.** What is Jesus doing in v 5? READ. Jesus is doing great stuff, but where is the judgement? King Herod is still unfairly holding him in jail, the Romans are still oppressing the nation, and immorality is still happening all around. Where is the judgement – where is getting rid of injustice, unfairness, false beliefs, pain and poverty? “Are you the Christ or am I mistaken and another is to come after you?”
D. Our wrong thinking/beliefs are cause of a number of doubts
How often our deepest pain, discouragement or doubt comes from OUR OWN misunderstanding of God and His ways. We have false expectations, believe God led us in a way He never did, or falsely believe we know how God will carry out His promises. This can happen to any of us – including the most prominent, faithful, mightily used by God. Take George Whitefield who was the Billy Graham of his day and the most prominent preacher of the First Great Awakening. God used his preaching in ways that are unfathomable for us today. Later, he would marry and they had one little boy. While John Whitefield was on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean he learned his only son was sick. So he prayed fervently from a heart that trusted Jesus for everything. He felt he had received assurance from the Lord that God would heal the boy - that he would not die.

But the boy died and that sent George Whitefield into a six-month depression. Not primarily because of grief or even regret that he didn’t do something he should – that deep, deep depression was primarily because he misunderstood God’s plan. He started doubting the One who had never failed him before – because of his own misunderstanding of God’s voice. It is so important for us to keep centering our understanding of God and His ways on His infallible word and His actions, not our own personal interpretation of these. When we face hard times we don’t want to also carry the even heavier burden of disappointment with God because of our own misunderstanding. **So how does Jesus respond to our doubts** – even ones as serious as the collapse of faith of the most prominent leader of that day?

II. How does God respond when we doubt

A. Jesus answers with evidence and correction  
Matt 11:4-5  
(Isa 35:5-6; 61:1; 35:4; 61:2)

READ Matt 11:4-5. Jesus’ answer here reflects two well-known prophecies in the Old Testament: first, Isaiah 35:5-6 and then Isaiah 61:1. So Jesus is claiming that the things **He is doing** are the very things that these OT passages said the Messiah would do. Jesus answers with clear evidence of God’s work.

But here is the thing many miss – God’s judgement (or vengeance) is mentioned in each of those passages – either in the verse before or after. Isaiah 35:4 “say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you’” and then goes on to prophecy what Jesus references. Right after Isa 61:1, v 2 says “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God.” Jesus purposely leaves out the references to judgement in each of those passages. So Jesus answers with evidence for continued faith AND correction in faulty thinking.

B. Jesus calls us to the right path  
Matt 11:6
This is confirmed by v 6. READ. Blessed – fortunate – the recipient of God’s amazing grace are you when you don’t let recent doubt and confusion about Jesus’ plan or values cause you to want to change what you clearly & rightly understood about Jesus before. Because of our changing cultural values in the areas of marriage, gender, sexual morals, health, materialism, security and comfort, there are a number of church-goers in America who are having doubts about what the Bible clearly says. What Jesus tells John is, “John, look closely. The promised work of God has already started. God is clearly at work around. If the judgment part that is also promised is not here yet ... hang in there. It is coming in God’s timing. Blessed is the person who does not fall away on account of me.” The apostles, faithful Jesus followers, religious leaders and John the Baptist at that time all believed the Messiah would come with a bang – instantly getting rid of spiritual, physical, governmental and personal evil with total paradise only days or weeks ahead. But Jesus was clearly teaching & demonstrating that this is a major error of thinking. That wrongly combines of the first and second comings of Messiah. The Kingdom of God would actually come in more like yeast penetrating dough or a seed growing to maturity. You only see these things start, but it takes time before the goal is realized. Jesus not only answers our doubts, but he also challenges the false expectations we have so if we listen, we will go on to a much deeper and blessed level of life. When we are overwhelmed with grief, criticism, difficulties, pain or physical loss, it is easy to feel we are losing our blessings. Don’t give up! Hang in there!

C. Jesus defends us to others

Matt 11:7-14

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. Let’s face it when our eyes are opened to our own whining, complaining, ego, selfishness, lack of compassion or wimpyness, we often go to the other extreme and go into self-pity worried that everyone is thinking terrible things about us. You probably don’t remember this, but last week I pointed out how Zacchaeus did not treat the conviction of God as a punishment or disgrace, but as an opportunity to change something major in his life. He received God’s freely given grace and let that inspire & motivate change. People listening to Jesus might start thinking negatively about John – especially his shortcomings. But Jesus defends John and points out really positive things about him!

- **V 7 READ** – You didn’t go out to the wilderness to see a wishy washy person that constantly changes their mind – you went out to see a totally committed person which John is!
- **V 8 READ** – You didn’t go out to see someone fashionable, powerful or living in ease. You went out to see someone willing living poorer than the poor for the advancement of God’s work. Eating locust and wild honey in the middle of nowhere.
- **v 9 READ** – You went out to see a prophet – one who boldly speaks the word of God and challenges your wrong thinking. In fact John is more than a great...
prophet – he was foretold in prophesies to play an essential role in God’s work. READ V 10. And as v 14 says, John is the Elijah prophesied to come – READ v 14. You cannot be more built up before others than that! Then we read in v 11a READ. Jesus publically tells the crowd John is the greatest person born to that point. That was right after Jesus exposed that John’s doubt was based on his misunderstanding of God and sudden wimpyness! This is exactly what God did with Job when Job started doubting the goodness of God and complaining in front of his friends that God’s not fair. There, God answered Job forcefully – who do you think you are. Job rightly feels awful, but accepts this admonition as love from God to point him back to faith – a much deeper and profound faith. Then God turns around and uplifts Job before his friends who were not thinking such good things about him.

