

July 5, 2026

“Conflicting Expectations”

Matthew 11:16-19

Intro:

I know that this might be difficult to believe, but Cody and Evelyn did not (and sometimes still do not) always get along when they were playing. Shocking, I know. When they were younger and playing together, it was not unusual for one or the other to come complaining to Cindy or me that the other one wasn't playing fair. It is a tale as old as time, as they say. I would feel confident in saying that all of us have at some point in our childhood had a similar experience – either with our siblings or in the general interchange between kids. As adults, we probably have similar experiences with co-workers or neighbours, although the complaint isn't usually that so and so isn't playing fair.

I should be clear here that when Cody or Evelyn said the other one wasn't playing fair, what they really meant was that the other person wasn't playing the way they wanted them to play. This, of course, is a completely different issue that is really about selfish expectations and not being clear about what those expectations are. Sometimes the problem has nothing to do with the immediate situation, but is triggered by some other circumstance that is known only to the person making the complaint.

I recall one time while working in retail that my manager, who was a pretty good guy to work for the most part, was upset about something and told me to re-arrange one of the display cases in a specific way. This I did. When he returned from his lunch break, he came in and promptly tore a strip off me for not doing the display properly (even though I had followed his instructions carefully), pulled it all out and made me do it again.

In almost all of those situations where we find that other people are not playing by the rules that we want them to play by, the issue isn't their behaviour. It's that

we aren't sure what we really want and when what we get doesn't line up with what we think we wanted, we get upset.

As I said, this is not a new phenomenon and is as old as humanity.

The Passage:

In Matthew 11, we come across this rarely-talked-about discourse of Jesus' during the time that John the Baptist was in prison. The background here is that the people were looking for a Messiah who matched a certain picture they had. John the Baptist didn't match that picture, and so they put him into prison. Jesus had been doing some radical teaching and performing miracles and so John sent his disciples to find out if he was the Messiah. Jesus' response to those disciples was to send them back to tell John what they had seen and heard. Once they had headed off, Jesus then turned to speak to the general populace about John. John wasn't the Messiah, but he was a significant prophet in the story. Their problem with John wasn't that he wasn't the Messiah, but that he didn't fit the profile they had of what a man of God, specifically a prophet, should look like. Jesus began to point out that their expectations don't really matter because John was indeed a great prophet. I'm paraphrasing here, of course, and you should read the first 10 verses of the chapter for yourself, but you get the picture.

I don't think the people listening got the picture. Because Jesus then shifts into illustrating his point. Jesus is great for using every day common things as illustrations for his points. Sometimes, like this time, those illustrations stretch across time and make just as much sense today as they did back then.

Jesus has observed kids playing in the marketplace (which was the central gathering place for much of family and community life). What he sees is kids complaining because their chums aren't playing by the right rules. One group has said "we'll do a jig if you play a happy tune on your instruments", only to not dance when that happens, and so when those same musicians think they got the style of music wrong they switch to more somber music thinking that their friends will surely react properly to that music – but they don't. The point here is that the

kids with the instruments think the rules of the game are that the other kids should react appropriately to the style of music. The other kids are playing by different rules, or a different game altogether, that doesn't revolve around what music is being played.

The setup for Jesus is telling the people that they are saying they want one thing, but then when that is provided it turns out they really wanted something else, which has affected their perception and reception of not only John, but of Jesus himself.

John and Jesus:

John didn't follow the normal rules of society. He lived out in the wilderness and lived a simple life in terms of what he ate and drank. He didn't eat excessively and didn't drink alcohol. Sounds like he would have been a shining example of how a good God-fearing person should behave. The problem is that the people didn't want to have that same level of strictness applied to their own lives, and so they labeled John's as being demon possessed, for what "normal" person would live such a strict life?

But living a life of strict obedience to the letter of the law was something that was normally considered admirable... There is a confusing expectation there.

Jesus, by contrast, attended feasts and parties and presumably drank wine (one assumes he drank at the wedding in Cana, as an example in addition to this passage). So, he essentially lived opposite to how John lived, which should have been what the people expected of their Messiah. But, this too did not meet their expectations and instead they labeled Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard – even though his lifestyle of eating and drinking was the same as what the people wanted for their own lifestyle.

Again, a very confusing expectation.

Conclusion:

What are our expectations of Jesus? What kind of man, what kind of Messiah, do we expect him to be? What are the rules that we want him to follow, and by extension then, his followers to follow? We aren't likely going to solve this riddle in the time we have this morning, but I want you to give some careful thought to it as you head into the summer and maybe have more time for reflection.

People, both in the church and outside the church, have expectations of what Christianity should be and who God is and how He should act. When the reality doesn't match those expectations, we end up with a crisis of faith, or grounds for rejecting faith. But the problem isn't the inconsistency of God, it is the inconsistency of our expectations.

We want a God who is loving and kind. We want God to look and act like a cuddly teddy bear. But then we come face to face with the love and kindness of God that says everyone has an opportunity to enter into heaven if they accept Jesus' death and resurrection, and we don't want that for some people. We want the God of judgement and wrath. But a God who acts with finality and who treats sin with consequence and punishment, doesn't fit comfortably for our own lives because we don't want to face that ourselves. And so we reject God because He is too loving and because He is also hard.

As I said, this isn't something that will be solved for each of you in just one simple sermon. It takes time and effort to wrestle with your expectations and concept of God and harmonize those with the full picture of Him that we find in the entirety of the Scriptures. Can you accept that God loves you, and that He also allows what we see as bad things to happen in this world? When you want someone to be punished for their sins (meaning they spend eternity in Hell), and then they come to faith and forgiveness, do you respond with cheering because one who was lost has been found, or do you cry out because justice has not been served?

God is bigger than our expectations. But that really isn't the issue. What we need to wrestle with is this. Are we willing to let go of our expectations and submit

them to God? Are we willing to move from telling God what we expect from Him, to asking Him what He expects from us?

I would challenge you this morning to ask that very question as you spend daily time reading your Bible and praying, and see where God grows your faith as you do so.

Let's pray.