

Jesus and John

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[0 : 00] The message of Christianity isn't one of conquest and death, but compassion and life. What isn't to love about the message we believe and proclaim?

In Luke 7, 22, Jesus summarizes the impact of the message he preached. He says, The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.

What is not to admire about the message of Christianity? The unworthy example of Christians aside is not the message of Christianity the best news the world has ever heard.

Far from darkness, it's light. Far from foolishness, it's wisdom. Far from weakness, it's power. Yet for all the greatness of the message of Christianity, the vast majority of people to whom we speak view it as repressive, irrelevant, and ignorant.

Why is that? Could it be that we're not clear enough in our presentation of the message, that only if we presented it in a different way, more people would realize just how attractive the gospel really is?

[1 : 29] Or is there another force at play which none of us can see? Well, this passage, Luke 7, 18 through 35, as well as clarifying the message of the gospel we are to believe and proclaim, answers this question that so often haunts us.

Namely, why does the message we preach fall on deaf ears? And why, no matter how we present that message, does it so frequently meet with rejection?

Why are churches half empty? We want to consider two things from our passage today. First, the message from verses 18 through 30.

And secondly, the messengers from verses 31 through 35. Now remember, Luke's first audience was the early church, which was eagerly evangelizing, rapidly expanding.

And he wants them and us to be clear on the gospel message we believe and proclaim, but also to understand why it is received both with acceptance and rejection.

[2 : 39] So first of all, the message in verses 18 through 30. Our passage doesn't begin with Jesus, but with John the Baptist. Earlier this year, Kirk preached an outstanding sermon on the interaction between Jesus and John from this passage concerning the difference between doubt and unbelief.

But my focus this morning is to take a wider sweep and understand what this interaction and Jesus' following reflections upon it tell us about the message of the gospel we believe and proclaim.

So our passage begins with John the Baptist sending messengers to Jesus asking him, Are you the one who is to come or should we expect another?

Jesus' response to John's question, a John we know to whom Jesus was related by blood, had baptized Jesus, and for whom Jesus had great respect, tells us all we need to know about that message which as Christians we are to believe and to proclaim.

First, the message is Christ. Second, the message is the kingdom. The message, first of all, is Christ. It's Christ. John the Baptist's question is this, Are you the one who is to come?

[4 : 07] Or are we to expect another? It's a person-focused question. He does not ask, Is the message you are preaching true? Or are the works you are performing genuine?

Or, but he asks the question, Are you the one who is to come? Now this language of the one who is to come is code for the Jewish Messiah, the long-awaited King and Savior of Israel, the Christ prophesied throughout the whole Old Testament, responding to the news that he'd heard of Jesus raising a dead man to life in the town of Nain.

John is now asking this question, Are you the Messiah? Could you be the Christ? John's question, you see, is person-focused.

It concerns the identity of Jesus. Are you the Messiah? Are you the one that we've been waiting for, for thousands of years, the one in whom are fulfilled all the hopes and dreams of our nation for freedom and for greatness?

Perhaps one of the reasons that John asked that question was because he expected a different kind of Messiah, a Messiah modeled on the greatest of Israel's kings, David, under whom Israel was both religiously purified and nationally strengthened.

[5 : 31] And there was up to this point no sign of Jesus walking in David's footsteps. Well, Jesus replies, Go and tell John what you've seen and heard.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead's raised up, the poor have good news preached to them, and blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

In the previous and following chapters of this gospel, Luke records account of Jesus giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, preaching good news to the poor.

But the point's this. John the Baptist asks a person-focused question, and Jesus gives him a person-focused answer.

John asks a question about the identity of Jesus, and Jesus answers him by pointing to his words and his works. Jesus does not simply answer, Yes, it's me.

[6 : 34] I am the Jewish Messiah. Because many before and after Jesus will use their words to claim that they're the Messiah. But Jesus does so much more.

He proves it, and he calls upon John to examine the evidence. Who else can give the blind their sight? Who else can make the lame walk? Who else can cleanse the leper?

Who else can raise the dead? Who else can preach good news to the poor? Who else other than the long-promised Christ? What we're saying is this.

Just like Jesus' answer to John is person-focused, in that it centers on the person and identity of Jesus, so the message that we believe and proclaim is person-focused, in that it centers on the person and identity of Jesus.

The apostle Paul, under whose mentorship Luke wrote this book, he wrote these words. He said, We preach Christ and him crucified.

