

Luke 7:18-35

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[0 : 0 0] of Luke, which focus on the question of who is this Jesus and seeking to refocus our attention on him just personally and directly as we look in the gospels at his works and his words.

Luke chapter 7, beginning at verse 18, let's read together. The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And 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?

And 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, he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits. And on many who were blind, he bestowed sight. And he answered them, go and tell John what you have seen and 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. When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind. What then did you, 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.

[1 : 5 6] I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. 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.

To what then shall I compare the people of this generation? And what are they like? They are 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. Let's pray. Father, we pray that you would send us your spirit as we look into your word now, open our hearts and minds to receive from you. In Christ's name, amen.

The atheist Richard Dawkins wrote, In other words, religious faith is only sustained when people refuse to question, doubt, and think rationally. Now, some Christians have behaved as if Richard Dawkins was right. I was recently talking with a friend of mine. He's one of the only Christian faculty members at a small liberal arts college where he teaches, and he was talking with one of his colleagues, a fellow professor who shared with him that he had grown up in a Bible-believing church, but no longer identified as a Christian.

And they had a 40-minute conversation about the questions that led this man to distance himself from and eventually abandon his Christian faith that he was raised with. And at the end of the conversation, he said to my friend, you're the only Christian I've met who's been willing to seriously engage with me about these questions. Now, sadly, that's how many people have experienced Christianity.

If you believe in God or the Bible, don't ask too many questions. Don't worry about evidence. Don't ask for too many explanations. That means your faith is weak. Some Christians seem to resist or suppress all expressions of doubt or disappointment or questioning. They see no place for doubt in the life of a Christian. Now, by contrast, there are other Christians who seem to be strangely attracted to doubt.

[5 : 02] Doubt and disappointment and disappointment and questioning. They act as if doubt and disappointment should have a permanent place in the life of every Christian. One such person wrote, doubt is a healthy part of faith. I am generally suspicious of Christians who claim to be certain about what they believe. I think religious certainty is one of the biggest problems in the world today, and I think it is driving people out of the church. But that position has its problems as well.

For one thing, doubts don't just come out of pure neutrality. Behind every doubt or question is an alternate belief. Doubts emerge from other, often unstated assumptions. For example, this particular person who I quoted assumes that certainty or confidence in one's faith in God fosters arrogance. Always or almost all the time.

What does Christianity actually say about doubt and questions and disappointment with God? This morning's passage speaks to this very issue. In fact, it begins with a question from John the Baptist to Jesus.

Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? This morning I want to look at John's question, at Jesus' answer, and finally at our response.

So first, John's question. Now if you have read through the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1 through 3, Luke has already introduced us to John the Baptist. And we see in those chapters that the lives and callings of John the Baptist and Jesus were deeply intertwined from the very beginning.

[6 : 52] Their mothers were even related to each other. Luke describes their birth and circumcision and naming and growth and beginning of their public ministry. Jesus goes to John to be baptized by him.

John says, I'm not the Messiah, but he points to Jesus as the coming one. But by this point, John was no longer preaching in the wilderness. He was locked up in prison.

We learn that in chapter 3, verse 20. John had confronted King Herod, the most powerful ruler in the region. Because Herod, Herod had divorced his wife and married his brother's wife instead.

And John confronted him about that and many other evil things that he had done. And Herod decided he couldn't, the only way to shut him up was to lock him up. So he put him in jail.

And from jail, John sent messengers to Jesus to ask this question. Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? It seems like, for whatever reason, John was having second thoughts.

[8 : 00] He was doubting. He was questioning. Now some commentators have said that can't be right. How can John the Baptist, the bold preacher, be doubting Jesus?

No, he must have been asking this question simply for the sake of his disciples. That they could be reassured of who Jesus really was. But I think the most natural way to read John's question is as a genuine question.

John's disciples had reported to him the things that they had seen Jesus do so far. What we've looked at over the last three chapters, the blind receiving their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear.

And perhaps John was thinking, okay, that sounds all well and good. But I thought that one mightier than I was coming to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into God's barn and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

What about God bringing his judgment, righteous judgment on an ungodly government and a corrupt religious establishment? What about the Messiah delivering me from the clutches of wicked King Herod?

