

The King Who Is Justified by his Deeds

Matthew 11:1-24

There was a time 10 years ago when Carissa and I spent a summer in Japan, leading a team of college students on a summer trip with the Navigators campus ministry. And of course, when you hang out with students, you eat a lot of food. I remember one time picking up a chocolate-filled pastry and taking a bite only to discover, that wasn't chocolate. It was *anpan*—a bun filled with sweet bean paste. On another occasion I remember going for a grape popsicle . . . only it wasn't grape, either. More sweet bean paste.

Expectations are a powerful thing. Now I have nothing against bean paste per se, and I can see how over time someone could perhaps get used to it and quite enjoy it. But when you're biting into a pastry, expecting a sweet, soft, cocoa-ey frosting goodness, and instead get a mouthful of some unidentifiable flavor the consistency of refried beans, there's something disorienting and disappointing about it that experience.

Now that's ridiculous. The disappointment and disorientation we see in the story before us are a bit more substantial. In fact our passage this morning is all about misplaced expectations about Jesus, particularly with respect to his *deeds*—his actions, what he's been doing. The word "deeds" or "works" marks the beginning and end of this passage. You don't see that very clearly in the NIV translation, but look at it in the ESV:

- "Now when John heard in prison about the *deeds* of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples . . ." (11:2)
- "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*." (11:19) (there, Jesus personifies himself as wisdom).

So the passage opens and closes by mentioning Jesus' deeds. And what does it focus on in between, and a little afterward? Jesus' deeds, his actions. When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask him a question, Jesus points them to his deeds, v. 4: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see," and then he gives a list of the works he's been doing in the last few chapters. Similarly, Jesus ends the passage by focusing on his great works, specifically by condemning the cities where he had performed most of them because they had refused to repent and believe.

Jesus has been incredibly active during his ministry so far. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew so far we've seen him announce the good news of God's kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, teach the crowds, cast out demons, and call to himself a band of disciples to carry on his mission. But what he's been doing does not always line up with what people *expect* him to be doing. For

John the Baptist, something was missing. For the crowds who followed him, there was nothing to write home about. There was a gap between what people expected of Jesus, and what he actually came to do, that caused them to become disoriented and confused about just who he is, and whether or not they should actually trust and follow him.

We can run into that exact same confusion. Every single one of us has certain ideas about who Jesus is and what he came to do. Ideas about how he should be running things right now, what should happen if I trust and follow him. And when those expectations go unmet, our life and faith can become very disoriented. Our heart can fill up with doubt and fears. We can become disenchanted with God, underwhelmed, even angry, because it feels as though he's let us down.

But the question underneath all this—for John, for the crowds, for us: Do our expectations line up with who Jesus *really* is and what he *really* came to do? Are our expectations shaped by God's promises in Scripture, or by our desire to get rid of a problem, or by our preferences for how life should go in this world?

What Matthew shows us this morning is that when our expectations for Jesus line up with God's promises for his kingdom, then Jesus' actions actually confirm his true identity as King. We see what he's doing and we know we can trust him. But if our expectations don't line up with the promises of Scripture, then we run the risk of missing Jesus, as the crowds did, or even dismissing him, as John was tempted to do, and looking instead for hope in something or someone else.

John's Disappointment: Something's Missing (11:1-6)

Chapter 11 begins a new section in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has just commissioned his twelve disciples and sent them on a mission to announce the kingdom of God to the lost sheep of Israel. We don't actually hear how that goes; instead Matthew tells us how Jesus "went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee" (11:1). And as he's teaching and preaching, he's encountered by some of the followers of John the Baptist, with a message from their teacher who is in prison. Verse 2: "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (11:2-3).

We learn more about why John the Baptist is in prison in Matthew 14: he publically opposed Herod the Tetrarch (the ruler of Judea at that time) for marrying brother's wife, Herodias (cf. Matt. 14:1-12). And rulers don't like being told what they're doing is wrong. So here's John, sitting in prison, whose ministry had prepared the way for Jesus back in ch. 3, who had himself baptized Jesus, now hearing reports of his "deeds," and scratching his head, saying, 'I don't know, maybe he's not the guy after all.'