[7 : 42] Our message as Christians is not a nationalistic ideal. It's not military conquest. It's not about a philosophical certainty.

It is not about a theological dogma. It's a message about a person, Jesus Christ. Now, I may be unique, but in my experience, talking about God to people is fairly non-controversial, just as long as it's not the God of the Bible.

But when it comes to talking to people about Jesus, the eyes glaze over and the ears close. Yet, it is the person and work of Jesus Christ, which is the message we are called to believe and to proclaim.

Who Jesus is, what Jesus has done, Jesus Christ and him crucified. John's question was focused on Jesus.

Our message must be focused on Jesus. Now, the Jesus we proclaim will undoubtedly challenge expectations, just as Jesus' answer to John challenged John's expectations of what the Messiah should look like and do.

[9 : 01] But it is that Jesus, the real Jesus, who is the message of Christianity, is the Jesus who gives the blind their sight, the Jesus who makes the lame walk, the Jesus who cleanses the leper, who raises the dead, and who preaches good news to the poor.

It's as we preach, not regulations, and not religion, but a person that we're being faithful to that message.

Now, we can choose to educate ourselves as much as we like by the strenuous study of intellect, of the intellectual rationale, and the philosophical cogency of the Christian message.

But in the last analysis, Christianity rises or falls upon the person of Jesus Christ. Of that, all of us here must be absolutely clear. Just as our relationship with Him through faith is of first importance, so our presentation of Jesus Christ is of first importance in evangelism.

By all means, let's educate ourselves to the apologetic rationale and the philosophical cogency of Christianity. But first and foremost, let's be absolutely clear about who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ has done.

[10 : 25] because He is the reason for the hope that is within us. Not a program. Not a religion. A person.

And you know, where we'll find such clarity is both in our study of the Bible, both personally, and as we come together as a family, and in our personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The church is not called to proclaim equal policies, nor woke theology, but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

It may not be a message the world around us wants to hear, but it's a message it needs to hear if the blind are to receive their sight and lepers are to be cleansed and the dead are to be raised.

This passage is calling us to recommit ourselves to the centrality of Jesus as the message of the gospel. The message is Christ.

[11 : 32] But then also, the message here is the kingdom. The message is the kingdom. Now, it's clear as we work our way through the gospels that Jesus has the highest respect for John the Baptist.

Jesus recognizes that John has faithfully discharged the responsibilities God has given him to be God's messenger who would prepare the way for His coming. John the Baptist is not merely a prophet.

He is more than a prophet. In verse 28, Jesus says, Now, is greater than John.

None. Now, coming from the mouth of Jesus, these are powerful words. John the Baptist, the greatest man to have ever lived. Greater than Abraham.

Greater than Moses. Greater than David. Greater than Alexander the Great. If we're looking for greatness in John the Baptist's days, perhaps we wouldn't have immediately chosen to go out into the Judean wilderness.

[12 : 41] Perhaps we'd have gone to the city of Jerusalem or the magnificent palaces of Rome. But in Jesus' mind, John the Baptist was the greatest man to have ever lived because he so faithfully discharged the responsibility God had given him to prepare the way for the Son.

And you know, that's a lesson to us, is it not, that true greatness isn't often found in prominent places. It's most often found in the margins. And that if we want to become great in the eyes of God, faithfulness to his call comes before fame.

But for all of John the Baptist's greatness, Jesus goes on to say, yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

Even though John the Baptist's story is told in the New Testament, in reality, he is the last of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. We associate him with Jesus, but he belongs in the line of the prophets prophets, such as Samuel and Isaiah and Elijah.

In fact, in Luke 1, 17, God says of John's ministry that it shall be in the spirit and power of Elijah. For all that he's spoken of in the New Testament, John the Baptist's ministry belongs to the Old Testament.

[14 : 15] He is the last and the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He belongs to the previous age, the age in which the Messiah is yet to come and yet to engage in his saving work.

In other words, John the Baptist belongs to the era before the cross where Jesus, the Messiah, dies to create a new humanity, the so-called kingdom of God.

John belongs to the era before the kingdom. And what Jesus is here saying is that the lowest citizen of the kingdom of God, the least of those who belong by faith to him in that kingdom, is greater than the greatest man to have ever lived.

They've got greater privileges. They have a clearer vision of God's saving work. They have a firmer salvation. They're not looking back to Moses in Mount Sinai.

