

Luke 7:18-35 - When Jesus Doesn't Live Up to My Expectations

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Date: 12 March 2017

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Let's pray together. Father, even now as we come to your word and to your table that you've set before us, I pray that we would hear that voice that Logan just sang about.

We would hear the voice of sovereign grace crying to us that we would hear you speak as we open your word. We come as those coming in the midst of a battle that we're constantly engaged in.

Fighting the spiritual forces of evil. Struggling with our own sin. Dealing with our own weaknesses in our flesh. And we come because we need to hear from you.

We need direction. We need help. And we've come to your word. And so, Father, would you speak? Would you speak so clearly to our hearts that we would know we have heard from you?

[1 : 16] We give you glory and we ask for your help. In the name of Jesus. Amen. When we moved to St. Louis many years ago to begin seminary training, we had some expectations for what was going to happen.

We were pretty sure that we were following God's call into some sort of pastoral ministry. That we'd be in school for a few years and then take a call to a church somewhere and see what God had next.

Three years later, I walked across the stage at graduation with no job plans. A wife and a nine-month-old baby to provide for.

Really no realistic opportunities out there on the horizon. No idea what to expect would happen next. I had friends and classmates who were making plans to start with this church or move towns to build that ministry.

And they had lots of plans. The only plans I had for the near future were to move in with my in-laws. It was not part of the original plan that I had when I headed to St. Louis.

[2 : 33] I was sure I was following Jesus. But this is not what I'd expected it to look like. I remember feeling anxious, confused, wondering if I really understood Jesus.

Have you felt like that before? I was talking with an old friend last week who'd been following Jesus for many, many years. He's had some relational and professional challenges along the way.

But in the midst of those struggles, some possibilities were really starting to come together that had the chance to smooth things out in a number of different areas of his life.

And then all of a sudden, the rug got pulled out from under him again. This time by his church. He didn't expect that. Of all the places he thought that would happen, he didn't expect it.

It was the last thing he thought would happen at church. And so frustrated and confused right now. Life seems to be just spiraling downward and God seems distant.

[3 : 43] The church has pushed him away. Have you felt like that before? Maybe you feel like that right now. John the Baptist knows that feeling.

The last time we've heard from John in our study of Luke's gospel was back in chapter 3. Right after John baptizes Jesus, we're told that Herod throws him in prison.

Well, he's still there. Still in prison and beginning to get confused. Luke 7 at verse 18.

We're going to follow along with the story as we go this morning. This is Luke 7 at verse 18. The disciples of John reported all these things to him.

Being John. All these things. What's been happening? It's been Jesus healing, right? He's healing people. He's just raised a young man from the dead.

[4 : 44] Jesus is doing wonderful things and they tell John about them. And John hears and he has a question for Jesus. John calling two of his disciples to him sent them to the Lord saying, Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?

Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another? Now, for you to understand how strange that question is, remember that John is not just one among many of Jesus' followers, right? John is the one who was sent ahead to prepare the way for Jesus. The prophet who declared that here was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

He baptized Jesus. John has professed Jesus to be the promised Messiah, the one who was to come. John's whole life has been centered around that reality.

But now he's confused. Jesus, are you really the one? This is not seeming right.

[5 : 54] And we might wonder why. What is it that's causing John's confusion? And we don't know for certain. But perhaps, some say, John is hearing a little less judgment on the godless nations than he anticipated from Jesus.

Jesus has been healing Romans and other Gentiles. And he was supposed to pronounce that there was judgment coming on those who rejected the God of Israel. Joel, John hasn't heard much of that judgment so far.

Another possibility, perhaps John is hearing all of these amazing miracles. Things he knows are marks, are signs of the promised messianic deliverance to come.

And yet, he's not experiencing them himself, is he? What about that whole thing about setting the prisoners free? That one's in there, if I remember correctly.

Doesn't feel very good from the prison cell. This is not how it was supposed to go. I seem to remember prisoners free was part of the plan that you announced.

[7 : 00] When do I get that? Have you ever sat in church and felt that way before? People are excited and they're praising God. He seems to be doing great things in their lives, great things in the Huntsville community.

And yet, I don't feel him doing anything in my life. What about me? What about the mess I'm in? Jesus is really not living up to my expectations here.

This is not what I thought it would be like. The psalmist Asaph felt that way. He records in Psalm 73 how he looked around and saw the prosperity of the wicked.