When we doubt and then see the error of our thinking, why do we think God has given up on us? Why do we think He will just speak negatively about us? Why do we go into a different “woe is me” from the one that led to our doubt? When we truly confess and then BEGIN to show it in our actions, God is actually building us up in front of others. Do you see how incredible that is? It is almost more than we can imagine, but it has, is and will happen in each of our lives when we head into doubt. We are not going to change our faulty thinking without pain, but if we turn back to faith, there is no condemnation. On the other hand if we go into “woe is me, I’m no good to God” or “this is too hard I refuse to go through it”, then our hearts will harden against the truth, God and His ways. We will stumble and fall. We will not receive a rich welcome into heaven. Fortunately, God is working even on the hard-hearted, selfish, egotistical and disbelieving until their final breath on this earth!

IV. Two side questions …
There are two side questions many Americans have when they read verses 11-13. (1) How can we be greater than John the Baptist? (2) What does it mean that the Kingdom of God has been subjected to violence and violent people have been raiding it? These side questions actually help us to see how Jesus encourages us in times of doubt even more!

A. How are we greater than John the Baptist? Matt 11:11, 13
Do you ever look in the mirror in the morning and think, “I’m greater than King David or Queen Esther?” Do you ever stop at lunch and think, “I am greater than Solomon or Abigail?” Or at night, “I am greater than all the prophets in the Old Testament?” If you do, I might suggest you have a severe psychological problem – narcissism & extreme sinful pride. But isn’t that what Jesus says in v 11. READ. So John the Baptist is greater than any born before him and the simplest or least Christian today is greater than John the Baptist who is greater than ALL before him. Which makes us greater than all in the Old Testament! What is going on here?

We have to ask the question: “Greater in what way?” We are probably not more passionate for God than King David, more committed to family than Abigail, wiser
than King Solomon, braver than Queen Esther or have more of the Holy Spirit than Isaiah. So the comparison can’t be in our character, love, devotion, influence or wisdom. Clearly the standard of comparison for us to be greater than all before us must be the same as the standard of comparison for John the Baptist to be greater than all born before him. Only one standard is given here. Let’s RE-READ v 9-10. John could more clearly show who Jesus is than all those who came before him. All the faithful in the Old Testament pointed in some way to Jesus Christ and God’s truth & ways, but John did it the clearest – it is not just anyone born in Bethlehem it is Jesus. It is not just anyone who heals, stands up for the poor or teaches God’s truth who is the Christ – it is Jesus. You don’t have to be a pastor or have gone to seminary to point people more clearly to Jesus than the OT prophets. It is not that you have more knowledge about God, the Bible or His ways, but you can point people clearly to Jesus by just sharing the core of the gospel. What makes us better is simply the message Jesus has given us. We stand on the other side of the cross and resurrection. Why would we hide it, doubt its strength or worry about what people think? Because we are human! But be encouraged that Jesus will answer those doubts in a way that will make us bolder, more faithful and then complement us before others right when we feel like a failure. This encourages me!

B. How has the Kingdom of heaven been subject to violence

Matt 11:12-14

READ v 12-14. How has the Kingdom of God been subject to violence and what does that have to do with God’s encouragement in times of doubt. READ v 12. V 12 starts “From the days of John the Baptist until now …”. So the time period being spoken of is from the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry until this point about a year into Jesus’ ministry. Jesus has healed the sick, cast out demons, proclaimed good news to the poor, and called people back to a right relationship with the true and living God. God’s work has begun a new phase. But it hasn’t gone smoothly. The word for “violent men” is always used in the negative as is the word for “raiding it”. There has been much opposition to the establishment of God’s Kingdom through Jesus: John has been imprisoned, religious leaders have opposed, people have claimed Jesus’ powers are from the devil and there are always some who try to use Jesus for their own benefit. God’s Kingdom is growing but it is being contested each step of the way. Forceful people are shoving back and trying to exploit, domesticate or pillage it. Of course there are going to be hard situations in our lives that can lead us to doubt – even in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he was lesser known and the opposition hadn’t coalesced together to try to kill Him, there was strong opposition.

V 13 READ. The Old Testament prophesied about the coming Messiah UNTIL JOHN. Now that changes because John decisively identifies Jesus as the one who fulfills those prophecies. And READ v 14. Even John himself was prophesied. READ v 15. That is our call whenever Jesus answers our doubts – will we listen or will we stubbornly hold on to false thinking?

C. Finding our greatness in Jesus and the gospel

Matt 11:10-11
So our greatness does not lie deep inside ourselves, what we do, how good we look, how much education we’ve completed, how much we have or how popular we are. All of these show where we are in the pecking order of the world. Our greatness literally lies in Jesus – who He is and the good news He has given us - - - that anyone can come to Jesus, repent of their sins to receive forgiveness, believe He is God incarnate who died on the cross for our sins and then rose again to be saved and surrender to go God’s way instead of our own to experience inner transformation. Like John, it is not just that we personally know Jesus that makes us great, but that we can point other people to the true Jesus.

Our greatness is in Jesus – we get to have a personal relationship with the true God of all creation. How great it is that even in our stumbling and bumbling witness, the gospel is so powerful and so clear it can transform any life. Our call to witness and bring Jesus’ message to the ends of the earth does not ultimately rest on obligation (although there is some there), it rests on gratitude for what Jesus has, is and will do. Jesus is great for dealing with our doubt in a way that points us back to the truth, transforms us and uplifts us before others. Be encouraged and keep overcoming in the power of Jesus!