

## Cousins Converse • Matthew 11:1–19

My brother, Adam, was in West Palm Beach, Florida for a business meeting and he and a colleague of his were at a restaurant for dinner with the owner of an area business. They were coming toward the close of the deal and as he describes it, the atmosphere was cool. Then my brother said to his client, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” She said no, she didn’t think so. But he pursued it and as they talked further, they finally figured out how they knew each other. They were cousins! First cousins actually. I guess you could say we’re not real close with our cousins in our family!

Jesus had a cousin, did you know that? John probably wasn’t a first cousin, but his mother, Elizabeth, and Jesus’ mother, Mary, were related. In fact, you may recall from the Christmas story that as soon as Mary found out she was pregnant, she went to visit Elizabeth. Elizabeth was among the first, maybe the first, of those that she told about it. Jesus and John were cousins, but they were very different. It’s from a conversation between these two cousins, John and Jesus, that we read, in Matthew 11:1-19. It’s an unusual conversation, because it took place over a distance and took place through other people. They weren’t face to face when they conversed because John was locked up in a cell in the fortress of Machaerus near the Dead Sea. The story goes like this.

*After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the town of Galilee.*

*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.’ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.”*

*“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market places and calling out to others:*

*‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’*

*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners”.’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.”*

John was one of the greatest prophets who ever lived. He was a fiery and eloquent orator. People came by the thousands out to the desert just to hear him, just to see him. He was the hot personality of the day. He said things that other people barely dared to think. He criticized the sins of powerful, political

people. Concerning King Herod Antipas, he said that he had illegally divorced his wife and was immorally married to his new wife. Jesus

himself said that “among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” It was John, in fact, who introduced Jesus to the public. John was preaching and there were thousands around him and he stopped in the middle of what he was saying and pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The crowd turned and gave their attention not to John, but to Jesus. Another time when John saw Jesus he said, “Jesus is worth so much in com-

***He said things that other people barely dared to think.***

parison to me, that I'm not even worthy to get down to untie his sandals." And it was John who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. It was after that baptism of Jesus that God's voice spoke from heaven saying, "This is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased."

John was a powerful, famous, convinced and convicting man. So doesn't it seem strange for John to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" John was having his doubts. John, the one to whom everyone looked for a word from God, this man of concrete convictions, he was now unsure. You see, not even prophets are doubt-proof.

We sometimes think that other people don't have the doubts that we have. We assume that because someone is a prophet or a pastor or a parent or a professor, that they don't wonder about the things we wonder about; that they don't doubt the existence of God. We assume that they don't doubt the truthfulness of the Bible or whether Jesus is who he claimed to be. We assume that they never have questions. Particularly those in positions of authority, we assume that they never wonder if maybe they are completely wrong in what they believe.

We tend to assume that all doubt is sin and that doubts, especially about religious things, ought never be spoken. But that's not so. Here, even John the Baptist, the prophet of God — this righteous man, the cousin of the Christ, he wondered. He wondered if somehow he had made a mistake or perhaps he had misdirected his faith.

Doubts are often triggered by troubles and John's troubles were many. When he made those inflammatory criticisms about King Herod Antipas, the king sent his soldiers to arrest John and throw him into prison. As he was incarcerated he began to wonder if his life was at risk because he had been threatened often. What he did not know was that his life was very much at risk. It wouldn't be too very long until one night there was a wild party thrown and the daughter of the king's new wife, Herodias, danced. Her dance so pleased Herod that to reward her he promised to give her anything she wanted. She consulted with her mother and came back to the king and said, "As my reward and pay for my dancing, I would like the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter." So his worries were not without warrant.

John was really a man of the outdoors. He lived out in the desert. He wore rough, simple clothes, he ate wild food. He was a man who wasn't used to being closed in, and now he was imprisoned in a dungeon. My guess is he must have been like a wild animal put in a cage. One moment he felt like

screaming and pounding on the walls and the next moment he would sink to the floor, exhausted by the confinement and overwhelmed with rage and depression.

