

Doubt Due to Disappointment (11:1-19)

Good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 11**. If you're new to our church, we are in the middle of a **multiple-year series** straight through the book of Matthew in the bible. And Matthew, if you're new to church *in general*, is essentially an early biography of the life of Jesus.

And as you may have noticed from the **different colored bulletin** on your way in, today we are beginning a new *section* of the book of Matthew that we've subtitled **responses to the kingdom**. Essentially, in chapters 11-13 of Matthew's gospel, the focus is on how different people react and respond to the news of God's in-breaking kingdom. How they *respond*, in a nutshell, to *Jesus*. And in each of these responses, we get a window into the often-controversial nature of the kingdom.

And in *many* cases, we also see **reflections of our own responses** to the kingdom *in* their responses. They can serve as a mirror of sorts to our own hearts. And that's certainly the case in today's passage. Today, we're going to focus on **John the Baptist's response** to the kingdom of God. It centered around a *question* that John asks Jesus, and behind that question I think is an experience that at least a lot of us can identify with. So let's take a look. Chapter 11, starting in v. 1:

[1] After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. [2] When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples [3] to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Okay, if you were around when we began our Matthew series early last fall, that's where we were first introduced to **this guy** known as **John the Baptist**. *There*, he was this somewhat *eccentric*, prophetic figure who lived out in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, and wearing nothing but a jacket made out of camel's hair. Which are some very specific lifestyle choices to make.

But *then* he was in the wilderness; where we run into him *now*, **he's in prison**. We'll find out a few chapters later *why* he's in prison, but it wasn't for doing anything *wrong*. It was for calling out the moral corruption of a particular political leader of his day. He did that, and that ruler threw him in prison. But while he's in there, he **hears about the types of things** Jesus is doing: healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons.

And it **prompts a question** in John about Jesus' *identity*. His question is "Jesus, are you the *one who is to come*, or should we be expecting someone else?" That language, "the one who is to come" was a way of referring to someone Israelites knew as "the Messiah"—this king-like figure who was going to show up on the scene, set things right for the Jewish people, execute *justice* on their oppressors, and usher in the kingdom of God. So obviously there was a lot of anticipation around who that figure would be. John wants to know if *Jesus is* that figure, or if they should be waiting on somebody else.

Now here's **what's interesting** to me **about John asking that**. This is the **same John** the Baptist who was born as a miracle baby, based on a fulfillment of prophecy, to a woman named Elizabeth who was *well past* child-bearing years. ~~This was the same John who, as a baby in his mother's womb, lept, when Mary came near, pregnant with the Messiah.~~ This is the same John who was physically present in Matthew 3 when Jesus is baptized, the heavens open up, and an *audible voice from heaven* says "this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." This is the same John who says about Jesus at one point "behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

My point being that John is **not exactly sitting on a lack of evidence** or experiences that point to Jesus' *legitimacy* as the Messiah. Right? John has probably experienced more first-hand undeniable experiences with the divine than most of us today *ever will*. // And yet, at this point in the story, he is experiencing *uncertainty* about Jesus' identity. So **call that doubt**, call that *skepticism* or *cynicism*—but bare minimum, it is *uncertainty* about Jesus. Now I bring that up in *part* because there's this really **popular myth floating around** the Church that if you have enough faith and see God do enough undeniable things in your life, you'll never experience doubt or uncertainty about following him. But nobody ever told John that. Because here he is—a prophet of God, a *fulfillment of prophecy himself*—and *he* is experiencing *real*, actual *doubt* about who Jesus is.

So it's worth **asking: what had changed** for John? How had he gone from relative *certainty* about Jesus' identity, to *uncertainty* about it here? What *changed*? I think we could sum it up with the phrase **"unmet expectations."** John had expectations about who the Messiah would be and what he would do, and Jesus (at least at this point) had not met all of those expectations. There were some things that the Messiah was supposed to do that Jesus *had* done, and others that he *hadn't* yet. One of the ones he *hadn't* done much of was bringing judgment on those opposed to God.

