

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this Advent season we continue to prepare our hearts for Christ's coming. Last week we saw that one thing that hinders our preparation is division within the church. This week we see another thing that hinders our preparation. Doubts! Specifically, doubts about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

There has never been a single person in history more controversial than Jesus Christ. To this day the world argues about who he was and what he did. Some even doubt whether he ever existed – even though his existence had never been doubted previously! Even while Jesus still walked this earth, most misunderstood who he was and why he came.

Jesus asked his disciples about who people thought he was. "A prophet. Elijah. John the Baptist" were the answers. This shouldn't surprise us that many misunderstand Jesus, for the Bible tells us that the Good News of Jesus Christ is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor. 1:18). And since it is faith in Christ alone that saves, we should not be surprised if the Devil, the world and our own sinful flesh will create every doubt possible in an attempt to derail our heavenward journey.

In our sermon text today, we will see how John the Baptist (of all people!) had some doubts about Jesus. Pay attention to Jesus' response to John's doubts and questions, for in his response, Jesus speaks to us too. Jesus lovingly and gently sets aside all doubts about him. Dear friends: Do not doubt: Jesus is the promised Savior!

We read Matthew 11:2-10.

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

We all know well John the Baptist. Born just 6 months before Jesus, John was God's appointed prophet who prepared the way for the coming Christ. He gave up every earthly comfort to proclaim an unpopular message which nevertheless drew thousands to the remote area near the Jordan where John conducted his ministry. And his message? "Repent, you sinners! For the promised Messiah is coming!"

John clearly testified that Jesus was that long-promised Messiah. He said Jesus is the "**one who is more powerful than I,**" the one whose **sandals he is not worthy to carry.** And who said of Jesus, "**I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ... this is the Son of God**". And who said: "**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" (*Jn 1:29*)

But now he asks: "**Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?**" Is this the same John? What happened to the great prophet? As hard as it is to think about it, it certainly appears as though John was beginning to have some doubts. Now let's remember the circumstances. John was sitting in prison. He had been thrown in prison because he called sin a sin... and called it so even to a ruler. You see, Herod had visited his brother, Philip, in Rome. Herod became quite enthralled with his brother's wife (her name was Herodias.) Herod repaid his brother's hospitality by carrying off his wife and taking her back with him to Israel. Herodias divorced Philip and married Herod. Well, John the Baptist was bold enough to call Herod out on this sin and told him it was unlawful for him to have her. 1) She had gotten an unlawful divorce. 2) And in addition, she was actually Herod's niece as well. Herodias didn't take kindly to having her sin pointed out, so John was arrested and put in prison.

Considering these circumstances I think we can find two closely related reasons for John's doubts about Jesus that arise at this time.

- (1) Whenever a believer faces challenges and hardships in this world, our faith is challenged. We tend to ask "why". Why is God allowing this? If I have served God faithfully, why am I in prison? If God is a just judge, why is this injustice taking place.

And that last statement segways into the second reason for his doubts. John knew the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah very well. And he himself was a prophet who foretold what the Messiah would do. And what he prophesied was: "**baptize ... with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.**" If Jesus is "the one who is to come," John may have been thinking, where is the just judge? Where is the fire and brimstone? Why is justice not served. And maybe more specifically he was thinking: My imprisonment is a great injustice. Why has the Messiah not done something?! And so he asks: "**Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?**"

So essentially, John's dilemma was this: "I see the grace! Where's the justice and judgment?!" Dear friends, it's not unusual for us believers to have doubts about Jesus just as John did. Let's face it, just like John, this Jesus who has been revealed in Holy Scriptures isn't always the Savior we are looking for. Sometimes it happens we are looking for something else.

When we are suffering or going through difficult times, the doubts begin to arise. And when we see injustice in the world, doubts begin to arise. And when we go through difficult times or suffering *because* of injustice like John did, then the doubts REALLY begin to rise!

Have you ever endured ridicule because of your faith. Have you ever heard an unbeliever mock God and you wondered, "Why does God tolerate this?! Why doesn't God silence this person right now? Where is God's righteous judgment?"

Or, have you ever doubted Jesus when you stood near the open casket of a loved one? You probably thought, "It's not fair! Why him (or her)? Why now? Of all the evil people on earth God *could* have taken, why did God take my dear one?"

Or, have you ever doubted Jesus when you've seen the success of evil people? You see a known bandit drive by in a new Mercedes, and you think, "Why does he succeed and I am poor? Where is God's justice?"

As strange it sounds, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is a stumbling block for many – sometimes even for us! Jesus himself said, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Mt 11:6). Sometimes we cry out for justice, not mercy. We want to see some

punishment handed out, not grace! Why does God tolerate all this evil? *Jesus, are you really the one? Or should we expect another?*

Look at Jesus' answer for John's disciples. What we notice is that Jesus doesn't directly answer the question, does he?

