

THE LOST BEATITUDE

Matthew 11:2-6

Dr. Trevor Brown

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- I. John was not faulted for his question.
- II. A good question with the wrong response becomes a bad question.
- III. Blessed are you when you do not stumble.

The words of the famous speech are lost to time. There is no record of what was spoken, only a small historical plaque in Bloomington, Illinois. It reads, "This tablet marks the site where Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous 'Lost Speech' May 29, 1856."ⁱ The speech is termed "lost" because no known transcripts exist. Contemporary accounts suggest that Lincoln's oratory was so compelling that reporters neglected to take notes.

Jesus' most famous sermon was well-recorded. By the grace of God, his words were not lost to time. Surrounded by crowds weary from Roman oppression and religious burdens, Jesus walked up a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. There, he began with a series of statements: "Blessed is he..." You know them as the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit...that mourn...the meek...those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...the merciful...the pure in heart... the peacemakers...those who are persecuted." But there is a little beatitude in Matthew 11, so subtle that we often miss its message. Some call it "forgotten."ⁱⁱ I have called it the Lost Beatitude.

John the Baptist was a one-of-a-kind preacher. He lived most of his life in the wilderness near the Dead Sea. He ate off a menu that no one envied and wore the clothes that even the donation box doesn't want. Fred Craddock says he dressed liked yesterday and sounded like tomorrow. You know him best from the beginning of the gospels. Like Jesus, his miraculous conception was accompanied by angels. He even leapt in his mother's womb at the first sign of Jesus. The highlight of his whole career, of course, was when Jesus insisted that John baptize him as well. John had been making big announcements and baptizing people to repentance.

In Matthew 11, the miracles and ministry of Jesus are interrupted to give us an update on John, whose life had taken a few turns for the worse. As it happened, John was charismatic enough to draw big crowds but too convicted to keep it all to himself. So when he found himself amidst the royalty of the day, he spoke out and rebuked them for their affairs. It landed him behind bars.

John had been a free-range preacher, but now he was a caged bird. Nobody was more out of place in this prison than the prophet of the outdoors. He had seen the clouds open and the

heavenly lights come down on Jesus. He seemed so enlightened before, but now he sits in the dark in more ways than one. All of that helps us make sense of the question that John sends out. *"Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"*

The "expected one" or "one who is to come" was Old Testament language for the Messiah, the idea that a savior was coming. That was John's big announcement the whole time, actually. Do you remember what John said: "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matt. 3:11)

John had shouted about grim justice and pictured God as a thresher of grain. Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who welcomes children home even when they spit in his eye. John preached a victorious Judge who comes with an ax to lay it the root of the tree and fire to burn in judgment. And here was Jesus, not carrying on that way at all but being meek and lowly, going about doing good. And John couldn't figure it out. The devil got in his doubts as in Eden. John began wondering and then worrying, for one begets the other. Have I gambled it all on an imposter?ⁱⁱⁱ

It's easy to skip past the question as if it is a passing thought, but this was no simple curiosity. It was more than 100 miles between Herod's prison and Galilee, a multi-day journey for John's delegation. John wants to know, *"Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"*

JOHN WAS NOT FAULTED FOR HIS DOUBT.

I have sympathy for John. Dungeons have a unique way of introducing us to doubt. It was one thing to have a firm foundation on the banks of the Jordan, but it is another thing to stand in faith from jail. John's whole life had been one big exclamation point, but now all he can muster is a question mark.

Do you know anything about doubts? I know it's not a popular thing to admit. Some see it as a sign of weakness, others view it as an enemy to faith. Maybe you were raised to remove doubt from your vernacular. Some think that the holiest thing you can do is have no questions, but all of us have questions of our own.

I realize that you may not have found your life in a literal dungeon, though certainly many in Christian history and around the world today have. There may not be a visible lock and key, but you know what it's like to be in that pit. They say, "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage," but it is also true that there are things other than walls that do a prison make and other than iron bars may form a cage.