Perhaps you've been there. I don't mean in a literal cell with bars at the window. But maybe you've been in a cage of circumstances, with pressures piling up, until you knew that you couldn't possibly get everything done that had to be done. You could not ever meet the expectations that other people put on you. Your life was out of your control. Other people were ordering you around, or hurting you. You screamed that they had no right to do that. You wanted to rip the bars off your cage, but you didn't have the strength to do it. One minute you wanted to kick and climb the walls and the next minute you were so depressed and discouraged that you wanted to give up. Above all you began to doubt. You wondered if there really was a God. Had you been a fool to decide to give your life to follow Jesus Christ? You wanted to ask him just what John asked him, "Jesus, are you the one, or should I be looking for someone else?"

Doubt is often triggered by the troubles that we face. Some people snap out of the doubt very quickly. They might hardly even remember having it. It lasts only a fleeting moment then their faith comes on so strong that it chases all their doubts away.

But often it is not like that. For some of us, doubts are made worse by disappointments. We all have our expectations about the way things should be. We go into marriage with expectations of exactly what marriage should be like. We enter parenthood with a whole list of expectations of the way our children will behave, what they will look like and how they will turn out. We have expectations for jobs, relationships, investments, houses and cars. We have fantasies about the way everything should be. But seldom do such fantasies all come true and then we are crushed by the disappointment. Indeed, disappointments can be very great.

John had both expectations and disappointments. Like most Hebrews in those days, John would have expected that when the Messiah came he would be a political leader. They were fed up with the Romans. Their expectation was that when the Messiah came he would rally the Hebrew people into an army, like the Old Testament armies, that against formidable odds they would be victorious by the hands of God, and the Messiah would ascend the throne of David and great peace and prosperity once again would return to Israel. He would have been disappointed when this didn't happen.

There are many people today who have similar

expectations of Jesus. I think especially in an election year Americans think that Jesus should be in the business of straightening out the country. They think that he should get the right officials elected and the right laws enacted, and that the problems we face in America should be resolved by some supernatural intervention of the Almighty.

John was a man who had great expectations concerning the Messiah. John was also a man who saw sin and who preached judgment and repentance. If we were describing him in a current biography, we would say that John was a hellfire and brimstone type of preacher. He expected Jesus to be much the same. I think that perhaps he was disappointed when Jesus talked so much about love and forgiveness and so little about punishment and repentance.

I was at a conference in Atlanta, and a pastor from a country church in a nearby state came up to me one day and said, "You know, there are a number of old-timers in our country church who come and tell me what preaching is supposed to be like. They say that a good sermon is one

***Doubts are our struggles with reality and truth, but doubts do not change reality.***

where the preacher gets red faced, works up a sweat, shouts a lot, and steps on toes." I think that church like that would extend a unanimous call to John the Baptist because that is precisely the kind of preacher he was. He went out in the desert, his face turned red and the sweat dripped and his voice could be heard for miles around. He stepped on toes, even the king's toes. But he was disappointed that Jesus did not do it the same way. More than anything, I imagine that John wanted and needed a miracle.

The word came back to him that Jesus was giving sight to the blind, making the lame to walk, curing leprosy, and raising the dead. So why didn't Jesus get him out of jail? He must have thought to himself, "Wait a minute, Jesus is my cousin. I am a prophet of God — a righteous man. I have given my whole life, and I am here unjustly. I am here because I have spoken what God told me to say and you would think Jesus could spare a miracle. If he can feed the thousands, if he can strike wonder in the hearts of all these people, if he can do those things which none other has ever done before, why can't he just get me out of jail? That's not that big a miracle, as miracles go."

Many of us know John's thoughts because we've been there. We, too, have thought, if we have not said, "This Jesus who does such spectacular things, this Jesus who has God's power and performs miracles, why doesn't he throw one my way? My

mom is sick, my dad is dying, my daughter is living in sin, my son needs a job, my marriage is a mess. . . I sort of expected that when I became a Christian that I'd get a little bit of favored miracle-working. My back is really up against a wall. Has Jesus run out or is he so short of miracles that he cannot spare one for me?"

John had his expectations, a lot of them, and his disappointments because his expectations were not fulfilled. And so he had his doubts. Now understand something — his doubts did not change reality. Doubts never change reality. Jesus was no less the Messiah, no less the Son of God, his miracles were no less real nor was he any less the Savior of the world. For doubts are constructs of the mind. They are that which we think. Doubts are our struggles with reality and truth, but doubts do not change reality.

