



Confronting Doubts

JESUS DEMANDS DECISION.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 11:1-6,16-24 Memory Verse: Matthew 11:5-6

Doubts and decisions don't go well together. Whether in business or the military, people want leaders who are decisive. Yet, we often struggle with decisions as questions flood our minds. Often, we're not debating the merits or truth of a matter. Rather, we're doubting ourselves. Have we considered all the possibilities? Is this the right thing to do or merely what we want to do? What will happen if we make the commitment or if we do not?

Jesus demands a decision to trust and follow Him. He understands human frailty, but He does not humor our doubts. Instead, He helps us overcome them. Ultimately, each person must decide if we believe that Jesus is who He claims to be. If so, we have to determine if we are willing to deny ourselves, take up the cross of self-denial, and follow Him. We choose the commitment of discipleship.

As you prepare to lead this session, recall the commitment you have made to Jesus. Renew that commitment if it's grown cold. Ask God to help you know how to guide the adults in your Bible study toward their own commitment to Him.



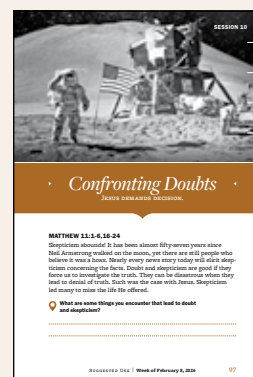
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Skepticism abounds! It has been almost fifty-seven years since Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, yet there are still people who believe it was a hoax. Nearly every news story today will elicit skepticism concerning the facts. Doubt and skepticism are good if they force us to investigate the truth. They can be disastrous when they lead to denial of truth. Such was the case with Jesus. Skepticism led many to miss the life He offered. (PSG, p. 97)

What are some things you encounter that lead to doubt and skepticism?



Understand the Context (Matthew 11:1-30)

Doubts often creep in from the least expected sources. John the Baptist had testified that Jesus was the Messiah. Some of his followers became disciples of Jesus after John pointed Him out as the Lamb of God. Yet, after being imprisoned for speaking against Herod's immoral behavior, John needed reassurance. Was Jesus indeed the One? Should they keep looking? As Jesus went about the towns preaching the gospel of the kingdom, John sent messengers to question Him.

Jesus did not rebuke John or the messengers. He gently pointed out what they had witnessed as He ministered. Sick people were healed. Dead people were raised. Poor people heard the gospel. Jesus's miracles should be testimony enough for John. His record should satisfy our doubts as well.

Turning His attention to the people watching this encounter, Jesus affirmed John and his ministry. The crowds had not sought John in the wilderness because He looked nice or spoke well. They went because he was a prophet. In fact, if they could receive it, John fulfilled the prophecies about the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Jesus knew the fickleness of human nature. Some of the people listening to Him had criticized John for his strange behavior. They wanted a prophet, but they couldn't understand John's rugged self-denial.

In contrast, Jesus's lifestyle was more normal. He ate in their homes and shared their company. But they complained about Him as well. The problem was not John or Jesus. The problem was people who rejected the message and the messengers of God.

We tend to want validation by prophets who look and sound more like ourselves. We often want them to tell us what we want to hear. And we want to make God in our image rather than being remade to reflect Him.

Considering the cities where He spent the most time and performed the most miracles, Jesus issued stern warnings. Places like Capernaum and Bethsaida should have been bastions of belief. Instead, the people's doubts led them toward destruction. Rather than repenting and following Jesus, most sought the benefit of His power without accepting His authority.

Turning His face toward heaven, Jesus offered thanks to the Father who revealed gospel truth to the innocent while hiding it from those who were self-satisfied. Looking again to the crowd, He invited those who were tired, needy, and weary to come to Him. He was humble, but no man was bolder. He was lowly, but no man was stronger. By yoking themselves to Him, they would find rest for their souls.

Read Matthew 11:1-6, 16-24 in your Bible. In what ways were doubt and skepticism expressed? How did Jesus respond to the doubters and skeptics? (PSG, p. 98)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display Pack Item 1 (Map: Jesus's Ministry Around Galilee), Pack Item 3 (Poster: Jesus's Mission), and Pack Item 6 (Poster: Prophecies Fulfilled by Jesus).

