

3 Big Obstacles

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[0 : 00] Today we are going to continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew. We've come to chapter 11 and I want us to look at the whole chapter together for a short while this morning.

But as we begin, we can read again the first verse and then the last three verses. At the beginning it says, when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

And then at the end of the chapter, Jesus concludes with these great words, come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. In the previous chapter, chapter 10, Jesus is preparing his disciples to go out as his messengers into a mission field.

And as he does so, he warns them that there is one thing that they and we are guaranteed to face if we're going out with Jesus' message.

[1 : 02] We're going to face obstacles. Now when we think of obstacles to Christianity, we tend to think in terms of opposition, people who are hostile to the Gospel and who deliberately oppress the church.

And that is a reality. Jesus himself experienced it, the early church experienced it and many Christians throughout the world today also experienced it.

But opposition is not the only obstacle that the Christian church faces. In fact, we can maybe even say that opposition is not actually the biggest of obstacles at all.

The reason we can say that is because history has proved again and again and again that when the church is oppressed, it actually grows.

But there are other obstacles and that's exactly what we see here in Matthew chapter 11. Jesus himself, as verse one says, goes out to teach and preach.

[2 : 07] And as he does so, he encounters three big hurdles. And today I want to look at these together because we encounter exactly the same thing, both in terms of the culture around us, but also in our own hearts.

There are three big obstacles that will either stop us from coming to Jesus at all or they'll hinder us as we walk with him.

The three obstacles are being unsure, being unfast and being unteachable.

And that's our three headings today. So first of all, we see people, we see the obstacle of being unsure. Verses two to three, we read that when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to them, are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?

John the Baptist was a key figure in the Bible. And even though we read about him in the early chapters of the New Testament, he is really the last of the Old Testament prophets.

[3 : 24] As Jesus explains in this chapter, John is the messenger sent to announce that the Messiah is coming. Crowds flocked to hear him. He called people to repentance.

He challenged the oppressive authorities of his day. He baptized Jesus. He saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus as a dove. And he pointed those around him to Jesus saying, behold, the Lamb of God.

In so many ways, John the Baptist is a giant in the Bible. And yet here we find him doubting.

Despite all that he saw and experienced, he's now in prison and he is unsure.

That obstacle of being unsure has been a huge challenge for the church ever since. It affects us as Christians. So alongside the highs of following Jesus, there's moments when I think every Christian finds himself or herself niggled by the question, is this all real?

And for those of you who are maybe not yet Christians, I am fairly confident that hardly any of you, probably none of you, are thinking to yourself, I am hostile to Christianity.

[4 : 43] But I am sure that many of you are thinking, I'm just not sure. I'm not opposed to Christianity. I respect it, but I'm just not convinced.

Second obstacle we see is being unfast. In verses 16 to 17, Jesus says, to what shall I compare this generation? It's like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates. We played the flute for you and you did not dance. We sang a dirge and you did not mourn. Here Jesus is describing the general public. He speaks about this generation and then he talks about the towns and cities where he has been preaching and teaching.

As he describes them, he doesn't say that they're hostile, aggressive or atheistic. None of these are the big problem. The big problem is that people aren't bothered.

So if a flute is played, they don't dance. If a dirge is sung, they don't mourn. In other words, the general public is just not fussed.

[5 : 55] There's a numbness, which means that the things that should make people either dance for joy or mourn with tears, it's just bouncing off them. And instead, people are distracted, uninterested and indifferent.

And of course, exactly the same as through today. Don't ever think that Jesus lived in a different world to what we live in. In so many ways, it was exactly the same. Today we are surrounded by a general public that is just not that fussed.

And that numbness is a huge obstacle to the gospel. It means that the life-changing message of Jesus is lost in a fog created by the latest celebrity scoop that we need to hear about, or the latest thing that we need to buy, or the latest TikTok video that we need to watch.

And the third obstacle is being unteachable. We see that towards the end in verses 25 and 26.

Jesus says, at the same time, at that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you've hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. In summing everything up in this chapter, Jesus gives this beautiful description of how God does not choose the intellectual elite to be the first recipients of the gospel.

[7 : 26] Rather, he reveals himself to people who are like little children. Now, there's a lot we could say about these couple of verses. I just want to focus on the fact that these verses reveal another massive obstacle to the gospel, being unteachable.

For the religious and intellectual elite around Jesus, the fact that they were wise and understanding, as it says there in verse 25, that was not an advantage to them.

It was actually an obstacle because it meant that they were unteachable. As Jesus went to preach and teach in the cities, as we're reading about in this chapter, these people didn't listen because they didn't think that they needed to learn anything.

