

Expectations and Reality

Matthew 11:1-19

You just can't please some folks, can you? In the eyes of some people, no matter what you do, there's going to be something wrong with it. And those who notice such things are usually the same ones who delight in pointing out the flaws that they find.

This is the way that Jesus describes the people of His generation in verse 16. On the one hand, the scribes and Pharisees had rejected John the Baptist because he had dared to challenge their complacency. After all, John lived a life of radical repentance, of challenging the moral habits of his contemporaries, of calling everyone to an uncompromising standard of holiness. But because he went farther than they wanted to go, they said he had a demon. Today, people of similar temperament would probably call John a fundamentalist extremist.

But on the other hand, the religious leaders also disapproved of Jesus' ministry. For if they thought John went too far in his rejection of worldliness, they didn't think Jesus went far enough.

Now don't get me wrong. Jesus wasn't really worldly at all. He never did, in fact, sin. He never did break any of the Old Testament laws. He did, however, challenge many of the interpretations and elaborations that the scribes and Pharisees had built on top of the Old Testament law through the years.

For example, the Law of Moses commands a fast in preparation for the great Day of Atonement. But the Pharisees reasoned that if a little is good, then a lot would be better, so they said that you should fast twice a week. Since John fasted even more extremely, they called him a whacko. Since Jesus fasted less, they called him a glutton.

The bottom line is that the Pharisees weren't going to be satisfied with John or Jesus unless they were just like the Pharisees. They weren't going to listen to John or Jesus because they didn't already agree with what they said, because the reality John and Jesus presented simply didn't meet their expectations.

But the religious leaders weren't the only ones trying to impose their expectations on Jesus, were they? For that's really the same thing the Jerusalem crowd did between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. After all, they started out the week with the highest of hopes, the greatest of expectations. The Son of David had finally come! He was going to give them the political independence and prosperity their ancestors had enjoyed when David had reigned in Jerusalem! Jesus was going to kick the wicked Romans out of the land, bringing perfect justice to His people and vengeance to their adversaries!

But when, by the end of the week, they saw Him arrested and humiliated, when he stood before Pilate and allowed the Roman soldiers to abuse Him without even saying a word in response, they rejected Him, just like the religious leaders had rejected both Jesus and John. For the crowd had no use for Jesus if He wasn't going to lead them in an uprising. They had no desire for such a meek Messiah. They simply couldn't see how their expectations of a political revolution could possibly fit with the reality of the cross.

Okay, so what about us? Do we ever catch ourselves doing the same sort of thing, imposing our expectations on God? No, I know we all understand who Jesus is. Every Sabbath morning we confess that He is not only the Son of Man but the Son of God, truly divine and truly human at the same time. I don't think any of us, even in our most cynical moments, ever call Jesus' identity into question.

But what happens when our expectations of life are shaken to their very foundations? Under the crushing blows of disappointment or depression, of grief or sickness, of poverty or pain do we ever question our faith in Jesus? Do we ever wonder how God could still be there, how God could possibly care about us? No, we know all too well that sometimes the reality of our lives just doesn't fit with what we expect an all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God to do.

Well, in today's passage from Matthew, we find that John the Baptist was all too familiar with the same sort of confusion. For why did he have to send some of his disciples to ask Jesus about His identity? Why couldn't John just come and see for himself? Because as verse 2 reminds us, Jesus didn't even begin his ministry until after John had been put in prison, until after King Herod had locked John up for daring to rebuke him.

And that meant that John's life obviously hadn't turned out the way that he had expected. For, along with all the rest of the people of Israel, he had been looking forward to a Messiah who would be a mighty king, who would set all wrongs to right, who would bring an even greater measure of freedom and righteousness than Israel had enjoyed in the days of David.

But things just weren't working out according to plan. For John knew Jesus was the Messiah – at least, he thought he knew. But even after Jesus' coming, Herod was still on his throne and John was still in prison. John's expectations thus had come into complete and confusing conflict with reality. Could John have been mistaken?

To John's credit, he didn't rely on hearsay or innuendo. He sent his disciples right to the source to get a direct answer. And how did Jesus answer them? By pointing to another aspect of the reality that was so confusing to them. He pointed to the things that they had heard and seen themselves, how Jesus was clearly displaying the power of God to give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, to make the lame walk and the lepers clean, and even to bring life to the dead. These were unquestionable signs of the Messiah, so many of which had been clearly spelled out by prophets – for example, in Isaiah chapter 35. There simply could be no doubt that Jesus really is Who He claimed to be.

But that still didn't clear up the mystery for John. In fact, it probably made it even more confusing. For notice the last Messianic sign that Jesus mentions in verse 5 – the poor have the gospel preached to them. That sign came from Isaiah 61, a passage John no doubt knew by heart. But listen to what else the Messiah says God calls Him to do in verse one of that chapter:

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to *those who are* bound."

So, by pointing to Isaiah 61, Jesus was thus acknowledging the very point that confused John in the first place – if Jesus really is the Messiah who proclaims liberty and who frees those who are bound, what was His prophet John the Baptist still doing in prison? If Jesus really was the Messiah, why didn't He set John free?

That's not just a question for John, is it? What do we do when our expectations of God don't match up with the reality of our lives? Well, we can choose to be offended at Jesus. Like the Pharisees and like the Palm Sunday crowd we can stumble, hanging on to our expectations while rejecting the reality that God has provided for us. We can give ourselves over to self-pity, or abandon ourselves to despair. We can let our disappointment fester, producing bitterness within us. John the Baptist could have chosen that path.

