

A few years ago, the Washington Post ran a story covering a man named Joshua Bell, who is widely regarded as perhaps the greatest violin player in the world today. He packs out concert halls and people pay hundreds of dollars to hear him play. He is typically accompanied by an entire orchestra and shows up in a tuxedo. A few years ago, he decided to do an experiment. He took his 4 million dollar Stradivarius violin to a subway in Washington, D.C. to play for people who weren't expecting it. (Please view the online sermon to watch the video.) Over the course of 45 minutes, thousands of people walked by, but only a few slowed down to listen, only one person recognized him, and no one applauded. Here was the mission behind the experiment: "To discover if, in a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, will beauty transcend?" No doubt the music was beautiful, but because of the setting and the expectations, almost no one recognized or appreciated it.

We find ourselves in a similar situation in Luke's gospel, as we look at a one-on-one interaction Jesus has with John the Baptist. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Luke 7. Here's the heart of the question in this passage: "*If Jesus doesn't show up as you expected or hoped, would you still recognize him?*" Let me phrase that question in a different, even more provocative way: "*If Jesus doesn't do or say what you want him to, will you still follow him?*" The truth is that sometimes we have the tendency of coming to God and saying: "Here's *what* I want you to do, here's *when* I want you to do it, and here's the result that I want. God, if you meet me on my terms and you come through for me, maybe then I'll trust you. Maybe then I'll worship you. But if you don't come through, if you don't meet my expectations, I'll just get on with my life without you."

In our passage today, John the Baptist had some very unmet expectations of Jesus. You might recall that Tom taught us a lot about John the Baptist a few weeks ago. We learned that John was Jesus' cousin who gained a huge following telling people to repent of their sins and prepare themselves for the Messiah. He told them that God was going to send his son, and they needed to be ready for him when he came. A lot of the ordinary folks heard his message, believed him, and were baptized. Most of the religious establishment heard his message and said he was crazy, a religious nut job who had lost his marbles. Things really changed in John's life when Herod Antipas, the King of Israel at the time, started an affair with his brother's wife. John confronted him publicly and called him to repent of his adultery. He didn't just tell the people to repent of their sins—he looked at the most powerful man in the land and told him to repent of his sins. Instead of repenting, Herod locked John up in prison. There was no such thing as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or freedom of the press in those days, so John the Baptist went to a prison cell. And in that cell, John the Baptist had a crisis of faith. He expected when the Messiah came, righteous prophets would be vindicated and corrupt leaders like Herod would face a reckoning. But John was still in prison, Herod was still on the throne, and with Jesus not doing what John hoped for, John was beginning to wonder if Jesus was really the Messiah after all. Did he miss it somehow? Was everything he did just a waste?

"John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Luke 7:18-19). At first blush, it's hard to imagine someone like John would ever doubt.

- John was Jesus' cousin who the Bible tells us was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth (Luke 1:15, 36).
- John leapt for joy in his mother's womb in Jesus' presence (Luke 1:41).
- John declared publicly of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

- John baptized Jesus (Mark 1:9), and when he did, God the Father spoke from heaven and said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17)
- John watched as the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus (Matthew 3:16) and even told some of his own followers to become followers of Jesus (John 1:35).

It’s not just John’s personal history; it’s Jesus’ present ministry. In just the last couple of chapters of Luke’s gospel Jesus has cured a leper, caused a paralyzed man to walk again, healed the centurion’s servant, and raised a widow’s dead son back to life. You would think that in light of all of that, John would have every reason to believe; he’d be the last person in the world to ever have a crisis of faith. But remember: John is sitting in a prison cell. And not a white collar, Martha Stewart prison cell. This was a pit, with no electricity or light, no running water or latrine, nothing. Hasn’t seen his family in who knows how long, and he knows he’s likely to be executed. In a difficult moment like that, even John the Baptist lost sight of all God had done for him personally in the past, and what God was doing for others in the present, and doubt began to set in.

When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” (Luke 7:20-23)

He doesn’t say yes; he doesn’t say no. But with John’s messengers right there to see it with their own eyes, he finds people who have been sick for weeks or months or years and cures them on the spot. He goes to people who are under the control of Satan, and he sets them free, a sign that the reign of darkness is finally coming to an end. He even finds people who are blind and restores their sight. Which is interesting, right? He could have just said “yes” and dispelled all John’s fears. It would have been so much easier and faster and straight to the point, but instead of giving John a black and white answer, he gives him evidence and then lets him decide what to do with it. That’s part of the nature of faith: we have to look at the evidence and then make a decision. That’s what Jesus tells John.

But John wasn’t the only one who had to make a decision about Jesus. So did the crowds, and so did the religious establishment of the day. Listen to what Jesus says next: “After John’s messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?’” (Luke 7:24). This is a figurative way of saying that John didn’t follow the prevailing winds of culture. He wasn’t a parrot, preaching what was popular. He didn’t simply go with the flow and say what was in vogue. Most leaders, even religious leaders, feel a need to tell people what they want to hear to keep the crowds happy and maintain their standing. Not John. He preached the truth without flinching. He told the king to end his affair. He told the rich to give away their money. He told the powerful to quit exploiting the weak. He told everyone to repent of their sin, humble themselves and turn to Jesus. He was a stalwart.

