



A PRISON BEATITUDE

Matthew 11:1-6

November 14, 2010

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¹When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Introduction

Expectations! We all have them; we can't live without them. They're those pictures we have in our minds of how the world ought to work, and they therefore shape the way we experience the world. But because they shape the way we experience the world, they're also the source of so much of the disappointment we experience in life.

The power of expectations to disappoint was brought home to me this past Halloween. It was the end of a long evening of trick-or-treating, and I'd gone into Annie-Claire's room to say goodnight. But there I found my little five-year old with a beet-red face, all contorted, eyebrows crossed. She was as mad as a hornet. So I asked her what was wrong. And without a single moment's hesitation, she told me. "Halloween's a rip-off!" she declared. Evidently, her expectation as to the amount of candy she was going to accumulate didn't match the reality she found at the bottom of her candy bag. And this, of course, left her sorely disappointed.

But it's not just children who approach the world with expectations. Adults come at the world with their expectations, too. And it's not just children who are disappointed when their expectations aren't met. That's my experience, as well, and I assume it's been yours also. When the picture in my mind doesn't match the reality around me, it can be very disappointing, even painful at times.

Now, I've found that disappointment from unmet expectations is particularly challenging for Christians. A Christian is someone who lives and dies on the basis of expectations—about how the world works, and about how it will all work out in the end. A Christian is someone who lives by faith in Jesus Christ; that is, with certain expectations about what Jesus will do for you.

But where Christians can get themselves into a whole world of trouble is by not getting their expectations right; or, by having the wrong expectations about what Jesus will do for

them. How often this happens: sincere Christians broken-hearted because Jesus hasn't done for them what they were expecting.

This is why, then, for the Christian, it all comes down to this: *What do you expect Jesus to do for you?*

What Do You Expect Jesus To Do For You?

This is what it all came down to for John the Baptist, whom we read about in today's passage of Scripture from Matthew's Gospel. John had his own set of expectations; he had a picture in his mind of what Jesus Christ would do for him.

We can summarize John's expectation of what Jesus would do for him in a simple statement: John was expecting Jesus to separate the righteous from the wicked. This is why John was the fiery preacher he was. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2), was the thrust of his message. And, when he saw people coming to be baptized as an expression of their repentance, he still didn't mince words:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt. 3:7-10).

Why so blunt? Why such fiery zeal? Why did he say what he said? Because of an expectation about what Jesus would do for him—and for the whole world.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:11-12).

This is what Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, will do when he comes: he'll separate the wheat from the chaff, the righteous from the wicked. And the righteous, they will be vindicated and prosper, while the wicked will be judged and suffer.

This was John's expectation of what Jesus would do for him. What are your expectations of what Jesus will do for you? As I search my own heart, and as I talk to others, here are the kinds of expectations I find us bringing to Jesus, what we expect of him and from him:

- A pleasant and enjoyable life
- A successful life
- A safe life
- A healthy life
- A long life

- A satisfying and rewarding career
- Recognition for one's accomplishments
- Promotions at work
- A good retirement
- A country in which the economy continues to grow
- A country in which civil liberties and religious freedoms are preserved
- An end to poverty
- An end to war
- An end to hunger
- An end to natural disasters
- Meaningful relationships with sibling
- Meaningful relationships with parents
- Meaningful relationship with children
- Children who love Jesus
- Children who don't disappoint you
- Children who live long enough to become adults
- A spouse
- A spouse who is faithful
- A spouse who loves Jesus
- A church with good kids programs
- A church with good youth programs
- A church with good music
- A church with good preaching
- A church that is always growing
- A church that makes you feel like you belong
- A church that uses your gifts
- An explanation for your suffering
- Freedom from unnecessary suffering
- Salvation for your loved ones
- Forgiveness without repentance
- Grace without faith
- Mercy without brokenness
- Joy without obedience
- Intimacy with Christ without holiness of life

Have you done an inventory of the expectations you place upon Jesus? If you're wondering where to begin, let me suggest starting with those areas of your life where you feel frustration or disappointment, whether with your child or your church, whether with your work or your

weight. And see if there's not lurking somewhere underneath the surface of the disappointment an expectation you have of what Jesus will do for you.

