



Chapter 11

Expectations can get us into trouble. You expected to get picked up, but she thought you were driving. The trip to the beach promised sun-soaked adventure, although a surprise cold front kept you indoors. Expectations can be too high and so we feel let down. Maybe they're too low and we wonder why we didn't act sooner. Sometimes we even attempt to manage expectations so that others' hopes aren't dashed.

Icebreaker:

1. Describe a time your expectations were either too low or high. What was the fallout from this experience?

This chapter begins by recalibrating long-held expectations about the Messiah, or Christ. Based off Old Testament passages, the Messiah was widely understood to be a kingly figure who would soon deliver Israel out of oppression. The wicked—including the Roman occupiers—would be judged and the righteous vindicated.

Verses 1-6

Jesus returns to teaching and preaching in the region but a question from John the Baptist, via John's followers, guides the discussion. Jesus wasn't fitting the mold of expectations for the Messiah. John had warned that "now the axe is laid at the root of the trees" back in 3:1-12. If Jesus is in fact the Messiah, why was it taking so long for Him to swing that axe?

2. It's easy to grow doubtful when our circumstances are difficult. Can you relate to John's doubt concerning Jesus's true identity?

Jesus "manages expectations" about the Messiah with a gentle reminder from the book of Isaiah about what signs should accompany the Messiah. Note how none of them relate to a timeframe! Yes, Jesus is fulfilling Old Testament expectations, even if He is falling short of the manufactured expectations of many in this day. Jesus shows an example of how we should subject our expectations to what Scripture actually says rather than what we want it to say.

3. Have you ever discovered that you had an expectation for God to act in a certain way that was later found to be based more on hope than on what the Bible actually says?

Verses 7-15

With Jesus's true identity affirmed, He turns the tables by addressing the role and identity of John the Baptist. Far from a vacillating pushover or a pocket-lining charlatan, John is a genuine prophet who boldly proclaimed God's message. Jesus cites Malachi 3:1 to explain.

The following verses contrast the Old Testament "age of promise" culminating in John's life and the new "age of fulfillment" following his life. The age after John would be marked by the experience of the kingdom of heaven. The benefits of this kingdom mean that those born after John get to encounter something greater than any before. Even so, the kingdom is subject to violence and opposition against it until it is fully realized at the end of this "age of fulfillment."

4. Take a minute to reflect on this. Share examples of how life includes both the sweet taste of kingdom blessings and the bitter experience of suffering.

Verses 16-19

John and Jesus's generation includes many who are like children who refuse to respond to God's actions. They won't celebrate the kingdom brought by Jesus and they wouldn't respond to John's more sobering call to repent. John's stringent lifestyle and Jesus's celebratory (e.g., banquets with "sinners") practices are rejected and even ridiculed by the people. Both will be vindicated, but not before great violence is done against them.

5. John the Baptist and Jesus were faithful heralds of God's gospel message, albeit in different ways. How should the refusal of people to accept their message shape our own expectations for faithful ministry?

Verses 20-24

The most egregious rejection of Jesus is, surprisingly, in those places where a number of His miracles occurred. This reality challenges those who claim they would believe if only they could see a miracle! Note also that Jesus displays an aspect of His omniscience (all-knowing) when He claims that ancient cities, such as Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom would have been more responsive than the contemporary cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Severe judgment awaits those who reject God's miraculous revelation.

6. In what ways has God revealed Himself to you, whether miraculous or more "natural"? How would you classify your response? In other words, are you responding with an active belief, or are you like these cities of Galilee? Take time to pray that everyone in your group would be responsive to God's revelation.

Verses 25-30

Here is one of the most remarkable passages in all of Scripture. We see the "upside down" nature of God's kingdom in comparison to the ways of this world. The pride of this world is extinguished by God's favor toward the humble, and the clear emphasis of these verses is that Jesus offers rest to those who follow. "Rest" is not the absence of activity, but is rather a whole-hearted dependence on God to care for and deliver us as we learn from our Master.

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase says it this way: "I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

7. How does this image of the Christian life compare with your own experience as a Jesus-follower?

Tying the Bow

There's a price to discipleship. We saw last week in Matt. 10:38 that a would-be disciple must "take his [or her] cross and follow" Jesus. Here in chapter 11, though, we see an even greater cost of "non-discipleship" if we don't take the "yoke" of Jesus. Dallas Willard combines these images in *The Great Omission* by stating that, "nondiscipleship costs you exactly the abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring...The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it." Yes, we pay a hefty price to follow; we forfeit incomparably greater riches, though, when we choose not to follow at all.

Perhaps the best thing we can do right now is to pray that we would all experience what Jesus is offering in verses 25-30. Use these points as a guide:

- Pray that you would be free of the kind of pride that the "wise and understanding" of this world fall into. Ask God to make you teachable like a little child.
- Thank God for revealing Himself to you through His Son, Jesus.
- Pray that you would exchange any heavy burdens you've been carrying for the life-giving "yoke" that comes only from knowing and walking in step alongside Jesus.