

Feb. 7, 2016
Jesus and the Kingdom of God Pt. 8
The Least in the Kingdom
Jeff Kennedy

Key Scripture: Matthew 11:28

Today's Key Theme

1. Even spiritual _____ struggle with _____ (11:2-6).
(Is. 29:18; 35:5; 35:6; 53:4; 29:18-29; 26:18-19; 61:1)

Application/Takeaway:

2. Doubt often follows _____ (11:16-19).

Application/Takeaway:

3. Doubt can flourish in an environment of _____ (11:20-24).

Application/Takeaway:

4. Jesus invites us to a life of _____, _____, and _____ (11:25-30).

Application/Takeaway:

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Introduction: Up until this point we've talked about the authority of the Kingdom, the Kingdom and its righteousness by grace, the power of the Kingdom, last week pastor Todd talked about the kingdom disciples and their dangerous commission to reach the world, and this week we're looking at the least in the Kingdom—children of God...

- Not children with perfect faith
- Not children who've got it all figured out...
- But children who wrestle with their questions and respond in simple, desperate trust.

Big Idea: Today Jesus is going to show us how to cope with our doubts and how to best respond in the face of uncertainty.

Here's the first thing we need to know about this...

1. Even spiritual giants struggle with doubt at times.

Scripture: Matthew 11:2-6: Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"⁴ And 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.⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

- Prison in Machaerus: Ch. 11 opens with a courier who has brought a question from John the Baptizer who is incarcerated at the fortress of Machaerus—the easternmost site of **Herod's most palatial and opulent citadel**. Prison chambers have been excavated near the fortress and the contrast between the luxurious palace and the dank, suffocating and cold caves and clanking chains of John's imprisonment can hardly be overstated.
- **John's Question: John has prophesied** that Jesus would do 2 things: *Baptize the wicked in the fires of judgment and the righteous with the baptism of the Holy Spirit*. John hears that Jesus has not done any of this yet, but is instead hears about the "deeds" or the works of Jesus the Messiah. So he sends a message with his disciples, "Have I made a mistake here? Are you (like me) just another forerunner, a harbinger of the one to come? Should we both be expecting another?"

John is dealing with the natural doubt that can surface as a result of suffering.

- **Jesus reminds John of the Messiah's vocation: Jesus'** role which is to bear and carry the sin and suffering of the world (according to Isaiah).
 - The blind receive their sight (**Is. 29:18; 35:5**)
 - The lame walk (**Isa. 35:6**)
 - Lepers are cleansed (**Isa. 53:4**)

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- The deaf are made to hear (Isa. 29:18-29)
 - The dead are raised to life (Isa. 26:18-19)
 - The good news is preached to the poor (Isa. 61:1)
- **Jesus reminds John that HE is a prophet:** He says, John is a prophet, greater than a prophet, and the greatest prophet—the last prophet or “Elijah” who will announce the sudden inbreaking of God’s Kingdom in power and authority.

Remember how the prophets “from the time of John” which means from the “age of the prophets” which John represented—violent men tried to take the Kingdom of God by force. You’ve suffered the same violence and persecution and suffering that all prophets have.

- **Jesus reminds us of our calling and vocation:** And we are a community of prophets. Jesus told us we should identify our sufferings with theirs. Because when people watch us go through pain we testify of the power of the Gospel to save us in spite of our trials.

Illus. After the death of my sister and dad, my mom and I turned to Jesus and served him and found comfort in the Lord. Years later I got a facebook message from an old school friend who wasn’t a believer at the time, and he told me in that message how glad he was to find me on facebook because he had always wanted to let me know that watching our family go through that painful suffering and trial and then turn to God in faith had a very positive impact on him. He said he had always admired the strength that we somehow found in our faith. I thanked him for the encouragement and asked if he was a believer and follower of Jesus and his response was “I’m getting there.”

It never occurred to me that my suffering and the desperation for God that I had in my pain was a witness to someone else. It never occurred to me that the doubt I faced and wrestled through was helping someone else.

And this is the undercurrent in Jesus’ message to John. “John—a lot of people have followed and listened to you. And if you fall away it will have grave consequences for this Kingdom ministry. People are watching to see how you handle martyrdom. And how you deal with this suffering will effect the way they see and hear this message of the Kingdom.”

So here’s the question: What do we do when the miracle doesn’t arrive on schedule?
What do we do when Jesus doesn’t come to the rescue?