And he envied them. God didn't seem to be judging their sin at all. They had it easy. They got all the breaks. And he began to think that all his time and effort following after God were just a waste.

He was confused by the circumstances around him. You could certainly add Job to that list.

Suffering and tragic circumstances and time and again unable to explain why this is happening.

[8 : 09] Why these terrible things to someone who trusts in God. God? Where has it happened in your life? Where has Jesus not lived up to your expectations?

And left you confused? Frustrated? Doubting? Struggling with unbelief even? Has it been when your spouse lets you down after all these years that you've been faithful?

When a close friend or a beloved church disappoints you after years of love and investment? When a child grows up and wanders away and pushes you off after all you've done to point them to Jesus and they don't want anything to do with him or you.

When he took a step of faith to serve God. This is what he's calling me to. And then you just got hurt. And wished you'd never tried. You can understand John's confusion.

Can't you? After all, again, this is not one of the people in the crowds following Jesus. Here's the one who of all people has understood what it is Jesus is coming to do.

[9 : 27] I know what the kingdom's going to be like. I'm telling you ahead of time. And here comes the king. John's confused now. As confused as John is about who Jesus is, Jesus is equally clear on his messianic identity.

He doesn't merely say yes to answer John's question, but his answer will provide even more clarity perhaps than we would expect. Verse 20, When the men had come to him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you saying, Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?

In that hour, Jesus healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits. And on many who were blind, he bestowed sight. And Jesus then speaks.

He answers them. Go and tell John what you have seen, what you have heard. 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, and blessed is the one who is not offended by me. It's as though they come to Jesus and Jesus says, Hang on, just watch for a minute before I answer the simple question.

[10:51] It may be unfolding a little bit differently than he expected, but I want John to know that this is the same kingdom he preached about that was coming. And the kingdom of Jesus, as we've seen time and again, is coming in word and in deed, right?

Verse 22, Jesus says, First, let me show you. Here's what you need to tell John about. Blind receiving sight, lame walking, lepers cleansed, deaf hearing, dead being raised up, poor having good news preached to them.

Watch it happen, Jesus said. This is what the kingdom was going to be like, right? They watch and see, and then they listen, and they hear Jesus quoting, you may not recognize these, but John would have every one of these in the list I just read.

Quotations from the prophet Isaiah. Quotations when Isaiah is talking about what's going to happen when the Messiah shows up. And Jesus says, Here they are. Let me tell you, because I know John knows these verses.

It's happening. In word and in deed, the kingdom is coming. The chosen deliverer is here.

[12:05] He ushers in a new kingdom, and here's what it's going to look like, and feel like, and sound like. Jesus is very clearly claiming to be the Messiah. And he's also, at the same time, he's anchoring John's faith in the promises of God, and the way he's displaying the reality of them day after day.

Remember how Isaiah said it would happen? Here's what God said. Here's what God said. Here's what God said. Now watch me. The same thing. The same thing. Watch it happen. See, John. Hear, and see, and believe. I'm the one. Jesus wants to build up John's faith. In fact, he finishes with a blessing that is true in general, but being sent specifically to John.

Blessed is the one who is not offended by, who doesn't fall away on account of me, Jesus says. The opposite of falling away, or being offended by Jesus, is of course to believe in him, to stand firm in trusting him.

[13:13] That's what Jesus wants for John. Jesus says, you've got the right guy. Being for God's kingdom is first and foremost about your alignment with me, and you knew it, John.

You knew you needed to know who the king was. I'm the one. You weren't confused. You can rest easy, John. This is the kingdom and the king you were born to promote.

I am he. I want to say it to you, and I want to show it to you, so that your faith can be built. How many times have I said, you can't have the kingdom without the king?

That's what's at the heart of this here. Jesus is saying that believing in him is the path to blessing, even when it doesn't look or feel like it. That because he is the king, and because he's bringing the kingdom in ways you didn't expect it to come, you can rest.

You can trust him. That's his message for John and for us. It's a gracious gift from Jesus to build up the faith of his confused and imprisoned follower.

[14:24] Do you see Jesus' heart in that? But what Jesus says next is even more amazing. My favorite part of this passage. Verse 24.

But think with me for a minute first. Would you say that this has been John's finest hour of his life? His greatest day as a follower of Jesus?

Is this his strong moment? It's not really, is it? He's confused. He's doubting things that he even preached to others just last year.

And in the midst of his struggles, Jesus found out. And if it could be any more embarrassing, in front of a crowd of people that all heard about him, they're chuckling, snickering.

