

“Disappointment with God”
Matthew 11:2-19
February 25, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

John the Baptist, still a young man in his early thirties, has been languishing in prison for several months by order of King Herod. Such opposition was not unexpected by John. After all, most of the great prophets of the Old Testament suffered similarly. Wasn't the great prophet Elijah chased all over the country by the evil Queen Jezebel, who sought his death? So John would not have been surprised at receiving similar treatment. But he also reasoned that things are different now because the long-awaited Messiah had arrived in Jesus, and it had been prophesied of him by Isaiah that he would set the prisoners free (61:1). Surely Jesus would soon begin the judgment about which John had prophesied. John had said of Jesus, **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees”** (Matt. 3:10). But when he heard of the things Jesus was doing, they sounded nothing like what he expected. He heard of no judgment, only words of mercy and deeds of kindness.

When God acts differently than we expect of him, it can easily bring a crisis of faith that we call doubt. A couple I once knew was so excited when they got pregnant somewhat late in life. The husband believed that he heard from God that this child would be God's special gift to them, a message he excitedly passed on to his wife. When the child was born with special needs that would never be cured, this couple was sent into a spiritual tailspin for several years. They had begun to doubt God's goodness. John was experiencing doubt here too. The passage describes both the believing and the unbelieving kind of doubt.

I. Believing Doubt

Does the Bible commend or condemn doubt? That question is all the more important since our society sees doubt as a good thing, a sign of an open mind. We are encouraged to doubt everything in order that we might arrive at the truth of the matter. While there is certainly some merit to that position, it does have a critical flaw. The critical flaw is that it assumes that we have one thing that should not be doubted, and that's the capacity of human reason to discern the difference between what is true and false. In other words, this position says “doubt everything except yourself.” The Bible's perspective is quite different from that. G. K. Chesterton summarized it like this. “A man was meant to be doubtful about himself but undoubting about the truth. This has been exactly reversed.”

To summarize it, then, the Bible says that self-doubt is good while doubt of God is bad. We can see the bad side of doubt in James 1 where it says that the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. This person is unstable in all his ways. We can see the same thing here, where Jesus attempts to help John with his doubts. In other words, Jesus doesn't want John to accept his doubts as a good thing, but works to help him get past such doubts.

Doubting God may not be a good thing, but it is certainly not uncommon. Haven't most of us struggled at one time or another with doubts about God? They often come, as they did in John's case, during a time of suffering. John was in prison because he had the courage to rebuke King Herod about an unlawful marriage he had entered into with his brother's wife. What John didn't know at this time is that he would stay imprisoned until his execution by decapitation to satisfy the wrath of the woman Herod had unlawfully married, Herodius. So he was suffering unjustly at the same time Jesus was roaming free throughout the countryside performing these miracles. John must have been thinking, "if he really is the Messiah, why doesn't he come to deliver me?" In those circumstances, the doubt was born in his mind, "Maybe he's not the Messiah after all. Maybe I was mistaken when I announced that he was."

I have titled this point, "Believing doubt." What makes John's doubt believing is that he takes his doubts to Jesus, sending his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah. When we take our doubts to Jesus, he responds with such gentleness. Jesus doesn't say to John, "Shame on you, John. I can't believe you're doubting me now after all that you've experienced. Have you forgotten the voice from heaven after you baptized me?" But Jesus does none of that. When we come to him honestly with our doubts, he responds with gentleness. He invites John's disciples to hang out with him for a time and simply observe what's happening in Jesus' ministry. After seeing the miracles of restoration and hearing the way the gospel lifts the least of God's people, the poor, they are invited to report back to John and let him draw his own conclusions. Jesus is a confident, secure Messiah, seen here in his complete transparency. It is the insecure who tend to raise their voices and seek to control and manipulate others. The confident can simply say, as Jesus did here, "I'm an open book; check it out for yourself and draw your own conclusions."

This passage also helps us when we encounter doubts about Jesus. We are to do the same thing Jesus invited John's disciples to do. We are to stake everything on the truth of God's Word. The things Jesus points to here were prophesied numerous times throughout the Old Testament. **"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"** (11:5).

In *the Silver Chair*, one of C. S. Lewis' volumes in the chronicles of Narnia, Aslan the Lion appoints two children and a froglike man named Puddleglum to find good Prince Rilian and free him from the evil witch. Aslan gives them four signs to know when they have found the Prince. But everything seems to go wrong and they miss the first three signs. One sign remains. They will know the prince by this: he will be the first person they meet to ask them to do something in the name of Aslan. Everything continues to go from bad to worse, and the two children and Puddleglum find themselves trapped underground with a knight who is insane. It is said of him that he must be tied to a silver chair each night to protect others from his insane violence. While they are with him one night, they witness this for themselves. But he doesn't seem to be insane at all. The knight tells them that the witch has cast a spell on him that causes him to be insane during the day but completely sane at night. He is tied to the chair at night in order to be kept under her control during the time of his sanity. On this particular night, the witch is away and the knight makes his appeal to the children. "If you have any pity, cut my cords and set me free. You are not her subjects! Free me now and I am your friend, otherwise, your mortal enemy. By the bright sky above, by the great lion, by Aslan himself, I charge you."