Application/takeaway: The rain falls on the righteous and unrighteous. Suffering touches us all. And one of the reasons why followers of Jesus aren’t shielded from suffering is because **God wants to show the world what a faithful servant looks like in the face of the**

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impossible. That trusting and relying on God is the right response and the only way we can make it through some of the horror that comes to our doorstep.

Jesus' answer to John is: 1) Remember what the Messiah is supposed to do first: declare the age of Jubilee and freedom for the prisoners to sin and disease, 2) strengthen your faith by remembering your vocation—you have the privilege of being counted among the prophets—and you will have the responsibility of suffering as the prophets 3) you're blessed if you don't fall away/take offense because of me—and the people watching you will be blessed as they see you wrestle through this.

The second thing we learn from this passage is that...

2. **Doubt can follow unmet expectations.** Jesus moves on from natural doubts we all face to the chronic, institutionalized doubt of the Jews. They expected the Messiah to bring judgment on sinners and justice to the righteous—salvation for the Jews. But Jesus' message of salvation for outsiders was a shock and his message of their need to repent and believe was off putting.

Scripture: 11:16-19 “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

- **The children at play (Have you ever** seen a parent whack a kid in the mall and you were like, “Yeah! Get em!). The Children in marketplace didn't respond to the games because they wanted to play other games. Their unresponsiveness was due to having expectations of the Messiah that Jesus didn't meet right away.

Illus. Logan when he was 5 was running the table—making up rules and frustrating his brothers and sisters trying to play chutes and ladders. So, they flipped the board over and started playing Candy land. So simple. So easy.

And this is what Jesus did as well. Jesus flipped the religious board on them. He changed the game. And they didn't like his rules and refused to play.

These two accounts illustrate wonderfully the parable of the Children at Play. Jesus' rejoinder is “Do you think, that you've sort of *missed the point* here?” People matter to God. And they matter more than our slavish devotion to religious protocols. They matter more than ticking off the boxes of religion.

Do you ever get the feeling that nothing you ever do—no matter how well you do it—is good enough for some people?

Never a word of encouragement or affirmation. Can't find good in anything—but are quick to chasten you when you misstep or just step.

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The Pharisees opposed John—giving the excuse that he was too austere—too much of an ascetic—he was the “funeral” prophet and they refused to respond to his “dirge” or funeral song. They rejected Jesus giving the excuse that he was a party-Messiah, fellowshipping with known sinners and people far from God. The tune he played on his “flute” was not the celebration they had hoped for. They expected neither a prophet nor a global messiah who announced the year of jubilee—they wanted a regional king who would make their lives easier, not call them to repentance of sin, not call attention to their spiritual apathy.

Application/Response: And the response Jesus expects from me is *surrender*. I expect Jesus to wave his hand and take away my leprosy—to dissolve my ailments with a word—to come to the rescue before this disease or this wayward child or this stress consumes me. To speak to me in prayer and give me “word” or a personal promise of victory.

I have to be careful that I don't turn into these “children”—unresponsive and excuse making. Unwilling to play God's game unless he agrees to play things my way on *my terms*. As it turns out, I am not the sovereign Lord of the universe—and I have to surrender my need to be the master of my own destiny.

Summary: Often, disillusionment with Jesus will set in when expectations go unmet. Doubt can seep in when Jesus' doesn't act the way we think he should.

Which leads us to the next point...

3. Doubt can flourish in an environment of unchecked spiritual apathy.

Scripture: 11:20-24 “²⁰ Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes...”

There problem was overexposure to the Bible.

Overexposure is what happens when a thing is seen, heard, or advertised so frequently that it becomes a mere noise—losing its freshness or appeal.

The people Jesus had preached to had heard it all and seen it all. Jesus' best fireworks cannot awaken the snoozing Galileans. They had been there done that and bought the t-shirt. At first his wonders astonished and amazed the crowds. But before long these same crowds became bored disinterested and inattentive to Jesus' ministry.

And it's something that we're all susceptible to.

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Apathy sets in when we hear too much without responding. Overexposure happens when there is too much light and not enough heat—the heat of a passionate devotion to God.

Apathy sets in when we congratulate the preacher or admire the sermon as a piece of art, but then fail to engage our hearts and lives with it.

Apathy sets in when we are preoccupied with other concerns. And church attendance is just a thing we do—tacked onto our already busy schedules.