Now it's remarkable that someone like John could have doubts about Jesus. We often think that doubting is this cardinal sin, from which there's no forgiveness. And God calls us to a steadfast faith. But he also wants to be honest when we have doubts and questions. Not to bury them in shame, or use them as an excuse to ignore Jesus, but to wrestle honestly with them—which is what John is doing and why he sends his disciples to go inquire of Jesus.

So where does John's doubt come from? What triggers it? It has to do with the report he heard about Jesus' deeds, his actions. Something seemed to be missing from them. He had expected to

hear of him doing *something*, and it wasn't there. Now we're not told here exactly what it is, but based on John's earlier message, and on Jesus' reply to him right here, we can safely suggest that what was missing for John was Jesus' actions of judgment.

Remember how John had called the nation of Israel to repentance. Their long-awaited King was coming, and they needed to prepare to meet him by turning away from their sin and rebellion, and toward God in faith and repentance. And for those who refused to turn to God, John warned them of this King's coming judgment. He said in Matthew 3:12, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

One author describes John's confusion like this: "John warned those who wouldn't bear fruit with repentance that 'the axe is laid at the root of the trees' (3:10a). But now 'in prison' (11:2) and soon to die for proclaiming God's righteousness and the coming Messiah, John wondered where this axe was, and when Jesus was going to start swinging it."¹ God promised to deal with his enemies when his King comes, and from my perspective, here in prison, it sure looks like they're still winning.

Listen to how Jesus responds in vv. 4-6: "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away [or take offense] on account of me.'"

Now on the one hand it sounds like Jesus is just listing off his recent itinerary, summarizing the previous few chapters. But there's something bigger going on for those who have ears to hear, or at least ears tuned in to the Old Testament promises of God. Nearly every single action listed here can be found in the book of Isaiah, as illustrations of what God would do when he rescued his people from exile and restored his broken world to himself through the king who is to come.

Listen to Isaiah 35:4-6, for example: "Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.' *Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. . . .*"

Or Isaiah 61:1-2: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me *to preach good news to the poor*. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God. . . ."

Jesus is saying three things to John with this answer. First, that his actions do in fact testify that he is the coming King. The promises of Isaiah are being fulfilled before everyone's eyes (cf. Lk. 4:16-21). Second, that he hasn't forgotten about judgment. That's part of what Isaiah promised—we heard it in both the passages we read. And before this passage ends, Jesus will pronounce judgment on three cities. But before that final judgment, *the good news must be preached to the poor*, the needy—not just those in financial need, but the spiritually poor—those who, left to

¹ Doug O'Donnell's helpful discussion in *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 208.

themselves, are spiritually bankrupt in God's sight.² Third, judgment will come—it will come on John's captors—but not before John is released. As Jesus alludes to these passages in Isaiah, the one phrase he doesn't reiterate is “freedom for the captives” or “release for the prisoners.” John's vindication will have to wait for the end.

The promises of God include both judgment *and* salvation. John was expecting mostly judgment, and he nearly missed the Messiah. Our expectations today tend to be the opposite. We expect mostly salvation, deliverance from all our problems, God's love. One author writes, “Most people assume it is God's job to love them. . . . He needs us. He pines for us. And if we pay him any attention—go to church, do a good deed, recycle, or maybe meditate while listening to soothing music—then we've done him a really big favor.”³ We don't see God as very holy, and therefore we don't think sin is that big a deal. So when we come to a passage like vv. 20-24 later in this chapter, or Matthew 25, or parts of Revelation, or lots of other places in the Bible, and hear of the very real threat of judgment and hell for those who reject Jesus as king, we scratch our heads and ask, ‘Is this the guy that we should be hoping in, or is there someone else?’

But do our expectations of Jesus line up with Scripture? We should expect Jesus to save. But should we expect him to judge sin? Another way to ask the question, *does sin really deserve to be punished?*

Think about God's holiness. If God is truly holy—above us, unlike us, over us, bigger than us, morally perfect in every way—then just the slightest imperfection makes us unworthy of his presence. The smallest act of disobedience makes us rebels against his kingdom. If God is holy, he must punish sin.