Are your challenges physical? Is your trouble financial? It could be both. Maybe your blood pressure is up and your bank account down. Maybe you are physically ill, but you hide it well enough for people to assume you are well. Maybe you have lost a loved one. You smile, but it hangs heavy on your soul. Maybe there's no tragedy at all, and that's the real tragedy. If

something were going wrong, you could explain your discontent with life. That would be easier than answering the questions that you thought wouldn't be there when were on top of life. Maybe the most surprising thing about John's question is that he turns out to be just like us. If he could hang on with no wavering, then there's hope for us. We might turn a corner and leave all the questions behind. But if even John has his doubts..?

Frederick Buechner says doubt is "the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."^{iv} I suppose that's why some of the most powerful voices of faith in the Bible also voiced the biggest doubts. John was often mistaken for Elijah. They dressed the same and sounded the same. When Elijah was threatened after he defeated the prophets of Baal, he ran to the wilderness, collapsed under a tree and said, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (1 Kings 19:4) Instead, God gave him rest and started to feed him. Elijah had doubts.

The prophet Jeremiah was familiar with confinement, too. He was the one who cried out, "Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive *stream* with water that is unreliable?" (Jer. 15:18) Moses questioned God's choice of him as the leader, saying, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" Gideon famously cried out, "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" In Psalm 13, David cried out to God, saying, "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

You have questions about what you see happening or what, perhaps, has happened to you. If a colossal character like John the Baptist can falter, then you should hear again the words of James 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you."

John is not alone in his confusion. You are not alone when you have questions either. Jesus is not intimidated by your doubts. He can handle every concern and invites you to bring them to him. Consider his response.

A GOOD QUESTION WITH THE WRONG RESPONSE IS A BAD QUESTION.

What did Jesus do? Did he bitterly scold the troubled prophet? Did He say, "I'm ashamed of you. I'm frustrated by you." He did not do that at all. In fact, on the day that John the Baptist made his poorest remark about Jesus, Jesus said the best thing about John the Baptist: "Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!"

Jesus did not rebuke John. If you carried in questions today, it's not rebuke for you either. It is only good news. Jesus doesn't give John a dissertation on who he is or a treatise on the divine trinity. He simply tells them to "*Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind see... lame walk... lepers cleansed... deaf hear... dead are raised up... the poor have the gospel preached to them.*"

Frederick Buechner paraphrases it well: "You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up birdwatching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-

out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of deadbeats are living it up for the first time in their lives.”^v Jesus’ answer is simple. Long time preacher, Vance Havner, translates Jesus this way: “I am running on schedule and carrying out my program as planned. It may not be as you expected but do not be upset by it.”^{vi}

“And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”

The word translated here as “stumble” is from the Greek word *skandalon*. From this we receive English words for “scandal” or “scandalous.” It refers to trap or a snare, often translated as a “stumbling block.” This is to be tripped up in such a way that one takes offense or is scandalized. It is to see in another what I disapprove of and what hinders me from acknowledging its authority.

It is easy in confusing times to get offended by the Lord. Jesus knows that there is something scandalous about him. You’d better know it too. If you don’t know, if it hasn’t tripped you up and nearly knocked you down, then you might not have met him yet. You might have met some knock-off version of him sold somewhere else, because *this* Jesus is a jolt in the middle of your life. The Lost Beatitude warns us not to remove the offense by making Jesus over in our image so that he fulfills our agenda.^{vii}

Anne Lamott says that, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”^{viii} There is nothing more natural in our day than to shape Jesus into someone who agrees with us. If you strip Jesus down so that he no longer gets in your way, he will be unrecognizable. Because of that, he will be unrecognizable in you.

The problem is not that we ask questions or that we don’t understand. The problem is what you do when the Jesus you meet doesn’t match the Jesus you want. He will either be a sanctuary or a stumbling stone. A good question with the wrong reaction becomes a bad question.

To the Pharisees, he was an offense. To his hometown, he could only be the carpenter’s son. To the masses fed with bread, he was distasteful. There is a deeper privilege and a higher state that many never reach, to have found the lost beatitude.

BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN YOU DO NOT STUMBLE.