[9 : 09] I don't hear about any of that happening yet. Jesus, are you really the coming Messiah? Or is there somebody else coming after you?

Should we be on the lookout for someone else? You know, sometimes loyal and self-sacrificial servants of God experience doubt and disappointment and depression.

The prophet Elijah did. Right after his dramatic showdown with the prophets of Baal, a victory, he ran away and went into a cave and wanted to die.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous German pastor who resisted the Nazis and protected the Jews and trained underground church leaders and even joined in a plot to assassinate Hitler, wrote a poem when he was in the concentration camp entitled, Who Am I?

This is what he wrote. Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country house.

[10 : 24] Who am I? They often tell me I would talk to my guards freely and friendly and clearly as though it were mine to command. Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune

steadily, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.

Am I really all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself? Restless and longing and sick like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath as though hands were compressing my throat, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, trembling in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, faint and ready to say farewell to it all.

Have you ever been there? Everybody around you looks at you and says you're so strong in God's word, you're so devoted to the Lord, you're such a servant of God's people and on the inside you feel like you're about to break down.

You feel weary and worn out and short-tempered and cynical. Some days you look around and don't even quite know what to believe anymore.

Doubt and disappointment can be provoked by all kinds of things, whether it's simple physical tiredness or grieving a loss, boredom and idleness, spiritual attack, harboring unconfessed sin, all kinds of reasons.

[12:04] Sometimes it's when we feel strongest that we're most spiritually vulnerable. After all, the Bible warns us pride goes before a fall. And sometimes it's when we feel weakest that our faith is being refined, sometimes unbeknownst to us.

What do we do when we're in the midst of doubt, disappointment, or depression? Well, sometimes I think we hold on to those things. We sort of turn them over and over in our own minds.

We simmer and marinate in them. We can even become proud of them. We see these things as a badge of authenticity that distinguishes us from more simple-minded believers.

If we're honest with ourselves, we'd be afraid to let those things go. Sometimes we hide our doubts instead. We feel that doubt is inherently shameful, so we avoid revealing our doubts and our disappointments to fellow Christians.

We especially resist voicing any doubts to a Christian leader. Perhaps we share our doubts and disappointments with unbelievers or unorthodox believers, thinking that they will be more sympathetic.

[13:24] But those are not healthy responses to doubt and disappointment. Look at what John does here. He sends messengers to Jesus.

Despite the prison walls, despite the geographical distance separating him and Jesus, he finds a way to communicate his questions and bring his doubts to Jesus.

There's no one more sympathetic and no one more wise than Jesus. So bring your doubt and your disappointment and your depression to Jesus through prayer and through fellowship with his people.

There's John's question. Are you the one? Or shall we wait? Now let's look at Jesus' answer in verse 21 to 28.

Notice how Jesus responds to John. He does not rebuke or shame him. He does not say stop asking such questions.

[14:27] You should know the answer, of course. Look instead at how he responds. Verse 21. He does a bunch of miracles right in front of their eyes. He shows John's messengers some of the visible fruits of his ministry.

You learn who Jesus is by seeing what he does. And there are many people even right here in this room who can testify to the transforming and healing power of Jesus Christ.

Where Christ is we will see his actual and visible work in people's hearts and lives. Not always in the form of miraculous healings but real fruits of the spirit.

Real change over time. Sometimes it's two steps forward and one and a half steps back. But it's real change that wouldn't be happening in your life or in other people's lives apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit.

And sometimes when we're doubting or disappointment we can be encouraged by looking around at our brothers and sisters and seeing God at work in their lives. Verse 22.

[15:32] Jesus lists the work of mercy he has done. Sort of summarizing these last three chapters. but these words are also a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. And John well versed in the Old Testament would have recognized that.

Because Isaiah prophesied that in the day of the Messiah exactly these things would happen. For example Isaiah 35 5 and 6 says Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf

unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap like a deer. Isaiah 26 says Your dead shall live their bodies shall rise. Isaiah 61 1 The spirit of the Lord is upon me he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. What Jesus is saying is I'm the promised Messiah the one of whom the scriptures have foretold. Jesus reminds John that the Bible has a storyline and Jesus is the climax it leads up to him and sometimes that's helpful when we're facing doubts as well.

