

Would you turn to Matthew 11 please?

Can you believe Christmas is almost here!

Well this morning I'd like to talk about Christmas gifts.

But look as hard as you'd like, and you won't find these gifts carefully wrapped under a tree. Nor can anyone go to a store and get them. No, these gifts are the gifts that God gives, oftentimes unexpectedly.

This morning we're only going to look at a few verses in Matthew 11, but we're going to do a fair amount of Bible hopping as we look at Jesus' ministry. All the while trusting the HS will bring application to our lives as we remind ourselves for this coming year of the importance of being a dedicated follower of Christ.

The title of this morning's message is God's gift of change.

LET'S PRAY.

Have you ever noticed the best team doesn't always win? Sometimes the cheater gets the highest grade. There are times when the shady businessman gets the big sale and the bigger bonus!

Even for the faithful follower of Christ life doesn't always unfold the way we think it should. Life gets hard. Injustice mocks us while sickness diminishes us. All the while knowing if the Lord doesn't come rapture us soon, things will get worse.

SHOW PIC

It's been said if life only threw us fastballs we'd bat 1.000! But life can throw us nasty curves. Or give us a change up and we whiff badly. **CLOSE PIC**

We've all found ourselves confused at times with the difficult circumstances we have to deal with.

As we look ahead with anticipation and eagerness to what the year 2024 may have in store, let's remind ourselves of someone who was confronted with difficult change, someone whose circumstances weren't playing out the way he thought.

JTB had seen Jesus' mighty works, and he had the testimony of heaven of who Jesus is! JTB was heaven's witness, he had a front row as the HS descended upon Jesus. JTB said in **John 1:34 "And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."**

John knew that he knew! He was fully convinced who Jesus is!

Let's read verses 1-3

Matthew 11 1 Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities.

2 And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

When JTB was tossed into prison he was confused. The voice that previously cried out with such certainty of who Jesus is, began to crack and quiver. John knew Jesus, there was no doubting his Lord's identity.

But if Jesus is who He says He is, JTB wonders-why's he sitting in prison? If Jesus brings hope and life, John ponders why he's stuck in the dead sea fortress of Machaerus, the Jewish equivalent of Alcatraz.

JTB was baking in the Dead Sea heat, and he's staring at walls, wondering... if Jesus is God's deliverer, why is he, as God's messenger, with his head on a literal chopping block?

SHOW PIC

Have you ever noticed that circumstances, especially very difficult and stressful and painful situations, have a way of fogging up the truths we know? **CLOSE PIC**

Johns' circumstances were causing his faith to be seriously challenged. His confidence was wobbling. So, JTB sends messengers to question Jesus.

So with that background, let's read now verses 1-6

Matthew 11 1 Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities.

2 And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: 5 The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

In response to John's disciples' question, Jesus says 'look around'. Every day blind eyes could see! Paraplegics could walk, leprous skin became new, corpses were raised to life, funerals turned into parties.

Things were changing!

Events were happening that were unprecedented on this scale in human history. Remember even the wind and waves obeyed His voice!

Everything Jesus described to John's messengers was happening in droves. Jesus was shaking things up. Obviously, God was at work in a new way.

We like to think of Jesus as the one who calms the seas and stills our storms, but we don't often like to think of Him as the one who shakes things up in our lives, the One who rocks our world.

SHOW PIC

In 1971 the MOMA hosted an exhibit of a famous French painter Andre Matisse. The work 'the boat' hung upside down for 47 days before anyone saw the mistake! Imagine, a masterpiece on exhibit hanging upside down and none of the art connoisseurs even noticed! **CLOSE PIC**

Yet this was the state of the world before Jesus came! Jesus flipped the world upside down in shocking ways. Let me give you some examples:

Jesus pointed to a sinner who beat his chest, and was truly sorry for his sin, and said this man would be heard over that self-righteous hypocrite who acted like God owed him.

Jesus counted the widow's measly mite as more valuable to God than all the money the rich man offered in his self-righteousness.

When Jesus saw that death robbed the life of a woman's son, He stopped the funeral in its tracks, and resurrected the boy.

The priests in those days painted the picture of God as harsh, and petty and vindictive. But Jesus describes God as a Father rushing to welcome home His wayward son.

Jesus is the expert in not only changing people's perspectives, but in changing their hearts and lives.

Realize Jesus never came to put His stamp of approval on the way things are. Instead, He constantly challenged people with change.

Remember how 2 different times Jesus bounced the crooked money changers out of the temple, flipping over tables in righteous anger? Once He did it with His bare hands. But the other time there's a peculiar, even shocking detail. **John 2 14 And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. 15 When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables.** Jesus didn't just pick up a whip on a counter. He didn't just get caught up in the emotion of the moment, grabbing whatever He could find. No, John clearly says Jesus made a whip of cords.

