

INTRODUCTION

The Lord Jesus and John the Baptist were uniquely linked. There is only one Lord and Savior – Jesus Christ. There was only one forerunner who prepared the Lord’s way – John the Baptist. While the number of prophecies concerning John are very small compared to Jesus, he was a prophesied figure.

John’s role was to prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God.

When the priests and Levites asked John who he was, he answered, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.

This is what Isaiah wrote 700 years before the ministries of John and Jesus:

Isaiah 40:3–5 (2016 ESV) — 3 A voice cries [the voice of John the Baptist]: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 And the glory of the Lord [Jesus Christ] shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Yahweh says in Malachi,

Malachi 3:1–3 (2016 ESV) — 1 “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says

the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when he appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.

And again through Malachi Yahweh says,

Malachi 4:5–6 (2016 ESV) — 5 “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet [John the Baptist] before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 6 And he [John] will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

The arrival of John *should* have caused the people of Israel to both fear the judgment of God and hope for His redemption. He preached repentance, and they should have repented. Some did, of course. But the leaders – the priests and Levites, the scribes and Pharisees, the Sadducees and Essenes and Zealots – continued in their religion. They ignored John as unnecessary. They dismissed him as irrelevant.

The past few Sundays we've been taking a careful look at what Jesus said about John the Baptist. Today Jesus exposes the real response of virtually all of Israel's leaders, and most of Israel's population to both John and Himself.

WHAT IS THIS GENERATION LIKE?

But to what shall I compare this generation?

This generation is the culture at large during Jesus' time. Jesus wants to explain to the crowds what they themselves are like.

It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates

This might sound harsh, but Jesus isn't being unreasonably critical; He is explaining *why* they act and believe as they do, especially regarding Himself, John, and religion. If they do not face who they actually are, and continue in their playacting, then there is no hope for them.

They are like children who sit in marketplaces, doing nothing productive, and play at the most serious aspects of life. They pretend. Life is a game. It isn't real. They don't have to take it seriously. They talk like they are rehearsing a play; they think they can always stop, go back, and try again.

A week ago this past Thursday the actor Alec Baldwin killed one person and injured another on a western movie set. His character was going to draw his gun and shoot at the camera to get a dramatic image. Baldwin didn't know that the gun was loaded. The assistant director who handed him the gun didn't know the gun was loaded. The armorer for the movie – whose job is preparing and managing the weapons on set – didn't know that the gun was loaded. They were just *acting*. Just *playing*. It wasn't real. On film it would look deadly serious. But of course, they were just *playing*; it was all make-believe. Except it wasn't.

That's what this generation is like. They are children who play at real life, expecting there to be no harmful consequences, no long-lasting effects.

They played at joy and sorrow.

“we played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.”

Likewise, the people that Jesus observed – **this generation** – played at joy and gladness. They were so good at it that they didn't realize that they weren't joyful, and they weren't glad.

Our world is filled with people who play at joy, but don't have it. We all know that there are men today who pretend to be women, and women who are pretend to be men. They say that it fulfills them. Yet the suicide rate among those who undergo what is called “gender reassignment surgery,” but which is actually mutilation, is up to *twenty times greater* than their peers. That's not *twenty percent* higher; it's *two-thousand percent* higher. They simply play at joy; they don't actually experience it, and their lives prove it.

This doesn't just happen out in the unsaved world; I've known many people in church who played at joy, but who would quickly become sour and antagonistic if they couldn't have something their way.

Our world is also full of people who play at mourning, at repentance. They have no sorrow over sin, and so have no meaningful repentance. Again, just like children at play, they pretend to grieve and mourn over sin and guilt, but it's just make believe. It's the weeping and wailing and the tearing of clothes. It's what Jesus describes in Matthew 6 when He speaks about fasting. “And when you fast,” Jesus says, “do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:16). It's just make believe, play-acting. Oh, some were very good at it; they could win an Academy Award if they had a Best Spiritual Special Effects category. But it wasn't real.

In our time there are many who pretend to be outraged by all sorts of things, but those who have some discernment can see through their pretense. For instance, the demands made by many that everyone has to wear a mask. There are many videos of politicians and

others happily milling around and talking *without masks*, and then someone announces that the cameras are on, and the masks come right on. They play a dirge for the public – everyone has to be afraid, everyone has to bow to their demands – but when playtime is over, they go right back to their own lives.

TRANSITION: Here's the thing, though. In spite of the insistence of the childish generation, John the Baptist wouldn't play along. Jesus wouldn't play along.

JOHN WOULDN'T PLAY

But Jesus and John the Baptist resisted the efforts of the religious leaders and the people to control them.

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'he has a demon.'

Apparently, John fasted – a lot. Yes, he ate locusts and wild honey when he ate. But he often fasted, mourning over the hardness of the hearts of his people, and the coming judgment of God.

