

## The King Who Causes a Scandal

Matthew 13:53–14:12

Have you ever passed up a good thing, not because it wasn't good, but because it somehow didn't meet your expectations or match your agenda? It was the right car, the right price, but the wrong color (and you kick yourself later for not buying it). Or you received a scholarship for a particular college, but it's not the one you wanted to go to. Then later, when you're paying student loans, you wish you had.

This is essentially the plotline of every family meal in the Levering household. Good food is presented to our children, who regularly pass it up, not because it's not good, but because it somehow fails to match their expectations or agenda. Our conversation this past Friday night went something like this: "Here's your pizza." *"That's circle pizza. I wanted square pizza."* "It's the same thing." *"But I wanted square pizza."* The expectations don't match. It went like this with the next child: "Come to the table; dinner is ready." *"I can't. I'm not done with my chapter yet."* Or some nights it's, *"But I just started a new level on my game."* *"My show's not over yet."* Translation: dinner doesn't fit into my agenda right now.

Expectations are powerful thing. And agendas are even more powerful. So powerful that they create a scandal when their unmet, and can cause us to miss out on things that really are good for us—some things we honestly can't live without. Even, things like the kingdom of God.

If you're just joining us, we're about halfway through the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, which (along with the other three Gospels) tells the story of how God is establishing his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Israel's long-awaited king, Jesus.

When we left off last December, we looked at the end of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven in ch. 13. We saw how indescribably good it is to be included in God's kingdom. There is no greater treasure than to belong to God's kingdom, and no greater terror than to be left out.

As we come to a new section in Matthew's Gospel this morning,<sup>1</sup> we have two stories before us of people who are at risk of missing out on the goodness of God's kingdom of God, because they are scandalized by Jesus' teaching and miracles. They fail to line up with their expectations; they threaten their agendas. Matthew 13:53-58 tells the story of Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth, and 14:1-12 show us Herod's reaction to Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus' teaching and mighty works are a stumbling block to those who reject him as king. They don't make sense. They're too incredible. They get in the way. They restrict us from living the way we want to live.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:53 marks the end of the third and beginning of the fourth narrative-discourse sections in the Gospel, signaled by the phrase, "When Jesus had finished these sayings" or something similar (cf. 7:28; 11:1; 19:1; 26:1).

As Peter puts it in a passage we looked at two weeks ago, quoting Psalms and Isaiah, Jesus is the stone the builders rejected, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (1 Pet. 2:6-8; cf. Ps. 118:22; Isa. 8:14).

But for those who believe, who see in Jesus and his reign the cornerstone of God's salvation program, Jesus' teaching and miracles are neither ridiculous nor restricting, but they are liberating and life-giving. They free us to live the way life was meant to be lived.

### **When Expectations Become a Stumbling Block to Following Jesus (13:53-58)**

Our first story is at the end of chapter 13: When expectations become a stumbling block to following Jesus. Verse 53:

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there,<sup>54</sup> and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?<sup>55</sup> Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?<sup>56</sup> And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"<sup>57</sup> And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household."<sup>58</sup> And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (13:53-58)

When Jesus shows up in his hometown of Nazareth (cf. 2:23), and starts teaching in their synagogue, the people of the town can't comprehend that the boy they watched grow up is somehow a great teacher and miracle worker, let alone the long-awaited king of Israel.

On the one hand, they recognize something special is going on here. Matthew tells us how they were astonished by his wisdom and his mighty works. Astonished and *offended*. Because they had a category for Jesus, and miracle-working Savior was not it. It's almost a "Who does this guy think he is?" reaction. 'We know who he is: He's the carpenter's son. He's Mary's boy. James and Joseph and Simon and Judas' big brother. His sisters are right here with us. This is the guy you call if you're building a house, or trying to fix your back porch. But healing the sick? Giving sight to the blind? Teaching as though he himself is the fulfillment of Israel's Scripture (cf. Lk. 4:21)? That's going too far.' When Luke describes what is almost certainly the same event, he tells how the crowds were so outraged they actually took Jesus and hauled him to the edge of a cliff so they could throw him over (Lk. 4:29-30). Jesus walks away that time. But it's a foreshadowing of what would eventually be his end (or so his opponents thought, when they nailed him to the cross).

