

We are going to look at this passage through a lens of expectation. We know about expectations; we all have them. Expectations actually can be really good. When you see a movie trailer preview, it sets up an expectation to whether or not you should go see the full movie. You have an expectation of how food tastes. You know what type of food to order based on how hungry or what type of food you feel like eating. But expectations can also result in disappointments.

Have you ever had times where you thought, I'm going to go do something. You had this beautiful picture in your mind. And what ended up wasn't exactly what you had pictured. You had expectations that you thought would work out but didn't. We all have expectations. Maybe the expectations, and disappointments with those expectations, have stuck with you.

I remember when I was a little kid one of the things we would do from time to time with my dad is go fishing. We didn't live near a body of water but we had a friend who had a small private pond about an hour away. One particular Saturday morning we were all excited because we were going fishing and we drove all the way to this farm. It started to pour down rain. I remember standing in the barn with rain coming down, thinking, Come on God, let this up so we can go fishing.

In Jesus' day people had expectations as well. They had expectations of God. They expected God to work in the world in a certain way. It seemed like God had been absent for hundreds of years. They were expecting and looking for God to show up. They were looking for God to do what he's done in the past. They had expectations of how God would act in their world.

One of the people who had expectations was John the Baptist. He had expectations of how God would act and show up in the world. A message gets sent to Jesus from John. Jesus, what's going on? I had an expectation. What's happening? I don't see it played out.

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

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 cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good

news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."
(Matthew 11:1-6)

John the Baptist was an interesting guy. He was an eccentric guy. If you don't know the story: he wore really strange clothes and lived out in the wilderness. But John was very clear on what he was meant to do in the world. He had a calling from God to prepare the way for the Messiah, the one who would initiate the kingdom of God. John was popular we're told. But he was also incredibly outspoken. And that's part of what led him to find himself in prison.

The local Roman ruler of that region was a guy named Herod. He was one of the sons of Herod the Great. This particular Herod was doing his own thing. He went to visit his brother in Rome. He fancied his brother's wife and seduced her, disposed of his own wife and then married her. When this guy returns back to the region John the Baptist doesn't think that's right. So he publicly criticizes the local ruler of that region. Herod returns the favor by imprisoning John.

It's kind of a tragic, in some ways, end for John. Imagine the heartache if you were John. Imagine the heartache of this moment that you've been obedient to God's call and that faithfulness has led you to a prison. Imagine what it must have been like for John. Imagine the questions going through his mind. Questions about God. Questions about life. Questions about the past. Questions about the future as you sit in this prison cell. You've lived your entire life story literally outside in the wild. And now your life is coming to an end in a cramped prison cell. We don't know exactly John's intention in asking the question that he does ask of Jesus. He sends a question through his representatives. The question is incredibly fascinating. It's something where I think the whole entire passage hinges. He says through his disciples, "Jesus, are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?"

There's a theological component to that question. He says, Are you the one who has to come? The one who is to come is this idea, this person of the Messiah. There was an expectation in Jesus's day that God was not done. There would be a coming Messiah. There would be someone who would inaugurate the kingdom of God who would bring about a tangible sense of the Kingdom among people. The Jews expected this.

In fact we get a picture of what that Messiah would do during that time from a writing of one subset of Jews called the

Estonians, who lived out in caves. Like John, they were out in the wild. They said the Messiah will be the person who liberates the captives, who restores sight to the blind. He will heal the wounded and will make the dead live. He will bring good news to the poor and he will enrich the hungry. There was an expectation that God's representative would show up on earth and that he would do something about how the world works. That's part of the expectation.

That's part of this whole idea of the one who is to come. Not only was there a theological component to John's question but there is also an emotional one. You can see it in the second half of that question—Or should we expect someone else? I don't know about you but my heart just breaks reading that phrase. Are you the one? Did we waste our time? Should we be expecting somebody else? You can see the emotion there. In Matthew chapter 3, John was so sure that Jesus was the one and now he's at a point in life where he's saying, was it all worth it? I mean, you were and then here I am. There's an emotional component to what John saying here. Is hope misplaced, Jesus? Doesn't the kingdom mean that justice will come? And yet here I am sitting in prison. Where's the kingdom in that? Again we're just speculating—we don't know.

But you can imagine what it must feel like seeing that prison cell. Maybe you've had those questions for God. Maybe you've gone to a place and been in a place in your life where you're thinking, God, should I have put my hopes somewhere else?

John asks this question of Jesus. Jesus answers by pointing the attention to what he's doing in the world. In other words, I hear your question John. Look around and see that something of God is happening in the world. See that there is a bigger story going on. The thing you'd hoped for is taking place. Jesus points to his actions. Actually the words he says are quotes from Isaiah 35 and 61. Isaiah 35 and 61 talk about what the world will be like when the Messiah comes. Jesus says these things are happening in and through him. God is at work in the world in a bigger way than you could have imagined. That means something. It means your hope is not wasted. It means you can still hang on; God's not done.

