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Pursuing the Kingdom: Unmet Expectations

Matthew 11:1-19

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Have you ever been convinced that something was going to turn out a certain way, only for it not to turn out the way you expected? Maybe you expected a job to work out, and it didn't. Maybe you thought a relationship would turn out differently. Maybe you assumed that if you did everything the right way, everything would eventually fall into place, but instead, life became more complicated and not the way you thought it was going to be.

And when these expectations aren't met we tend to become angry and frustrated because we lose our sense of control. We are saddened with the loss of specific wants, desires or dreams. And we become anxious and stressed, worrying about what will happen next and feeling unsettled.

And even though this happens in our every day lives, the truth is that the same thing can happen to us spiritually. You see, one of the hardest things about faith is not believing whether or not God CAN do something. Sometimes the harder thing is trusting Him when His plan is different than ours. And that's where we find John the Baptist as we now make our way into Matthew ch. 11.

Now, we haven't seen John since chapter 3 after he baptized Jesus. But we know John. He wasn't an unbeliever. He wasn't a spiritual outsider. John was the man who had stood beside the Jordan River and proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He was the one who pointed people toward Jesus. He had declared that Jesus was the One who was coming after him. And He had even seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus like a dove at His baptism when he heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And in that moment, John knew exactly who Jesus was.

But now, the ministry that God had called John to has led him to prison. And while he's sitting there, he's hearing reports about what Jesus is doing. Jesus is preaching and healing people. And it all of that sounds good, but John is still in prison.

So, eventually John sends a few of his disciples to Jesus with a question, "Are You the Messiah we've been looking for, or should we look for another?" And that's a remarkable question coming from John. John is wondering, "Jesus, is this really what the kingdom is supposed to look like because I thought it was going to look different?"

And that's where this passage speaks directly to us. Because sometimes the greatest challenge to our faith isn't caused by what we don't know about Jesus. It's caused by unmet expectations and what we think He should do.

So, the passage we're going to look at this morning teaches us that pursuing the kingdom means trusting Jesus even when what He's doing doesn't match our expectations. So, if you are able, please stand while I read the Word of God from Matthew 11:1-19. [Read Passage]

Matthew begins in vs. 1 by saying, "When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities." Now that connects us

directly back to ch. 10. Jesus has just sent His disciples out on mission. And now Matthew shifts the focus back to Jesus. And the first person we encounter is John the Baptist.

And vs. 2 says, "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples." Think about John's situation. He is in prison because he stood up for what was right by faithfully confronting the current ruler, Herod Antipas, over his sin because he had divorced his wife and unlawfully married the wife of his half-brother Philip. John had done what God called him to do, and now he was suffering because of it.

And while he's sitting in prison, he hears about what Jesus has been doing. Have you ever noticed that when you find yourself in difficult circumstances it can make you see things differently? When everything is going well, faith can seem easy. But when that diagnosis comes, or when the relationship falls apart, or when the financial pressure increases and you're sitting in a place you never expected to be, suddenly the questions become much more personal, and you start to wonder, "Where are you God?"

And so John sends his disciples to Jesus and asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Now, again, this is an honest question from John. And notice that Jesus does not condemn him for asking the question.

And that matters. Because sometimes we have the mindset that having questions or doubts means that we've somehow failed as a Christian. But the Bible is filled with people who asked difficult questions. David asked over and over again in the Psalms, "How long, O Lord?" Job asked God "why?" in the middle of all his suffering. The disciples repeatedly asked Jesus questions they didn't understand. And here, even John, the forerunner of the Messiah, reached a moment where he needed reassurance.

The truth is, faith does not mean that we never have questions or doubts. Faith means that when we have those questions and doubts we bring them to Jesus. You see, there is a difference between honest doubt that seeks truth and hardened unbelief that refuses truth. Notice that John didn't turn away from Jesus when things were not going his way. But he brought his questions to Jesus.

In the same way, when you don't understand, take your questions to Jesus. When you're confused, take your confusion to Jesus. When you're hurting, take all your hurt and pain and take it to Jesus. When you don't understand what God is doing, don't run away from Him, but run toward Him instead. John's actions, here, teach us that honest questions do not have to lead us to questioning our faith. But if we bring them to God, they can lead us into a deeper faith.

2. Jesus Points Us to His Works When We Struggle With His Ways

And, then, Jesus answers John's question in vs. 4 where He says to those John sent, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Again, notice what Jesus is doing here. He doesn't give John a long, drawn out, theological explanation. He doesn't say, "John, let Me explain everything that's happening that you don't see."

Instead, He points John to the evidence he can see as He quotes prophecy concerning the Messiah in vs. 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." All of these things we already seen in Matthew's account of Jesus life

and ministry up to this point. Jesus is essentially saying, "John, look past your circumstances and see what's happening."

What Jesus is doing here is pointing John back to the promises of Scripture. He quotes portions of Isaiah 35 which speaks about the blind seeing, the deaf hearing and the lame walking and Isaiah 61 which speaks about the good news being preached to the poor. Jesus is showing John that the promises about the Messiah are being fulfilled in Him. That He is exactly who John knows Him to be.