Jesus' teaching and miracles were an offense to the people he grew up with, even his own family (cf. Jn. 7:25-27, 40-44). Which is no surprise to Jesus, as he says in v. 57: "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." They didn't line up with their expectations of who he is, or what God's king would be like.

But whether or not he fits their expectations doesn't change the truth of who he is. And that's true for us as well. Our own expectations about who Jesus is, or about how life or religion works, can get in the way and become a stumbling block to actually following Jesus.

For instance, some of us expect the world to work in a certain way. Science tells us that virgins don't have babies, that people sink when they stand on water; they don't walk. That you can't feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, and that dead people don't come back to life after three days in the grave. There's a certain materialistic view of the world that looks at the mighty works of Jesus and takes offense. 'How stupid do you think I am to buy that stuff?' That is outside my expectations.

But is it true? What if it's our expectations that need to be adjusted? What if God is not bound by the laws of nature, but is above them and over them? What if, as Tom Wright states, the resurrection of Jesus "is not an absurd event within the old world but the symbol and starting point of the new world."<sup>2</sup> Something for which science lacks the proper analogies to make sense of.

Others among us perhaps have certain expectations about how religion works. Maybe we think that if I follow God and trust in him, then good things are going to happen in life. Jesus' mighty works are going to be mighty beneficial to me. I'm going to see and experience his blessings and miracles as a reward for my faith. But if that's not what happens, then his miracles become a stumbling block to me. When life goes in a different direction than what we expected, we feel cheated, as though Jesus is letting us down. We trip over his words from later in Matthew 16, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (16:24). We don't have a category for suffering. And so we pass on Jesus, because that isn't what I thought I was signing up for.

Or maybe we like to think, with respect to religion, that good people go to heaven when they die regardless of what they believe about Jesus. And by good people, we mean *most* people—as long as you don't murder someone. It doesn't matter if you follow Allah, or Buddha, or Joseph Smith, or Jesus Christ—as long as you really mean it in your heart. We call this "universalism." But if that's our expectation, then we're bound to stumble over Jesus' teaching and take offense at him when he says things like John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." That just sounds too exclusive. Too restrictive. In fact many people stumble over Jesus on this very point: his claim of universal authority, and the exclusive ability to save sinful humans and reconcile them with God. It's offensive. But is it true?

What if God really is holy, and sin really does separate us from his holiness? What if 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 is true, that in the end, God will "inflict... vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might"? If that's true, we do nobody a service by pretending that it's not. If a doctor was ever found to be withholding the truth of a deadly diagnosis from a patient, because he was afraid that patient would be offended, he would lose his credentials and everything he has in a lawsuit. Especially if there was an available cure! Yet the world says to Jesus and his offer of salvation: "don't say that; it's too offensive. Too judgmental."

But the problem is real, and Jesus is the cure. He took our sin in his body on the cross that he might fully exhaust God's holy anger against our sin and reconcile us to God. When God looks at those who trust in Jesus, he declares them not guilty. He doesn't see their sin; he sees his beloved child. As Peter says of Jesus (again, quoting Isaiah), "by his wounds you are healed" (1

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 67.

Pet. 2:24; cf. Isa. 53:6). Jesus is the cure. And he offers forgiveness and new life to all who will trust in him, because *only he* is able to save them. And again, that's only offensive if it's not true. Were a scientist able to discover a cure for cancer, and tell the world that no other drug on the shelf is able to cure it, only this one—is that offensive? Is Tylenol going to get it's feelings hurt at such an exclusive claim? Only if it's not true. It's actually marvelous news if it is.

And so what sounds at first like a restrictive and judgmental claim is actually the most inclusive and generous invitation of all. In Jesus there is forgiveness for every sin, every offense, every failure, all our shame, all that's wrong with this fallen world—Jesus is able to make all things new. Only Jesus. Don't let your expectations become a stumbling block to following Jesus.

The tragedy of this story in Matthew is that because the people in Jesus' hometown respond to him with unbelief, they cut themselves off from the grace and goodness that could be theirs. Verse 58 tells us that Jesus “did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.” Jesus' miracles were not a sideshow for entertainment. They were the in-breaking of God's kingdom. But that kingdom is always to be received by faith. Apart from faith in Jesus, they were passing up on what was truly good simply because it didn't match their expectations.