To see God's purposes God's faithfulness in the past to see that God led his people in the Old Testament through a wilderness too. And God's people waited hundreds of years and many of them died without seeing what was promised but God was faithful to his promises.

[16 : 52] It's helpful for us to look back and see God's faithfulness in the scriptures. Verse 23 Jesus gives a challenge blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Another translation in the NIV says blessed is the one who does not stumble on account of me. You might say blessed is the one who is not turned off by me.

What's Jesus saying here? Well it seems that John most likely had expectations about Jesus that needed to be revised.

He was expecting Jesus to bring salvation and judgment all at once. Jesus was operating on a different timeline. Yes there would be a future day of judgment but now Jesus was here to bring God's mercy his saving grace to a broken world.

Sometimes our doubts and disappointments are rooted in sincere but misguided expectations about what God is going to do and when he's going to do it and what part I'm supposed to play in it.

[17 : 58] And sometimes our doubts and disappointments are God's means instruments that he uses to reshape and refine and refocus our expectations.

Sometimes we can be offended by the mercy Jesus shows. Isn't that what Jesus has been doing? Showing mercy to all kinds of people.

Teaching his disciples love your enemies do good to those who hate you bless those who curse you pray for those who abuse you be merciful even as your father is merciful.

God the father is merciful every day to people who hate him and curse him and abuse his blessings and he calls us to be merciful like him. That's a hard teaching.

Right? Many of us would be offended by that if we take it seriously. Now it doesn't mean we shouldn't set appropriate boundaries when relationships turn toxic but it does mean we should pray for people even those that hurt us and pray for an open heart toward reconciliation.

[19 : 13] Perhaps we're offended when others seem to receive more mercy than we do. Imagine John sitting in prison and he gets this report.

Jesus heals the lame. He gives sight to the blind. He cleanses lepers. He raises the dead and I'm still here in prison. Okay Jesus I can see you're there for somebody else but what about me?

Jesus said blessed is the one who's not offended by me. In another place he says don't be envious because I'm generous. You see the salvation that Jesus brings is by his grace alone.

It's not something we earn or deserve by our works. We can't deserve it. We can't earn it. We can only receive it. And some people are offended by that because it means it humbles us.

The only way we can receive it is to humble ourselves and lay down our pride and acknowledge we don't deserve it and we can't earn it. And we have to open our hands and receive it as a free gift.

[20 : 23] But when we accept that salvation by grace Jesus says we're blessed. We're at peace with God. We can have joy from the Lord.

Jesus is a merciful Messiah. That's the first part of his response to John is emphasizing his mission of mercy. But then Jesus turns to the crowds in verses 24 to 28 and he asks them a question about John.

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? He repeats this question three times. Right? Not a reed shaken by the wind. Not a weak and wavering individual driven by the trends of popular opinion.

Not a man dressed in soft clothing. Overprivileged, overprotected, and overindulged. But a prophet. In fact, the messenger prophesied by Malachi who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord himself.

Jesus is a merciful Messiah, but John was a messenger of repentance. John was a prophet in the line of Elijah. He spoke the truth without apologizing for it, without mincing words, without beating around the bush.

[21 : 35] He called people to repent, to confess their sins, and be baptized in the Jordan River. That was a dramatic public symbol. It means I need to start all over again.

I'm going to leave behind my old way of life and start something new. And John didn't just talk about forsaking sin in general. He called people to repent of particular sins.

So John told the tax collectors who were notorious for fudging the numbers to their own benefit, don't collect any more than you're authorized to. He told the soldiers, notorious for abusing their power, don't extort money from anyone.

By threats or false accusation, be content with your wages. He told Herod, who did whatever he wanted to do and expected others to get in line, repent, you're committing adultery.

John was willing to get in people's face and confront them about their sin. He called people to repentance and warned of God's coming judgment. He said, even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

[22 : 38] Every tree, therefore, that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Now, in some ways, Jesus and John might seem like opposites.

John preaching about sin and repentance and warning of God's coming judgment. Jesus proclaiming good news to the poor and healing all kinds of people. John, the solemn ascetic living in the wilderness, subsisting on locusts and wild honey, eating no bread, drinking no alcohol, teaching his disciples to fast.