He even gives a little bit more of encouragement because John was the one who spent his life believing that God had called him to usher him to be the forerunner to this messiah. In essence he's saying John, your life was not a waste. Yes, I know you're in prison. I know it didn't really work out the way you thought it might. But you've had a moment. You've had a part in history that's unique. That's greater than anyone else has ever had.

Not everyone saw that about John. In fact, even though he was incredibly popular, the culture had a lot of questions and concerns about John. They had expectations about him. So Jesus in this next set of verses addresses those expectations.

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? 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. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

**"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you
(verses 7–10)**

He quotes the prophet Malachi. He says, John is the one about whom it is written, *"I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you."* (Malachi 3:1)

Jesus says that John is more than what people expect. He uses two images to draw contrasts. He uses two images to point out what John is not like so that he can show what John is like. The first image he uses is of a reed. It's this idea of a plant-like structure that would be pliable, that can move with change, that can move with the storms. The second image he uses is of fine clothes. In that particular time period to say someone of fine clothes was kind of a way of saying someone who's weak. They were typically people in power who maybe the normal culture thought didn't have a lot of substance to them. John is not like either of those things. He's not like one that's kind who just moves with the storms. He's one that stands firm in truth. He's also not one who's lacking substance. He knows what God is calling him to do. He's confident in that. That's what John is like.

Now, a little aside just because I'm fascinated by history. There is also another conversation that's going on underneath. Jesus is giving a subtle critique of the ruling power, the oppressors of John. If you were there listening to Jesus, who are the people who wear fine clothes in kings' palaces? They're the ones who are ruling. They're the people like Herod who has put John in prison. Herod's dad had coins minted for that particular region and on the back of one of the coins was an image and guess what the image was? A reed. So you're listening to this thinking, Oh. Jesus is saying John's more than what everyone expects. And he's even more than the people who are in power, oppressing him. John is more.

There's something great about John and his role in the world. He's like a prophet Jesus says. He is a prophet but he's even more than that. These two words in English in verse 9 that says "more than a prophet," that word **more** in Greek in the original language is a superlative word. It means in excess. It means that he's beyond even what the prophets of old were like. So yes, he's kind of like that but he's more. Jesus says he's like this messenger that Malachi talked about. Jesus quotes Malachi chapter 3. Malachi says that before the Messiah will come, a messenger will come. Someone will come before the Messiah and prepare the way. In fact, in Malachi chapter 4 we know the identity of that messenger. He says it's Elijah. So Jesus links John's ministry. John is

like a prophet but he's actually like this messenger that Malachi talked about, like this Elijah-type figure. That was part of the expectation that before messiah would come, Elijah would come. In fact, if you've ever taken part of a Passover meal, they open a door and leave a chair or pour a glass of wine for Elijah. It's part of the Seder meal of Passover.

There's still an expectation that before the messiah would come, Elijah will come to prepare the way. Jesus says to everyone listening around him. He says, that expectation that you had? It's been met—his name's John. Jesus sets this case for how great John is and the role that he's played in the world but then just as we're getting along that track, Jesus says, yes, John is great and the role he has played is unique in history. But John's less than anyone who accepts the kingdom message.

“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. 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. 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. Whoever has ears, let them hear. (verses 11–15)

Jesus carries on with this qualitative language. He says as great as John is he's still less than anyone who accepts the kingdom of God's message that's happening through Jesus. In other words, Jesus is saying you don't really rank people kind of like the top person and the lowest person, but even if we did John would still not even make the page.

Well, what does that mean. It means that John was part of a different era. It means that in part of that era, John was the greatest person that could have been. But now something new has happened. Something new has come in Jesus. There's something new happening. A new era, this idea of the kingdom becoming tangible on earth. Jesus says something new is happening and anyone who has ears to hear, you get to see and be a part of this. He says all of history has culminated in this moment. All the law and the prophets have testified and prophesied to this moment. He says it's a thing that's going to have opposition to it. There are people of violence who are trying to oppose the kingdom message. In fact, we can see that in the fact that John's in prison. It's an example of that violence. There's a story going on. God is doing a work bigger and larger, greater than it has ever been done. That's happening through him. Yes, John is great but he's not as great as anyone who's willing to follow Jesus into this new life. Everything builds to this moment.