Think about evil. If evil is truly evil—the wickedness of genocide, racism, abuse, deception, and violence—then God in his *love* must punish sin and evil; he cannot turn a blind eye to sin.

Think about the cross. If sin doesn't deserve to be punished, then the cross was an unnecessary part of the story. It's in the cross where God's judgment and salvation meet. The judgment we deserve for our sin and rebellion was poured out on Jesus in our place, that he might save us from our sins. For those who have trusted in Jesus Christ as their King and Savior, there is no need to fear the judgment of God; Jesus Christ has exhausted God's holy anger against our sin, draining that cup to the very last drop. But if the cross was necessary to save us from God's judgment, those who reject Jesus and his cross remain under that judgment.

The promises of God in the Old Testament tell us to expect both salvation and judgment from Jesus—judgment in the end for those who reject him and continue in rebellion, but salvation today and forevermore for those who turn from sin and trust in him.

But John's confusion about Jesus gives him the occasion to address the crowds' confusion about him as well. John wasn't the only one who was disenchanted with Jesus and his actions. So Jesus addresses the crowds by reminding them of the role of John the Baptist.

² See O'Donnell, 209-210.

³ Joshua Harris, *Dug Down Deep* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 46.

The Crowd's Disenchantment: Nothing to Write Home about (11:7-19)

Look with me at vv. 7-9. Jesus starts with a couple of rhetorical questions about John, the answers to which are obviously, No. First he asks, "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?" (11:7). Picture a stalk of papyrus blowing back and forth—a wimpy spokesman, hard to pin down, blown along by the latest fads or opinions. John was clearly not that. Verse 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" (11:8). Here the picture is of a court-prophet in the service of the king. A groveling yes-man kept on payroll to tell him what he wanted to hear when he needed God's approval. John didn't draw a crowd because of that.

No, John is a prophet of God, steadfast and deadly serious, willing to stand before the powers that be and boldly proclaim God's Word, even if it landed him in prison (11:9). Jesus acknowledges the rising conflict around God's kingdom that John's ministry has triggered. He says in v. 12: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing [or rather, 'has suffered violence'], and forceful [or violent] men [take it by force]." John was involved in serious conflict, and nobody doubted his tenacity as a prophet.

But Jesus says there's even more to John than this. He tells the crowds in v. 10 what John's ministry was really about: "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" (11:10; cf. Mal. 3:1).

Here Jesus quotes the Old Testament book of Malachi, which is largely a rebuke against God's people Israel for their faithlessness to their covenant with God. Yet God will not leave them in their infidelity; he will come to them in both judgment and salvation (Mal. 3:1-4; 4:1-4), and he will send his messenger in advance to prepare the way (Mal. 3:1; 4:5).

Jesus says John the Baptist is that messenger. He is the one that Malachi 4:5 spoke of: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Mal. 4:5-6). As Jesus says in Matthew 11:13-15, "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." Not a resurrected Elijah, but one who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah," as Luke 1:17 puts it, to prepare the way for God to return to his people (cf. Isa. 40:1). "He who has ears, let him hear."

The true significance of John was not his *chutzpah* before Herod's violent opposition, but the pivotal role he played in the dawning of God's kingdom on earth. As Jesus describes him in v. 11, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist . . ." (11:11). He was the final prophet under the old covenant, the capstone pointing forward to God's kingdom. And "yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." The least one who enjoys the blessings of Jesus' kingdom is actually greater than John the Baptist, because whereas John lived in the shadow looking forward, we live in the light of the Son of God.

So here's Jesus' point to the crowd: if that's who John is, and that's what his ministry is about—preparing the way for God to come to his people—that means that Jesus really is the one they've all been waiting for. The one who would come in both judgment and salvation, to rescue his

people from their sin, to turn their hearts back to God, to make right all that is wrong in this broken and fallen world—the brokenness of our hearts, of our bodies, of our relationships with one another, the brokenness of our relationship with God. Jesus came to bring all of creation under his rightful and merciful rule. And every great work and miracle so far has been a signpost that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. His works have been demonstrating this fact all along.

But the crowds are unimpressed. They've been following Jesus around, listening to him teach, seeing him heal the sick and cleanse lepers, but it's nothing to write home about. Or at least it's nothing so amazing that they're willing to surrender their lives to this king.