Jesus, the joyful king who spent most of his time in the cities, eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, speaking of himself as the bridegroom, his disciples as wedding guests and his ministry as new wine in new wineskins.

You might think, that looks about as different as can be. But Jesus spoke very highly of John. Jesus did not criticize anything about John's ministry.

Among those born of women, none is greater than John, he said. Jesus absolutely affirmed John's ministry as a messenger of repentance. And yet, he said, the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

[23 : 57] Verse 28. You might say, what does that verse mean? Well, it means that John was a transitional figure. The messenger going before the Messiah.

Sort of like the torchbearer of the Olympic Games. Leading the way, heralding the greatness and uniqueness of what is to come. But of course, once the Olympic Games begin, the torchbearer fades into the background.

Or it's like the first emissary of the Allied Liberation Forces announcing to the inhabitants of a Nazi concentration camp, you are no longer under Hitler's dominion.

A new kingdom has arrived. A new regime is in place. John was preparing the way for the Lord, announcing the coming of the king.

His role was unique. His role was important. But Jesus had come to establish God's kingdom with authority. And once the king had arrived, in particular, once his kingdom would be established through his own death and resurrection, John's role would fade into the background like a candle fading into irrelevance before the rising sun.

[25 : 10] So Jesus answered to John's question. Jesus is the merciful Messiah. John's the messenger of repentance. Now how do we respond to both of them?

In verse 29 to 35, we see two responses to John and to Jesus. And interestingly, we don't see half the people taking John's side and half the people taking Jesus' side.

What we see is half the people take neither side and half the people take both of them. Verse 29 and verse 35, we see a positive response. When the people heard this and the tax collectors too, they declared God just or they justified God having been baptized with the baptism of John.

They had responded to John's call to repentance. They had taken his warning of judgment to heart. They had heeded his words and so they also welcomed Jesus' ministry. Verse 29, I think, helps us understand verse 35.

Wisdom is justified by all her children. It's the same verb, justified. Now throughout the Bible, wisdom is always connected with the character of God. And the children of wisdom are people who live according to God's wisdom or according to God's ways and his character.

[26 : 36] In this case, those who receive John's baptism and receive Jesus' ministry are the children of wisdom. And so just as in verse 29, it says the tax collectors and the people declared God just.

That's the same thing verse 35 is saying. Wisdom is justified. Wisdom's ways are proved right or declared right by all her children. All right?

Those who receive the ministry of John and Jesus declare God is righteous in calling us to repentance and God is faithful to his promise in bringing his mercy through the Messiah.

So we see those people receive both. Verse 30, by contrast, we see the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected both. And in verse 31 through 34, Jesus exposes their hypocrisy in doing so.

He says, you are like fickle children. What you want is always changing. You're never satisfied. Right? When Jesus arrived playing the flute as it will, summoning people into the joy of God's kingdom, they didn't dance.

[27 : 47] They didn't rejoice. They didn't join in. Instead, they rejected Jesus and labeled him a glutton and a drunkard. When John came singing a dirge, speaking about God's wrath and judgment and calling people to repentance, they didn't mourn over their sin.

They didn't repent. Instead, they labeled him a fanatic, demon-possessed. Jesus says, you're never satisfied. No matter what they look like, you're always finding fault with the servants of God.

You see, there's a kind of doubt and questioning that is honest and sincere. There's a kind of disappointment and depression that God's servants may, and usually sometime in their lives do, experience.

That's what John the Baptist was experiencing at the beginning. He had some misguided expectations. He was in a very difficult and stressful personal situation and so he had some doubts and disappointment.

Jesus says, no worries. Jesus doesn't rebuke or condemn or shame him. He responds to his question with mercy and with encouragement and even publicly commending him for his faithfulness.

[29 : 01] But there's also a kind of doubt and questioning that is not fully honest or sincere, which we see in the Pharisees and the lawyers. They were unmoved either to joy or to tears.

They were indifferent, complacent, apathetic, dismissive, impossible to please. They were always finding fault with God's servants. One's too strict, the other's too generous.

because really, they didn't want either John or Jesus to interfere too much with their lives. They thought they were pretty good as they were.

And so they would always find a reason to doubt and reject God's messengers. And Jesus says that kind of doubt and questioning is just sinful and it leads only to spiritual death and destruction.

