

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 21 April 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Terms for Entering the Kingdom

Matthew 11:1-16

Back in 1997, my parents and I made a road trip to Arizona; and while we were passing through Kansas, we stopped in a little town there. This town was where my grandfather was born in 1891, a few years after his parents had moved there by covered wagon; and we were hoping, while we were there, to find out more about our family history. Now, we weren't sure whether anyone in this little town would remember our family, since most of the clan had eventually moved back East. However, after we had asked around the village, we were directed to an elderly lady who did, in fact, remember our family. She especially remembered my grandpa's older sister.

Now, as we talked with this lady, and listened to her stories, I received confirmation of something that my relatives who were old enough to remember had often said about my great aunt: and that was that she was...shall we say, "headstrong." One thing they particularly remembered about her was that she was *not* a good loser. If she were playing a board game with someone, and it appeared that she was going to lose the game, she would somehow manage to knock over the game board "by accident." Apparently, her philosophy was that if *she* weren't going to win the game, then *no one* should win the game!

The desire to be in control of everything is deeply engrained in our nature, because we all have a *sin* nature: and our sin nature is focused on just one thing: "Me!" We may chuckle at the little story about the boardgame; but the Bible says that "***The wages of sin is death.***" Sin and self-will are no game! There are *eternal* consequences for those who choose to control their own lives, instead of surrendering to Jesus Christ: and there are eternal consequences for trying to get into the Kingdom on your *own* terms.

This morning, we will be learning about some people in Jesus' day who, quite literally, tried to *stop* others from entering into the Kingdom of Heaven, since they themselves refused to enter the Kingdom on God's terms. We will also see what the *terms* for receiving the Kingdom of Heaven are. The title of this message is ***The Terms for Entering the Kingdom.***

Read Matthew 11:1-15.

I. John's request to Jesus (vv. 1-3)

In **Matthew 10**, we examined the instructions that Jesus gave to the Apostles as He was commissioning them to preach the Gospel throughout Israel. Now, in **chapter 11**, we find that Jesus Himself, after He had sent out the Apostles, set off to preach the Gospel from city to city.

Now, as we just read, some couriers came to Jesus one day, with a message from John the Baptist. Apparently, sometime shortly after Jesus had sent off the Apostles to preach, King

Herod had arrested John, and put him in prison. And what was his crime? Preaching that it was a sin for Herod to take his brother Philip's wife from him, and to live in adultery with her! Now, why did John have to open his mouth and say this? Was he trying to make a name for himself? Hardly! John had nothing in this world to gain, and everything to *lose*, by calling out Herod's sin. Yet, despite the danger to his life, John boldly declared that what Herod was doing was a sin against God. Why? First of all, because he knew that to be silent about evil is to condone it: and the people needed to understand that adultery is *not* O.K. with God, no matter what rank or station in life you may be. They needed to know that adultery is a terrible sin, of which men must repent! Secondly, John knew that *God* wanted him to say these words: and when God commands you to speak, you *must* obey. Thirdly, John cared for Herod's soul. Though Herod was not a Jew, John desired for Herod to repent and be saved! Tragically, though, Herod did not heed John's warning. He continued to follow perversion and lust, until it led him to commit the terrible crime of murdering God's man!

Read Mark 6:10-29.

John the Baptist's ministry was powerful: yet, it was short! For thirty years, God had been preparing John to preach to the people of Israel; and now, after scarcely a year, his preaching ministry had come to an end, and his life was hanging by a thread. How was he dealing with this? Let's go back to **Matthew 11:2-3**, and see what was going through his mind. (**Read Matthew 11:2-3.**) John was a great man of God; but he was also human. For the first time, he had a *doubt* about the Saviour whom he loved so much. You see, even John did not *fully* understand Jesus' mission. Like the prophets of old, John had pored over the prophecies of the Messiah; and even though the Messiah was now here in the flesh, he *still* did not fully understand everything about Jesus' program. He didn't quite have all the pieces of the puzzle.

Read 1 Peter 1:10-12.

Like all the prophets of old, John the Baptist had a great understanding of the Messiah. At the very least, John understood that Jesus would suffer, and be rejected. John himself had said that "***no man receiveth his (Jesus') testimony.***" (In other words, "Few people will receive Christ's message.") John knew Scriptures such as **Isaiah 53**. He knew that the Messiah would be "***despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.***" From that same Old Testament Scripture, he knew that Jesus is "***the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.***" John, of all people, must have realised that the Messiah would, in some way, *be slain* for our sins—just as the lambs were slain on the altar. John also understood that men needed to repent of their sin, and believe on Jesus, to enter the Kingdom.

