

Blessed are the Unoffended

Matthew 11:1-19

Jesus is always consistent, but never predictable. Even mighty John the Baptizer has a hard time understanding how Jesus' actions line up with who He is. So John asks. The God of the Bible welcomes—even requires—you to pursue Him: “ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7). But this is not an inquiry to find out if Jesus agrees with you. It's to figure out if you agree with Him, and adjust accordingly. Blessed are those who are not offended by Him.

Cause for Confusion

John is arrested by Herod Antipas and imprisoned at Machaerus, about 15 miles northeast of the Dead Sea. He hears about the works of Christ and sends two of his disciples to find out if Jesus is the coming one (vv. 2-3). This is surprising because we know John baptized Jesus, saw the Spirit descend on Him, and announced He is the greater one to come (Matt. 3:16, 11). But where is His greatness? John is prison rotting away, and though Jesus is in the countryside doing some astonishing things, to all appearances He is leaving Israel structurally and politically the same. John told the Pharisees and Sadducees that “even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees”, and the mightier one to come would baptize with fire use His winnowing fan clean out the threshing floor and burn up the chaff with fire (Matt. 3:10-12). Jesus explains by quoting passages from Isaiah: the blind see; the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the gospel preached to them, and blessed is he who not offended by Him (vv. 5-6; Is. 29:18; 35:5-6; 61:1). But Jesus leaves out the judgment portions of these prophecies, as in Isaiah 35:4 which says: “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you”; Jesus only quotes from verse 5: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.” It's not that Jesus isn't going to bring justice and use the ax to chop down oppressive trees, but His project is bigger than that. He has been healing Israel, casting out demons, gathering tax collectors and sinners. He is finding the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and turning the proud away; blessed are those who are not scandalized (*skandalizo*) by this mercy. When grace abounds the church gets messy, and tidy, petty, self-righteous people find a lot to complain about. Rather than be thankful for what God is doing, they are stumbled by it. Dwight Moody responded to one critic, “I like my way of doing it rather than your way of not doing it.” John asks good questions, not doubting Jesus but wanting to understand who He really is and what He is doing. But others were absolutely scandalized by the kind of people Jesus was welcoming and putting to work in His kingdom. Are you distant from Jesus because you don't get what He is doing, and are you humbly asking questions to figure it out? Does His timeline for reformation and revival stumble you? Are you mainly interested in worshiping Christ with people like you, or happy to be with those whom God calls, even former lepers? Jesus doesn't apologize to John for not fulfilling his expectations. He warns against idolizing those expectations.

The Violent Take It By Force

Jesus goes on to explain John's greatness, his ministry, and how it relates to His own. Three times He asks, “What did you go out to see?” (vv. 7-9). What should we know about John, and do we have ears to hear (v. 15)? The first question is if they went out to see a reed, shaken by the wind (v. 7). John came from the desert, a harsh climate where no reeds grow by the water. Reeds are soft, pliable, and sway with the wind. Jesus doesn't break a bent reed (Matt. 12:20; Is. 43:2), but John is no reed. Reeds and wind also remind us of the Sea of Reeds, the Red Sea, and the wind that parted the waves for the exodus. They didn't go out to

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see Moses begin a new Exodus either. The second question is whether they went out to see a man clothed in soft garments. These are the kind of people you see in kings' houses (v. 8). John wore camel's hair, had a leather belt, and ate locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). The closest John got to the inside of a palace is the prison he is in next to one. Soon his head will be carried inside on a platter as a result of rebuking the king (Matt. 14:1-12). David would later have faithful priest-advisors, but that's not John's role. He is not a reed or a soft prophet, but more than a prophet: "For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You'" (v. 10; Mal. 3:1). John is the one Malachi prophesied would prepare the way the of the Lord. He would be a hard man for hard times when the kingdom suffers violence. Verse 12 is challenging: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." The kingdom suffers violence, but the second half may also be rendered: "the strong press into it." That is, men like John stand strong and enter into God's kingdom. He did not live by the river, enter into the promise land, or become a palace advisor with nice clothes. John is in prison because he stood fast, and many entered the kingdom because of him. He is greatest born among women, but his greatness was preparatory for those who will live in Jesus' greater kingdom (v. 11). Everything leads to and hinges on Jesus; after Him everything will be different. The people Jesus speaks to went out to see John. Have we? We've been given more than John had through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We must stand with greater courage than He did.

Justified Wisdom

Jesus compares His generation to children who aren't playing well together. Some play the flute, but no one dances. Then they mourn, but no one is sad (v. 17). John lives sparsely on bugs and wild honey, and they say he has a demon (v. 18). The Son of Man eats and drinks, and they call Him a glutton and drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (v. 19). Jesus and John are damned if they do and damned if they don't. G.K. Chesterton found the same people condemning Christianity for being unmanly and passive one minute, and then violent and aggressive the next:

The very people who reproached Christianity with the meekness and non-resistance of the monasteries were the very people who reproached it also with the violence and valour of the Crusades. It was the fault of poor old Christianity (somehow or other) both that Edward the Confessor did not fight and that Richard Coeur de Leon did. The Quakers (we were told) were the only characteristic Christians; and yet the massacres of Cromwell and Alva were characteristic Christian crimes. What could it all mean?

John prepared the way for Christ, and it was right for him to live ascetically and take a Nazarite vow (cf. Lk. 1:15). Jesus is the bridegroom and so He ate and drank, made wine at Cana, and spent time with tax collectors and sinners, leading them to repentance (Matt. 9:15). "But wisdom is justified by her children" (v. 19). Sometimes it's time to mourn, and others it's time to dance. Wisdom knows this and listens for the tune God is playing. You recognize wisdom by its children. You might not be among John's disciples, but what are they doing? Great things. Christ calls all kinds. Blessed are the humble who are not offended.