It dawns on them that they have now heard the fourth sign. He asked in Aslan's name. But they have their doubts. Does the sign count if spoken by a knight with a reputation for insanity. If he is insane, he might kill them if they free him. "If only we knew," the girl cries. "I think we do know," Puddleglum says. "Do you mean everything will come right if we do untie him?" asked the boy. "I don't know about that," said Puddleglum. "Aslan didn't say what would happen. He only told us what to do. That fellow may kill us once he's up. But we must still follow the sign." So trusting only in the word of Aslan, they set him free and discover that he is after all Prince Rilian, the object of their quest.

Perhaps you are in a similar position now as these three in Lewis' book, having doubts about Jesus. If so, this passage leaves no doubt about what you are to do. Like John, take your doubts to Jesus. And as Jesus encouraged, remember the sure authority we have in God's word. Specifically, this requires the exact opposite of our natural tendencies, which are to withdraw and isolate ourselves. Instead of that, the need is to make sure not to absent yourself from the church. Continue to submit yourself to the preached word of God and to the works of Jesus seen through his people, all the while keeping an open mind as you take your doubts honestly to Jesus. It is exposure to Jesus' words and works that brings faith. Remember, he does not shame you but will help you.

II. Unbelieving Doubt

The audience changes in verse 7 from the disciples of John the Baptist to the crowds. Jesus proceeds to talk about John to crowds who he knows will

end up doubting him as well. But in the case of these crowds, Jesus knows that their doubt will end in unbelief and rejection. Jesus was a different kind of Messiah than what they expected, and they could not accept this difference. At the end of our passage, Jesus puts his finger on the main problem. He said this unbelieving generation is like children playing pretend wedding and pretend funeral. At the pretend wedding they play the flute and expect their playmates to dance. At the pretend funeral, they sing the mournful funeral dirge and expect others to mourn and wail. Jesus' point is that they were seeking to control God by demanding that he meet their expectations instead of submitting their expectations to God and his wisdom.

Jesus points out that they were not even consistent with their own expectations. John the Baptist was too extreme in his asceticism, often fasting and living a very simple lifestyle. These crowds didn't like that and said that he was demon-possessed. So maybe they wanted someone who knew how to have a good time. If so, Jesus should have been just what they wanted. He came eating and drinking, but they didn't like that either, accusing him of being a glutton and drunkard. They sound very much like spoiled children who can never be pleased.

It is not unusual for God to act in a manner different than we expect him to act. He is God after all. That's what John the Baptist was experiencing here. The important thing is how we respond when God acts so unexpectedly. Do we submit ourselves to God or do we hold on to our expectations and demand that God submit to us? There are two options with God. You can have a god of your expectations or the true God who reveals himself in Jesus. If you want the god of your expectations, you will be like a spoiled child who is never satisfied. Sadly, I have known more than a few people who have written God off because he didn't meet their expectations. They expected him to give them the kind of marriage they thought they wanted, or the kind of children or career or home or health they desired. They played the flute for God and he didn't dance to their tune.

Why should you submit to God when he acts in a manner at odds with your expectations? Jesus addresses that by talking about John the Baptist as a great prophet. In doing so, he's really talking about his own nature as God, because that was the central message of John. So Jesus reminds them of John's ministry, particularly its popularity. People don't normally schedule trips to the wilderness because it's such an inhospitable environment. But they did when John was preaching and baptizing there. So Jesus asks the crowds what they went to all that trouble to go and see. He wasn't just a reed blown by the wind, some "here today, gone tomorrow" kind of prophet. Nor was he a member of royalty wearing soft clothing. He was a prophet of God. He wasn't just any prophet, but *the* prophet all Israel was expecting to announce the coming of the Messiah.

If John was so great, why is he now in prison? Jesus answers that question in the hard-to-understand verse 12. **“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”** The kingdom of God is under attack from violent people who want to destroy it. John has been caught up in that violence. Jesus himself will become a victim of that violence not long after this.

God seems often to act in a manner contrary to our expectations. We would expect, as John the Baptist himself expected, that when he arrived on the scene, it would be the violent and the evil who would suffer, not the righteous. Jesus responds to this with two answers, the first of which we have just looked at. He’s God, and he knows what he’s doing. John the Baptist, the greatest of all prophets declared clearly that Jesus is God.

There is a second answer he gives. He knows how to bring us to greatness. **“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”** (v. 11). Jesus is bringing about a greater kingdom. All you have to do is get to Jesus, and he will lead you into his kingdom.

I want to repeat one of the stories Chris Granberry told at our Missions Conference two weeks ago. Their church on the Yakima Indian reservation has an extensive bus ministry to pick up the children on the reservation and bring them to church on Sundays. Many of the parents don’t come and also don’t value the church enough to make the effort to get their children there. One little six-year old boy overslept one Sunday morning and didn’t wake up until he heard the sound of the bus pulling up in front of his house. When he thought he might miss church, he panicked and ran out of his house to the bus wearing not a single stitch of clothing. Chris said that the little boy just thought that if he could get to church, they would take care of him. The bus driver assured him that he would wait for him while he went back inside to get dressed.

That little boy may have had better theology than he knew. All you have to do is get into the kingdom of Jesus, and everything else will be taken care of. Even if you’re just a naked, poor six-year-old boy, the least in the kingdom is greater than the greatest in the period before Jesus. Jesus knows how to bring you into that kingdom. You do not know that.

CONCLUSION:

If you are struggling with doubts now, will you receive this word from Jesus? He knows how to bring you into his kingdom and he will certainly do so.