Sometimes when life becomes confusing, we need to stop focusing on the circumstances and start looking again at Christ. We need to remind ourselves of what has Jesus already done? What has Scripture already revealed to us about Him? What has God already promised? What do we know to be true about His character?

Brothers and sisters, there will always be things we don't understand. But we don't have to understand everything to trust in God and who He has revealed Himself to be. Corrie Ten Boom, the writer and Holocaust survivor, once famously said, "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God." That's the heart of this passage. John didn't know what was going to happen to him. But he was reminded of who Jesus was. And that was enough.

But then Jesus says something fascinating in vs. 6, "...blessed is the one who is not offended by Me." Now the word "offended" here does not mean the same thing as what it means in this day and age. It goes far beyond "taking an offense" to something and literally means to "stumble over." And this statement goes right to the heart of John's struggle. Jesus says, in effect, "Blessed is the person who doesn't "stumble over" the way I choose to work."

John wanted to know whether Jesus was really the Messiah. Jesus essentially tells him, "Trust what you know about Me even when you don't understand everything I'm doing." That's one of the great challenges of following Jesus. You see, we want a Jesus who fits our expectations.

But Jesus refuses to be reduced to our expectations. He is greater than the boxes we try to put Him in. For, He is more gracious, patient and more powerful than we can even imagine. And sometimes He acts differently than we expect. The question is whether we will still trust Him when He does?

Imagine a child sitting in the back seat of a car while their father is driving. The child doesn't know where they're going. They don't understand why their father took a particular road. They may even think their father is going the wrong direction. But the child doesn't need to understand the route. They only need to trust the driver knows where he is going and will get them safely to their destination.

Far too often, our faith is like sitting in the back seat of the car saying, "God, I don't understand why we are taking this road." And God says, "You don't have to understand why. You only need to trust Me."

Well, after Jesus responds to John's question, He then turns back to the crowd and continues teaching about the kingdom. Maybe those in crowd overheard the question and were now thinking differently about John because of it. But instead of criticizing John for having questions, He praises him.

Look at vs. 7. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" Remember, John was preaching the kingdom in the wilderness of Israel and people were going out to see him and hear what he had to say. In other words, Jesus is asking, "Did you think John was just some weak, easily influenced person?" The obvious answer is no. Everyone knew John was a man of conviction whether they agreed with his message or not.

Jesus goes on in vs. 8 and asks, "But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments?" This is referring to the clothing of the wealthy as mentions in this same verse "those who live in kings' houses." As opposed to the rough, threadbare clothing of the common man who have put in a hard days work. The point is, did they go out to see someone in fine clothes putting on a show? Again the answer is no, for John wasn't living for his own personal comfort. In fact, they knew he wore clothes made of camel hair and sustained himself by eating locusts and honey.

So then, Jesus brings His point home in vs. 9-10 by continuing, "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes. And I say to you, more than a prophet." This is he of whom it is written: Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

Jesus is saying that John is also one who was prophesied about and that he had fulfilled the calling God had put on his life. This is what Jesus is talking about later on in vs. 14 when he mentions the prophet Elijah. John was the partial fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 of the one who was to come before the awesome and great day of the Lord.

John may have had a question in prison, but his question didn't erase the faithfulness and purpose of his life. And that's important. A moment of struggle doesn't necessarily define the entire life of faith of a person. John had faithfully served God and had faithfully fulfilled his purpose of pointing people to Christ.

And Jesus goes on and says in vs. 11 about John, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." Think about that. The same John who just asked, "Are You the Messiah?" is the one who Jesus calls great.

That should be an encouragement to us. If you are in Christ, your struggle doesn't disqualify you from the love of God. Your questions don't mean God has abandoned you. Your difficult situation doesn't erase everything God has done in your life. We just need to keep believing in what we already know. Keep trusting in the goodness of God. Keep waiting on Him and He promises He will see us through.

Jesus then says something remarkable at the end of vs. 11, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Now that verse really sticks out. And Jesus is pointing beyond John to the new reality of His kingdom. John stood at the doorway between the old covenant and the new. He was the great, and final, prophet of the Old Testament era who announced the promised Messiah. And now the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus which is the fulfillment of all of God's redemptive promises made by the former prophets, including John.

The point isn't that John was insignificant, far from it. The point is that the new covenant that Jesus is bringing is greater than what even John could fully experience. God's plan was bigger than John's understanding and went beyond what he could see.

And God's plan is bigger than ours as well. We see only one chapter, but God sees the whole story. John could only see the prison he was in, but God knew the purpose and was directing his steps.

Well, this kind of kingdom calls for a response as Jesus continues in vs. 12, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." This is a difficult verse and has been interpreted in several ways. But much like what we have talked about over the last few weeks, the basic picture is that the arrival of God's kingdom has created conflict and opposition. The gospel will cause division between those who accept it and those who reject it. God's kingdom is not something people can encounter casually. God's invitation to "whosoever will come" demands a response.