Next...

4. Jesus invites us to a life of humility, repentance, and wonder.

Scripture: 11:25-30 ²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

- Humility is appropriate because of who God is.
- Humility is an apt response because of God’s role in the transaction.
- Childlike faith is the byproduct of genuine humility.
- Childlike faith results in genuine repentance from the heart.
- Repentance from the heart is a state of life, not merely an event.

God forbid that we would morph into something ungodly but having the appearance of godliness—Jesus hasn’t called us to be art critics of a well-packaged Sunday morning service.

God has called us to be worshipers and witnesses to his truth. To be like saucer-eyed little children, eager to receive, eager to grow, eager and desperate for his power as we humbly admit our powerlessness.

Chapter 12 provides a perfect contrast between the little children who come in humility and repentance contrasted with the “wise and learned” who fail to come to Jesus for salvation.

- Ch. 12:1-8 Resistance over Sabbath—The Pharisees added their traditions to Moses’ law, They ignored the exceptions and exemptions provided in the law, and they completely missed the heart of the law! Jesus reminded them that: 1) David wasn’t censured for doing the same, 2) Jesus is in fact the Lord over the Sabbath (a big offense to these Jews).

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- Ch. 12:9-14 Resistance over a Withered Hand—The Pharisees again oppose Jesus because he heals and delivers people on the Sabbath. They prioritized their religious tradition more than the people that tradition was made for.
- 12:22-31 Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is attributing Jesus' work to the Devil when in reality it is done by the Power and Spirit of God.
- 12:33-36 Failure to bear the fruit of repentance is a clear sign that these teachers were false shepherds of Israel.
- 12:38-42 Sign seekers rather than genuine seekers of truth.

The problem with the Pharisees is that they had become so fossilized in religion—trapped in the amber of religiosity—they had lost all humility before God, their fixation on protocol left no margin for flexibility, no white space to work it out.

And so Jesus calls them to replace the yoke—the fastidious compliance to all these extra biblical rules—for his light and easy yoke—one that he carries.

And in a tight religious system like this—there is no room for wonder.

Illus. I remember the first time I ever flew on a Jet plane. I was flying with a missions team to Belize Central America. All my senses were alive during that first flight. Pulse quickening as the plane taxied and picked up speed on the runway. My stomach leaped as the jet climbed to 35k feet. I must've took 35 pictures of the tops of clouds that day. I had never seen clouds from that perspective. It was the first time I had ever hurtled through the air in a metal tube with wings 6 miles high at 500mph.

The thought of sleeping through that experience seemed unthinkable.

That was 30 years ago.

Now when I fly...earplugs, Dramamine, and snoozing all the way. I'm sure I'll rediscover the wonder of flight if and when I ever take my first commercial trip to outer space. But I'm also sure that after my 10th trip outside the thermosphere—I'll be just as bored with it as I am now.

It's human nature to lose interest. It's human nature to want zip and fizz of a new experience.

The antidote—the spiritual elixir that will inoculate us from drifting off and forgetting the newness of our faith—is an active pursuit of Jesus.

“Come to me.” Jesus says. And I will give you the rest from your burden. I will exchange your heaviness for my peace.

So the answer is Jesus. His presence. His Spirit. His resources and truth.

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- John the Baptist did the right thing—he sent word to Jesus—opened lines of communication while wrestling with his doubts and unmet expectations.
- The religious leaders did the wrong thing—a generation unresponsive to John’s dirge and warnings and indifferent to Jesus’ song of jubilee—announcing the joy and celebration of the Kingdom.
- The sleepy, spiritually lazy crowds missed an opportunity to fall back head over heels in love with their God through Jesus.

And you and I have a choice today.

Conclusion: When we suffer and face doubt or times of spiritual dryness the answer is not to run from him, to recoil or withdraw from him—the answer is to run to Jesus. With the wonder and uncomplicated faith of a trusting little child—a child who does not have all the answers—who does not seek to engage a life of faith only if Jesus agrees to play on his terms—a child who is willing to learn and follow and in the process find rest for the weariness of soul.

LET’S PRAY...
FINAL SONG

Closing: The biggest challenge those of us who’ve been at this a while face is to rediscover the wonder of childlike faith—and the antidote to inoculate us from becoming religious fossils is to rediscover the wonder and childlike faith and passion for God.