

*2When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."*

*7As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

Many years ago I read in the paper about a lawsuit. A church in Florida was being sued because the pastor had declared that those who tithed would have an abundance of prosperity, health, happiness. This man believed what he heard, gave his ten percent, but the blessings did not follow. He called his lawyer.

In a few moments many of you will bring pledges forward. What do you expect to get in return? What do you buy with this money? When you go to a store or a restaurant you know what you expect for what you hand over. What do you expect here? From me? From other church members? From God? Yes, especially, what do you expect from God?

One of the very hardest lessons in life is to learn that our money and our gifts buy us nothing with God. Absolutely nothing. God and his goodness are not for sale.

Our Lord Jesus taught us that his Father sends his rain on the evil and the good, makes his sun to shine on the just and the unjust. Everything from God is simply a gift. What God gives cannot be purchased or guaranteed by our giving. God's heart is not in love with greenbacks as our hearts so often are.

Yet after years of work and service in the church, years of faithfully and freely giving, most every one of us will be disappointed if things don't go a little better for us because of the sacrifices we make.

Maybe that is how John the Baptist was feeling. When he heard what Jesus was doing he sent word to Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus sent word, "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. "

Now John knew the scriptures. He knew that Isaiah had promised the time when these things would happen. When the Messiah would come, sorrow and sighing would flee away, disabilities would be overcome, joy and gladness would be everywhere. John was hearing what the Messiah was doing. Yet he still sent his disciples with the question, "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?"

I think John was disappointed. Yes, the blind were receiving their sight, the lame walking, the deaf hearing. But John, himself was still in prison - soon to be beheaded. Jesus would not raise John the Baptist as Lazarus and the young girl were raised. The Age of the Messiah was here, and John would know only suffering and death.

Look around. There are empty spaces among us. People are imprisoned by sickness, disability. People who sang God's praises here with us have died. Some who joined the procession just a year ago to offer their pledges are no longer among us today.

What do you do for us, Jesus? What sort of Messiah are you?

We are tempted to say that all of God's promises are fulfilled not in the physical realm, but in the spiritual realm. Spiritual blindness, spiritual deafness, being dead spiritually are all overcome in Jesus.

But did you notice when John sent word to Jesus, Jesus did not choose a spiritual answer. He did not talk of an increase in prayer, an increase in synagogue attendance, new attitudes, better living. He spoke of physical healing. Yet John was still in prison.

What can we expect? We don't know. We really don't know. One tells of a miraculous healing, another suffers. One seems to be rescued out of the jaws of death, another dies. Nameless blind people and deaf people and crippled people were helped by Jesus, yet John whose birth was announced by an angel, seems abandoned by God.

Yet Jesus calls John a prophet, Jesus says that John is Elijah, come to lead the way for the Messiah. Yet he suffers in prison. He is beheaded because of a promise made to a dancing girl.

As Christians we are called to see things as they really are, and not to lie about them. You won't buy anything with your offering here today, nor with your faith. Christians and non-

Christians are blessed in the same ways physically; they suffer in the same ways physically. Jesus himself died the same death you and I will die.

Then what is the point? Just this: Herod could take John and put him in prison, and chop off his head. But he could not take John out of the love of God. Pilate could torture Jesus, strip him and put him on the cross, but he could not take Jesus out of the hands of his Father.

God's promise to you is not that you will be spared hardship or distress, or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword. Paul as he writes to the Romans knows all of these will come upon Christians. But he promises that none of these can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I do not want you to be building your house on a shaky foundation. I would not want any of you thinking that through your tithing or working in the church or even your believing that you guarantee an easier way for yourself in this world. But I hope that you and I will always build our lives on the assurance of the love of God in Christ. No sickness or suffering, or loss can ever defeat us. God stands with us, supports us in Christ.

And he will have the final word. After every Herod and Pilate have struck at us, every disease and loss and death itself have sought to own us, we will still be God's possession, his children. God raised Jesus from the dead to show us all what our ending will be like, the last page in our book, the last act in our play is eternal life with Jesus and with our God.

Why do we make our pledges then, bring our offerings? Always and only to give thanks.

And through our gifts we hope for this: God will bless people through us and our gifts. We hope he will feed the hungry, lift the fallen, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick or in prison, bring his word to ears needing to hear. Through our gifts of thankfulness we hope the world will hear about what Jesus is still doing, how he is feeding the starving of Somalia, how he is visiting shut-ins in Avon Lake, how he is still telling of the goodness of God through the word that is preached.

For Jesus still wants the blind to receive their sight, the lame to walk, lepers to be cleansed. Through us he wants to still be walking dusty roads bringing the blessings of God.