

Text:

Matthew 11.1-19

Big Picture:

Jesus' public ministry of teaching and healing catches the attention of John the Baptist, who is in prison. John's interest in Jesus is more than a passing awareness of a great teacher. John wants to know: Are you really the Messiah we have been waiting for?

Preparing for the Lesson:

On the surface, John's question probably seems a little odd. We make assumptions about the interactions between John and Jesus and certainly tend to believe that John was fully aware of Jesus' role as Messiah. It would appear, however, that he does not. When we spend a few minutes thinking about this, it may not be as unusual as we might think. The question, I believe, is: "What understanding did John (and others like him in Israel) have about the coming Messiah? Just what exactly was that Messiah supposed to do?"

Determining one single Jewish way of thinking in regard to the Messiah is problematic. Just as there is no way for us to identify one single "Church of Christ Doctrine" for example, the diversity and number of people in Jesus' day created a wide variety of understandings about the one who was to come. It is fair, however, to assume that a good portion of Jews thought of a coming Messiah in an "earthly king" sort of way. The one who was coming would release the Jews from their Roman captors and restore their rightful place as a great nation. A crown of gold and sword would have been a much more dominant metaphor than a crown of thorns and a cross.

When this is taken into consideration, John's question does not seem as out of place as we first might think. The question that needs to be answered—and the one I want us to consider in group—is: "What does it mean to be a Messiah? Just what exactly does a Messiah do?"

Jesus answers this question for us. John's followers are told that the blind can see, the lame can walk, etc. The very things Jesus has been doing in Matthew chapters 8-9 are the things he holds up as proof of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. How do we know the Messiah has arrived to usher in his kingdom? Well, wisdom, as Jesus will go on to say, is proved right by her deeds. We know because we see the fruit of Jesus' life.

The challenge for us is to recognize the ways we assume the Messiah, and by extension the kingdom of heaven, will take on an us-defined role. In other words, we need to be aware of the ways we want our Messiah to look exactly like we need/want/desire him to look and the ways we want to shape him to our expectations, instead of our conforming to the pattern of the kingdom.

This is not easy, for the ways this happens is subtle. A health and wealth gospel (that following Jesus will bring you prosperity) tends to be our easy-to-pick-on example, but there are plenty of other ways we see this happen. We assume that if we are following God, our congregation will be blessed with growth. We assume that our children will grow up in the Lord. We assume our mistakes will ultimately prove to be beneficial. The list goes on and on. If we are not careful, our idea of following Jesus becomes more an exercise in crafting him to fit in our lives, versus giving up our lives for him.

At the end of this section, Jesus points out that “this generation” (scholars will say he is referring to the people of Israel) refuses to join the kingdom of heaven. They neither laugh nor mourn. John and his ascetic practices led to the accusation he was demon possessed. Jesus and his fellowship with those who most needed to hear the message of the kingdom leads to the accusation that his is a drunkard. This generation is never happy! Why? Because the Messiah does not look like the people thought he should.

Possible Lesson Outline:

Begin your discussion with the following question: If you were asked the question “what proves a church is successful,” what would you say the criteria is for success? Why do you see these things as important? What things did you leave off the list and why?

Ask discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

I think it would be interesting to hear the children in your group answer the following question: What does Jesus want us to do in order to follow him? Perhaps another way to ask this would be: What does it mean to be a Christian?

My assumption is that most children will have a picture of Jesus that is less altered by their own expectations of who they want Jesus to be. Their answers may be closer to a more accurate picture of following Jesus than our own.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think John the Baptist would question whether Jesus was the coming Messiah? Is this an odd question coming from John? Does John have doubts about Jesus or is he asking something else? If so, what?
2. What does Jesus’ reply to John tell us about the true expectations of what it means to be the Messiah?
3. When you think about living a life of faith, what sort of expectations do you have for yourself and others who are to follow Jesus?
4. How do these expectation compare or contrast to the expectations of the world around you? How does the world’s expectations shape their view of Christianity as whole?
5. In what ways do we continue to show the world that “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, etc. ...”? How can we do a better job at this?
6. Jesus comments that “this generation” is like children who neither dance nor mourn; in other words, they don’t know what they want to do. Why would “this generation” or any generation react in this sort of manner? What do we learn about people’s expectations through this passage?
7. How do we try to conform Jesus, the Messiah, into the shape of our own expectations rather than give our lives completely over to his call for us to follow him?

What's Next:

Next week's section is Matthew 13.53-14.36. One Groups will be looking at 14.22-36.