INTRODUCE:

Call on a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 97 of the PSG.

ASK:

What are some things you encounter that lead to doubt and skepticism? (PSG, p. 97)

EXPLAIN:

Suggest that doubt and skepticism may be very natural and even necessary responses when we are confronted with new ideas or decisions. Note that, even as believers, we might experience times when we are tempted to doubt Jesus in one way or another.

SHARE:

Point out **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Jesus's Mission*) and remind the group of why Jesus came to earth. Explain that while He fulfilled His role perfectly, even those who knew Him best had questions about Him. Share that today's session examines the doubts of one of these people and how Jesus responded in love and truth.

TRANSITION:

By examining what Matthew had to say about Jesus and His response to skepticism and doubt, we can learn how to respond to our own doubts—and the doubts of those around us.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play “We Believe” by Newsboys and share the printed lyrics. Lead the group to identify the theme of the song. Guide the group to circle the words and phrases that express doubt. Invite the group to also identify significant words and phrases that allude to faith. Ask: ***Why would a song that emphasizes belief also allude to doubt?*** Affirm that it is possible for believers to question Jesus at times in their lives. If you are comfortable, share a time when you have doubted Jesus in one way or another and how you overcame those doubts. Guide the group to look up Mark 9:24 for further insight into how belief and doubt tend to mirror each other.

Uncertainty (Matt. 11:1-6)

1 When Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples, he moved on from there to teach and preach in their towns. **2** Now when John heard in prison what the Christ was doing, he sent a message through his disciples **3** and asked him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” **4** Jesus replied to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: **5** The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news, **6** and blessed is the one who isn’t offended by me.”

(v. 1) After *giving instructions to his twelve disciples*, Jesus *moved on* to a new location. He followed their preparation by going into *their towns* to *teach and preach*. The phrase “their towns” referred either to the hometowns of the disciples or possibly the towns where they were sent to minister.

The text distinguishes between Jesus’s teaching and His preaching. His teaching involved instruction, while His preaching exhorted people to accept and act upon the message of God’s kingdom. Jesus wanted the people to know God’s truth confidently and obey it without reservation.

(v. 2) *Now when* introduced Jesus’s dialogue with the *disciples* of John the Baptist. This exchange occurred while John was *in prison*. Herod arrested John because the prophet did what prophets do. He declared God’s judgment against an immoral king (Matt. 14:3-4).

Although imprisoned, John could interact with his followers. Possibly through them, John *heard . . . what the Christ was doing*. However he learned about Jesus’s ministry, John *sent a message* to Jesus *through his disciples*.

(v. 3) John’s query was curious: *Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?* The phrase “one who is to come” referred to the Messiah. John had identified Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:29-36), and some scholars believe imprisonment caused him to waver. However, his knowledge of Jesus’s ministry was based on his followers’ reports. They may have been biased because Christ’s ministry was so different from John’s work (Matt. 9:14).

(vv. 4-5) Jesus’s response demonstrated His respect for John. Instead of rebuking John’s followers, He merely *replied* to them, a term without strong emotions. Jesus told them to *report to*

John what they heard and saw from Jesus. Some interpreters translate this phrase as “tell John.” Some writers suggest this includes what Jesus taught as well as the wonders He performed.

Jesus’s works involved miraculous healing, such as restoring eyesight to *the blind* and strength to *the lame*. People with *leprosy are cleansed*, and those who were *deaf* could hear again. Beyond that, He did what no healer had done: *the dead are raised* (Matt. 9:18-26). These acts fulfilled messianic prophecies, such as Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:5-6. Even more important, *the poor* were hearing the *good news* of God’s kingdom. Taking this message to the oppressed and downtrodden also fulfilled messianic prophecy (Isa. 61:1).

(v. 6) Almost as an epilogue, Jesus added a personal word for John and his disciples: *Blessed is the one who isn’t offended by me*. “Blessed” can be rendered as “happy.” Some commentators think John’s imprisonment led him to succumb to the popular notion that the Messiah should be a political liberator. If this were true, John might be *offended* that Jesus’s work did not extend to freeing him from prison.

However, this view is doubtful since John previously told his followers Jesus was greater (John 1:30). Later, when John’s disciples reported that more people were following Jesus, John replied that Jesus must increase while he (John) must decrease (3:23-30).