Again, that's still an obstacle today. Many people resist the teaching of Jesus, not because they're aggressively hostile, but because when it comes to the big questions of life, they're already confident in their own answers.

And as a result, people don't want to be taught by Jesus. And yet, the whole concept of being teachable is fundamental to being a disciple of Jesus.

[8 : 41] That's what the word disciple means. It means to be a learner. And that's exactly what we have to do in order to become disciples and to live as disciples. We need to learn from Jesus.

But in order to learn, we need to be teachable. In order to be teachable, we need to acknowledge that there's stuff we don't know. And in order to acknowledge that there's stuff we don't know, we have to show our weakness.

And that's probably the bit that we find the hardest. So there's these three big obstacles in Matthew chapter 11, being unsure, being unfast, being unteachable.

I want us to ask the question, what does all this teach us? Well looking at these three categories, the obvious question is to ask which one are you?

But in reality, I think instead of picking one, the truth is far more likely to be that in different ways, we are all of them.

[9 : 45] We all have times when we are unsure. When giants like John had doubts, we are the same. We all have areas of our lives where we're unfast, where we can be just as numb to things

that are going on around us.

And we all have ways in which we're unteachable, where we would far rather be listened to than for us to have to listen to others.

And this affects us whether we are Christians or not, these obstacles will prevent you from being saved if you're not yet a Christian, and these obstacles will spoil your relationship with Jesus if you are already a believer.

So what's the answer? What do we do? Well it would be very easy for us to think that the answer is to overcome these hurdles and come to Jesus.

So if you imagine in your mind somebody who's walking home and in order to get home, they have to climb over fences and ditches and walls and eventually they'll get there.

[10:57] So I could easily say to you, you need to jump over the ditch of being unsure. You need to push through the bog of being unfast and you need to break down the wall of being unteachable and then come to Jesus.

In other words, we could say you need to overcome the obstacles and come to Jesus. But I don't think that that's what this chapter is really telling us to do.

The chapter is not saying overcome the obstacles and come to Jesus. The chapter is saying come to Jesus and the obstacles will disappear.

And that's summed up in the beautiful statement that Jesus makes at the end of the chapter. Jesus says, come to me and learn from me.

When we face these obstacles, we need to come to Jesus and we need to learn from Him. So let's look at that in terms of each of the three obstacles.

[12:08] When you are unsure, come to Jesus and learn from Him. When John's message of uncertainty came to Jesus, Jesus responds with an amazing reply.

He answers them and he says, go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them and blessed is the one who's not offended by me.

The key words I want to focus on are the words what you see and hear. In other words, Jesus points the unsure person to objective, verifiable truth.

Now that's really important for us to recognize because many people think that faith means belief in something that's kind of vague and mystical and that doesn't necessarily tie in with the facts.

Ironically, a very clear example of this is secular humanism's approach to death. So often people with that worldview will talk about the death of loved ones in terms of people being with us or that we'll meet again.

[13:34] Now I can completely understand why people say that because a cold, hard, purely secular view of death is something that very few people can actually live with.

But having that idea of something being there or the idea of a new chapter or the other side, that's not faith.

That's guessing. Faith in terms of how the Bible understands it is not vague or blind. It is grounded on objective, verifiable truth.

That's why Jesus doesn't say, tell John, keep the faith, feel the energy, be true to yourself and everything will be fine. No, Jesus says, tell John the facts about what you're seeing and hearing.

Real blind people have received their sight. Real lame people walk. Real lepers have been cleansed. It's all reminding us that the gospel is grounded on objective, verifiable truth.

[14:45] In other words, it's based on stuff that's real. So the miracles of Jesus really happened. The ministry of Jesus really happened. The betrayal, arrest and crucifixion of Jesus really happened.

And most importantly of all, the resurrection of Jesus really happened. These are objective truths, real events that really happened.

And they're verifiable through the historical record that the Bible gives us. That's why there's such an emphasis in the New Testament on eyewitness testimony.

The New Testament, especially the gospels, it's not a collection of religious meditations. These are grounded on eyewitness records.

Christianity is not based on stuff that we wish was true. It's grounded on stuff that is true. Now you might be hearing me say that and you might reject that.

[15 : 49] You might think, well, I don't think it's true. Well if that's the case, I want you just to imagine that Matthew who wrote this gospel is sitting on your sofa or wherever you are just now.

Imagine that he's just sitting in the room next to you. And if you're rejecting the truth of what Matthew 11 is saying, you'd have to turn to Matthew and say to him, Matthew, see all this stuff that you wrote?

It didn't happen. You were wrong. I think Matthew would respond by saying to you, hold on a minute.

I was there. So when John comes to Jesus with his doubts and uncertainty, Jesus points him to objective verifiable truth.