Picture this in your mind! Jesus in the corner of the temple, weaving a whip as He stares intently at the greedy priests. His hands clenched, hot molten rage bubbling up, Jesus is about to go ballistic!

SHOW PIC If it were a wild west showdown, you'd see the tumbleweed blowing with that famous whistle-it's about to go down! **CLOSE PIC**

Our Lord Jesus, cleansed the temple in a premeditated act of aggression! And it wasn't the only time!

Jesus was always upsetting the establishment by implementing change.

He healed folks on the Sabbath on purpose! Jesus coulda done these healings on Friday or Monday, and avoided all conflict and controversy. Hey God's open 24/7! There's 6 other days for miracles but Jesus kept intentionally doing them on the Sabbath!

Why? To infuriate and agitate the narrow and legalistic. Jesus ran roughshod through religious rules and traditions. He showed how silly and hypocritical they were, putting law over love. Jesus constantly revealed how wrong it is to put rituals over people.

We like those parts of Jesus, don't we??

But realize Jesus also made life uncomfortable for His own disciples.

Jesus frustrated His followers with hard sayings. His parables were puzzles they often didn't understand. Jesus sent out the disciples one occasion with no pay and no supplies! **Luke 10:3 Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves. 4 Carry neither money bag, knapsack, nor sandals; and greet no one along the road**

This seems harsh! You can hear the voices of the progressives-c'mon Jesus lighten up!

Why would Jesus be so insensitive towards His disciples when He sent them out? Jesus never wanted them to get settled, because this world wasn't the disciple's home.

And of course, this is true of us.

As you study the gospels it's clear Jesus was not afraid-He wasn't timid or shy. He was willing to get in your face, -remember He called the religious leaders SONS OF HELL!

But Jesus didn't always confront people in an intimidating way. Often, Jesus would just force people to think by asking them soul searching questions.

But make no mistake-Jesus fearlessly challenged everyone He ever met.

Whether with Pharisees or the Jewish establishment or masses on the hillside. It didn't even matter if it was His disciples by the campfire, Jesus was always exposing sinful people to a higher way. At times it came in the form of a comfort, at other times Jesus would directly challenge folks.

At all times, Jesus refused to let people settle for what was, when closer to Him was attainable. And this is still the case.

As the old saying goes, Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

Remember the rich man who came to Jesus? He had the best resume of good works ever-and he was rich! Surely Jesus would be tender and gentle with this guy's feelings!

Mark 10 17 Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

18 So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother.' "[fn]

20 And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth."

21 Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

22 But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Jesus was gentle, but Jesus made it hard on the rich young ruler! Jesus challenged the desires of the rich man's heart! Our Lord got directly to the point-did the rich man worship God, or money?

As the rich man walked away sad, I know what the disciples were thinking-'Jesus how we gonna build this church You keep talking about if You keep running off the people with all the money!'

Jesus never coddled or flattered people to gain or maintain their loyalty. In fact, Jesus made faith in Him a continual challenge, even at the risk of losing followers.

In John 6 Jesus gave a very difficult teaching. And the results were shocking... **John 6 66 From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.**

Did Jesus go running after them, saying 'now wait a minute, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, please come back, I'll change my teaching style, I'll be more culturally pleasing and relevant' Is that what Jesus did?

No-He then turned to the 12 apostles **John 6:67 Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?"**

Here's the picture-Jesus always challenges His followers!

Jesus even rebuked His most outspoken and loyal follower! **Matthew 16:23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."**

Jesus is never afraid to call out sin!

As voluntary, lifetime enrollees in Jesus' school of discipleship, none of us get to skate by. Jesus never stops challenging us.

I'm sure the disciples knew Jesus loved them. But rather than constantly assure them He was on their side, Jesus was

constantly probing the disciples' hearts if they were still on His side.

This applied to Jesus' family too-you remember the time they came to speak to Him! **Luke 8 19 Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. 20 And it was told Him by some, who said, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You."**

21 But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."

I'm sure Jesus' family did not expect this reaction from Him!

And be sure, Jesus never let anyone use Him for their own political ends! In fact, when they wanted to make Him king, what did Jesus do? **John 6 15 Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.**

Jesus' kingdom is not of this earth. Jesus refused to do any man's bidding, He answered to God alone.

What Jesus was then, is what He remains today. **Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.**

Jesus is all about challenging and changing people.

And as His disciples, you and I are subject to our Lord's promptings. Yet I wonder, is keeping the status quo our unstated vision?

As we approach the year 2024, are we living in the shadow of past victories, or are we ready to follow Jesus into uncharted waters by the power of His HS?