The amazing thing about John was that this man who was the prophet, this man who was so unusual and so special, had the courage to speak his doubt. He addressed Jesus straight out where other people could hear. And Jesus answered. He answered him with words of encouragement.

Jesus' first answer listed the evidence. "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." All of these were powerful evidences that Jesus was the Messiah. They were fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies that described what the Messiah would be like and what he would do. Powerful, powerful evidence, but not proof. Because like all evidence, there can always be an explanation or a rationalization. Evidence is never quite complete, never quite proof. While God gave evidence, he did not give proof, because he always leaves room for faith. Faith in Jesus is invariably based upon fact, but faith in Jesus always requires trust beyond the facts.

Imagine with me a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. In a moment of privacy he asks her, "Are you glad you married me?" Before she has a chance to answer, he throws two more questions her way. He asks, "If you had it to do over again, would you still marry me? Are you convinced that I am the best man in the whole world for you?" Now, several answers run through her mind, but it seems like a poor time for a joke and so she says an enthusiastic, "Yes, I am convinced that of all the men in the world, you are the best man for me." She bases that on a half century of evidence. She has seen that he has been faithful to her when she re-

members others whose husbands were not there. She has seen his courage to stand up against wrong when less courageous men would have crumbled and fallen. She has seen him speak the truth when it was a painful thing to do. She has seen his kindness, sometimes when it was kept secret from all others. She has seen that he is a very good man and that for 50 years, their marriage has been magnificent. She has the evidence, but not the proof. For to have the proof that he was the best man in the world for her, she'd have to date approximately two and one-half billion more men. She'd have to go out at least twice with every other man in the world and keep records, compare them and grade them and find out who has the highest score and then get back to him a few thousand years later and say, "Good news! You're number one, you came out 2/100ths of a grade point ahead of all the other guys." But you see, she doesn't need proof. His evidence and her faith are all that they needed.

God has given to us great evidence that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God and the only Savior of humankind. The evidence is in the Bible, in history and in the lives of hundreds of millions of people who have gone before us and who surround us now. Josh McDowell has well titled his best-selling book, Evidence that Demands a Verdict. Evidence, not proof, because God always leaves space for faith. John had to make a personal choice just like we do.

Some people accept the evidence and believe in Jesus. They are happy and they are blessed, while others reject the evidence and Jesus. They say they can't believe. In fact, there are some people who look at the evidence that God offers concerning Jesus and they stumble and trip over the very evidence that was intended to cause them to believe. Jesus spoke concerning both groups of people when he said in Matthew 11:6, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Jesus' encouragement to the doubting John included that evidence, but it went beyond the evidence to explanation. But I don't think it was a simple explanation because it deals with some complex issues. When people are down and doubting, they need words to lift them up. Jesus said, "John, you're the greatest!" He went on with wonderful descriptions of John as a true prophet of God, the one who was predicted in the Old Testament to be another Elijah, to pave the path and announce the coming of the Son of God as the Messiah. But Jesus also explained that they were at a great historical dividing place — it was almost as if he drew a line in the sand and said, "On this side are all the Old Testament proph-

ets and everything that has led up to now."

John the Baptist was the very best prophet of an era which had come to an end. And while John was the last of the old era, Jesus was the first of the new era. The Old Testament promised a Savior to come. It prepared for Jesus and the kingdom of heaven. The old was an era of law, but the new is an era of grace in which Jesus actually brought that kingdom to earth.

Jesus was announcing the arrival of the kingdom of heaven on earth. He brought the power and presence of God to earth and into human lives so that any who became Christians could experience God here and now. It wasn't a matter of waiting until some day. Every Christian would be given heaven's passport, not just as access to heaven some day, but as a passport that could be flashed anywhere on earth right now to say, "I belong to God and I am part of heaven already." A wonderful new era had come.

But it is explained in a strange way. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it." In other words,

*Evidence, not proof, because God always leaves space for faith.*

becoming a Christian and living like heaven here on earth comes

only to those who aggressively go after Jesus and heaven. It's only for the forceful ones.