In fact, nothing seems to please them or meet their expectations. Jesus compares them in vv. 16-19 to a bunch of unappeasable children. "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'" (11:16-17). They're unsatisfied by John's ministry of repentance in the face of judgment, with the fasting and mourning over sin, like a funeral. Verse 18: "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'" Yet neither are they compelled by Jesus' ministry of celebration and the joy of sinners being reconciled to God. Verse 19: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.''"

Instead of repenting in the face of judgment and turning to Jesus as Savior, they stand over Jesus in judgment, weighing his actions, deciding for themselves whether his ministry has any relevance or credibility. Not at all unlike the way we often put Jesus on the stand, as though he has to make his defense to us over whether or not we should trust and follow him.

Why is it that sometimes, when we read these stories, or the rest of Scripture, or when we see God answer prayers, or see Jesus change someone's life, we remain unmoved by it all? Unimpressed? Nothing to write home about? For some of us, perhaps, the whole thing just doesn't seem relevant. How does a miracle-working king who got himself killed two-thousand years ago help me pay the rent? Or get that girl to call me back? What does it have to do with my everyday life?

Some of us feel that we tried God, and he let us down. We prayed, we went to church, we tried to read our Bibles, and our child still died of cancer. The panic attacks, the loneliness, the addiction still wear us down.

I don't want to minimize for a moment the very real pain and difficulty that many of us face. But we have to ask, Are our expectations of Jesus shaped by God's promises in Scripture, or by our desire to get rid of a problem, or by our preferences for how life should go in this world? God doesn't promise us a perfect, pain-free life—at least not yet. There will come a day, when King Jesus returns and completes God's kingdom in a heavenly new creation, and in that day, as Revelation puts it, "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

But we live in the meantime, between the cross and new creation, where suffering still plays a part, but where God still rules, and is with us even in our suffering.

We cannot come before Jesus as though *we're* giving *him* a chance to prove himself. We are not the judge. We don't have enough wisdom or perspective to be the judge. There are things at work that we cannot see; things God is doing, even through pain and suffering, that we may never see clearly this side of heaven.

But if we see Jesus and his ministry according to God's promises in Scripture, we know we can trust him. He has the wisdom to know what he's doing. He is wisdom personified, as he says at the end of v. 19. And wisdom will be justified by her deeds. Though this world may dismiss him or ignore him, his actions demonstrate that he truly is the King of heaven and earth.

Jesus' Denouncement: Judgment for Rejecting the King (11:20-24)

And there's much at stake in missing Jesus. John wanted to see judgment come now. Jesus said wait. But it will come. It will come for those who miss or dismiss him and his deeds, who reject him as King and forfeit the grace that could be theirs through faith in him. In fact our passage concludes with Jesus' harsh words against three cities. Verses 20-24:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ²¹ "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Scholar Tom Wright says about these verses:

These warnings are among the most sober and serious words he ever said. He had lived in Capernaum, after all; he knew the people. They were his friends, his neighbours. The baker where he bought his bread. The people he met in the synagogue. And he knew Chorazin and Bethsaida, just a short walk along the lakeside. And he knew now, despite all the remarkable things he'd done there, that they were bent on going their own way, following their own vision of God's kingdom. And he knew where that would lead.⁴

Sin really does deserve to be punished. That's why Jesus died on the cross—so that we can be rescued from the Father's judgment and instead enjoy his love. Don't miss Jesus. Don't dismiss him, simply because your expectations don't line up with what he came to do. Pray for the eyes to see him for who he truly is. Trust him, and follow him. And keep trusting and following him, even when it doesn't make sense.

He is the one we've been waiting for, even if we never knew it up to this point. He is the one who alone can put your life back together—in part now, and fully in the resurrection to come. He is the one who alone can restore your relationship with his Father in heaven; he made your sin his sin, that his righteousness might be credited to you. He is the one who stands before his Father day by day interceding for you. Who sent his Spirit to give you life and strength to trust and follow him. He is our Savior, and he is our King, who alone has the wisdom, and the power, and authority to make all things new. His name is Jesus. Let's worship him together.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 133.