So three applications as we close. Number one, God's servants may have different gifts or emphases in their ministries.

[30 : 11] The Apostle Paul speaks about spiritual gifts. In Romans 12, he refers to some who have the gift of mercy and others who have the gift of prophecy or exhorting. Some of you might be more like John.

You can point out what is wrong in the world and what needs to change in the church. You can speak the truth with boldness and you don't really care what people think. That's a gift.

It can also be a liability if you don't learn to use that gift with appropriate gentleness and love in an edifying way. Some of you might have the gift of mercy.

You can come alongside people who are troubled. You can come alongside someone who's weak and practically help them. You can listen to someone who has an anxious heart.

You can be patient and forbearing with difficult personalities. That's a gift. It can also be a liability if you never speak the truth and always refuse to confront even when that's called for.

[31 : 21] But here's the thing. God's gifted us all differently but through Christ we're all on the same team. And so we need to bear with one another and learn to work together even if we rub each other the wrong way sometimes.

We need to try to use our gifts for the edification of the body in a balanced way but we also need to bear with one another and receive one another's gifts and realize that God has given each of us different gifts.

second application John the preacher of repentance and Jesus the merciful Messiah are on the same team.

You can't have one without the other. You can't fathom the magnitude of God's grace in Jesus until you have taken to heart God's law and its demands.

You can't fully enter into the joy of Jesus' kingdom without being serious about turning to God for the grace to help you change. That's what the season of Lent is about.

[32 : 29] The season of leading up to Easter that we're in right now. Traditionally it's a time of preparation of fasting and prayer confessing our sin seeking reconciliation with God with one another preparing to share in the feast of Christ's resurrection with fullness of joy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this grace is costly because it calls us to follow and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.

It is costly because it costs a person his life and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin and grace because it justifies the sinner.

Above all it is costly because it costs God the life of his son. You were bought at a price. What has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.

Above all it is grace because God did not reckon his son too dear a price to pay for our life but delivered him up for us. costly grace is the incarnation of God.

[33 : 48] God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ taking on our sin bearing it on the cross being just in bearing the punishment of our sin and being merciful in offering us a new life in Christ.

So our final application is to take communion together with repentance and with joy. when we come to the Lord's table there's a call to repent to confess our sins.

The apostle Paul gives a strong warning whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

Let a person examine himself then and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. What that means is this if you are living in unrepentant sin that is if you know you are living in a pattern of disobedience to God and you have no intention or desire to change then don't take the bread and the cup because you can't feast on Christ if you are refusing to turn to him.

Let a person examine himself Paul says as the bread is being passed out pray with the psalmist search me oh God know my heart test me and know my anxious thoughts see if there be an evil way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

[35 : 25] But taking communion is not only an opportunity for repentance and self examination it's also an invitation to partake with Christ in his joy. Because through what the communion table reminds us is that through Jesus' death on the cross our sin has been paid for.

The price has been paid. We don't take the bread and the cup because we're good enough or because we've done enough. We take the bread and the cup knowing that he is good enough and what he did on the cross for us is enough.

And in response we say take me Lord I'm yours. You are mine and I love you. And we can know the joy of forgiveness as we take the bread remembering his body and take the cup remembering his blood.

Jesus described his kingdom as a great banquet where the poor and the doubting and the disappointed and the depressed can come and find rest and peace and joy and feed on the bread of life for this life and the life to come.

Finally if you're not a Christian consider the invitation of Christ to you. Instead of taking the bread in the cup today consider taking Christ.

[36 : 42] If you have many doubts and questions feel free to ask them. There's no shame in doing that. prayer. But also consider what is holding you back from surrendering to Christ and trusting him.

There's some prayers in the center of the bulletin that you can look at and read through as the bread and cup are being passed out. One's a prayer for those searching for truth.

Another is a prayer of belief. Perhaps one of those prayers you would want to read them and perhaps even use those words to pray. As we prepare to share communion together let's pray. Lord we come to you today even with our doubts our questions our disappointments we pray that you would feed us with the bread of life.

We thank you Lord for your mercy. We thank you Lord for your righteousness. righteousness. We thank you for the cross of Jesus Christ. And that is our hope.

[37 : 54] In his name we pray. Amen.