

**Gaudete, A ✕ D 2009**  
**Matthew 11:2-11**

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 Who is the greatest preacher ever? And what's the yardstick by which to measure greatness? Big crowds? Overflowing offering plates? Ever-expanding buildings? Book deals, weighty theological theses, a television hour? Those are only some of the things you might consider as hallmarks of greatness. What about the preacher who drives away his congregation, who offends everyone, who is abrasive? "Listen preacher, take it easy in the pulpit this week. We overheard some people talking, and they're threatening to find a different congregation. They weren't overly excited at having been called a pack of vipers who were in danger of going to hell if they persisted in their ways. Talk of hell and the wrath of God is just going to drive people away. And—if we might suggest it, preacher—you just might tone down the attacks against the governor. What does it matter if he killed his brother to marry his sister-in-law? If they love each other, that's what matters. There's no reason to make Herod mad at you. Let it slide. Pretend not to know about it."

2 Your answer to the question and Jesus' answer might not be the same. John the Baptist has none of the marks of greatness, no big church to preach in, no successful church marketing strategy, no winsome preaching style, no catchy sermon series, and yet Jesus declares of John, that among those born of women, none is greater. He has none of the external marks of success it would seem, no big salary, plush parsonage, or dapper duds. He drives people away in droves. He's caustic, calling everyone a sinner who deserves hell. Eventually, John offends the wrong guy. He calls Herod to repent, so Herod has John thrown in prison. The wilderness congregation presumably disbands. A few disciples remain, but they must have felt a little jaded. What happened to the greatest preacher of all time?

3 Three years ago, as John saw Jesus approaching for the first time, he pointed and declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." Behold, the One foreshadowed by the innocent lamb in the Garden of Eden who died to give his skin as a clothing for Adam and Eve. Behold the One foreshadowed by every Jewish sacrifice for sin, every animal that surrendered its life, bared its neck, shed its blood to cover sin. Lambs take away sin by dying. Behold, the Lamb of God who will do the same. Shortly thereafter, John gave the sin of the world to the Lamb of God. He poured the scummy waters of the Jordan over the head of the Savior; to fulfill all righteousness, John did to Jesus what was only done to sinners. He is, after all, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

4 But now John is in prison, sending messengers to Jesus to ask if He's the one or if they should expect another? What a downer John is. Today is, after all, Gaudete, Rejoice Sunday. Rejoice, the Introit exhorts you. Rejoice, cry the flowers which make their return to the chancel only one Sunday in Advent. Rejoice, the new rose vestments and paraments exhort. Rejoice sings the lone rose colored candle in the Advent wreath. But John is in prison. This is the most successful preacher ever? Shackled and bound, just biding his time until Herod's step daughter dances for her step father and asks for the head of John on a platter. If this is what preachers successful by Jesus' measurement can expect, it's little wonder that so many preachers and congregations want to measure success by the world's standards instead.

5 What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? A preacher who bends and sways with every passing current? One who knows when the Word of God is best supplemented with a little self-help psychology or where the clear commands and condemnations of God are best replaced with something that will offend people less? No? Then what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Comfortable, effeminate clothes are for those in kings' palaces, in the good graces of the elite, those whose preaching has boundaries and limits. Not John. His camel fur and leather belt set him apart from the popular circles. What then? What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, and more than a prophet, the one of whom it is written, "I will send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

6 John the Baptist is the model for preachers. John went before the Lord to prepare people for His coming. Preachers follow the Lord, preparing the way for His return. So speaking of the Office of the Holy Ministry, St. Paul declared, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy." What are they to preach? The same thing John preached, the same thing Paul preached, the same thing Isaiah preached: "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

7 What did you go out to see? Don't look for success in any of the worldly indicators of success. John faithfully preached the Word of God and ended up beheaded. Don't even look for big crowds or full offering plates. Those are not indicators of success. Nor are they what you've come to see. The grass withers and flowers fade. Only the Word of God endures forever.

8 So from prison, John sent his messengers to the Word of God, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Maybe at the twilight of his life John has a moment of doubt. If so, this is the right way to deal with doubt. His doubt drives him to Jesus, the source of faith. Maybe John sends his messengers to Jesus for his own sake. Or maybe he sends them to Jesus for their sake: "Behold, the Lamb of God. Do nothing else. Behold nothing else." John is about to die. His ministry seems about to fail, at least by worldly standards. So he sends his disciples to Jesus. Even in death, John does what he did in life. He sends them to Jesus. Are you the One who is to come? Go and tell John what you see and hear. The blind see; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; and the poor have the good news preached to them. Blessed is the one not offended by Jesus.

9 What did you come out to see? Not popular preachers, nor worldly signs of success. Those are not the things of Jesus nor the things of His Church. Preachers may lose their heads or—worse—their salaries. Congregations may lose members or buildings. Success is not measured in staying profitable or alive, but in staying with Jesus. So the most successful preachers are those who point you to Jesus, and the most successful Christians are those who, continuing to hear and receive the Word of God, remain with Jesus. All flesh is grass, and grass withers and flowers fade. The Word lasts.

10 John went before Jesus as the forerunner before the Lord in life and also in death. Jesus is the One who was to come; there is no other. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world does so in His death. For John, for you, the Lamb of God was slain, roasted on the

spit of the cross. And now He for whom John prepared the way has prepared the way for John and for you. He has paved the path into and out of death. He has prepared the way to eternal life. The Word become flesh, God in human flesh, Jesus Christ, remains. He died and rose for John and for you.

11 What did you come out to see? Jesus. He is the success of preachers and the success of His Church. He is the Word that endures when everything else withers and fades. His Word in Holy Baptism has declared you to belong to Him. The Word endures. His Word in Holy Absolution declares you forgiven. The Word endures. His Word in Holy Communion delivers His own Body and Blood to you to forgive your sins. The Word endures. Worldly success withers and fades, but the Word succeeds, lasts. Gaudete, rejoice. When doubts press, go to Jesus. When Herod threatens your life, go to Jesus. He is the One who is to come. There is no other. Rejoice.

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