And you've got to think that at least **some of this was personal** for John: he was currently rotting in prison because of a wicked ruler who was opposed to the things of God. And it at least didn't seem like Jesus was doing anything to remedy that situation. So **John had expectations, likely at a theological and personal level, that Jesus was not yet**

meeting. And *that* was generating *uncertainty* about who Jesus was. It was doubt, due to disappointment.

And if we could be honest, isn't **this often where doubt comes from?** From *unmet expectations*? From *disappointment*? As much we might like to pretend that doubt is purely intellectual and objective—it often isn't. Or at least it doesn't *start* that way. I've been doing ministry for a while now. I've had the privilege of walking with quite a few people through seasons of doubt and uncertainty. And still, I have yet to meet a person who meets Jesus, has a great experience following Jesus, has a great experience with other Christians—and then just reads a book by a smart atheist one day and goes “wow I've never thought about it *that* way before—I don't think I can be a Christian now.” No—generally, there is some type of experience (or *experiences*) behind the doubt.

And quite **often, it's** an experience of **disappointment**. When we decide to follow Jesus, we often have a picture in our heads of what following Jesus will look like and feel like. Or maybe we have a picture in our heads of what our lives will look like as *a result* of following Jesus.

- Maybe we think that if we follow Jesus, our **lives will go well**. Maybe we think he will protect us from certain types of **suffering** or difficulty. And then we follow Jesus, and our dad gets cancer. Our mom gets Alzheimers. We have a friend die tragically or way too young. And our life just doesn't go like we thought it would go.
- Maybe we think that if we follow Jesus, he will eventually provide us with the perfect person to **date and/or marry**. And then our 20s come and go, our 30s come and go, our 40s come and go...and the perfect person still hasn't come. God never did what we thought he was gonna do.
- Maybe we think that if we follow Jesus, he will lead us into **career success** or financial stability of some sort. And then we follow Jesus, and we end up working the same dead-end job for 10, 20, 30 years—maybe even struggling to make ends meet. God doesn't do the thing that we were fairly certain he was gonna do.

And we could go on with examples, but I don't know that we *have* to. **I think if we were brutally honest, we all have expectations of our life with Jesus that have not gone the way we thought they would go. That has created disappointment. And so often, disappointment leads to doubt.** Maybe it leads to doubt right away, or maybe it sows tiny little seeds that eventually grow *into* doubt. But that's how it often happens, **whether we're aware of it happening or not.** *John*, I would argue, is having some version of that experience here in our passage. So he sends word to Jesus to get some clarification on who Jesus is—is he the Messiah, or is he *not*? So let's look at Jesus' response, v. 4:

[4] Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: [5] The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Okay—basically, Jesus’ answer to the question “are you the Messiah?” is yes. But you may have missed it because he goes *about* his answer in a somewhat roundabout, cryptic, Jesusy sort of way. What he does is quote from several key passages in the book of Isaiah about the types of things the Messiah would do: the *blind* would see, the *lame* would walk, the *lepers* would be cleansed—so on and so forth. He says, essentially, “go tell John that I am doing all the things the Messiah is supposed to do.”

But there is one glaring omission from the passages Jesus quotes. Another significant thing that Isaiah said the Messiah would do is “set the prisoner free.” And in other passages where Jesus quotes these lines from Isaiah, he *includes* that line.¹ But here he doesn’t. Why not? I mean it’s not like Jesus just *forgot* about that part of who he was supposed to be. Most commentators say that he leaves that line out as a sort of hidden message to John. He’s saying, “John, I *am* the one you and everyone has been waiting for. But that doesn’t mean you’re going to make it out of prison.” And he’s right. We find out later that John will not make it out of prison alive—in fact, he’ll be beheaded while he’s in there.

Now just for a second, can we try to imagine how it would’ve felt for John to get this news? John has been giving his entire life over the kingdom of God. He’s lived out in the wilderness, he has forgone any type of creature comfort imaginable to live a life of obedience and sacrifice. He is now *in prison* for doing precisely the type of thing he was supposed to do in obedience to God...and Jesus just told him it is going to end *horribly* for him as a result. I mean, can you *imagine* the disappointment? The letdown? The frustration? And then can you imagine how easy it would be for the *doubt* to set in?