Now one of the encouraging parts of this story is that even though they didn't accept Jesus' true identity and authority here, many of his siblings do in fact become followers of Jesus later. The James mentioned here is the same James that's in Acts 15, the leader of the church in Jerusalem and author of the book of James in the New Testament. The Judas mentioned here is the author of the book we call Jude. They came to see that in Jesus, we have something far better than any of our expectations. Something more powerful than nature. More secure than health and wealth. More just and more generous than universalism. We have a Savior who's actually able to give us the life and significance we're looking for, all to the glory of his Father.

### **When Agendas Become a Stumbling Block to Following Jesus (14:1-12)**

The second story is found in ch. 14:1-12: When agendas become a stumbling block to following Jesus. Look with me at 14:1-2: “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.’”

The Herod mentioned here is Herod Antipas, one of several sons of Herod the Great (which is the Herod who attempted to kill the infant Jesus back in Matthew 2). Herod Antipas received a third of his father's territory to rule on behalf of Rome, specifically Galilee and Perea. Like the crowds in Nazareth where Jesus had just taught, Herod had heard the report of Jesus' mighty works. And like those in Jesus' hometown, he took offense. But not for the same reasons. The crowds in Nazareth were upset because Jesus didn't fit their expectations; Herod is unsettled because Jesus crosses his agenda. We see this in his association of Jesus with John the Baptist, whom he had previously had killed.

That Herod thought Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist is kind of curious. As one author notes, he “must have believed the Jewish idea of physical resurrection but superstitiously interpreted it from [an ancient Greek] perspective of spirits seeking revenge.”<sup>3</sup> So he thought he

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 557.

was in trouble. The reports of Jesus' mighty works unsettled him, because they signaled a moral authority that threatened his own authority and agenda. A moral authority he associated with John the Baptist, who had publically opposed Herod's adulterous marriage, for which he died.

Verses 3-11 give us the backstory on why Herod is nervous about the report of Jesus and his fear that John the Baptist has come back to get him. Verse 3:

For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, <sup>4</sup> because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." <sup>5</sup> And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. <sup>6</sup> But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, <sup>7</sup> so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup> Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." <sup>9</sup> And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. <sup>10</sup> He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, <sup>11</sup> and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup> And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. (14:3-12)

It's a gruesome story. As one author writes, "Hollywood, eat your heart out! Adultery, divorce, backstabbing, deceit, high-handed political maneuverings, *and* the voice of one crying in this wilderness of debauchery."<sup>4</sup> Both Herod and Herodias had previous marriages that they left in order to marry each other, Herodias having been married to Herod's brother, Philip. They shared a hatred of John the Baptist, who called him out on his sin against God and Israel's covenant (cf. Lev. 18:16; 20:21). But Herod felt his hands were tied because of the crowds' reverence for John as a prophet. And so Herodias plays Herod's drunkenness and pride one night, using her own daughter (who was probably no older than 12 or 14) to manipulate Herod into silencing their opponent. She dances what was probably an alluring dance. Herod is pleased, and tries to show off in front of his guests by making an open-ended promise. Herodias sends her daughter in for the kill, literally. She wants John's head on a platter, served up at the banquet like desert. Again, it's a gruesome story.

John crossed Herod's agenda and got himself killed. And now Jesus comes along, whose teaching and miracles likewise cross Herod's agenda. And who like John will eventually get himself killed, though his death is but the beginning of the real story.

That someone would claim a moral authority over him was an offense to Herod. It was seen as restrictive and enslaving. It was a stumbling block to following Jesus. And that reaction is just as common today as it was back then. The idea that there is some moral absolute is largely scoffed at today. Freedom is seen as the freedom to do what I want, rather than the freedom to do what is good. And this shows itself perhaps nowhere more acutely than with respect to sexual ethics.

This was a trigger issue for Herod. He wanted the freedom to have sex with whomever he wanted, regardless of God or his laws, and no brother and no prophet was going to stand in his way. This same desire for so-called "sexual freedom" makes Jesus' teaching an incredible stumbling block for so many today.

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<sup>4</sup> Doug O'Donnell, *Matthew* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 383.