The term “offended” also can be rendered “scandalized” or “embarrassed.” Rather than being disappointed by Him, happy (blessed) individuals see in Jesus the fulfillment of their hopes for the Messiah. We may experience honest doubts about Jesus, but confessing those doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith and affirming the truth (16:13).

EXPLORE Matthew 11:1-6



APPLICATION POINT: We may experience honest doubts, but confessing our doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith.

READ:

Guide the group to read Matthew 11:1-6 silently and to reflect on why John and his disciples might have had doubts about Jesus.

CONTEXT:

Allow adults to share their thoughts about John's doubt. Note that John's ministry had diminished. Share that he had been arrested and imprisoned for taking a stand against Herod.

SAY:

For some reason, John felt the need to question Jesus. He may have been seeking some measure of reassurance in prison. He also may have reflected the first-century understanding that the Messiah would drive out Rome and reestablish David's kingdom. He might have wondered why Jesus hadn't set him free. Regardless of the reasons, it's a good reminder that even Jesus's most loyal followers can have doubts at times.

DISCUSS:

Refer the group to **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Jesus's Mission). Allow adults to share how this description of Jesus's mission aligns with His own description in verses 4-5. Point out that while John's ministry was waning, Jesus was upending religious tradition and His disciples were beginning to replicate His work.

ASK:

How would John have understood Jesus's reply in verses 4-5 based on his knowledge of the Old Testament? (PSG, p. 101)

RECAP:

To supplement the conversation, share this content from page 100 of the PSG:

To answer John's question, Jesus pointed to the evidence. He gave John's disciples a list of miracles He had performed. In doing this, Jesus was alluding to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the types of miracles the Messiah would perform. Jesus was saying to John, "Identify me through the miracles that I do."

REVIEW:

Refer to **Pack Item 6** (Poster: Prophecies Fulfilled by Jesus) and highlight the preaching and healing ministries on the chart. Mention that Jesus's response also resembles the Messiah's "job description" in Isaiah 61:1-3.

TRANSITION:

It is one thing to have doubts. The key is knowing how to respond to those doubts. Jesus's response encourages us to bring our questions to Him and to ground ourselves in His words and actions.

Cynicism (Matt. 11:16-19)

16 “To what should I compare this generation? It’s like children sitting in the marketplaces who call out to other children: **17** We played the flute for you, but you didn’t dance; we sang a lament, but you didn’t mourn! **18** For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ **19** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

(vv. 16-17) After speaking to John’s disciples, Jesus turned to the crowds and expressed His high regard for John the Baptist and his ministry (vv. 7-15). He reminded them that they had sought John because He was a true prophet of God. In fact, John had fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal. 3:1).

Jesus understood the cynical nature of human beings. So, He offered a broad, rhetorical question: **To what should I compare this generation?** While Jesus likely was referring to His contemporary population of Israel, His remarks could apply to any generation.

They were like **children sitting in the marketplaces**. In most towns, the market was not just a place to buy food and goods. It was the center of the community. While adults bargained over purchases, the children sat or played. Jesus compared this generation to children who would **call out to other children**, asking them to join in their games.

In this case, nothing the hypothetical group did seemed to satisfy the others. If one group **played the flute**, the others refused to **dance**. This metaphor describes a merry scene of music, possibly like a wedding. If the joyful music got no response, they **sang a lament**, a song of sorrow as at a funeral. Yet, the other children **didn’t mourn**. Children’s games often imitate scenes observed in the lives of adults. This scene wasn’t intended to portray an actual wedding or funeral, but a pretend one.

(vv. 18-19) Jesus’s purpose in the short analogy was to show the cynicism of the general population. John the Baptist lived an ascetic lifestyle, **neither eating nor drinking**. This statement did not mean that John never ate or drank anything, but he did live the life of a Nazirite, drinking neither wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15).

Living primarily in isolation, his garments included a coarse and crude camels’ hair coat and a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). These were not the actions of a normal person in society. While many people came to John’s baptism, many others simply dismissed him as having **a demon**.