And John preached a simple message of repentance, "for the kingdom of heaven [was] at hand." And the kingdom had now arrived in the person of Jesus and the people had to decide how they would respond.

And that's still true today. Jesus doesn't simply invite us to admire Him, or appreciate His teachings, or simply to have Him to be a part of our lives. He calls us to surrender and to follow Him. The kingdom cannot be received passively. It is always founded on God's work on our behalf, yes, but God's work will always produce a response in us.

That's why the gospel is both comforting and confronting. It comforts us because Christ offers us the forgiveness, grace, mercy and salvation that we all so desperately need. But it also confronts us because it tells us that we are not our own. The kingdom of God calls us to repentance, surrender and obedience. Pursuing the kingdom means that we don't simply ask, "What do I want God to do for me?" But we begin asking, "What does God want from me?" "What must I do in light of this truth?" Not to earn favor with God but because I have already received it in Christ.

Then, Jesus closes this section with an illustration about the generation of His day. In vs. 16 He says, "But to what shall I compare this generation?" And He compares them to children sitting in the marketplace. And they say, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

And then Jesus explains, "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, 'Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

Do you see what Jesus is exposing? The idea is that those who have a heart to criticize will find something to criticize. John was too serious and Jesus was too social. And so they rejected them both.

Brothers and sisters, this attitude being described here is showing us that it's entirely possible to become so attached to our expectations of what we think God should be like that we reject God, Himself, when He doesn't meet those expectations. We say or think things like, "God, if You really loved me, You would do this." Or, "If You were really good, You wouldn't allow that." But the gospel calls us to something deeper than demanding that God conform to our expectations. It calls us to trust the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus.

Jesus ends by saying in vs. 19, "But wisdom is justified by her children." In other words, eventually the end results reveal the truth. The wisdom of God may not make sense to us in the moment, but its fruit will become evident.

And Jesus' ministry would ultimately reveal who He was. His death would reveal His sacrificial love. His resurrection would reveal His power and authority. And the gospel message would spread throughout the world as we're observing in our study of the book of Acts in Community Groups. The kingdom was moving forward even when people couldn't see it or recognize it. We just need the faith that looks beyond our circumstances to see it.

So what does Matthew 11:1–19 mean for us as we pursue the kingdom of God? First, bring your questions to Jesus. Don't pretend. Don't hide. Don't be afraid to say, "Lord, I don't understand." Take your questions to Him rather than running away from Him. And don't be afraid to ask a brother or sister in Christ for help in your understanding for often times God works through His people to bring a word or understanding or encouragement.

Second, when you don't understand what Jesus is doing, remember what you do know about Jesus. Look to Scripture. Remember who He is. Remember what He has done for you through His death and resurrection. Remember His promises, namely, the most often repeated promise in scripture, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Your circumstances may change, but Christ never will and He is always with you.

Third, don't confuse God's silence with His absence. John was in prison, but Jesus hadn't forgotten him. Remember God is working even when we cannot see what He is doing.

And fourth, don't let your expectations get in the way. We can bring our requests to God. We can pray boldly. We can ask Him for healing. We can ask Him for provision. We can ask Him to change circumstances. But ultimately we say, "Your will be done." That's not weak faith. That's surrendered faith.

Now, there will be times when life doesn't go as we expect. There will be circumstances that don't make sense. There will be seasons when we wonder what God is doing. But when that happens, we don't have to abandon our faith. Instead, we look to Jesus.

We remember who He is. We remember what He has done. And we remember that God's kingdom is bigger than what we can see and that everything is working together for His glory and our ultimate good. (Rom. 8:28)

Maybe you're in a season right now where you have questions. Maybe you're asking, "God, where are You?" Or, "Why hasn't God answered me?" Maybe you're confused because your life doesn't look the way you thought it would.

But don't "stumble over" Jesus because He doesn't fit your expectations. Instead, trust Him. Follow Him. Wait on Him. And continue to pursue His kingdom. Because one day, when He comes again and we see the whole picture, we will understand that God was there all along. Let's pray.

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank You that when we have questions, we can bring them to You. Thank You that You do not abandon us when we struggle, but You invite us to trust You more deeply.

Lord, there are times when Your ways don't make sense to us. There are times when our prayers seem unanswered and our circumstances don't match what we expected. Give us the faith to trust You even when we cannot understand what You are doing.

Teach us to pursue Your kingdom rather than our own. Give us hearts that say, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done." And when we find ourselves in difficult seasons of life, remind us that You have not forgotten us.

May we keep our eyes on Jesus, remain faithful to Him and follow Him wherever He leads. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord give you faith to trust Him when His ways do not meet your expectations, courage to bring your questions to Him and patience to wait upon His purposes. May you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, pursue His kingdom and trust that He is faithful even when you cannot see the whole story. Go in His grace and walk faithfully with Him. Amen.