- Jesus could have said (but didn't), "Yes! I am the promised Messiah! Tell John that I am he and to stop doubting and believe."
- He also could have even provided a bit of an explanation: "Tell John that since he is a prophet, he was looking forward the Messiah. He rightly saw the Messiah as one who takes away sin AND who judges the wicked. But what John doesn't understand is that the judging of the wicked will come in the distant future. The forgiving and the judging do not happen simultaneously! Tell him to be patient and wait... judgment day is still a long way off. But it *will* come."
- Or, Jesus also could have lashed back at him. "Oh you of little faith! Who are you to question God almighty?!" He could have quote Job to him: '**Where were you when I aid the earth's foundation?**' That's right, you didn't exist. God is God and you are not, so stop questioning God's ways!" But Jesus didn't do that either.

Instead, Jesus gave no direct answer or thorough explanation. Jesus said this: "**Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.**"

John's question is, "Where's the judgment?" Jesus answers, "*Look again at my grace!*" When we look closer at Jesus' answer, we see that Jesus points John to two pieces of evidence that show he is indeed the promised Messiah. The first thing that grabs our attention is that Jesus points to his *works of mercy*. But in that very same answer, Jesus points to the *Old Testament prophets* as well – he directs John to once again study God's Word to see what they said about the Messiah. Jesus was quoting from the Old Testament in the answer he gave to John. The prophet Isaiah foretold, "**Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy**" (Is 35:5-6). Isaiah foretold the day when the Messiah would give sight to the blind, heal the lame, and make the mute able to speak again. Jesus points to his works – that he did these things, and even more! He also *healed those with leprosy*, and even more amazing, *raised the dead!* The prophet Isaiah also said, "**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor**" (Is 61:1). Jesus also told John's disciples to tell him how "**the good news is preached to the poor.**" *Jesus strengthened John's faith by showing him how his works of grace were an exact fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.* In fact, his works of grace even exceeded Old Testament prophecy! By answer how he did, Jesus is saying that the only way to remove all doubts

And by directing John to his works of grace, Jesus sent another silent message to John. "Now is the time of grace. If I were not the promised Savior, I wouldn't be fulfilling all the prophecies – I wouldn't be doing these miraculous signs. As surely as I have fulfilled the prophecies of grace, I will also fulfill the prophecies of judgment. But now is not the time. The judgment is still coming."

So how did our Savior answer his doubts? Again, not by giving a direct answer, but rather he provided John with the information and resources necessary to reach his own conclusion. He said, "Search Scriptures and see if I'm not fulfilling the prophecies!" And he

said, “Look at my mercy and forgiveness. Focus on them and see if you’re not convinced that I am the Messiah.”

Jesus didn’t give the direct answer because every great teacher knows that the best learning takes place when the learner is active. Don’t tell someone something if you can guide them to discover it themselves. Jesus tells John’s disciples to go share the evidence with John and let him reach his own conclusions.

Dear friends, when we doubt who Jesus is and what he did – when we doubt the way he rules today – Jesus assures us and strengthens us just as he did John the Baptist. Jesus **points us to his word** to be reassured that he is the promised Savior. And he also **points us to his works of grace**. When doubts arise, dear friends, study God’s Word! This is the only possible way to turn doubt to trust.

- In his Word, God reminds us that we are in great need of his forgiveness. We are sinful from birth. We offend God daily by our sins. Do you find yourself doubting God’s justice? Then let Scripture remind you of your mountain of sin against the holy God! If he acted in justice at this moment, hell would be the only just verdict.
- But also study Scripture to recall God’s wonderful grace and mercy which was revealed to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Recall the great works of mercy done by Jesus. While we *doubt*, Jesus perfectly trusted the will of his heavenly Father – even on the night he was betrayed as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. We question God’s *justice*. In contrast, Jesus quietly and willingly endured what appeared to be the greatest injustice in the history of the world. God’s perfect and holy Son was condemned to die on a cross like a terrible criminal. Jesus could have objected. He could have defended himself. He could have asked, “Where is justice?!” But he went to the cross silently, for there he would suffer and die for every sin, every doubt, and every suspicion of God we ever had. In Jesus, we have complete and full forgiveness.
- And let us not forget the greatest miracle of God’s grace. On the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead. By rising, Jesus put all doubt and fear to rest. God, our heavenly Father, has been merciful and has blessed us! The payment for sin was accepted. Our place in heaven is reserved. We will live with Jesus, for he lives.

We’ve seen the grace. Where is the justice? Dear friends, Jesus is coming again – soon. The judgment we long for will be here when we least suspect it. All of God’s enemies will be condemned for all eternity. Until then, rejoice that we live in this time of grace. Praise God for his patience and mercy that he allows even his most hardened enemies to live out their time on earth. Use this time to share the good news of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with everyone you meet. For God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of his truth. Thank God for his patience and gentleness in dealing with us. As he did for John, our Savior gently encourages us in our faith and reassures us of his love. Be strengthened in your faith as you read of Jesus’ grace and mercy in the pages of Holy Scripture. Dear friends, do not doubt, but believe: Jesus is the promised Savior. He has come. And he is coming! May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. Amen.