

What are your expectations of Jesus?

Matthew 11:1-19

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When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. 2 Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" 4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. 6 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

16 "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, 17 "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not 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 at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matt 11:1-19).

Today we begin our fourth major section in our journey through the Gospel of Matthew. So far our study has taken us through the following sections:

- He's the One – The introduction of Jesus as the Messiah (Matt 1-4)
- Get Real – The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7)
- Follow Him – Jesus' first miracles and instructions to his disciples (Matt 8-10)

Our new section gives us numerous portraits of Jesus. It shows us how Jesus begins to deal with a crowd that is growing hostile. In Matthew 11-12 is loaded with examples of Jesus

having conversations and confrontations with people, and the main problem that surfaces is that the Jewish people do not believe in Jesus. He paints a picture for them as to who he is, and for the most part, they do not like it. This section is characterized far more by unbelief rather than belief, by conflict rather than agreement, and by a growing opposition rather than popular support. Jesus and his teaching see growing strife, especially with the religious crowd.

Matthew 11-12 will show us many conflicts. Jesus will be asked to prove that he is who he claims to be (12:38-42). He will be accused of being empowered in his healing by a demon (12:22-32). He will be attacked for breaking the Sabbath by healing a man (12:5-13) and for allowing his disciples to pluck grain for food (12:1-8).

There will be strong words. Jesus will tell the rulers that their judgment will be worse than what happened to Sodom (11:24), that anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven (12:31), that every person will have to give an account for every careless word (12:26), and that his real family are those who do the will of the Father (12:50).

Our passage for this morning introduces this section by showing us a portrait of Jesus as the promised messiah who doesn't meet the expectations of the people. He is not widely accepted or embraced. And the main reason that he is not recognized as the Messiah is because of people's expectations. In other words, their expectations led to unbelief.

The Roots of Expectations in Unbelief

I believe that there are often roots of expectations underneath our unbelief. Unbelief often surfaces because life is not turning out as we had thought, and the result can be a crisis or failure of faith. Unfulfilled expectations challenge what we believe. Disappointing circumstances can create unbelief.

I'm sure that you've heard an unbeliever say, "I cannot believe in a God who allowed such pain in my life." And I'm also sure that you know professing believers who abandoned the faith because believing in God didn't give them what they wanted. Luke 8:13 describes these people as those who "hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away." They professed belief in Jesus, but they didn't expect testing.

On a less dramatic level, I think that every follower of Jesus battles moments of unbelief because of expectations. The Bible is full of examples of this: Abraham regarding God's promise of a great nation and their infertility (Gen. 16), Israel at the base of Mount Sinai, believing that Moses must be dead (Ex. 32), Saul's improper sacrifice after waiting for Samuel (1 Sam 13), and Elijah on the run from Jezebel (1 Kings 19). In every case there was some kind of expectation in the person's mind and heart, and the crisis of belief came when those expectations were not met. Unfulfilled expectations create a potential crisis of faith.

Can you think of times in your life when you faced this challenge? I sure can. It is amazing to me how many times my expectations wage war against what I believe to be true about God. Disappointment and despair can cause doubt.

Three Common Statements of Unbelief

Matthew 11:1-19 shows us three situations in which unfulfilled expectations create unbelief. I'd like us to wrestle with today with this question: "What are your expectations of Jesus?" and show you where I see this in our text.

Statement #1: I thought you'd change things by now

Our first section is Matthew 11:1-6. It begins with transitional phrase that we've heard before: "When Jesus had finished instructing his disciples..." We heard this in 7:28, and it is a statement that marks the close of his instructions on the mission of the disciples and moves us into this new section on the portraits of Jesus.

We learn in verse two that John the Baptist is in prison. He had been arrested (4:12) because he had openly condemned Herod Antipas for his improper divorce and marriage to his half-brother's wife, Herodias (see Matt 14:3-4). According to the biblical historian Josephus, John was imprisoned at Machaerus which was a fortress near the Dead Sea.

John sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him a pressing question: "Are you the one who is to come {Messiah}, or shall we look for another?" Now that is a very interesting question. What is John asking? He is asking Jesus if he really is the Messiah. Before I tell you why John is asking that, look at Jesus' answer:

4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them..." (Matt 11:4-5).

Jesus quotes a number of Old Testament themes regarding the coming Messiah (see Isaiah 26:19, 29:18, 35:5-6, 42:7, 61:1). He cites these examples as sufficient proof that he is indeed the coming One or the Messiah.

But it is Jesus' statement in verse 6 that gives us a clue as to what is going on here. Jesus says, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." The word for offended is skandalizo. You can hear the word "scandal" in it, and it means to be tripped up or to stumble. Jesus uses a form of the word in Mark 14:27 to predict the "falling away" of his disciples when the persecution of his passion begins. So Jesus is telling John's disciples to look at the works that he is doing, and he adds a rebuke regarding not being offended.

What is going on here? Remember John and Jesus had different ministries. John's message was primarily one of divine judgment. He saw the Messiah through this lens: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:12). John anticipated that the Messiah would usher in a season of judgment and divine retribution. Perhaps he longed for this with a new level of urgency since he is locked up in a remote prison. But so far nothing like that has happened; in fact it has been quite the opposite.

Jesus' ministry has been more about teaching, healing, and compassion than judgment. He has been moving among the people, teaching them about the kingdom of God, healing their diseases, and fellowshiping with the outcast of society. He breaks customs and societal norms, especially regarding the Sabbath, but there is no sign of judgment. John was looking for a Judgment-Messiah, and Jesus was not on his script.