In the early 80's, we had an interesting project here at Wooddale Church. We engaged a secular research firm to do a market research study on what people think and what their preferences are in our area. One of the things that we specified, because we wanted objectivity, was that the project leader had to be a non-Christian. That request was understood differently than we intended it, and they assigned a Muslim to the project! So it was, I guess, objective because of that. Anyway, all the telephone calls were made, all the data was gathered and the correlations were calculated. Questions such as, "What are the felt needs of your life?" and "How far would you be willing to drive to a church where those needs would be met?" were asked.

We discovered something that I think was very interesting. We discovered that there is a direct correlation between great needs and the willingness to drive great distances to a church that will meet those needs. So, for example, those who were ill with a serious disease or were having family problems, economic reverses, maybe unemployment or bankruptcy, and broken relationships, perhaps an addiction — people who had enormous problems — indicated willingness to drive as long as two and three

hours each way, to go to a church where those needs would be met. Now by contrast, people that didn't think they had unmet needs — you know who they are, they're good looking, healthy, rich, they own the company, they live in a big house that's paid for, their children all get straight A's, their car starts in the winter — they wanted a church that was within walking distance, in case they ever went!

Jesus was saying that the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it. It wasn't the religious elite, it was those who were deaf, who were blind, and who were poor. It was those who were struggling with enormous issues of life who were willing to press through the crowd no matter what anyone said, in order to get to Jesus because he offered a solution that no one else had. He says that the kingdom of heaven and becoming a Christian is like that — it goes to those who admit their needs and forcefully lay hold of Jesus Christ.

Jesus also explained that at the same time there are some people who are so picky and are such spoilsports that they actually miss out on all that Jesus has to offer. They miss the power of God here and now and they miss the assurance of heaven some day. Jesus said they were like children who are out on the streets playing games. One of them takes a flute, and starts playing a dance and says, "Come on, everybody, let's dance!" And other children say, "I don't want to dance." So somebody else says, "Let's play funeral," and they grab the flute and start playing the dirge. Then some of them say, "I don't want to play funeral." So they don't get to play. They are so picky, so insistent on having their own way that they don't get to play at all.

Jesus explains that God was reaching out to people of that generation and he used different approaches, different styles. First came John, who was like a hermit. He lived out in the desert, he never drank a drop of wine. He ate natural food off the land, he wore rough, gunny sack type of clothing and wandered through the wilderness. He spoke for God but people said, "I don't want to listen to him. He's weird looking. You've got to be careful about these religious fanatics and John is a fanatic. He's way too conservative." Next came Jesus. He wore ordinary clothes, dressed just like everybody else. He ate and drank and went to parties and hung around with known sinners. But those same people said, "I'm not going to have anything to do with him. He's too ordinary. Look at him, he doesn't look like a Messiah to me. He's a glutton. He's a drunkard. He's too liberal. I'm not going to follow that Jesus." And the result was that spoilsport picky people miss out on God and heaven.

And I think we have to watch out for that. We've got to be careful that we are not included among those who say, "I don't like this translation of the Bible, I don't like that translation of the Bible, and this church uses this denominational name and that church uses that denominational name." Or, "When I go to church I don't like the music, it's too old fashioned (or too contemporary)" People are so picky and so spoilsport that they miss God. They miss heaven. They miss the power and the presence and the peace of God himself.

Don't be that way. Don't be a picky spoilsport. Be one of those forceful people who pushes your way through the crowds and through the circumstances of life to Jesus. Follow him no matter what. Jesus spoke these words to encourage John and gave to him evidence — evidence to see, evidence to hear. Jesus gave explanation of some pretty complicated stuff. He gave John what he needed to chase all of his doubts away and to enable him to face the realities of his difficulties in the present.

I have not asked you, but I guess I should. Do you have doubts about Jesus? Do you have some recent troubles that triggered those doubts and have some unfulfilled expectations and great disappointments caused those doubts to grow greater? Let me tell you, you are in good company, with John the Baptist, the prophet, the cousin of Jesus.

Let me encourage you, Jesus isn't turned off by your doubts. He's not frightened by your questions. He is not chased away by the concerns that you have, nor angry because you have them. You can tell him all about your doubts. You can say it straight out, "Jesus are you the one? Have I been following the wrong guy? Should I go find someone else?" You can ask him, you can tell him. And then Jesus will give to you all the evidence that you need. He will give to you all the explanation that is required in order to chase those doubts away, but he will always leave space for faith. Examine his evidence. Listen to his explanations. And believe.

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