They're looking to Jesus and his cross. the lowest citizens of Christ's kingdom, no matter how downtrodden in the eyes of the world they may be, are superior to the greatest of all citizens that ever came before.

[15 : 33] Think of it this way. I was engaged to Kathmer for 14 months before we got married. Up until we made our marriage vows, which she's regretted ever since, our relationship was not complete in its fullest sense.

Even on the night before our marriage, we were not one, but two. Our relationship, even though it was lovey-dovey, was inferior to that which we have enjoyed for the last 25 years.

Think of Jesus' death and resurrection as the marriage. John, although he came late to the engagement, never experienced that marriage and therefore he had only inferior experiences of grace, knowledge, and salvation compared to those who came after and put their faith and trust in Christ and Him crucified.

He was engaged to Christ, as it were, but through faith we're married to Him, which is better by far. The message of the kingdom is that those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, who are not offended by Christ, but believe in Him instead, are the special subjects of God's salvation and grace.

The world thinks of them as foolish and weak, but in the eyes of God they are lovingly precious. To the world they may be the lowest of the low, but in God's eyes they are greater than the greatest.

[17 : 24] Now, faith in Christ before the pandemic was described as a virus which needs to be destroyed. I think Richard Dawkins described it that way.

Don't hear much from Him these days, do you? And sometimes as Christians who are in the minority in a culture which is apathetic and hostile to our message, we might feel pessimistic and develop a serious case of what we'd call in the North the poor means.

Listen afresh to the message of Jesus which tells us that through faith in Him we are the most privileged people on the planet because we have Jesus and in Him the forgiveness of all our sins and eternal life.

We have a clearer vision of God than Moses had, than David had, than Abraham had. And this is the status into which we are inviting those to whom we proclaim the gospel.

That if this person should believe in Jesus Christ and become His disciple, immediately they should attain to a status greater than Abraham, David and Moses. That though they should be the very least in the eyes of this world, they shall be great in the eyes of God.

[18 : 42] We're inviting people into a life of privilege and blessing. Yes, there are thorns, but what Christ makes us is the rose. So this then is the first thing and the longest thing we learn from this passage.

We need to be crystal clear about this message we believe and proclaim. If people reject us when we proclaim the gospel to Him, let it never be because we ourselves neither believed in what we were saying nor were clear about what that message was.

It's all about Christ. It's all about His kingdom. We're calling them to believe in God's Messiah whose coming changes the world forever and we're calling them to privileges untold and unimaginably great.

The early church aren't to preach a message about Christ plus the Mosaic law. They're to preach about Christ and Him crucified.

What holds good for them holds good for us. Christ plus nothing equals everything.

[19 : 52] Christ plus anything equals nothing. The message.

Well, secondly and more briefly, the messengers verses 31 through 35. The messengers. Well, the gospel's not without hands because in His wisdom and grace the risen Christ places the proclamation in the hands of messengers, His people who He's called to go forth with that message to all the nations of the world and make disciples for Him.

Now, one might suppose that having such an attractive message as we do, we'd have no problem persuading anyone we meet to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

That having heard the good news of Jesus and the blessing of all the privileges which become ours through faith in Him, everyone we speak to would eagerly listen and respond in faith.

But if the response of those to whom the gospel was preached in the book of Acts was divided, and the response of those who heard what Jesus had said to the messengers of John the Baptist was divided, and if we take into account our own experiences of sharing that gospel, we know that it's not the majority of people, but the minority of people who will accept the message we're proclaiming and believe in Jesus.

[21 : 27] There are some. Let's never lose hope that there will be some who will respond in faith and trust, but it shall not be the majority. Let's look at both groups from our passage very briefly.

First, those who reject our message and those who accept our message. Those who reject our message first of all. Most of those with whom we share the gospel of Jesus Christ will reject our message.

It's a painful thing, and our first instinct is to question whether we're presenting it in the right way. Maybe if we change the way in which we present the good news, more people would believe. So let's invest in an evangelistic program that teaches us how to do that better. Or maybe if we became more like the people we're sharing the gospel with, all kicked back and cool. Or maybe if we became like those in previous generations who enjoyed success and sharing the gospel, all Puritan-like, wearing black suits all the time. Then we'd be more successful. [22 : 35] Well, in verses 31 through 34, Jesus bursts our bubble. Those who reject our message will reject our message no matter how it's couched.

Supposing we announce it with flute and dancing, they'll reject it. Supposing we announce it with a dirge, they'll reject it. Supposing it's presented by a hermit living in the desert and is seriously different from the world around it, they'll reject it.