John, what kind of question is that? Are you really, you were so excited last year, so sure of yourself, not so sure anymore in prison, huh? John at his lowest, struggling.

[15:28] So Jesus sends John's disciples back to him to build up his faith. And then listen to what happens next. When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John, talking behind his back.

Jesus is going to get him now, right? What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?

Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in king's courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet, this is he of whom it is

written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you. I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John. Yet the one who's least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

Let's get this clear, Jesus says. John was no weak man without convictions, a reed swaying in the wind. He was no fancy royalty avoiding the struggles of life as you know them.

[16:40] No, not at all. He was a prophet, a true man of God. More than that, Jesus says. There have been lots of prophets, but no one who has ever lived, born of a woman, is greater than John.

That's how wonderful John is. You want to know more about John? Nobody's greater than him. Greatest guy ever. What gracious words.

Do you hear Jesus' charity in that? The way he treats his fearful, struggling follower? Doubting John?

Confused John? There's no one in the crowd snickering about John's question anymore, is there? Jesus doesn't crush his wounded follower when he has the chance.

No, he wants to build him up. Listen, follower of Jesus. Do you know how Jesus speaks about you when you're not listening?

[17:45] He doesn't roll his eyes, whisper to his Father in heaven or to the crowds gathered around in heaven.

There he goes again. What a flake that will guy is. Calls himself a pastor. He forgets the most basic things about me.

He didn't even pray this morning. Does he even remember how much he needs me? Man, what a disappointment. It's not what he says, is it?

It would have been well deserved for John and Will. It's not what Jesus says. No, on the days we have stopped listening, distanced ourselves from him and our confusion and our struggle, when Jesus hears about it, he's saying of us, that's my beloved brother.

My beloved sister. Isn't he great? Isn't she wonderful? Jesus is so much more gracious than we deserve.

[18:56] I'm not sure what his purposes are in your life right now, in the midst of your struggle even to know who he is, but I know this, as you bring your doubts and your questions and your hurts to him, he will be so much more gentle, so much more gracious with you than you imagine him being right now.

When he hears how his fearful, struggling, doubting follower is doing and you come to him, you will find him gracious and loving beyond what you deserve and well beyond what you feel.

hear him saying proudly to you, my beloved servant John, my beloved servant Judy, my beloved servant James, maybe God has you here today just to hear his benediction, his good word of blessing pronounced on you again in your weakness and your failing.

He wants you to hear that it's true today. Even the weakest of his followers today is greater than John than we just praised.

We'll come back to that thought in just a moment, but this interaction that Jesus has with the crowds closes with some more challenging words from Jesus.

[20:32] He's going to rebuke the Pharisees for their childishness. Verse 29, when all the people heard this and the tax collectors too, they declared God just having been baptized with the baptism of John.

But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him. Jesus speaks again, to what then shall I compare the people of this generation and what are they like?

They're like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, we played the flute for you and you did not dance. We sang a dirge and you did not weep. For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine and you say he has a demon.

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking and you say, look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.

Notice here the contrast between John who comes to Jesus in his weakness and struggles and doubts and the Pharisees and lawyers who fend Jesus off with their excuses and their self-sufficiency.

[21:53] The gracious words of Jesus are for the struggling one, right? And the challenging, strong words of warning are for the certain, self-confident ones.

Jesus says in fact, verse 30, they've rejected the purpose of God for themselves. Yikes! You don't want that said of you. The warning is that if you found certainty or confidence anywhere else than Jesus, watch out.

Jesus compares them to children who refuse to be pleased. You've never seen a kid in that kind of mood, I suspect, where you can't do anything to please them. You know, grapes or strawberries? No. A book or a movie, which one would you like? No. I don't want to do either of them. You can't make me happy.

I've got a complaint about anything you suggest. Y'all don't have kids like that, do you? Neither do I. These children that Jesus is describing, they don't want to play a happy, energetic game.

[23 : 10] They don't want to play a sad, calm game. John is too conservative. Jesus is too liberal. Why? Because the only thing that can satisfy them is what?

My way. Doing it just the way I want it done. You can't make me happy. I want my way. So it's their refusal to repent.

That's what John's baptism is about and Jesus' call, right? It's their refusal to repent and an insistence on self-sufficiency that Jesus is warning against.

They're using any excuse they can come up with to keep Jesus at arm's length. To avoid actually coming to Him and trusting Him rather than self.