In contrast, **the Son of Man came eating and drinking**. The title “Son of Man” was understood by most Jews as referring to the Messiah. Though used in the third person, it’s clear Jesus was speaking of Himself. Again, the phrase “eating and drinking” does not suggest that Jesus was a **glutton and a drunkard**. Unlike John, He merely joined in normal social engagements.

The problem for the critics had nothing to do with how much Jesus ate or drank. Instead, it was about the company He kept. Jesus was a **friend of tax collectors and sinners**. He socialized with them, and that raised serious questions in the minds of those devoted to the first-century Jewish religious establishment.

Using a proverb, Jesus judged this cynical attitude by noting **wisdom is vindicated by her deeds**. “Vindicated” means to show something is correct. In this case, genuine wisdom is revealed by what it produces. Some scholars read this statement as indicating that the truth of a matter is known by the facts seen in life.

We are to be sensitive to the truth that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations. Instead of being cynical about matters we don’t understand, we need to be open to learning and applying biblical truth.

**READ:**

APPLICATION POINT: We are to be sensitive to the fact that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations.

Enlist a volunteer to read Matthew 11:16-19 as adults compare Jesus's ministry and John the Baptist's ministry.

ASK:

What primary complaints did people have about John and Jesus? Why?

EXPLAIN:

Summarize this content from page 102 in the PSG for more context:

"In Jesus's comparison, He most likely was referring to two popular games that children played, weddings and funerals. The "flute" was typically used at weddings, while a "lament" was sung at funerals. In these activities children would act out two important events in the life of the community. . . . Inevitably there would be a child or two who refused to play. . . . With this comparison, Jesus set up the hearers for the condemnation He was about to bring. . . . John and Jesus lived contrasting lifestyles. Yet neither approach was acceptable to those who were skeptical of both men. They resented John's austerity and call for repentance. . . . For the critics, Jesus wasn't strict enough in following the traditions of Judaism."

ASK:

How do people's preconceived notions about God cause them to miss what He is doing? (PSG, p. 103)

TRANSITION:

In God's design, John's asceticism and Jesus's liberty were both appropriate. Each followed the path God had for them. Believers have to be careful to avoid the trap of cynicism, thinking that "one size fits all" when living out our faith.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Collector's Item

Bring a collector's item, such as an old coin or book, to show the group. Suggest that the collector's item is authentic and valuable because of its age or rarity. Direct adults to raise their hands if they believe your claim. Tell the group that the item has a legendary reputation for wielding a magic power. Again, direct them to raise their hands if they believe that claim. Ask: ***Would you change your mind if you saw a demonstration of that power?*** Affirm that humans are cynical by nature. Highlight Jesus's comment that true wisdom can be discerned by how people live each day. Discuss how showing wisdom can disarm the arguments of cynics who question Jesus as Messiah.

Denial (Matt. 11:20-24)

20 Then he proceeded to denounce the towns where most of his miracles were done, because they did not repent: **21** “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago. **22** But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. **23** And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today. **24** But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

(v. 20) People who constantly doubt the truth about Christ ultimately deny Him altogether. In this case, some of those people lived in **towns where most of his miracles were done**. Jesus **proceeded to denounce** these places and their non-believing residents.

The word “denounce” suggests a strong reprimand. Instead of praising God for Jesus’s miracles, the people cynically dismissed Him and refused to **repent**. Those who refuse to turn from their sin are already under condemnation for their lack of faith in Christ (John 3:18-19).

(v. 21) Using a strong expression of grief (**woe**), Jesus compared Jewish towns like **•Chorazin** and **•Bethsaida** to Gentile cities like **•Tyre and •Sidon**. Jesus performed **miracles** in the first pair of cities. The four Gospels do not mention much about Chorazin, but its proximity to Bethsaida and Capernaum suggests its residents also witnessed Jesus’s miracles. The residents should have believed and repented readily.

In contrast, Tyre and Sidon were rich, coastal trade centers in Phoenicia, but they were spiritually impoverished. Isaiah and other prophets had foretold their ruin because of their haughty idolatry (Isa. 23:1-5; Ezek. 26:1-4ff). Yet, Jesus said these Gentiles would have **repented in sackcloth and ashes** if they had seen the wonders performed around Chorazin and Bethsaida. People put on sackcloth, a coarse uncomfortable cloth, as a sign of mourning or grief. As they wailed, they often tossed ashes over their heads.