Jesus went on to say: “‘If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces’” (Luke 7:25). John didn’t use his platform for self-enrichment. He didn’t buy nice clothes or build a big house. He wore camel skins and ate wild locusts. There was a humility in his heart, a purity to his life, that was beyond reproach, and sadly, exceedingly rare.

And then Jesus went on to give John the greatest compliment that could ever be given. ““But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John”” (Luke 7:26-28a). Jesus is saying that of every person who had ever been born to that point in history, John was greater than all of them. He was greater than Abraham the father of faith, than Moses the deliverer of God’s people, than Joshua, Samuel, David, and Elijah. John had a higher place of honor than every person who came before him.

But then, get this—he says, ““yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he”” (Luke 7:28b). John is greater than everyone who came before him, but you and I, if we have placed our faith in Jesus, have a higher place of honor than him. He pointed the way to Jesus, but we are saved by the sacrifice of Jesus; our sins are washed away once and for all. Jesus lives in our hearts. The ceiling he reached for becomes the floor that we stand on. We are living the dream of all our spiritual ancestors who came before us.

“(All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)” (Luke 7:29-30). Jesus is explaining why he was such a polarizing figure, why some people who listened to him and witnessed his miracles believed, and others listened to the exact same messages and witnessed the exact same miracles and refused to believe. He says it all comes down to humility. Jesus says it has nothing to do with who is more intelligent or less intelligent, more educated or less educated, more moral or less moral, more spiritual or less spiritual, more discerning or less discerning—they all listened to the same message and witnessed the same miracles. What determined their response had everything to do with humility. Who was willing to listen to a confrontational message, admit they were wrong, and follow God, even though it meant making a costly change in their life? If you’re willing to be humble and admit that you have sinned and that you need help, you can accept Jesus. If you’re not, you never will.

“Jesus went on to say, ‘To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: “We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry””’” (Luke 7:31-32). In other words, no matter what we do, we can’t make you happy. We sing you a happy song, you refuse to dance. We sing you a sad song, you refuse to mourn. No matter what we do, you refuse to budge. This is like one of those truthful breakup conversations when someone says, “It’s not me, it’s you.” Do you know why this relationship isn’t working? Because you have a proud, stubborn heart.

““For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners””” (Luke 7:33-34). They said John the Baptist was too austere, too rigid, too harsh. Then Jesus came with a different tone, and they said he was too generous, too free-spirited, too liberal. No matter what John or Jesus said, people found reasons to reject them, because they had already decided they didn’t want to listen to them. Then Jesus made this brilliant observation, ““But wisdom is proved right by all her children”” (Luke 7:35), which is another way of saying there may be no way of knowing who’s right today, but if you wait long enough, sooner or later, everyone will see who was right. Two families might decide to raise their kids in very different ways—they discipline differently, they educate differently, they choose friends differently. Which way is right? Wait twenty years and see what the children are like as adults.

Twenty years ago, no one knew whether it made more sense to invest in Blockbuster or Netflix. In fact, not even the owners of Netflix were sure—they offered to sell their company to Blockbuster for fifty

million dollars. Blockbuster said no thank you. Today Blockbuster is bankrupt and Netflix is worth 250 billion dollars. This past summer I was with the former chairman and COO of Blockbuster. When this topic came up, let's just say it was still a touchy subject. No one knew who was right back then, but twenty years later it's evident to everyone.

Or think about a tree. I love trees. Over the past four years I have planted about 400 trees. (Keren says I might have a problem.) When you plant a tree that has been growing in a pot, all the roots are twisted up. When you put it in the ground, you have to spread the roots out so they can grow in different directions. If you don't, if you leave them twisted, the tree will grow fine—for about twenty years. But then those roots, growing in the dirt, will get so large, and because they are twisted, they'll choke one another out. And right when your tree should be peaking in terms of its health and beauty, it'll actually die. How will you know if you planted your trees right? It's impossible to know right away. But wait twenty years and everyone will know. Jesus is saying there may not be an enormous difference that everyone can see at face value between the life of someone who decides to accept and follow him, and the life of those who reject and ignore him, but wait twenty years, and in two decades, there will be no doubt; it will be apparent in an instant to everyone.

When I look at this interaction with Jesus and John the Baptist, there is one clear overarching question that stands out to me: why is it so hard to accept and follow Jesus? The religious leaders didn't do it. Even John the Baptist himself struggled. Why is it so hard to accept and follow Jesus? We see three answers in this passage.