I think that last part is why Jesus tacks on *this line* at the end, v. 6:

[6] Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

To “stumble” in the Jewish vernacular was to fall *into sin* and/or *away from* God because of something. *Stumbling* meant something had tripped you up to the point that you could no longer believe in God or his message at all. After communicating to John in so many words that he likely will not meet all of John’s expectations as they stand, Jesus says

¹ See Luke 4:18.

that John is *blessed* if he can deal with that reality. **Blessed is the person who can deal with *disappointment* without it turning into *disbelief*. Blessed is the one who can *wrestle* with doubt without being *defeated* by it.** That's Jesus' message for John. And if you're thinking "yeah, that sounds great—but how do I do that?" you're asking the right question. We're going to get there before we're done today.

For now, I want us to **keep following the story.** Because Jesus is going to **stay on this topic** of unmet expectations, but he's going to talk now about *people's* unmet expectations of *John*. Pick it back up with me in v. 7:

[7] As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? [8] If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

So Jesus here is addressing **different expectations people had** of John the Baptist. He says "when you went out to the wilderness (where John was), what exactly did you expect to find there? A reed swayed by the wind?" This was an expression used to describe a person who was easily swayed by other people's *opinion* of them. **But remember: John was living off the land, eating bugs and beehives, and wearing camel's hair. If you're leading *that* kind of life, I think we can safely say you have experienced *freedom* from what people think of you, right? You may struggle with a lot of things—but *fear of man* isn't one of them.** So people should've known that that's not what they were getting in John the Baptist.

Then he says "okay...then what did you expect to see—a man dressed in fine clothes?" Also no—I would remind you once again of the camel's hair jacket. That's not who you should've expected John to be either. So who was John supposed to be? Look at v. 9...

*[9] Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Bingo. Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. [10] This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." [11] Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever 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 been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. [13] For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. [14] And if you are willing to accept it, he is the **Elijah** who was to come. [15] Whoever has ears, let them hear.*

Okay, Jesus just **said a lot of things** all at once. Let's try to break a few of them down together. **First, John is precisely who the Scriptures said he would be.** Jesus is saying to the crowds, "John may not be who *you* expected him to be, but he is precisely who the *Scriptures* said he would be: he was a *prophet*." He wasn't a pushover, he wasn't a pampered king—he was a *prophet*.

And **prophets in the Bible** have a long history of being persecuted, opposed, and even suffering *violence* because of the task and mission God gives them. Because at the end of the day, their job is to speak out *about* God and *against* people's sin. People tend not to like especially that *second* part. So **the fact that John is now in prison for doing precisely those sorts of things ultimately shouldn't have surprised anybody...**if they were rooted and grounded in the Scriptures. John was a prophet—this is what happens to prophets.

The *second* thing I think is worth pointing out is **how highly Jesus speaks of John the Baptist.** Did you catch that? "Among those born of woman there has not risen anyone *greater* than John the Baptist." That's high praise from the son of God. Notice: **John may be uncertain about Jesus, but Jesus does not speak negatively about John.** He lifts him up, holds him up as an example, even.

But notice, that's **immediately followed by** this statement: **"whoever is least in the kingdom** of heaven is *greater* than John." Here's what he means: **as great as John is, and as significant as his role in the kingdom was—it still pales in comparison to those who will get to see the kingdom come in its fullness.** Though John got to play this vital, pivotal role, the most insignificant follower of Jesus who comes after him will be "greater"—and get to see greater *things*—than John. Because in many ways, this is the end of the road for John. He's in prison, he's going to be singled out, and then executed.

So do notice that as much as Jesus raves about John, **it still does not change John's circumstances.** Do you see that? Jesus says all these incredible things about John, all while sending word back to him that he will not make it out of prison alive. **John's negative circumstances shouldn't be misconstrued as God's disapproval of him, and God's approval of John does not mean that his circumstances will turn out like he wants them to.** Do you see that tension?

Okay. If I could just offer you **some pastoral advice,** in light of *that*: **do not interpret the circumstances in your life as a sign of God's posture towards you.** Do not make the mistake of thinking that *good* circumstances in your life are signs of God's *approval*, and *bad* circumstances in your life are signs of God's *disapproval*. That simply is not how God works.

