

## Are You Building the Kingdom of God?

Matthew 11:2-19

July 5, 2020

A few years ago, Reader's Digest had a story about a woman who was looking for a birthday card for her husband. There was one that caught her attention. On the outside it read: "Sweetheart, you're the answer to my prayers." Then she turned to the inside, and it read: "You're not exactly what I prayed for, but apparently you are the answer."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if that's how John the Baptist had felt about Jesus. In John's view Jesus started out with a great promise but later on, John became a little less certain about Jesus' Messiahship.

When Jesus was baptized by John, John saw the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus, and there was a voice from heaven saying that Jesus was God's beloved son.<sup>2</sup> At that time, John was absolutely sure that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the answer to his prayers and the prayers of many over the centuries.

John knew Jesus' background better than anyone. Jesus was his cousin. He knew Jesus' family very well. Jesus, like his Dad, was a carpenter. He did not have any interest in becoming a warrior or a military leader. He lived a quiet and normal life as a carpenter. Then when he started his public ministry, he was fantastic. He had great insights and humor. Not only that he was able to perform incredible miracles but he was far from starting any revolution against Rome. He was just a soft-spoken rabbi with great insights.

John, like many of his contemporaries, expected the Messiah to be a military leader. Jesus was far from that but still John believed people could change. David was not a warrior or a military strategist when he started out. He was a shepherd boy; but later he became one of the greatest warriors in history. Knowing that, John held on to his hope and waited. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Why? Because he had a heavenly confirmation.

John stated, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it rested on (Jesus). I myself did not know who the Messiah was, but the one who sent me to baptize with the water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Bartocci, "The Unexpected Answer," Reader's Digest, 9/84, pp. 87-88.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:17

descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Because of this divine confirmation, John confessed that Jesus would save the world from its sin. John saw Jesus at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”<sup>4</sup> There was no doubt in John’s mind that Jesus was the Messiah. So, why did John end up questioning Jesus’ Messiahship later on?

John spoke of the judgment the Messiah would bring to this world. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry John said, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”<sup>5</sup>

John expected Jesus to bring judgment – rewarding the faithful and punishing the wicked. John was right that this judgment would come but it would happen in Jesus’ second coming.

John did not realize that Jesus came the first time to teach, heal, and to provide a path to eternal salvation by sacrificing himself on the cross. Only when Jesus returns a second time will he execute the kind of judgment that John expected in his own lifetime.

John had the same Messianic expectation that everyone else had at the time. He expected Jesus to lead a military campaign against Rome and bring peace and prosperity to Israel. He expected Jesus to bring judgment against all evil doers, the evil doers of his own nation and the evil doers of foreign enemies.

But none of that was happening. This is why John raised the question. John sent a couple of his disciples to Jesus and asked, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” In other words, “Are you doing what you are supposed to be doing?” “All the works you are doing are absolutely amazing and wonderful but are they the works of the Messiah?”

To John’s question, Jesus replied, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” In other words, the works of the Messiah is not just for political establishment. It is for the restoration of humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:32-34.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:29.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3:12.

Then Jesus added, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away because of me.” What he means is that the Messiah has not come to take a military action. The true Messiah is not what they expected.

The work of the Messiah is to bring a new life, a new hope, and a new beginning and this work of the Messiah is not just the work of one person. It is actually the work of all God’s people. That work is to establish the Kingdom of God on earth and all the followers of Christ have a part in building this Kingdom.

An American theologian, Jim Wallis once said that politicians hold up their fingers to check the wind to see which way it’s blowing. Then they vote according to the wind. When you have a new politician, he or she does the same. They all do the same. So, Jim Wallis suggests that we need to change the wind in order to change our nation.

How does it work? Wallis uses the example of the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid was not brought down by guns or violence or even by changing the politicians, but by changing the wind. How?

In the face of racial injustice, people of faith began to pray together. As a sign of their hope and conviction that one day the evil of apartheid would be dismantled, each person lit a candle and placed it in their windows. They wanted others to see the candles and know the meaning of them, and possibly join them in lighting the candles.

Their neighbors, the government officials, and the whole world saw their belief. They lit their candles and prayed their prayers. It was a powerful statement.

When the government officials saw it, they were deeply offended by this. They passed a law to make it illegal to light a candle and put it in the window. It was seen as a crime, as serious as owning and flaunting a gun. The irony of this was that the children noticed it.

At the height of the struggle against apartheid, the children of Soweto kept saying: “Our government is afraid of lit candles!”

The government had a reason to be afraid because it was a powerful symbol of judgment against the government and a powerful message of hope. It was a proclamation of judgment that apartheid was morally and ethically wrong. It was also an expression of hope that one day all human beings would be treated equally and would be judged by their character and not by their skin color.

Eventually those burning candles, and the prayers and the hope people held, changed the wind in South Africa. Morally shamed by its own people, the government conceded that apartheid was wrong and dismantled it without a war. It was brought down by lit candles backed by hope and prayer.<sup>6</sup>

But those candles did not light themselves. The candles were lit by the people who sought to restore humanity and to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth. In a way, they were the Messiahs for their own country. They were participating in the work of the Messiah.

When the Jews celebrate Passover, they save a seat and reserve a cup at their Seder table for Elijah, the prophet who is to come before the Messiah arrives. Toward the end of the Passover meal, the door and windows are flung open and they invite the spirit of Elijah to come. They pause for a moment in silence.

For thousands of years, those doors and windows have been opened, and for thousands of years all that has entered has been the wind.

One Hasidic story tells of a pious Jew who asked his rabbi, “For about forty years I have opened the door and windows for Elijah every Seder night, waiting for him to come, but he never does. What is the reason?”

The rabbi replied, “In your neighborhood there lives a very poor family with many children. Call on the man and propose to him that you and your family would like to celebrate the next Passover at his house.

And for this purpose, provide him and his whole family everything they would need for the eight days of Passover. Then on the Seder night Elijah will certainly come.”

The man did as the rabbi told him, but after the Passover he came back and claimed that again he had waited in vain to see Elijah. The rabbi answered, “I know very well that Elijah came on the Seder night to the house of your poor neighbor but of course, you could not see him.”

And the rabbi held a mirror before the face of the man and said, “Look, this was Elijah’s face that night.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ron Rolheiser, "ADVENT HOPE," 11/28/04 <http://www.ronrolheiser.com/currentcolumn.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, pp. 92-93.

Rabbi was telling him that he was the Elijah that night. In other words, he was one of the persons who was building the Kingdom of God here on earth. He was not only Elijah that night, but he was Messiah that night.

As we wait for the second coming of Christ, we need to reflect on the question John asked Jesus. Perhaps John's question for Jesus is actually Jesus' question for all of us: "Are you the one who was to come, or should I look for someone else?" Are you the one who is building the Kingdom of God here on earth, or should I look for someone else?

The Independence Day gave us freedom. Are we using the freedom to build up the Kingdom of God?