First, Jesus doesn't take away our suffering. This is so challenging because we think that if we are on God's team, we are always going to win. Life is going to be easy, not hard. But life doesn't always work out that way. The man who was greater than all other prophets in the entire Old Testament, the man who called Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," ended in a prison cell. Angels didn't show up to fluff his pillow in prison; he didn't magically have warm, home-cooked meals appear. There was no miraculous escape where he walked out a free man and got to stand before the king and say, "See, I was right, God is on MY side!" No, he's just in that prison cell, feeling defeated and all alone. And faith is hard in a moment like that. Maybe you've felt that before, not all alone in a prison cell, but all alone in a hospital waiting room, or all alone in a funeral home after everyone else has left, when it's just you and a mountain of tissues that just keeps growing. In a moment like that, faith is hard.

In those moments we have to remember that Jesus was a Messiah of the cross, that he told us to take up our cross, and that he promised us, in red letters, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). If we were hoping for faith to be like a "get out of suffering free card"—no job losses, no difficult diagnosis—we had the wrong expectations! Suffering is a part of life, especially for those who believe. But with Jesus, we have a companion in our suffering, knowing that we are not alone. We know there is purpose to our suffering; oftentimes our hardest moments are the most formative and powerful. And we know that suffering will not have the last word—one day Jesus will vanquish every form of suffering. He will wipe every tear from our eye and the world will finally be set right. That's true. That will happen. But it hasn't happened yet. And it makes accepting and following Jesus hard. Just like John had to wrestle with that, so do we.

Why is it so hard to accept and follow Jesus? Because he doesn't take away our suffering, and because Jesus doesn't tell us what we want to hear. A lot of leaders, especially politicians, gain their influence by telling people what they wanted to hear. I remember in 2008, when President Obama was running for office the first time, he said publicly, in a church of all places, that he believed marriage was between one man and one woman, period, end of discussion, that is the way God intended it. At the time, that's what most Americans believed. He told people what they wanted to hear. Years later, when the tide of public

opinion began to change, guess what? He changed his stance, too. That's what most leaders do—they say what they think people want to hear. Not Jesus. He tells us the truth, regardless of our response.

Human tendency is to curate content that confirms what we already believe, to choose podcasts and preachers and news networks who are simply going to tell us that the opinions we already have are right. We all need to make sure that in our own walk with God, our hearts and ears are open to his critiquing us, to his challenging and confronting us. If we are only listening to voices of affirmation, it's probably not Jesus we are listening to. When Jesus speaks, he shatters our echo chamber. And if we want to be serious in our relationship with Jesus, we need to make sure we have people in our lives who will speak uncomfortable truths to us as well.

I was reading in 1 Kings 22 this week, about King Ahab. He was trying to decide whether to go to war or not, and hundreds of prophets showed up and all told him exactly what he wanted to hear. Hundreds of yes men. Even the King knew how phony it was. He said, "There is only one prophet through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me" (1 Kings 22:8). Whether it is your preacher, or your mentor, or your counselor, or your close friends, be sure that you aren't just listening to people who only ever have good things to say about you. Because if you really want to follow Jesus, there are times when he will challenge you. He's not going to say what you want to hear.

Why is it so hard to accept and follow Jesus? Because he doesn't take away our suffering and he doesn't tell us what we want to hear. And here's a third answer: Jesus doesn't give in to our demands. Jesus isn't a DJ who plays whatever song we request. He's not a cosmic weatherman who sends us whatever we are in the mood for that day. Eighty degrees and sunny? Sure. Five inches of snow for the kids to play in? Sure. Whatever you want, here I am. Jesus isn't a butler. He's a king. He doesn't ask us what we want. He's in charge. We ask him what he wants. And to follow him, we have to humble ourselves and make him our Lord and leader

There is a story that circulated about 25 years ago about a near collision at sea. A captain got on the radio and said: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision." Seconds later came the response: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision." The captain responded: "This is a US Navy ship. I say again, divert your course." The response came: "I say again, divert your course." The captain says: "This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States' Atlantic fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers and two submarines. I say again, change your course or defensive measures will be taken." The response: "This is a lighthouse. Your call."

Sometimes following Jesus is like that. He tells us we need to make a change and meet us on his terms. We offer a counter proposal—"Jesus, why don't you make a change and meet me on my terms." Jesus is a lighthouse. No matter how much we huff and puff and talk a big game, no matter how smart and unique and special we think we are, he doesn't give into our impetuous demands. He's in charge, he sets the terms. We have to decide if we'll humble ourselves and accept the terms. If we will, we can follow him. If not, our life will eventually be like a ship that refused to divert course and was dashed against the rocks.

Perhaps the most important verse in our entire passage, the verse that unlocks the meaning of all the other verses, is Luke 7:23: "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Even though Jesus may not be the Messiah we were expecting or would have chosen ourselves, even though he shows up unexpectedly and in disguise like a world-renowned violin player in a subway, even though he allows suffering in our lives and confronts us and calls us to humble ourselves, blessed is the one who sees all the evidence, and instead of turning away, comes closer. It may not be how we initially expected, but he's

the Messiah. He is God in the flesh. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Blessed are those who look at the evidence, and even when life is hard and faith is hard, still believe.