Yet, John also understood that "***The kingdom of heaven is at hand***"—that it was near. Why, then, was he now in *prison*, and facing execution, while Jesus was still going around to

people's homes, and dining with them? For that matter, why hadn't Jesus come to prison to visit him? That must have been somewhat of a shock to John. Did Jesus really care about him? And was it *really* the mission of the Messiah to go around eating with people all the time, while his followers suffered in prison? As for the Kingdom, it didn't seem to be near at all. If *he*, the forerunner of the Messiah, were about to be executed, what would become of Jesus Himself? Would Jesus *fail*, just as all the false messiahs had failed? Had he been mistaken? Was Jesus a powerful prophet, but not the Messiah? John *had* to know the answer; and so, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus plainly whether He were the Promised One, or not.

Brethren, the fact that even a great man like John the Baptist could have a momentary doubt about Jesus goes to show what can happen when we start to look at outward circumstances, instead of at God's promises. Though John had been given much truth from Heaven, and had proclaimed the name of Jesus to Israel, the cold, hard reality was that he was now in prison, and facing execution. Like everyone else (including the Apostles) John had the expectation that Jesus would deliver Israel from their enemies very shortly. Things weren't working out as John had thought they would. And so, John began to doubt.

Christian, can you identify with John? Are there times in your life when you are plagued with doubts? Has there ever been a time when the cold, hard reality of a trial that you were going through made the promises of God seem unreal—to the point that you even had an awful, fleeting doubt about the truthfulness of the Bible? Are there times when things in your life seem to be falling apart, and you question whether the Lord has been at work in your life at all? Are there times when you are filled with despair, and you find yourself wrestling with the Lord, and asking questions that you thought you'd never ask? What do you do when you are in such a state? If you have ever wondered these things, you are about to get the answer!

II. Jesus' reassurance to John (vv. 4-6)

(Read Matthew 11:4-6 again.) John had asked a painful, heart-wrenching question of Jesus. And what was Jesus' response? Did He send John's disciples back to him with harsh, cutting words of rebuke? Did Jesus say, "You're supposed to be my *forerunner*, John! How *could* you ask such a thing?" Not at all! You see, when God's people ask Him for wisdom, He gives it to them "*liberally*," and "*upbraideth not*." Even when our Master must rebuke and chasten us, He does so in love and gentleness. John was having a "crisis of faith"; and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knew exactly how to help him through it. First, He invited John's disciples to stick around for a while. All day long, they watched in wonder as Jesus healed people of incurable diseases and handicaps. Then, when the day was done, Jesus sent them back to John with His answer. And what was His answer? **He simply brought John back to the Scripture.** He reminded him of the things that had been prophesied of the Messiah in the Old Testament—the fact that the Messiah would give sight to the blind, cause the lame to walk, heal the lepers,

give hearing to the deaf, raise the dead, and preach the Gospel to the poor. He then pointed out that all those things had been fulfilled that very day, right in front of his disciples' eyes!

The Bible doesn't tell us how John responded when his disciples came back with Jesus' answer; but apparently, this was all John needed to hear. From that point onward, it is not reported that John had any more doubts. Jesus had given John the key that he needed to be freed from His prison of doubt: and that key was *the Scripture!* When John heard Jesus' answer, he was, no doubt, reminded of **Isaiah 29:18**, which says, "***And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.***" He remembered **Isaiah 33:24**, which says, "***And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.***" He also remembered **Deuteronomy 18**, where Moses had said that God would raise up a Prophet like himself, except much greater. Surely, *Jesus* was the great Prophet that Moses had foretold, for He was healing a thousand-fold more lepers than the *one* leper that Moses healed! As John thought on all these things, he also heard, in Jesus' words, echoes of **Isaiah 35:5-6**, and **Isaiah 61:1-2**.

Read Isaiah 35:5-6 / 61:1-2.