But Jesus says in verse 6 that we will be blessed if we don't take offense at Him. So, how can we receive this blessing? Only by adjusting our expectations, only by embracing reality, not on our terms, but on God's terms. But in order to deal with our expectations, we first have to acknowledge what they are. That's why in verse 7 Jesus asks his listeners to examine what they had thought about John the Baptist.

For why did the people go into the wilderness to see John? Because they thought he was a reed shaken by the wind? By no means. If there was one thing John the Baptist was not, it was wishy-washy. John shot straight – he called 'em like he saw 'em. He never wavered from his main message – that God's people needed to repent of their sins because the coming Messiah was right around the corner.

Okay, so the people understood that John was a true prophet of God. But what did the people's expectations of John have to do with Jesus? Well, in verse 10, Jesus turns our attention to our passage from Malachi. For Malachi said that John would not only be a prophet, but the one who would prepare the way of the Lord. Notice that Malachi doesn't just say that Messiah is coming. He says that the Lord is coming.

In other words, if you thought John the Baptist was an uncompromising straight-shooter, just look at who is coming after him! The Lord is coming, the One Who is infinite, the eternal, the unchangeable. The Lord is not anything close to a reed shaken by the wind. He never changes because His ways are always perfect.

Now, I don't know what your expectations of God are today. Maybe you think He's let you down, or that He's turned His back on you. If that's the case, you need to do what John had to do: let go of your expectations and look at the reality. For Jesus is not only the Messiah – He is the Lord God, and that means He never changes. The same Jesus that made the blind see and the lame walk, the same Jesus who cleansed the lepers and opened the ears of the deaf, the same Jesus Who raised the dead and Who walked out of his own tomb on the third day, the same Jesus is the same today. He is still almighty. He is still moved with compassion for sinners like us. No matter what our expectations of Him may be, the reality is that Christ is Lord, and just like John the Baptist, He never changes.

Why did the people go into the wilderness to see John? Because of his elegant garments? By no means. The very clothes John wore, made of scratchy camel's hair, indicated his passion for purity. He made absolutely no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. In wearing such uncomfortable clothes, John reinforced the main message of his ministry: that repentance was an urgent business. It needed to be swift and radical, complete and uncompromising.

And why is that? Because of what the prophet Malachi said would happen when the Lord showed up:

"But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He *is* like a refiner's fire And like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness."

In other words, if you thought John the Baptist was worked up about repentance and hung up on holiness, just wait until you see who comes after him! The Lord is coming to His people, but He is coming not only to love us and heal us and forgive us of our sins. Because He loves us, He is also coming to refine us, to purge our sins out of us, to purify us.

And the image that Malachi has of this process is not a comfortable one. Fire refines silver and gold by melting it down. Lye soap burns and stings when it touches the skin. And this painful process of purification is what the Lord promises to all His people, to all who long for His coming.

Now, I don't know what your expectations of God are today. Maybe you think He's been unfair to you. Maybe you think you are having to suffer too much. But let go of your expectations and look at God's reality. The good news is that God sometimes has good reason to bring suffering into our lives, even suffering that is like a refiner's fire, the kind that goes to the very core of our being, that challenges all our basic assumptions about life, that melts us down, and leaves us a puddled mess on the floor.

And why does God allow things like this to happen to us? To make us holy. To make us like Jesus. For whatever our expectations may be, the reality is that the path to holiness often leads through suffering. Yes, Jesus came to take up His cross for us, but as we saw in Matthew 10:38, He calls all who follow Him to do the same. So the reality for us and for John is that if we follow a suffering savior, we shouldn't expect a pain-free life.

So what was John to make of all this? Yes, Jesus was the Messiah, but no, He wasn't going to deliver John from unjust imprisonment. Instead, John would be called to suffer for his faith, to die a martyr's death.

Okay, so what are we to make of all this? The reality is that, no matter the circumstances of our lives, Jesus is in fact the Messiah. He is in fact the Son of God. And He really is working through everything in our lives, even the suffering we experience, to make us more like Him. Thus far, we hear the same message that John heard.

But there is another truth here, a comfort for us that even John could not receive. For as verse 11 says, there is a sense in which all of us who live on this side of the cross are greater, are more blessed than even John was. And to understand this, we need to turn again to our passage in Malachi. For there the prophet tells us,

"Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts.

The good news is that the Lord is coming into His temple. But unlike in Malachi's day or John's day, the temple of the Lord isn't made with wood and stone any more. Ever since the Day of Pentecost, the temple of the Lord is wherever His church is, for the Lord dwells in the hearts of all who trust in Jesus.

This is why we can rejoice, no matter what suffering may come into our lives. For no matter what reality we may face, we can rejoice that the Lord has come into His temple. In our deepest pain we can be sure that Christ is with us, and that He will never leave us.

Yes, Christians, we will suffer, like all people in this sinful, broken world. But for us, suffering is not pointless. No, the good news is that, for us, suffering can have the deepest meaning. For our sovereign God, the Lord of all things, allows us to suffer so that we might be purified, so that we might be holy, so that we might be more like Jesus. And just as Jesus has suffered and died for you, He will be with you in your hour of pain, in your hour of need. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. The good news is that, in the Person of His Holy Spirit, He will abide with you.