In that generation, the excuses were that John was demon-possessed and Jesus a drunk. That's what they'd said to keep them away. What explanations do people make in our generation that keep Jesus at arm's length?

[24 : 22] There's certainly many we could say. I'll give you one on each end. One on the too sad or too little side and one on the too happy or too much side.

First, we sell Jesus short when we craft our own version of the real Jesus. If you've not taken a college religion class in the last, well, long time, or if you've not read any major magazine the week of Easter in the last decade or so, then you may have missed that this has become our MO as a culture.

It's apparently what sells. This is what we're all doing. We've decided we know better what the historical Jesus actually said and what He actually did than about 2,000 years of secular history and Bible study and things that people have known and learned.

We've decided we've got a better picture of it. In particular, if you read many of the new books, many of the things being taught in our college classrooms, you'll read a denial of Jesus' self-awareness as God.

They'll tell you Jesus really didn't think of Himself that way. He didn't really make claim to deity. And I can't describe to you, I don't have the time this morning and I'm not even going to try, the historical and literary gymnastics you have to play to take passages like this one where Jesus abundantly, clearly sees Himself as the promised Messiah King, Savior coming and to explain that away in the face of Jesus' clear words, His explicit references to the Old Testament, His tangible miracles performed before thousands and to say that's not what Jesus is saying and yet say but Jesus still existed.

[26 : 27] He was still there, things still happened, just not any of those things. It takes a lot of work but that's what's happening everywhere you turn these days and we must be careful because these things sound interesting.

They'll be out on the newsstands in the next couple of weeks and they'll be appealing to you because you're not used to seeing spiritual things on the newspapers and magazines and you'll think, oh, that's interesting.

Time magazine has something about Jesus. That's so Christian. I'd love to see what they have to say and it's dangerous. I don't know what time is going to write but I'm just telling you.

It's new spirituality to us in a secular age. It can be appealing. What it is is a way to keep the real Jesus at arm's length because I only have to deal with the one who does and says things that make sense to me.

Historical is defined as believable to me and that's how we craft what really happened. I make a Jesus in my own image and it's dangerous.

[27 : 40] On the other end of the spectrum, this generation both in the U.S. and around the world is missing Jesus by equating his promises with temporal prosperity and there may be a lot of struggles with that.

one of the biggest and most devastating problems in doing that is that we remove Jesus from our real struggles. That's the one in this passage that concerns me because there's a follower of Jesus with a genuine struggle.

John's confused. He's not certain who Jesus is and there would be many today who would come to John and just imagine if John had listened to friends like we may have and instead of sending him to Jesus they would say John listen if Jesus is the Messiah and if you really have enough faith you wouldn't be in prison.

Don't go talk to that Jesus guy. Look where he got you. Life's hard. And if John hadn't come with that to Jesus if he bought that lie and stayed away in his struggle from Jesus he never would have heard Jesus' gracious words of reassurance building his faith back up.

By setting up faulty expectations we set ourselves up for disappointment and for walking away from Jesus when life is hard.

[29 : 09] I found in particular that those of us who grow up in the church and then at some point struggle with doubts and confusion we have a really dangerous tendency in us and it's to say that we're searching we want to know what we believe and that's okay but the way we do it often is we go read books and websites and blogs and we say we're searching but the one person we've left out of the search is Jesus.

We're not interested in him we think we've heard enough we move away from God's word and from anyone who trusts it and go on our search and end up where we set out to end up.

Several I've watched walk away from their faith in Christ have hardly given Jesus a second glance in their doubts and their struggles they want to be searching but they quit looking in God's word and pleading for Jesus' help in their weakness.

Southwood we have to be a place where it is safe to ask questions where it's safe to have doubts where it's safe to struggle where your kids can come to you and ask things they don't understand. Why do we have to be a place where you can wrestle together with hard things like that? You know why? Because Jesus is. Because he's a place where it's safe to come with those struggles and doubts.

[30 : 39] He welcomes bringing those to him. This passage is crying out that's what it's calling for for us to come to Jesus with our confusion rather than avoiding him in our self-sufficiency.

It's his promises and his actions that confirm we can trust him. He wants to show himself faithful and trustworthy. There's another biblical character who experiences disappointed expectations and also lands in prison like John.

Joseph has good reason to believe God's plan for him is to be ruling over his brothers but where does he find himself? Instead, looking up at them from the bottom of a pit.