Christians expect an awful lot of Jesus; and well we should. The key, however, is to get our expectations to match *exactly* what Jesus has actually promised; nothing more, nothing less. Otherwise, we'll find ourselves stumbling over Jesus because he's not met our expectations.

How Well Is Jesus Meeting Your Expectations?

How well is Jesus meeting your expectations? This is where John the Baptist really struggled. *Jesus was not meeting his expectations.* John had heard all about what Jesus was doing. But, still, it wasn't matching the picture in his mind. And the result—*disappointment.* John found himself wondering about Jesus to the point of waffling in his commitment to Jesus.

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"(Matt. 11:1-3).

Evidently, in John's mind a question mark had begun to form about Jesus, and John was no longer confident Jesus was who he thought he was.

A surprising place for John to find himself in, don't you think? After all, he was hearing about "the deeds of the Christ" (11:2). It was no secret to John what Jesus was doing: the blind receiving sight (9:1-8), the lame enabled to walk (8:1-4), lepers cleansed (9:32-34), the deaf made to hear and the mute to speak (9:18-26), even the dead raised up, when Jesus restored a little girl to life (9:18-26).

Besides, it wasn't all that long ago that Jesus had come to John to be baptized, and there John sought to dissuade Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14). Surely, there, too, John saw the heavens opened up, and the Spirit of God descending like a dove on this Jesus (3:16). And surely there, as well, John heard the voice from heaven say of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17).

So, then, why on earth is John the Baptist waffling over who Jesus is? John's waffling because of where John is. Where is John? *John is in prison.* How did he get there? He was arrested, unlawfully, by a local ruler named Herod. John had both the conviction and the courage to speak out against the fact that Herod had taken his half-brother Philip's wife as his own. And Herod didn't like it, so he used his power to have him thrown in the slammer.

And now John the Baptist finds himself in prison, reaping the benefits of his righteousness, wondering if it's really going to payoff to uphold the ways of God or not. No doubt, he's also wondering where his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, is. Just imagine, then, John sitting in his prison cell, waiting for his cousin, King Jesus, to act in his defense. Listen to how one writer envisions the scene:

He lies in prison, a powerless victim of wretched paltriness and fully aware of the death threatening him from Herodias' hatred. Must not the knowledge of his own greatness have revolted against the apparent senselessness of it all? Surely his darkest hours

came then, and with them danger of rebellion and doubt: Can he who allows such things to happen to his servants really be the Messiah?¹

That's a good description of where John was at. But how about you? How well is Jesus meeting your expectations? Do you feel like a powerless victim of circumstances beyond your control? Are you frustrated by situations that don't seem to be turning out as they should, or as you'd hoped? Perhaps you've even found yourself lately in one of your darkest hours, wrestling with both rebellion against God and doubt of his goodness. And so you find yourself asking the question John the Baptist was no doubt asking himself: *Can he who allows such things to happen to his servants really be the Messiah?*

When these sorts of thoughts creep into your mind, you begin falling away from enthusiastically following after Jesus; and, eventually, if these thoughts are left unchecked, you can fall away altogether. Disappointment over unmet expectations can turn you away from Jesus. And if that sounds a bit melodramatic, listen to these words from Jesus, as he explains to his disciples the parable of the sower:

"Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away (Matt. 13:18-21).

What Can You Expect from Jesus?

This is why, again, it is so absolutely vital that you have the right expectations about what Jesus will do for you. And this is why Jesus knew he had to send the right expectations to John the Baptist, by way of John's disciples:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them (Matt. 11:4-5).