Don’t Stumble. It means reaching the point that, no matter what happens, you can say with Job, “yet will I trust in him.” Many people find that their vision for who or what Jesus can be for them does not match who Jesus turns out to be. They take offense, and they fall away. To be offended is to reject what you hear and just keep on being you. There will be plenty of things that just don’t make sense. John the Baptist must have wondered, “If Jesus can raise the dead, why can’t He get me out of jail?” Any little boy can ask why God put all the nutrients in spinach but didn’t put them all in ice cream. There is much that is baffling, but if we can’t understand it, by grace we can stand under it. We can see to it that we are not offended, and that is better than understanding.

If you are in a dungeon like that, have trouble fitting Jesus into your plans, or become frustrated when God won't do this or that, understand that He did not say He would. Instead, look around and see. Havner writes: *Eyes are opening to the Light. Deaf ears are hearing His voice. Lame souls are taking up their beds and walking. Lepers are turning up with new flesh. The dead in sin are awaking to Christ, their Life and Light. Around the world the lowly hear the Good News. Christ has not failed. He is carrying on exactly on schedule as He intended from the beginning. He has never missed an appointment and is never late.*

So, Blessed are you when the kingdom of God shakes up your life, and you don't reset it.

Blessed are you when generosity doesn't come naturally, but you live sacrificially anyways.
Blessed are you when you don't want to bother knowing your neighbors, but you make the effort because you need to.

Blessed are you when the needs in your coworker's life supposedly aren't your problem, but your faith leads you to step in anyway.

Blessed are you when you're tempted to hold that grudge, but you don't.

Blessed are you when you make peacefulness a priority in a politicized world.

Blessed are you when you reject the high places of the proud and stay connected to the lowly.

Blessed are you when you want Jesus on your side, but you choose to get on your knees instead.

Blessed are you when you feel a need to stop living for yourself first and then actually do it.

Blessed are you when following Jesus starts to actually cost you something, and you don't turn away.

Blessed are you when getting the whole family to church again is a challenge, but you go.

Blessed are you when you'd rather just sit here and soak it all in, but you keep feeling the pull to go serve.

Blessed are you when you stake your whole life on the truth that the death and resurrection of suffering, servant Messiah has brought salvation to whole world... It's a stumbling block some and foolishness to others.

Blessed are you when hold on to the truth that no matter the questions you have, the way of Jesus is always the better answer.

Blessed are you when you run into Jesus and manage not to slip back into who you were before.

For a brief period of my life, I lived alone. It was actually a really short time in the scheme of things, but I moved from my college town to seminary and found myself an apartment and started grad school. I worked at a church part-time (which is never part time) and spent the rest as a full-time student or playing sports with friends. I don't know that I was all that "grown up," but it was mostly adulthood. Somewhere in that brief time I learned how to live "on my own." Life was simple enough. A single guy may have dishes but really only uses one cup, one plate,

one bowl, and one spoon. Meals were simple. Furniture was inherited. Décor was minimal. You can picture the life.

Then, somewhere along the way, I met my wife, a young woman in the same stage of life with the same goals, passions, and the priorities. Whether you went straight from living under your parent's roof to marriage, or from lengthy singleness to marriage, you know that life is never the same. You can forget about using one cup and one plate. Even if there was just one, you'd put them in the dishwasher wrong. Someone said marriage is just your spouse perpetually standing in front of the kitchen drawer you need to open.

However, it's not long before you look back and wonder how you ever managed any other life. It's not just marriage. It can be a close friend, job change, a new church, or a big move. Then, maybe you have children, and the changes only increase in speed. The next thing you know, all you do when you are alone is talk about how great your kids are. Not only can you not imagine yourself without those people, but the truth becomes that there is no "you" without them. They have so shaped and formed who you've become that you're inseparable. There's no you without them.

So it can be with the Lord. Jesus says,
"Blessed are you if you meet *me* and can't be just *you* anymore."

ⁱ "Lincoln's Lost Speech," *Abraham Lincoln in McLean County*, McLean Museum of History.

ⁱⁱ Vance Havner, "The Forgotten Beatitude."

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, "John the Baptist," *Peculiar Treasures*.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, "Doubt," *Wishful Thinking*.

^v Buechner, "John the Baptist."

^{vi} Havner, "The Forgotten Beatitude."

^{vii} David Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 128.

^{viii} Anne Lammott, *Traveling Mercies*.