The amazing thing about objective verifiable truth is that no matter how much you doubt, that has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the fact that it's true, doubts don't affect facts.

[17 : 04] Now some facts are hard to believe. It is hard to believe that the whole of Western Europe would go into lockdown. I find it hard to believe that for every second of my life, my heart keeps beating.

It's hard to believe that in the last 80 years, there have been seven billion childbirths. And it's hard to believe that all around us, there is this force that you can't see or touch or smell or taste, and yet it can pull everything.

And the whole of the universe is held together by this force called gravity that we can't see or taste or touch. There are many things that we can feel unsure about, but our doubts make no difference whatsoever to the fact that they're true.

And that's why if you are unsure in terms of your faith, Jesus says, come to me and learn from me, learn the facts from me.

We will all have doubts at times. Even the greatest have doubts. John the Baptist doubted, even Elijah doubted in the Old Testament. They had incredible experiences.

[18 : 23] You might have incredible experiences, but the certainty that an incredible experience can bring at the time doesn't always last the distance.

And what will last is the objective truth that if you trust in Jesus, you are safe and that he is everything you need.

Often we are plagued with the same question that plagued John. Shall we look for another? Some people find that Jesus is too much for them.

So they recoil from the constant commitment of discipleship. I think more people find that Jesus is not enough. That's true for Christians and for unbelievers.

We feel the need to look for another. So we look for security in our health or our possessions. We look for self-worth in what other people think of us.

[19 : 20] We look for attention and affirmation on social media. We look for hope in politics. We look for joy in sport. If we are looking for meaning, security, hope and peace in another, it's because we're looking at Jesus and we are unsure.

But if you are a Christian and you have doubts, which is probably every single Christian listening to this, if you have doubts at times, I want you to imagine that you could do what John the Baptist did. Imagine you could send a messenger to Jesus right now in heaven and ask him, are you the Savior who is to come or should I look for another?

Am I really safe with you? And I think if that was to happen, Jesus would say to your messenger, go and tell them what you see and hear.

Your friend would come back and would say, I saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father. I heard Jesus praying to the Father and he mentioned your name loads of times.

[20 : 42] I saw your name written in permanent ink in his book of life. I saw God the Father smile when I mentioned your name.

I saw that they were preparing a place for you. So I think that you are definitely safe and you definitely don't need another.

So if you're a Christian, let me ask you the question, where do you feel at your most special? What pops into your head?

Lots of things can make us feel special, but where is it you feel most special? Is it with another?

So is it when you do well at work or is it when you're among friends? Is it when you have a good workout or exercise? Is it when you get lots of likes on Facebook or Instagram?

[21 : 45] If it is, then that means that even though you're a Christian, it means that you maybe don't quite understand Christianity completely because the place where you are at your most special is when Jesus is looking at you because you are never as special anywhere as you are with him.

Now, I feel unsure of that all the time. That's why I need to come to Jesus and learn from him. And if you're not yet a Christian, please ask yourself, where are you going to go when you're unsure?

Coming back to our second obstacle, when you are unfast, come to Jesus and learn from him. Again, this obstacle confronts us whether we're Christians or not yet Christians.

And a good way of diagnosing this question is to ask, what makes you mourn and what makes you dance? And all too often, the answers to those questions are things that don't actually matter very much.

[23 : 15] So I look at myself and I say, well, what makes me dance? And one answer is sport. So I think of Andy Murray winning Wimbledon and I think, wow, that was an amazing moment.

Or I think of Scotland's rugby team beating England or Scotland's football team beating anyone, all these things are thrilling.

But ultimately, none of them are really that important. And it's the same in terms of mourning. Every day, the news sings dirges to us about suffering and injustice in the world.

And yet, do we really mourn or does it just kind of bounce off us? Now, Jesus responds to the obstacle of being unfast by talking about a crucial and yet perhaps surprising topic.

He talks about judgment. So if you are unfast, Jesus says, come to me and learn about judgment.

[24 : 27] And we see that in the chapter as he speaks about Bethsaida, Corazin and Capernaum. Now that all seems a wee bit heavy.

When we hear that word judgment, it kind of makes us want to recoil a bit and it seems harsh. And it almost seems like it doesn't fit with the beautiful promises that the Gospel gives us, like the one that's on your screen from Matthew 11, 28 to 30.

It's easy to think that the two things don't go together, but that's the wrong conclusion to come to because judgment, judgment from God is actually a very precious thing.

And I think we can actually prove that if we think about it a wee bit. When something is seriously wrong in life, we don't tend to hear people say, we demand judgment.

I don't even know if I've ever heard that phrase in the media or around me. People don't tend to say, I want judgment. We need judgment. I long for judgment.