(v. 22) Jesus warned about the coming **day of judgment**. Sometimes termed “the day of the Lord,” this phrase described final reckoning before God’s throne (1 John 4:17; Rev. 20:11-15). Prophets described it as a harsh punishment for unbelievers (Zeph. 1:15; Jer. 46:10).

Jesus said it would be **more tolerable** for those who had not seen His glory. This does not mean they will somehow be pardoned. Rather, it suggests degrees of punishment.

(vv. 23-24) Even **Capernaum** would face stricter judgment. As the largest village on the Sea of Galilee’s northern coast, Capernaum was a major trade center. But the people apparently thought they should be **exalted to heaven**, a euphemism for the highest praise.

Instead, Jesus said unbelievers would **go down to •Hades**. **Hades** referred to the place of the dead where unbelievers are tormented (Luke 16:23). Despite seeing Jesus’s **miracles**, the people had not repented. As in verse 21, the word for “miracles” also can be rendered “power.”

Jesus compared Capernaum to **•Sodom**. Perhaps no city was considered more wicked than Sodom. Yet, the evil residents of that infamous city **would have remained until today** if they had seen what the residents of Capernaum saw. On that judgment day, punishment would be **more tolerable** for Sodom than for Capernaum.

Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus. We have no excuse for not following Him in faith.

Key Doctrine

Last Things

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See Luke 16:19-26; 2 Peter 3:7-13.)

**READ:**

APPLICATION POINT: Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus.

Direct the group to stand and read Matthew 11:20-24 aloud together. Suggest they recite the passage with the emotion they think Jesus shared.

CONTEXT:

Point to **Pack Item 1** (Map: Jesus's Ministry Around Galilee). Note Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum are on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Point out that Jesus was calling out cities where residents had seen Him work miracles. Affirm that this privilege came with great responsibility to demonstrate faith, a responsibility that many residents failed to embrace.

RECAP:

To highlight unbelief in these cities, share the following content from page 104 of the PSG and highlight the contrast:

Jesus indicted [Bethsaida and Chorazin] by pointing to two notoriously pagan Gentile cities, Tyre and Sidon. These two cities had been dreaded enemies of ancient Israel. Jesus said if they had seen the same miracles the inhabitants of Chorazin had seen, they would have expressed repentance by wearing the mourning clothes of sackcloth with ashes poured over their heads as a sign of grief. . . . [For Capernaum], Sodom was the example. Throughout the Old Testament, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah served as the prime example of wickedness before God.

ASK:

Jesus pronounced a warning to the cities that had the greater opportunities to witness His miracles. How does this warning apply to you? (PSG, p. 105)

CHALLENGE:

Note that the application point for these verses warns us to take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus. Encourage adults to consider if their understanding of who Jesus is and what He has done for them needs an adjustment.

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Find the location of Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum in a Bible atlas or map. Then, use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these locations. ***What are some significant facts about these cities that Jesus emphasized?***

CHALLENGE

REVIEW:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 106 of the *Personal Study Guide*.

- *We may experience honest doubts, but confessing our doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith.*
- *We are to be sensitive to the fact that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations.*
- *Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus.*

REFLECT:

Encourage the group to think about which of the following represents the greatest challenge for them: doubts about Jesus, being sensitive to God's work, or accepting the responsibilities of our walk with Jesus. Spend a few minutes discussing their responses and why they made those choices.

DISCUSS:

Direct adults to read silently the first set of questions on page 106 of the PSG and to identify reasons believers might struggle with doubts about Jesus. After a few minutes, lead a brief discussion about their answers. Allow them to suggest ways they can support one another without alienation or condemnation of honest questions.

PRAY:

Invite adults to take a few minutes to pray silently about any doubts or struggles they might be facing. After a minute or so, encourage them to pray for the person on their left and right. Close the session in prayer, asking God to give adults the courage to face their doubts and to seek ways to demonstrate their faith in genuine ways this week.

AFTER THE SESSION

Text or email the group and assure them that you are praying for any struggles they may be having. Invite them to send you a personal message describing their struggles if appropriate. Encourage them to read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 106 of the PSG. Affirm that you are willing to help them connect with a mentor who can walk with them.

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