I love reading mystery books. I read fiction novels at night just to go to sleep. I love getting pulled into a good fiction novel. My favorite type are the ones that are actually very confusing for 80 percent of it, and then at the end they go boom boom boom

boom and they tie it all together. Part of the reason I love reading those is because I think, Oh, if I had just been paying better attention that made sense and I could have connected that dot. That's what Jesus is doing. He says something is happening. The pieces are being put together. There's a larger story going on. That everything is going to make sense through history. Everything is culminating in this moment. And so you hear Jesus both praise John and call people to join him in this new reality, in this kingdom life. But there's a danger. Jesus spent his time trying to call people to this life. And oftentimes people would reject it. Because of the way that people have expected God to work, there's a danger they may miss out when he shows up.

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

**““We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.”**

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, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.” (verses 16–19)

He uses this image of two children in a marketplace. You know that when you play a pipe you're supposed to dance and when you go to a funeral you're supposed to act this way, he says. But the kingdom has come a whole different way than you expected. The kingdom has come; Jesus has happened. Jesus is in their life in a way that they didn't expect. And he's calling them insane. Don't miss out on this. Don't miss out on this invitation because your expectations get in the way. In fact, he pulls out some of the absurdity. He summarizes the absurdity of their expectations in that day. He said let me just give you an example. Let's talk about John. John came neither eating nor drink. In other words, John lived in the wilderness and you guys thought he was crazy for doing so, for cutting off from society. Jesus was the Son of Man, which is a reference to himself. He has come and gone right into society. He's going to dinner parties. He's hanging out. And you're saying he's crazy for being a part of it. He says it's absurd.

You're going to miss out on this kingdom life because of the expectations of how God should work and fit in your box. Then Jesus ends with this statement: **“but wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”** It's another way of saying, when everything is said and done you're going to see that John was right. When everything is said and done you're going to see that I was right. When everything is said and done you're going to see that this kingdom life is going to last for eternity.

I hear Jesus and this invitation to call people to face their expectations, to see life from a new perspective that there's something new happening in Jesus. It's happening, Jesus, says by everything that's going on in the world. Yes, there's injustice, yes there's hardship, but he says look, I'm doing something about it. Things are changing.

One of my favorite verses is from the book of 1 John, a different John if you're not familiar with the Bible: 1 John talks about how we can know that God loves us, what love is like. He doesn't say it's this warm cuddly feeling, but he says there's a way that we can know. He says this in 1 John 4:9: ***"This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him."***

The way that God showed his love is that he did something. He sent his Son into the world that we might live through him. God did something for you. That's Jesus's argument in the midst of the expectations. He's not trying to give them an intellectual thing to chew on for awhile. He's saying, look all around you. God is at work and he's doing something for people. 1 John says this is how God showed his love is that he did something for you. I think at first he says this is love. His description of love is not that we loved God, not that somehow we figured it out, not that somehow we got guilt into it, not that somehow we felt bad and decided to figure out how to love God. That's not how this thing works. He says this is love that God loved us. That's nice to hear. But how do we know that he loved us? Because he sent his son. God did something. He sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Maybe you've never really thought about it that way. God loves you and we can know that he loves, you can know that he loves you because he's done something about it. He's acted. And he's not just acted apart from you. He's acted for you. God has done something for you.

That's what Jesus's argument was to John. That's what Jesus' argument was to the people listening. That's what Jesus' argument was to the culture. He says look around and see that God is doing—something bigger than you could imagine. And he's doing something for you.

So what do we do with all of this? I thought about a number of different things we could do but just one thing continued

to resonate with me and resonate in my mind and hopefully a good challenge for all of us in this room today: There is someone in your life who needs to see Jesus. There is someone in your world that needs to be reminded that God is not done. There is someone in your life that needs to be reminded or maybe needs to see or maybe needs to see for the first time that God has done something for them. Maybe they're wrestling with expectations and disappointments. But there is someone that God has put in your sphere of influence that needs to see Jesus.

Maybe as we were talking this morning someone came to mind. It could be a family member, a friend, a coworker or a neighbor. Could be anyone. But, I want you to hold on to that person and I want you to find a way today before the day is up. I want you to find a way to help them see Jesus. I want you to do what Jesus did. I want you to point to how God is still at work around them. I want you to help them see that God is not done. Maybe that means a text. Maybe that means a call. Maybe that means going out to lunch with someone. Maybe that means meeting with someone. Maybe that means scheduling a meeting at work later this week. Maybe it means something you do. But today you make that choice. Today you're going to say, you know what, even if this person doesn't even know why I'm contacting them, I'm just going to do it because I want them to see Jesus. I think if you and I live that way it could change things.

That's why we're here. That's why we get so excited about being in the Fox Theater. That's why we've been here since September. We want people to see Jesus. We want to set a stage for people to see Jesus. That's my heart. That's my goal.

We hope people see Jesus because of you and what God is doing through you. So I want you to think about who is someone that you could do something for to help them see Jesus. As we face disappointments, as we face expectations, as we just faced this upside down world, the best hope for us, the best hope for you, the best hope for me, the best hope for that person that God has now put on your mind is that they would see Jesus.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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