Have you ever sensed that Jesus wasn't on your script? Ever wondered why God doesn't do something more than what he seems to be doing? Ever struggled with how unfair life can be without any clear sense of justice or resolution? Ever said, "How long must this go on, God! Why won't you do something?" Ever thought, "Don't you see what is happening here?"

If you've ever thought that, you've got good company:

- How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their destruction (Ps 35:17)
- How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? (Ps 82:2)
- How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? (Ps 119:84)

What is the solution? Psalm 13 gives it to us so clearly:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?... 5 But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. 6 I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me (Psalms 13:1-2, 5-6).

When our expectations on the Lord's timing have been disappointed, we need to embrace the insight of the Psalmist. Notice what he does to battle:

1. Chooses to trust in the steadfast love of God (v 5)
2. Chooses to take joy in what is supremely valuable: redemption (v 5)
3. Chooses to praise the Lord for his goodness (v 6)

The psalmist fights the unbelief of impatience by anchoring his heart to God. He chooses to trust even though it seems as though he and God are not on the same script; he chooses to hope in God even though he thought things would be different.

Statement #2: I don't see how this makes any sense

The second section is addressed the crowd. Jesus turns from answering John's disciples, and he asks the crowd a question (v 7) – "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" He asks this question three times (v 7, 8, 9), and his purpose is to help the people understand John's redemptive significance.

The first two questions are sarcastic. John is surely not like a flimsy reed blowing in the wind (v 7). Nor is he like those who live in palaces and luxury. Everyone knew the markers of John's ministry as hardship and rough clothing. These questions are setting the people up.

The third question hits the target. John is a prophet! (v 9). But he is not just any prophet. John's ministry has a historical connection to it. In verse 10 Jesus explains that John is the fulfillment of what was written in Malachi 3:1. He is the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. John's ministry marks the beginning of a new era of ministry. That is why Jesus affirms John's greatness (v 11) while in the next breath saying, "yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Jesus is explaining that the dawn of a new day has come. True kingdom living makes one greater than John the Baptist.

Next Jesus provides some further color on the new era and John's connection to it. First, he talks about violence and the kingdom (v 12) indicating that the kingdom of God (as communicated through John and Jesus) has suffered from violent attack. Meaning that both the religious leaders (rulers of the synagogues) and the political leaders (Herod) have tried to use violence to stop what is happening. Second and more importantly, Jesus says that John is the culmination or the climax of the prophecies from the Law and the prophets. Third, Jesus says that John is "Elijah who is to come," referring to the prophesy in Malachi 4:5 –

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes."

Therefore, Jesus is clearly telling the people of Israel that the plan of God is unfolding right before them. God's word – through the Old Testament prophets – is true, but they are missing it. That is why Jesus says two things:

- 1. "If you are willing to accept it."** This is directly connected to belief. "To accept" means that one believes. It is the same word that Paul uses to describe a person's belief that the Bible is truly the Word of God.

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13)

2. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” This is a frequent sober warning about the importance of hearing and listening to what is being said.¹

Do you see what Jesus is calling for here? He is calling them to believe and to have faith. He is calling them to believe that God’s word is being fulfilled **right now!** He is inviting them to place their hope in what they cannot see. He’s calling for faith.

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “the assurance of things **hoped for**, the conviction of things **not seen.**” Belief in Jesus is rooted in faith.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Coming to Christ means that you, by faith, place your trust in someone who you have not seen and you believe in a sacrifice on your behalf that is almost unbelievable. But that is why it is called faith. It is the divine assurance that things are true, things which seem foolish to others.

Coming to Jesus means that you believe even though that there things that you can’t figure out.

Statement #3: This is not how I would do it

Jesus concludes this section on unbelief by a powerful illustration. He makes a vivid comparison in verse 16. He compares this generation to “children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their playmates”, and these children will not play with others. They are stubborn and selfish.

Remarkably, Jesus compares John to a dirge singer and himself to a flute player – “We played the flute for you and you did not dance, we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.” He calls the people of Israel selfish children who are intolerable. They refuse to play regardless of the event or the tune.

Jesus then explains exactly what he is saying:

¹¹ see Matt 13:43, Rev 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22

“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 at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Matt 11:18-19).

The people reject John because he is too ascetic, and they reject Jesus because he is too unorthodox. They say that John has a demon, and Jesus is a partier. What does Jesus say to this?

“Wisdom is justified by her deeds.” Jesus is saying that the proof will be, not in what people expect, but in the fruits of their ministry. Luke’s account (7:35) of this reads “wisdom is justified by all her children.” The fruits of the kingdom will be seen in the lives and actions of those who believe.

The people of Israel looked at John and Jesus’ ministry and said, “that is not the way to do it – so extreme and so non-traditional.” Their agenda ruined their ability to see what God was really up to. They missed the Messiah and the manifestation of Elijah because they thought they knew how to do things better than God.

I often read Psalm 135:6 to remind my heart that God is not obligated to do things according to my plans:

5 For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. 6 Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps (Ps 135:5-6).

Unbelief often takes roots in our hearts when we think we’ve got a better plan than God. And the problem is that we can not only be guilty of unbelief; we will miss the wonderful things that God is up to. We can’t see the spiritual forest because it is missing a few of our trees!

So what are your expectations of Jesus? Do you see how underneath unbelief can easily lie the roots of our expectations? Unfulfilled expectations challenge what we believe. Disappointing circumstances can create unbelief.

Today, like in Jesus’ day, he invites us to trust him, to believe in him, to hope in him. We need to keep our selfish and proud expectations in check or we will miss what Jesus is doing.

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