Brethren, the Bible says that "***faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.***" The "key" of God's promises was right there in John's heart, because he had been hiding God's Word in his heart for years! He had merely to take out the Scripture, and, by faith, put it into the lock, turn the key, and walk out of his prison. He was still in a *physical* prison, of course (and would remain there until the day of his death); but he was no longer in the prison of doubt and despair. He no longer had to know all the "why's" and "wherefores." He didn't *have* to know everything that was coming down the pike; and he didn't *have* to know whether he would ever see the Kingdom before his death. He didn't *have* to know how every last piece in the "prophetic puzzle" fit together. He was no longer fretting about why everything in his life seemed to be falling apart. All he had to know is that *Jesus* is the fulfilment of the prophecies of Scripture, and that *He* will bring those who love and trust in Him safely into the Kingdom! He simply had to *trust Jesus' Word*, and rest in Him.

By the way, John had *not* been wrong in anything that he had taught about the Kingdom. If John had been mistaken in his belief that there was to be a literal, earthly kingdom, in which the Messiah will reign from Jerusalem, then this would have been the time for Jesus to correct John's error. However, Jesus did *not* give any such correction, because John *was not* in error. He *did* understand the Scriptures correctly! There *was* going to be a literal Kingdom; and the Kingdom truly *was* at hand. The Kingdom really *could* have been established within his lifetime. However, the one thing that John could not foresee was that Israel, as a nation, would fail to receive their Messiah within the acceptable time. He didn't know that the Kingdom would have to be *put on hold* for some unknown amount of time, on account of Israel's unbelief. Now, John did realise that there was to be a *church age* leading up to the

Kingdom. He had *witnessed* the first year or so of the church age; and he himself had baptised many people into membership of Christ's church! The church age had already begun; but the only question was, "*How long* will this thing called 'the church' continue until the Kingdom of Israel is set up?" And will there be any *other* gaps of time before the Kingdom comes (such as the seven-year Tribulation)? John did not know the answers to these questions.

Now, *could* Jesus have given John a little enlightenment? *Could* He have given him just a little hint as to *how long* it would be until the church age ended, and the Kingdom arrived? Could He at least have let John know whether he would ever live to see the Kingdom of Heaven set up? Yes, He *could* have done so; but He didn't. John would simply have to leave these things in God's hands, and keep believing that His Word *would* come to pass.

My friends, this is what *we* must do, too. We must *trust God's Word*. We must continue to believe that "***The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.***" There will be times when the cold, hard circumstances of life *seem* to contradict God's promises. At such times, we must take out His Word, and reflect on *who Jesus is*, and on how He has always kept His Word in the past; and with this in mind, we may take heart that He *will* do everything that He said He will do. Then, like Jeremiah, we can say, "***Great is thy faithfulness.***"

III. Jesus' recommendation of John (vv. 7-15)

Jesus had sent off John's disciples with the answer to his question; and now, as He turned back to the crowd, He had something to say about John. Jesus was about to give John the highest tribute that any prophet (other than Himself) would ever receive. **(Read verses 7-15.)**

John the Baptist was, in God's eyes, a man of highest honour. He was a man of honour because he did not waver in the face of opposition, or water down God's message. Jesus asked the question, "***But what went ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?***" In other words, "Did you go to see a man who would sway back and forth in his doctrine, depending on the desires of the people?" If *this* were what they had gone out to see—a man who would tell them what they wanted to hear—then they were sorely mistaken!

The very fact that Jesus challenged the people with this question shows that there were many people who *did* expect John to tell them what they wanted to hear! They wanted John to dance to the tune that *they* piped to him. Even the Pharisees, at first, wanted to receive John's baptism, and to get onto his religious "bandwagon." Why? Because they saw John as a "tool" that they could use for their religious and political ends. If they could simply get John to back down on a few core principles (such as demanding that people repent of their sin, and believe

on Jesus), then they could use him to strengthen *their* position. They were more than willing to share some power with John, if he would simply compromise a little!

Yet, ironically, it was John's *uncompromising* stand that attracted people to him in the first place! It wasn't John's rough dress, or his long Nazarite dreadlocks, that people found fascinating; it was *his obvious love for God!* People didn't go out to see a silver-tongued orator in impressive, fancy clothing. If they wanted to see that kind of man, they could have gone to see King Herod. (Herod was a sharp dresser *and* an impressive orator.) The people didn't want to see an orator: they wanted to see *a real man of God.* People went to see John because he, unlike their phony religious leaders, was filled with the Holy Spirit. They were attracted to him because he spoke with unwavering conviction, mixed with mercy and love. Just as people will come from miles around just to watch a raging fire, so people went out into the desert to see John "burning" with passion for the Lord Jesus Christ! Sadly, though, most of them did not take his message to heart. They refused to admit that they were sinners in need of repentance; and the longer they heard John preaching against their sin, and of their need to repent and believe on Jesus, the more they disliked his message.