Languishing in an Egyptian prison. I suspect he had many moments of confusion in his life. What are you doing, God?

How is this the way it's supposed to go? But at the end of his life we find Joseph explaining to those brothers how God was working all of this for good.

[31 : 52] We find Joseph telling them to trust God's promises. He's going to come and deliver you out of Egypt and take you to the promised land. You can count on it. How? What sustains Joseph in his confusion and struggle?

It's God's words and God's deeds. Isn't it? It's what Joseph has heard and what he's seen and experienced. It's the promises of God that Joseph has seen God fulfill time after time when it didn't look like there was any way that God was going to even save my life and now I watch him use me to save, oh my goodness, the nation.

The nations are being blessed. My family is being spared in famine. I have a glimpse at what God's doing. Genesis says God was with Joseph just like he promised and eventually Joseph who was confused and didn't know how God was working saw God be faithful and so he clung to the promise that God would do it again.

Jesus is saying here again, I am the promised Savior, King, come to me. Don't keep me at arm's length.

Hear my words. See my deeds. Trust my love for you. Once again in this whole story, Jesus is at the center.

[33 : 20] The issue is whether we come to him in our confusion or avoid him in our certainty. Jesus concludes by saying wisdom is justified by all her children.

My translation, God is experienced as faithful by all those who trust him. You know who vindicates God?

Who declares him to be right and just in this passage? It's humorous. It's people declaring that God is just. In fact, it's not just the crowds. Verse 29, all the people, even the tax collectors pronounce God just.

Not the religious leaders, the crowds and the tax collectors, the rabble who have repented. Isn't that crazy? The tax collectors are the one who see God be faithful and say he comes through, you can trust him.

Jesus says even the least of them is greater than John the Baptist because they're part of the new kingdom kingdom, with the new king. That's how incredibly glorious Jesus is.

[34 : 37] All of that is only possible because of him. Even the tax collectors see God's faithfulness. They're called God's children. Verse 35, because they're connected to him, to his son, the king.

He makes all the difference. Y'all, what's happening is Luke is showing us again why the gospel is good news of great joy for all people.

Because the weakest of his followers hear gracious words from their strong, perfect king in their lowest moments.

If you're confused and doubting today, come to Jesus as you are. Hear his promises again. Remember how faithful he has been.

Ask him to show himself strong again. Let his words of grace to you drown out your self-accusations, the accusations of the devil in your heart.

[35 : 43] His words and his deeds confirm his love for you. This is exactly what God has given us in the Lord's Supper.

God has given us to his church, to his followers, because he knows that we're going to struggle, that we're going to doubt, that we're going to be confused, and his heart is to strengthen our faith. So he gives this to us. He wants you to taste again his promises. He wants to come and to whisper in your ear again this morning, do you remember my promises? I promise to love you.

I promise to redeem you. And then he wants you to see what he's done. The greatest deed that he has done to show you that you can trust him, he went to the cross and laid down his life for you, and he wants you to see it again this morning.

Remember what he said to his disciples. The night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he'd given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for you.

[36 : 57] Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Y'all, this is not the table of Southwood or the Presbyterian church.

This is the Lord's table. And he invites all those who trust in Jesus to come. Listen, if you don't know Jesus, if you hear me saying these things and you think, I don't know, I still don't know what to think about Jesus, I'd encourage you not to come to this table this morning, but rather come and talk with us about Jesus.

Jesus, we'd love for you to know him. But if you know Jesus, you may be struggling with that this morning, you may be in a place in life where you're confused and you're not certain what to think about what God's doing or even if he's safe to trust right here because it doesn't feel like it.

If you're doubting, this is not a table where you're pushed away in your weakness. Jesus says to his struggling, weak followers, come to me, let me build your faith.

[38 : 27] Taste and see and remember I love you. I have great words to speak over you, words of gospel truth.

I think of you in terms of my son, God says. That's how you come to this table, through his body, and his blood. He loves you because of Jesus.

Come to him. Taste and see that the Lord is good and have your faith built up in Jesus. Let's pray and then we'll come together. Father, how kind of you to meet us in our weakness, to give us something we can hold in our hands and taste on our lips that reminds us you love us enough to send your son for us.

That reminds us that today, no matter how we feel, the way you feel about us has not changed. Because it was purchased on the cross by your son.

And your love is unwavering. Might we know it again this morning. Set aside these elements from a common purpose to that sacred use in our hearts, we ask in Jesus' name.
[39 : 41] Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.