If we're like JTB, and questioning, and unsatisfied with what Jesus is doing, could it be that we've forgotten that Jesus came to

bring change? Have we forgotten that one of God's unexpected gifts often comes as challenges to draw us into a deeper relationship with Him?

SHOW THIS ON SCREEN We must never forget, Jesus invites us to come to Him just as we are, but Jesus loves us too much to stay the way we are, for very long! **CLOSE PIC**

There were people who resented the challenges He brought, and the changes Jesus implemented. They were the ones who worshiped the status quo.

The Jewish priests were making a fortune-they controlled the temple tax. When Jesus cleansed the temple and ended their religious shenanigans, He cut deep into their pockets. And they were infuriated.

Have you ever noticed that folks often resist Jesus, because being His disciples come with His unwavering absolutes? We're commanded to have love for others, we're commanded with the need for humility, and sacrificing of self will. Our Lord Jesus even forbids the shortcuts we desire to take, because the ends never justify the means.

See our Lord demands not only we do His will, but Jesus demands we do it His way, in the Spirit rather than in the flesh.

As JTB struggled with doubt as he was stuck in prison, I've realized that I often do the same. Hey as long as Jesus' plans line up with my expectations, and everything is unfolding just how I think they should, then everything is good, I'm all in Jesus!

But when Jesus brings in those unexpected gifts of change in my life to draw me closer to Him, these circumstances for which I'm not ready, or He makes changes I don't understand, or He

demands of me what seems to be unfair or too hard, my faith begins to struggle. 'Jesus just let me have my way!'

Never forget that our Lord is always challenging His followers to trust Him in new ways.

Churches are filled with folks who desire to follow Jesus as long as they're comfortable and they're in control. But that's not how being a follower of Christ works.

Listen Jesus will never be a passenger, nor even a co-pilot! No Jesus always takes the driver seat! And what He wants of you and I, is to loosen our grip, and be led by the HS.

When the Jewish hierarchy realized there was no hope of conforming Jesus to their ways, they plotted to kill him. Jesus was too wild, too unpredictable, so they nailed Him to a cross.

Jesus refused to wear the crown of political clout the Jews ordered for Him, so instead they thrust on His head a crown of thorns.

When you and I resist the loving and needful changes that Jesus wants to implement in our lives, we are actually refusing His Lordship over our lives.

Here's the uncomfortable question I was confronted with last year amidst some very difficult circumstances, and I'll pose this question to you as well.

SHOW THIS ON SCREEN Am I truly a surrendered follower of Jesus, or am I a defender of that which makes me comfortable?

CLOSE

When they rolled the stone over Jesus' tomb, you can be sure there was a smug attitude and sense of celebration from Jesus' enemies. 'That's it-we finally took care of Jesus, we finally put

Him in His place! That'll be the last we hear of Jesus of Nazareth' they thought.

The stone sealing the doorway to the tomb was the modern day equivalent of throwing away the key. They assumed they didn't have to worry about Jesus implementing change and upsetting the status quo anymore.

Before the weekend was over, Jesus was back in business changing things up! Death was defeated and the world was never the same-new hope had been born and new power unleashed!

In our towns and in this church, Jesus is alive and shaping lives! He's building His kingdom and populating eternity. He's blazing new trails and teaching new ways of stepping out in faith.

When we commit to life with Jesus, we're agreeing to be uncomfortable sometimes! As His disciples, we're consenting to be challenged, even surprised.

If you walk with Jesus, I hope you like surprises, cuz there will be lots of them. Many of which, are unpleasant.

And as much as we may want to, we can't control Jesus, we can't cause Him to back down from challenging us to change us. And this is God's unexpected great gift to you and I!

Because it means Jesus isn't finished with us yet. He's not done shaking things up through us, and in us-to shape us and mold us. He's not done allowing circumstances in our lives that will cause us to surrender control, and trust more in Him.

Finally, look at verse 6 one more time in Matthew 11-Jesus told JTB though his messengers **6 And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.**"

The word blessed means happy! Happy is the disciple of Christ who follows Jesus with no reservations. Happy is the disciple

who isn't embarrassed to let Jesus lead. Happy is the person who never outgrows their need to rely on the leading of the HS.

As Christians, our goal is to be like Jesus, and we're not there yet! Which means our Lord will continue to challenge us, so that we may change.

This Christmas, when God gives you the unexpected gift of change, and having to trust Him by faith, how will you respond? Will you refuse His gift? Will you resist our Lord's urgings, and just try to do things your own way?

Or will your eyes light up, eager with anticipation to see what the Lord is going to accomplish through your obedience?

God is the original giver of unexpected gifts of change. Just look at the manger in the small town called Bethlehem.