So just think about it: things are **going really well for Vladimir Putin** right now, as a manner of speaking. He is very “successful” if you want to use that term. And still, I don’t think that means that God’s *approval* is on him or his actions. And conversely, things went pretty poorly for Jesus overall in his life on earth—crucifixion and all—and yet I think God approved of every single thing that he did. So do you see why we can’t use our *circumstances* as the metric of God’s posture towards us? The world is too broken and God is too good to view your life that simplistically. **God is so much better than karma.** In this story, we see that there is not a one-to-one relationship between your circumstances, and God’s posture towards you.

And finally, **Jesus connects John’s ministry to his own.** By calling John both “the messenger who would prepare the way” and “the Elijah who is to come,” Jesus is honoring John, but also indirectly claiming that he *himself* is the Messiah. The Old Testament prophets said that before the Messiah showed up, there would be a final prophet or “messenger” who would prepare people for his arrival. And they said that that messenger would be *like* Elijah, or would come in the spirit and likeness of Elijah. Jesus is saying John is indeed that messenger. Which means that Jesus *is* the Messiah.

Which **sets up our final few verses.** Read with me v. 16-19:

*[16] “To what can I compare **this generation?** They are like **children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:** [17] “We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge (a funeral song), and you did not mourn.’ [18] **For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’** In other words, you say he’s crazy. [19] **The Son of Man (a.k.a. Jesus himself) came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”***

So in describing some people’s response to him and to John the Baptist, Jesus uses this **metaphor about children** in the marketplace. Jesus often uses children as illustrations, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Here it’s *negative*. **One of the things** about children—especially small children—is that at times, they have a hard time imagining a world where everything doesn’t cater directly to them and their desires, right? A child thinks everyone should play the game that *they* want to play. They think everyone should operate on the schedule that *they* want to operate on. They think people should do what *they* want them to do. Right? As the dad of a five-year-old and an almost two-year-old, I can personally verify from experience that this is something children do, quite often.

So Jesus uses that word picture and says that's sort of **like what the people of Israel** are doing. They're frustrated that *John* isn't playing their game, and they're frustrated that *Jesus* isn't playing their game. They're disappointed that *John* isn't meeting their expectations, and they're frustrated that *Jesus* isn't meeting their expectations. So **it's almost as if—and follow me here—the problem is not with John or with Jesus. It's almost as if the problem is with people's expectations of John and Jesus.** It's almost as if people had expected these two men to *be* something that neither of them had claimed to be in the first place.

And I wonder if **you and I** don't sometimes make the **same mistake** when it comes to Jesus. I wonder if **sometimes, the reason Jesus does not meet our expectations is because our expectations of him are actually off.** Because you *do* know the one one way to be perpetually disappointed in somebody, right? **By expecting them to be somebody they aren't?** I wonder if sometimes the reason we are *disappointed* by Jesus is because we are holding him to promises that he never made. I wonder if sometimes the reason we get *frustrated* with him is because we have expected him to answer some prayers that he never promised to answer. And I wonder if we get *bitter* at Jesus because we expect him to give us things he has not promised to give us. **So maybe the problem isn't that we have trusted God and he has failed to come through. Maybe the problem is that we have expected God to be something and someone that he isn't.**

Listen—as difficult as this may be for some to hear, **God has not promised you** a stellar career. God has not *promised* you a beach house or a mountain house or a lake house. God has not promised you a *spouse*. God has not promised you an *amazing* marriage. God has not promised you well-behaved angel kids. He hasn't promised you a trouble-free or conflict-free existence. **God has not promised to make all your wildest dreams come true.** And listen: God may very well still *choose to provide* some of those things for you. But he has not *promised any* of them to you. **God's promise to you is not that if you follow him, things will go well for you as a result. Just ask John the Baptist about that. Just ask any of Jesus' disciples. Just ask Jesus himself, for that matter. That is not the promise we're given.**

Rather, the promise we're given is that Jesus is worth following, regardless of how well things go as a result. God's *promise* is that he is enough, no matter *what* circumstance comes. His promise is that “in this world, there *will be trouble*—but that we can *take heart*, for he has *overcome* the world. His promise *isn't* that he will give us everything we want—but that he will give us everything we *need*. And that as we follow him, he will mold and shape our hearts to *want* the things that *he wants*. And his promise is that ultimately one day he will deliver a world in which there *is no disappointment*,

because all will be as it should be. God doesn't exist to give us what we want—he exists to give us something far better.