[25 : 35] You don't tend to hear that. Instead, what we often hear is people saying, we demand justice.

And the events in America over these past few days are a really powerful example of that. People have seen something that's seriously wrong and they demand justice and they're rightly demanding that wrongs are put right.

But if you look at these two phrases, we demand judgment and we demand justice, let me ask you, what's the difference?

But the answer is nothing. That means that when Jesus responds to the unfastness of the crowds around him, when he responds to that by speaking about judgment, he is not being harsh or heavy.

He is actually talking about something that every single one of us craves. So humanity shouts, we demand justice, but do you know who demands justice more than anyone else?

[26 : 56] God. And the day of judgment that Jesus speaks about in this chapter, it's not a day of fire and brimstone and divine brutality.

It is a day of impeccable justice. It's the day when everything that is wrong will be called to account. And it all makes perfect sense. What's the one thing that oppression and injustice needs in order to thrive?

It needs a society where people aren't fussed. Weeds don't get very far if the gardener is fussy, but if they're not bothered, then the weeds are going to thrive.

That's why Jesus responds to the not botheredness of his generation by talking about judgment.

And at the heart of that is the fact that the judgment of God is going to put right the things that are wrong.

[28 : 00] That's why God's judgment is a wonderful thing. It's putting right every single thing that is wrong. And that, of course, is why Jesus is calling these towns and us to repent.

Repentance is a turning away from injustice. It's a turning away from everything that's wrong, and it's turning towards Jesus, the one who is righteous and just to his very core.

It's all reminding us that to Jesus, right and wrong matter, injustice and oppression matter, discrimination and prejudice matter, exploitation and abuse matter.

If there is one thing that's true about Jesus, he is never, ever unfust. And this is why we need to be really careful about what we can call the false security of indifference.

It's so easy to think that in terms of what's true or false, right or wrong, we are safer to be unfust, but it's not true.

[29 : 09] Right and wrong matter. And being unfust is not simply saying, I'm not going to enforce what I think is right. Being unfust is also saying, I'm going to turn a blind eye to what I know is wrong.

And all of that is true of your religious position. It's easy to think that it's safer to be indifferent, that it's better to be unfust, but it's not true.

If you were asked by a reporter on a massive TV station this afternoon, what do you think of George Floyd's death?

Would you want your answer to be, I'm indifferent? If on the day of judgment, God asks you, what do you think of my son's death?

Do you want your answer to be, I'm indifferent? At times we're all far too unfust. Jesus is saying, come to me and learn.

[30 : 25] And last of all, when you are unteachable, come to Jesus and learn from Him. Just want to comment on this very briefly because time has gone.

Jesus is telling us that the answer to unteachable-ness is to come to Him, but we are to come in a certain way. We are to come to Him like children.

Now we can easily think that that's a bit humiliating, and that's because so often unteachable-ness is a mask for our insecurities. But the truth is that coming to Jesus with a childlike teachable-ness is not humiliating.

It's liberating. It frees us from feeling that we have to impress. It frees us from the pressure of having all the answers. It frees us from feeling that we have to prove ourselves.

And it's all an amazing reminder that to come to Jesus, you don't need to know everything that's in the Bible. You don't need to have all sorts of abilities and skills. You don't need to have had some kind of amazing experience, and you most definitely don't need to get up to some kind of elite standard.

[31 : 37] You just need to know that you need Him. And you can come to Him as you are.

In many ways, a defining characteristic of a child is that they're dependent. And that's exactly how we come to Jesus. And that's exactly how we live our lives with Jesus.

And by coming to Jesus with that childlike faith, we will learn from Him. What is it that's the key difference between children and adults?

Well, the key difference is that children grow. Adults don't. And so that means that if we come to Jesus as teachable children, the result is that we are going to grow under His care, His nurture, and His protection.

So here are three big obstacles that we need to be aware of. And they're a reality for all of us in different ways. And the truth is that all three of these obstacles are exhausting.

[32 : 46] So being unsure is exhausting, always worrying, always doubting, always uncertain. Being unfust is actually exhausting as well, because we need to constantly distract ourselves from what really matters.

And being unteachable is exhausting. We need to maintain this outward appearance of being competent and capable.

In the face of all of these, Jesus is saying to you, come to me and learn from me. And the result? You will find rest. If you are unsure, if you're unfust, if you're unteachable, Jesus is not saying, sort yourself out.

He is saying, come to me, learn from me, and I will give you rest.

[33 : 54] Amen. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you so much for these words.

And we just come to you today as we are. We want to learn from you today, and we long for the rest that only you can give.

Help us when we're unsure. Help us when we're unfast. Help us when we're unteachable. Draw us closer to you, and please lead us in your ways, that every day of our lives will be lived for your glory. Amen.