What can John the Baptist expect from Jesus? What can you expect from Jesus? *First, you can expect to experience the presence of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ.* If you will come to Jesus Christ by faith, you will experience the power of the presence of the kingdom of God: blinded eyes opened, deaf ears unstopped, wounded hearts healed, sin-shackled soul liberated, and new resurrection life given. It happens every day, all around the world, and in our own midst, as people turn from their sin and to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith.

Second, you can expect to not experience the fullness of the kingdom of God until Jesus Christ returns to earth. You see, this is where John got tripped up, as did many others at the time, as well as many today. They make the assumption, quite naturally, that the coming of the kingdom of God means the coming of the *fullness* of the kingdom of God. So that if I'm truly on Jesus' side,

¹ Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, p. 29.

then everything will go well for me in this life. But, as Jesus has to make painfully clear to his followers, that's not the way the kingdom comes. That misses the mystery of the kingdom. For the kingdom is here, but not yet here in all of its fullness. Which means that the lives of Jesus' followers won't be today what they will be one day.

The third thing you can expect from Jesus flows from the second, and it's this: you can expect to be blessed. For this is the final thing Jesus says to John: "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (11:6). Blessed is the one—that is, happy. Jesus says you can expect to be happy. *But happy only if you're not offended by Jesus.*

What does it mean to be offended by Jesus? Offended is what my little Annie Clare was at Halloween this year. Her expectations for the amount of candy she'd get didn't match the amount of candy she actually got. And so she was offended, disappointed, frustrated and mad. "Halloween's a rip-off!" she said.

Offended is what you feel as well, when your experience doesn't meet your expectations; and *offended by Jesus* is what you feel when your life doesn't match what you expect Jesus to do for you. This is why Jesus says to John the Baptist, and to you and me: "Happy are you, if your expectations of me don't cause you to be offended by what I actually do for you."

You see, we can only expect to be happy in Jesus, if we find our happiness in Jesus alone, and not in the circumstances of our lives. That is why Jesus can speak a word of blessing—*A Prison Beatitude*—to you and me, in whatever situation we find ourselves in. And that is why, if we look to Jesus alone, we can find true blessedness, enjoy genuine happiness, regardless of the prison cell of our own circumstances in life.

Conclusion

Like John the Baptist, the great pastor-theologian-martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, found himself in a prison cell, not in ancient Palestine, but in war-ravaged Germany. On April 5, 1943, in the throes of World War II, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo and put in Cell 92 of the Tegel Prison, where he spent the remainder of his earthly life.

Yet Bonhoeffer's expectations of what Jesus would do for him matched Scripture. He understood the meaning of the *Prison Beatitude* Jesus spoke to John, and thus didn't take offense at his own unhappy circumstances. Instead, his expectations were chaste, and Jesus Christ remained central. "All things appear as in a distorted mirror," he wrote from his prison cell, "if they are not seen and recognized in God."

He went on to speak, both movingly and profoundly, about the presence of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name . . . we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world [therefore] without speaking of Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer spent only one Christmas at the Tegel prison, the Christmas of 1943. In anticipation of the holiday, one of the official prison pastors asked Bonhoeffer to write

something to be distributed to the other prisoners for their encouragement. So, on a sheet of paper, Bonhoeffer wrote the following prayer:

O God,
Early in the morning do I cry unto thee.
Help me to pray,
And to think only of thee.
I cannot pray alone.
In me there is darkness,
But with thee there is light.
I am lonely, but thou leavest me not.
I am feeble in heart, but thou leavest me not.
I am restless, but with thee there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with thee there is patience;
Thy ways are past understanding, but
Thou knowest the way for me.²

“Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me,” Jesus says to each one of you today. Happy you will be if you fix your expectations, not in your circumstances, but in the person of Jesus Christ. Happy will you be if the word of God, not the desires of your heart, shapes what you believe Jesus will do for you. And happy will you be if you can say by faith in the Son of God: *Thy ways are past understanding, but Thou knowest the way for me.*

Amen.

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² Cited in Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, pp. 469, 448-449 (respectively).