Are you with me? And **understanding that** protects us from expecting God to be somebody he never claimed to be. It helps align our expectations with reality, and keeps us from falling into unbelief and disbelief.

So **that's one way** to *guard against* doubt due to disappointment: by working to make sure that our expectations about Jesus are the right expectations in the first place. That helps a lot. That's a *preemptive* way to address it. But **still, there are going to be moments** where we are disappointed. There are going to be moments where we're frustrated, even *angry*, at how things played out in our life and how God could've *allowed* them to play out like that. And all of that very well may *still* lead to doubt. So what do we do *then*? How do we deal *reactively* with doubt? Three things I'd recommend...

Be honest about what's behind the doubt.

You **may legitimately have intellectual** hang-ups when it comes to following Jesus. You may have questions about the trustworthiness of the Bible or the believability of some of the supernatural claims in it—or any number of other things. And there are answers to those types of questions to be found. But I'll tell you right now: if behind the doubt is actually *disappointment*—is actually an *experience*—no answers to intellectual questions will actually satisfy you. You've got to be honest about the *actual source* of it. And quite often, that source is *disappointment* of some type. So be honest about that. Second...

Take your disappointment directly to Jesus.

Sometimes I think we talk to anyone and everyone about our doubt, *except* for the one who can actually do something about it. In Matthew 11, John is experiencing uncertainty about Jesus, so who does *he* talk to about it? Jesus *himself*. Once you've been honest about the disappointment behind your doubt, let me encourage you to take that disappointment **directly to Jesus in prayer.**

And I do mean *directly*. Have **you ever read** some of the prayers in the *Psalms*? Have you ever read some of the *Prophets*? At one point the psalmist asks God why God is “so far from saving” him, why God has *abandoned* him? On another occasion, a psalmist accuses God of making his life horrible and taking away every close friend he has. The prophet Jeremiah at one point accuses God of *tricking him*.² The psalmist and the Prophets evidently had no issue taking their disappointment, their frustration, and even

² Psalm 22, Psalm 88, and Jeremiah 20:7, respectively.

their anger directly to God and talking to him about it. **I don't know where we got the idea that all of our prayers have to be pretty and proper and perfectly manicured—but we didn't get it from this bible.**

So why do we think **we wouldn't be able to do** precisely the same thing? If you're *disappointed*, *tell him* you're disappointed. If you're *frustrated*, *tell him* you're frustrated. If you're angry, *tell him* you're angry. For one thing, it's not like he doesn't already *know*. And too, you might just find that instead of being shocked or appalled at your raw emotions, **God meets you right where you're at and his Spirit brings you precisely the encouragement and hope that you need.** I once heard somebody say that **sometimes prayer can look a lot like** pounding your fists into the chest of God while he wraps his arms around you and brings you close. I love that image, because it communicates that God is a good *father*. That he can handle our raw emotions and disappointment without it changing his affections for us. So consider taking your disappointment directly to him. Lastly...

Don't walk through doubt alone.

Lastly, **don't isolate** yourself in your doubt. I have found it to be a pattern in my life that the more I isolate myself, the more I start to believe things that aren't true and invent problems that aren't there. So I would just encourage you, once you've started being honest with God about your doubts and disappointments, to let in some other followers of Jesus too. Allow them to understand where you're at and what you're struggling with. Tell them what got you to the point you're at and ask them for help.

I can assure you that if you were to **show up to LifeGroup this week** and just spill whatever disappointments you have, you're not going to get a rebuke or a mean look—you're going to find a group of people ready to hear you, understand you, remind you of what is true, and walk through it *with* you. We don't believe at City Church that anybody has to be *above* doubt or disappointment, because even the most impressive figures in the bible weren't. Rather, we want to be to you in it. So let us know how we can do that for you.

So be honest about what's behind the doubt, take your disappointment directly to Jesus, and don't walk through doubt alone. I think if we can practice those things, we've got a shot at being the ones who are "blessed," even in our doubt and disappointment. Let me pray for us to that end.