So it still is today. Our society is filled with "seeker friendly" churches, which are committed to making people comfortable, and to not offending anyone. They give people entertainment. They turn down the lights, and give them sensual music which has some biblical words, but which sounds just like night club music. They then give the people a sermon with just enough Scriptural content to make it seem as though they are being fed God's Word—when, in reality, they are getting nothing but spiritual "cotton candy." The need to *repent* of selfishness, lust, adultery, fornication, pornography, filthy movies, homosexuality, drinking, drugs, blasphemy, covetousness, idolatry, dishonesty, anger, hatred, pride, self-righteousness, false gods, false religion, and false ways of salvation, is *never* spoken of. As for Jesus, He is portrayed as a cool, non-judgmental, sin-affirming "buddy," instead of as the *holy God* who will be our Judge one day. The *true* Jesus of the Bible is not presented, because people don't want *that* Jesus.

Brethren, if you are endeavouring to live for the Lord, you can expect the same reaction that John got. If you are on fire for God, people just might "come to watch you burn" for Christ—for a while. Yet, because they choose to remain indifferent to the Lord, and to continue in their sin, and not to submit them their to Christ, most people will, eventually, tire of your testimony, and turn away. Yet, there just might be *some* who will listen. Brothers and sisters, be like John the Baptist! Don't compromise! Don't water down the truth! Someone's eternal destiny is depending on *your faithfulness* to proclaim the true Jesus to them!

Now, why else was John such a man of honour? In particular, why did Jesus say that no other prophet was greater than John the Baptist? Was it because he was morally superior, or because he did greater miracles? No. He wasn't superior to anyone; and he did *no* miracles! Why was he called the "greatest," then? Because he was the *closest* prophet, in *time*, to the arrival of the

Messiah. John was the *first* prophet of the New Testament age. He was the one whom God chose to precede the arrival of the Messiah, and to herald His arrival to the world! John was the one of whom **Malachi** had prophesied. Let's read **verse 10** again. (**Read verse 10.**)

Read Malachi 3:1.

John the Baptist was the "*messenger*" whom the Lord sent before His face, to prepare the way for Him. In this sense, John was the "*greatest*" of all the prophets. Yet, Jesus says something curious: He says that the "*least in the kingdom of heaven is greater*" than John. What does Jesus mean? Well, the word "*least*" comes from the word *mikroteros*, which (when speaking of *time*) can mean the "latest," the "younger," or "*the last in order of birth.*" Do you see what Jesus is saying? He's talking about Himself! In his humanity, Jesus was six months younger than His cousin John: yet, Jesus was *infinitely greater* than John, because He is God!

Jesus has given His tribute to John. He has commended John as the greatest of the prophets, apart from Himself. However, Jesus now spoke some troubling words. Let's read **verse 12** again. (**Read Matthew 11:12.**) Even while Jesus was speaking, His disciples were going from town to town to proclaim that "*The kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" This was a joyous message! Yet, Jesus now had a very *troubling* message about the Kingdom. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven was suffering "*violence,*" and the "*violent*" were taking it by force. Who were the "*violent*" ones who were trying to take the kingdom "*by force*"? Whoever they were, Jesus said that they had been at work "*from the days of John the Baptist until now.*" In other words, from the beginning of John's ministry until that very moment, some people had been trying to "snatch the reins" of the Kingdom from John and Jesus, and to take it for themselves. Who were these people? The religious leaders of Israel!

Now, make no mistake about it: the religious rulers did want the Kingdom of Messiah to come. However, *they* wanted to be the ones in charge of it. They wanted a "puppet" Messiah—one who would do *their* bidding. *They* sat in the "seat of Moses"; and they weren't about to give up their seat to a ragtag bunch of carpenters and fishermen. Do you see why the Kingdom of Heaven was suffering violence? The religious rulers were about to unleash their fury against the King *and* His representatives! John would be the first one to feel their wrath; and then Jesus, and then the Apostles. Israel's leaders were doing all in their power to wrest control of the Kingdom from Jesus and His followers, and to take it for themselves.