Jesus had opinions on who could have sex with whom and in what context. *More* than opinions: they were *commands*. Commands for which he will hold all people to account for whether or not they obey them. Commands that, if or when we disobey them, can be forgiven through the grace we have in Christ. But commands that are not open to revision or subject to public opinion, but issue from the throne of our Creator God. When Jesus speaks about marriage and sex, he unambiguously affirms God’s creational design that *God is for sex*—he made us sexual beings, it’s part of his good design; that *sex is for marriage* between a man and a woman, that’s the exclusive context in which it is meant to be expressed; and that *marriage is for life*—it’s not something to be taken lightly or broken whenever our affections or lust move on (cf. Matt. 5:27-32; 19:1-12).<sup>5</sup> As Tim Keller has said, “Sex is a God-invented way to say to another person, ‘I belong completely and exclusively and permanently to you.’”<sup>6</sup>

Understood correctly, Jesus’ teaching on marriage, singleness, and sex is beautiful and liberating. It frees us to love and follow God and to genuinely love one another, to do what is truly good for the other. But it’s probably the single most offensive doctrine for non-believers today, and an increasing stumbling block for young people in the church. One author writes, “Just as C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* all those years ago, there are few of Christianity’s teachings more offensive, unpalatable, and likely to drive people away from hearing the Gospel than its sex ethic.”<sup>7</sup> So, like Herod, many of us want the right to engage sexually with whomever we want, and we’re offended if anyone, including Jesus tells us otherwise. His sexual ethic is seen as repressive, outdated. It is an offense to those who reject him as king.

Now that’s not to say there aren’t other honest questions or legitimate criticisms that drive people away from the church. And it’s not to say that the church has always handled these specific questions well. We haven’t always done a good job listening or loving or trying to understand. We haven’t made space for people to wrestle honestly with their questions or feelings in the safety of a loving community, without fear of being rejected or isolated. Worst of all, we have not always approached this subject from the perspective of the gospel—upholding both the sinfulness of sin and the sufficiency of God’s grace in Jesus.

But even when we do get that right, the fact remains that many continue to be offended by a biblical vision of sex and sexuality. Which means that their issue isn’t so much with the church, but with Jesus. His teaching is a stumbling block. Such that many will pass on him, and others will find themselves revising their doctrine in order to justify their behavior, or the behavior of someone the love.

These are hard issues; I don’t want to pretend that they’re not. Some of us deal with them daily. And we need the comfort and encouragement of one another to face them. We need the daily reminder that the gospel is sufficient. We need to give space in the church to wrestle honestly with them—and not just with questions about sex and sexuality, any questions or doubts we find ourselves facing. The gospel of Jesus gives us space to be honest in our exploration—we don’t

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<sup>5</sup> Vaughan Roberts, *God’s Big Design* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller, “The Gospel and Sex,” *Q*. Available at: <http://www.qideas.org/essays/the-gospel-and-sex.aspx?page=2>.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Rishmawy, “Who Are You Sleeping With? My Conversation with Tim Keller,” *Christ and Pop Culture*, April 11, 2013. Available at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2013/04/who-are-you-sleeping-with-my-conversation-with-timothy-keller/>.

have to perform for each other or for God to be accepted. And it gives us guardrails for wrestling in a healthy way—upholding both the sinfulness of sin and the sufficiency of grace.

But what I want to say you this morning is this: don't let your agenda become a stumbling block to following Jesus. His teaching and mighty works are not ridiculous or restrictive; they are life-giving and liberating. They free us to live the way we were meant to live. True freedom is not the freedom to do whatever I want. It's the freedom to do what is right and good. And there is no lasting joy in any other kind of freedom. Submission to the gospel of Jesus frees us to truly live.

The other thing we often do at our dinner table, other than arguing over the shape of a pizza slice, is play family games. Board games. It's one of those experiences in life where it's painfully obvious how the rules really do set you free. If you've ever tried to play a board game with a two-year-old who has no concept of the rules or the objective of the game, it's not fun for very long. If you've ever won a game by cheating, even if you didn't get caught, it's not a true joy. There's something missing. The rules are not there to restrict the players, but to set them free. Free to enjoy, free to play and have fun, free to do what is right and good, free to live.

So it is that Jesus' teaching and miracles us free. Our king has not come with a ball and chain in hand, but with a key. To unlock the chains of sin and death, and set the captives free. It's interesting to consider the passage that Jesus preached that day in Nazareth, when he was run out of town (as Luke 4 tells us). From Isaiah 61: “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim *liberty* to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at *liberty* those who are oppressed,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.’ . . . And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Lk. 4:18-19, 21).

Don't let your expectations or agendas get in the way of following Jesus. May we find life and freedom through faith in him.