Matthew 3:7–11 (2016 ESV) — 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

In other words, judgment is actually coming. It's not a game; it's not pretend or make-believe. One day each person's life will end – *the axe is laid to the root of the trees*. Jesus is going to baptize everyone, those who repent and believe *with the Holy Spirit* for salvation, and those who refuse to repent and believe *with fire* for judgment.

There's no question that John rejoiced at the news of redemption. There's also no question that he mourned over the judgment that so many would face. He fasted. Fasting is *never* a picture of celebration or rejoicing; it is *always* a picture of suffering and mourning. I suppose we could say that John only saw the first part of salvation: grief and repentance and longing for redemption. He knew that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but John didn't see anyone's sin taken away.

In any case, John the Baptist wouldn't rejoice just because the spiritual children of his world commanded him to rejoice.

JESUS WOULDN'T PLAY

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at Him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

The humble found Jesus as tender and gracious as the proud found Him fierce and unyielding. Part of this accusation is true; Jesus *was*, and *is*, a *friend of tax collectors and sinners*. What He is not is a friend to the proud and unrepentant. Matthew describes the day of judgment:

Matthew 25:31–33 (2016 ESV) — 31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be

gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

Jesus already knows who is who. The sheep and goats are known to Him. They make themselves known in the world by their response to Jesus and His Gospel. But He knew who they were before the foundation of the world, before anything was created.

So, yes, Jesus IS a friend of tax collectors, and sinners, and doctors, and farmers, and receptionists, and mechanics, and even of pastors.

But the accusation began wrongly. Jesus was not a **glutton and a drunkard**. Why would they make this accusation? Perhaps because Jesus received gluttons and drunkards whom came to Him in faith. And perhaps it was because He refused to fast and mourn at the command of the scribes and Pharisees. The Bible says **there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents** (Luke 15:10). That joy doesn't begin with the angels; they reflect what they see in the face of God. Whenever one person repents of his or her sin, the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit is proven and vindicated and manifested. The scribes and Pharisees wondered how Jesus could casually eat with such wicked people. But how could Jesus have remained joyless when a sinner turned to Him in humble faith and appealed to the *Savior* to *save*?

Jesus wouldn't mourn just because those who play at religion decided He should.

JUSTIFYING WISDOM

Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

Those who play at *mourning* and play at *rejoicing* are really playing at *wisdom*. Wisdom is the combination of *genuine knowledge of biblical truth*, and the *masterful skill* which is enabled by that knowledge. Mourning over sin, and rejoicing in Jesus Christ, are not *emotional* responses to stimuli, but *wisdom* responses to truth. Putting it differently, spiritual mourning and rejoicing are not involuntary reactions, but deliberate responses. We should not mourn sin because we *feel* mournful; we should mourn sin because *sin* is mournful. We should not rejoice in Jesus Christ because we *feel* joyful; we should rejoice in Jesus Christ because our *redemption* is joyful.

So Jesus says that wisdom – the *masterful skill* which is enabled by *knowledge of the truth* – is justified, or proven to be true, by her deeds. *Wisdom* is revealed and manifested by *actions*. *Wisdom is what wisdom does*.

That's what we see in both John the Baptist and Jesus Himself.

John's deeds revealed his wisdom. He knew the Scriptures. He knew his role: he was the forerunner to the Messiah. He knew the Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth. He knew his job: to call the people of Israel to prepare the way for the Lord. He also knew the people of Israel were stubborn, hard-hearted, stiff-necked, and rebellious. He knew that the Lord was coming not just to redeem His people, but to judge the wicked. And so John *mourned*. We know that because he fasted: **John came neither eating nor drinking**. Fasting in Scripture is never a sign of celebration; it is always a sign of mourning. John fasted because he mourned Israel's rebellion.

Likewise, Jesus' deeds revealed His wisdom. He didn't just *know* the Word of God; more, He is the *Living* Word of God in human flesh. He is Lord and Savior. He knew His task: to live in faithful, sinless obedience; to die as a substitute for His people; and to rise from the dead, thus perfectly and completely fulfilling the will of the Father. Jesus Himself was wisdom in action.

So do you see that the people who play at religion, who play at mourning over sin, who play at rejoicing, without ever truly doing either, are the very opposite of wisdom? This is extraordinarily dangerous. The Scripture says,

2 Timothy 3:1–5 (2016 ESV) — 1 But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. 2 For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, 4 treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 [and all this while] *having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.* Avoid such people.

Until you get to verse 5, you might think that the Holy Spirit is describing the unsaved, pagan, wicked world. But that phrase *having the appearance of godliness* changes all of that. These are not open, obvious unbelievers. They are false Christians. They have *the appearance of godliness*; that's what makes them resemble true Christians. But they *deny its power*; that's what makes them false. We might pity them, but we must *avoid them*; once their falseness is known, we must not accept them as brothers or sisters in Christ; we must not join them in their play-acting.

BRINGING IT HOME