Supposing it's presented by a socialite who lives in and among the people and to whom the people can relate, they'll reject it. Get Jesus' point? It's not about style.

It's about substance. It's the message of Christ which is being rejected. Now, of course, we should do everything we can not to put stumbling blocks in the way of anyone by being obscure or by compromising.

And yes, we should invest in those evangelistic courses which make the message of Jesus simple and plain. And yes, we should live lives which make the message of Jesus attractive to our contemporary generation.

[23 : 51] But ultimately, it's the message they're rejecting. Dress it up how we like, the message of Jesus Christ and His kingdom, that's what they're rejecting.

Notice how in verse 30, the Pharisees and the scribal leaders rejected. They couldn't stomach the thought of a weak Messiah.

They rejected the message no matter how it was presented to them. You know, before I was a Christian, I used to listen to a certain preacher. He was my minister when I was a boy. I thought he was very boring. Very boring indeed. As a boy, I might have wished that he could have pepped up his sermon some way to make them more attractive. He never used to any illustrations about football or the things that I was interested in.

He wasn't kicked back and cool. He were a dog caller. Well, after I became a Christian, I listened again to that same preacher and thought, man, this guy's taken my advice.

[24 : 51] For the first time in my life, I find what he has to say very interesting indeed. The reality was not that he had changed, but that I had changed.

Before I became a Christian, no matter how he had presented the message of the gospel, I was deaf and blind to it. But after I became a Christian, after I'd accepted the message of the gospel, everything he said was interesting because it was all about Christ and his kingdom.

That's ultimately why people reject our message. And while paying attention, of course, to how we proclaim the gospel, we shouldn't overstress about our presentation technique or style.

It is not us they're rejecting. It's the Jesus we're preaching. We can present it happily or seriously, incarnationally or historically, but still they'll reject it.

Let's not blame ourselves for their rejection more than we should. Rather, let's pray that God in his sovereignty would open their blind eyes and deaf ears to the truth about Jesus Christ.

[26 : 03] We're going to come back more to the role of prayer in our evangelism later in the summer. those who reject our message. Secondly, those who accept our message.

Those who accept our message. For all that will experience the pain of rejection will also experience the joy of acceptance. There will be some, maybe only one or two, in our lifetime who will gladly hear and joyfully accept the message of Christ and his kingdom.

In our passage, these are described in verse 29 as tax collectors and sinners. And Jesus goes on to say of them, wisdom is justified by all her children in verse 35.

Wisdom is justified by all her children. In other words, this is a really tough, tough sentence to kind of exegete, but in other words, having received Christ as Savior and Lord, if you were to ask them, was it wise to have become a Christian?

You're going through all kinds of persecution as a function of being a Christian now? Was it wise to have trusted Christ? They'd have said to you, absolutely, it's the best thing I ever did and Jesus is better than I ever could have imagined.

[27 : 27] There will be some who will accept our message and they'll go on to be finer and more mature Christians than we'll ever be. And through them, more people will come to faith in Jesus Christ than ever have come to faith through us.

And at the end of long and fruitful Christian lives, they'll say to us, what's not to love about Jesus and His gospel? They'll say that and we'll look at ourselves in the mirror and we'll thank God for His grace that He used us in that person's conversion.

Christ worked through our unworthy, dirty hands and our useless words to bring them to a living faith in Him. And it's that we cling to as we go out into an apathetic and hostile world with clarity about the message we're preaching.

Just like the early church clung to that as they clearly proclaimed the simple gospel to a first century Roman world and invited all to believe. most will reject but some will accept and they'll go on to enjoy a life of greatness in the kingdom of God.

They'll go on to blessings unnumbered. They'll be greater than even John the Baptist. And then, you know, finally, when we meet these people in the new heavens and the new earth, they'll catch up to us and they'll say to us, remember when you told me about how wonderful Jesus and His gospel is a thousand years' time when they meet us in the new heavens and the new earth or run up to us and say, remember when you told me how wonderful Jesus and His gospel is and for months and months I couldn't hear what you were saying but then one day I believed.

[29 : 18] You know something. I've learned that Jesus and His gospel are greater than you could ever have described or imagined. Thank you for sharing it with me.

Let us pray. Our God and Father, we're humbled when we think that we've made the gospel a system rather than a person.

Lord, bring us back to the central thing of Jesus Christ and Him crucified in whose name we pray. Amen.