Now, of course, there was no way that the Pharisees could actually snatch the Kingdom from King Jesus. However, they *did* provoke God to *withdraw* His offer of the Kingdom. You see, in order for the Kingdom to come, Israel must *accept* Jesus as their King. The Kingdom of Messiah was being offered to Israel, in the near future! However, they had only a narrow window of time to accept the offer: and the religious leaders were doing all in their power to

keep the people from accepting the offer. It was as though the gates to the Kingdom were wide open, and many of the people were heading toward the gates; but the Pharisees and Sadducees were vehemently forbidding them to enter. They themselves refused to enter the Kingdom of King Jesus; and they were preventing *others* from entering the Kingdom, as well. They were already punishing Jesus' followers, by putting them out of the synagogue; and even as they spoke, they were plotting to *kill* John and Jesus. The Pharisees were, in effect, provoking God to slam the doors of the Kingdom shut, so that people could not enter. If *they* couldn't be in charge of the Kingdom, then they didn't want *anyone* to enter the Kingdom!

Read Matthew 23:13.

As Jesus spoke to the people that day, there was a new feeling in the air. Everyone sensed that the Kingdom was at hand; and they were right! That's why Jesus said, "***All the prophets and the law prophesied until John.***" In other words, the Old Testament era had *ended* when John began to preach. The Old Covenant era had ended, and the *New* Covenant era had begun. This meant that the *Kingdom* was at hand—because the New Covenant includes the promise of a reunited Kingdom of Israel, under the rule of the Son of David. **Yet, the King had to be received by Israel.** Just as King David refused to take the throne of Israel until all the tribes *asked* Him to rule over them, so Jesus, the Son of David, will not take His rightful throne *until the people of Israel receive Him*. There was a condition for the Kingdom to come: and the condition is that they receive their King! That is why Jesus said, "***If ye will receive it, this is Elias.***" Let's look again at that verse. **(Read Matthew 11:14-15.)** The key word in this verse is "***if***." Jesus was saying that "***if***" they would receive "***it***" (the Kingdom), by repenting of their sin and believing on Him, *then* John would be the fulfilment of the "Elijah" prophecy.

Read Malachi 4:5-6.

There is no question that John fulfilled the prophecies of **Isaiah 40:3** and **Malachi 3:1**. John was that "***voice crying in the wilderness***"; and he was the "***messenger***" who went before the face of the Lord. He was also "***Elijah***," in that he came "in the spirit and power of Elijah." To a certain extent, he did turn the hearts of Israel's sons and fathers to each other. However, John was not the *ultimate* fulfilment of the Elijah prophecy, because most of the people did *not* respond to his preaching in repentance. Because Israel rejected John's preaching, the land *was* smitten with a curse, just as Malachi warned; and the people were scattered into captivity! Who, then, is the ultimate "Elijah"? Who is the "Elijah" that will *truly* "restore all things"? It's Jesus Christ Himself! One day, the Lord Jesus will finish what John began. During the Tribulation period, multitudes of Jews will believe on Jesus as their King; and when Christ returns to earth, and sets up His Kingdom, *every* Jew that enters the Kingdom will be a believing Jew. Literally *all Israel* will be saved, and will receive Jesus as their King!

Now, perhaps you are wondering what all this has to do with *you*, since none of us here are Jews. Well, it has *everything* to do with you! Just like the Jews, *you and I* must choose what we will do with Jesus. Will we receive Him, or reject Him? The Pharisees wanted the Kingdom *without* submitting to Jesus the King; and likewise, many people today want to go to Heaven, but do *not* want to surrender to Jesus as their King. They don't want to submit to the terms that God has given us. The terms for entering the gates of Heaven, *and* the glorious Kingdom of Christ on earth one day, is that you "Repent, and believe the Gospel."

Conclusion: As we close this morning, I would ask, "Have *you* received the terms for entering the Kingdom?" Only those who will *humble themselves* before God may apply. That is why Jesus said that He came to preach the Gospel *to the poor*. He wasn't talking about the "materially poor": He was talking about the "poor in spirit"—those who acknowledge their sin, and their need of the Saviour. Have *you* done this? Have you become "poor in spirit"? If you've never repented of your sin and asked Jesus to save you, I plead with you to do so! If you are saved already, I would ask, "Are you, like John the Baptist, standing firm on God's Word, without compromise?" Perhaps, like John, you are having some doubts and fears. If so, take out the "key" of God's Word, and unlock the door!