

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Messengers from John the Baptist

Luke 7:18-35

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Messengers from John the Baptist

Scripture

It has been several chapters since Luke has told us about Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. The last time we heard of John he was preaching and baptizing and drawing incredibly large crowds to his ministry in the desert in the region around the Jordan River. Eventually, Jesus himself was baptized by John (Luke 3:21), and began his ministry, which soon drew large crowds of people too. But then Luke notes ominously that because John dared to reprove King Herod for unlawfully marrying his brother's wife (Matthew 14:3-5; Mark 6:17-18), Herod had John thrown into prison. After languishing in prison for 6 or 8 months, John began wondering whether Jesus was in fact the promised Messiah. And so he sent he sent two messengers to Jesus to ask him what was going on.

Let's read about Jesus' meeting with the messengers from John the Baptist in Luke 7:18-35:

¹⁸The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹calling 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?" ²⁰And 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?' " ²¹In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²²And 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. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

²⁴When 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?
²⁵What 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 kings' courts. ²⁶What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

²⁸I 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.” ²⁹(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

³¹“To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³²They 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.’

³³For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴The 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!’ ³⁵Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”
(Luke 7:18-35)

Introduction

Charles Wesley wrote more than 7,000 hymns in his life, a number of which we sing today. He wrote the magnificent Advent hymn, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” The lyrics ex-

press rich theological truth concerning the advent of Jesus:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born, thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a king,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit,
Raise us to thy glorious throne.¹

Jesus was of course the “long-expected” one. He knew that, and, at the start of his own ministry, John knew that too.

However, after John had been imprisoned and languished there for many months, he began wondering whether Jesus was in fact the “long-expected” promised Messiah. And so John sent two messengers to Jesus to find out who he was.

Lesson

Our lesson today pivots on three key questions. By asking and answering these three questions, we are given:

1. An Explanation of the Ministry of Jesus (7:18-23)
2. A Clarification of the Identity of John (7:24-30)

¹ Paul Eckert, *Steve Green's MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship.*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1998).

3. An Illustration of the Perversity of the People (7:31-35)²

I. An Explanation of the Ministry of Jesus (7:18-23)

First, notice an explanation of the ministry of Jesus.

During the early part of Jesus' ministry, he was wildly popular. Although he did occasionally encounter opposition, the people by and large accepted him. His message and his miracles were making a profound impact on people.

Jesus healed all kinds of diseases (4:40). He cast demons out of people (4:41). He preached to great crowds (5:17). He had feasts in people's homes (5:29). He healed Gentiles like the centurion's servant (7:1-10). And he even raised the dead (7:11-17). And so **the disciples of John reported all these things to him** (7:18).

But John was still stuck in prison. John had obeyed God's call on his life. When the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness, he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:2-3).

And you remember his message. He said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (3:7-8). And he warned them of the coming judgment and said, "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" (Luke 3:9).

But Jesus' ministry was not a ministry of judgment. It was a ministry of proclaiming good news to the poor, and liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and setting at liberty those who are oppressed, and proclaiming the year of

² This outline is from a sermon by Alistair Begg in *Truth for Life* (<http://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/jesus-and-john/>).

the Lord's favor (4:18-19). There was no emphasis on judgment in Jesus' ministry.

That really puzzled John. So, **calling two of his disciples to him, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"** (7:19).

So they went to Jesus. Luke says that when they got to Jesus **in that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight** (7:21). It's almost as if the men interrupted Jesus to ask a question, but Jesus was too busy healing people. Finally, Jesus finished healing people and casting out demons, and he turned to the men to find out what they want.

After seeing what Jesus had just done, one can imagine one disciple saying to the other, "You ask him." And the other says, "No! You ask him!" And so he asked (and here is the first of the three questions in our text), **"John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"** (7:20).

Now I want to point out that when John had doubts about Jesus, he went to Jesus to get an answer. He did not sit and brood and stew in his doubt while sitting in prison. So often, when believers have doubts, we don't go to Jesus for answers. We get stuck with our questions and our doubts because we don't take them to Jesus for answers. We don't go to his word and examine our doubts in light of his revealed truth.

Notice the wonderfully gracious answer of Jesus to John's messengers. He doesn't rebuke John. **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"** (7:22). Interestingly, Jesus did not give John a "yes" or "no" answer. By pointing John to the miracles he was performing and the message he was proclaiming, he was reminding John of several Old Testament evidences

that would accompany the arrival of the Messiah. Passages such as Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 point to a future resurrection of the dead associated with the advent of the Messiah. Similarly, Isaiah 35:5-6 associates healing of the blind, lame, and deaf with the Messiah, while Isaiah 61:1 describes the preaching of the good news to poor, captive, oppressed, and spiritually blind sinners.

Now, I don't want you to miss an important point in Jesus' answer to John. Yes, the **blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear**, and even **the dead are raised up**. But, the most important aspect of Jesus' ministry is that **the poor have good news preached to them**. Listen! It is one thing to have physical healing, but it is a completely different thing to have spiritual healing. The people who were blind and lame and deaf eventually died. Even the dead people Jesus raised up eventually died. But, if their souls were not reconciled to God, their physical healing was all for naught. All people desperately need to be reconciled with God.

Oh yes, John, Jesus is the long-expected promised Messiah. He is the one born to set his people free. He is the one who from our fears and sins releases us. The reason he did miracles was to authenticate his message that he was – and is – the Savior of sinners. And that is why preaching the good news is so important.

Finally, Jesus told John's messengers, "**And blessed is the one who is not offended by me**" (7:23). The one who believes that Jesus is the long-expected promised Messiah will be blessed, and will never be disappointed.

II. A Clarification of the Identity of John (7:24-30)

Second, Jesus gives a clarification of the identity of John.

Here now we have the second of the three key questions. Actually, there are several questions here, but Jesus is really

making one point about the identity of John the Baptist.

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 go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet" (7:24-26).

The people did not go out into the desert to go and look at the reeds. Nor did they decide to go and see if they could find people wearing fine clothes in the desert. No. The reason they went out to the desert was to go and hear John's preaching.

When the people first heard John they were really excited because God was speaking to his people after more than 400 years of silence. And when John began preaching, his message was so powerful that initially they thought that he might be the Messiah (3:15). But John told them that he was not the Messiah. Instead, he was the Messiah's forerunner. And so Jesus reminded the people of Malachi's prophecy that was being fulfilled by John when he said, **"This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you'" (7:27).**

And then Jesus made an astonishing statement about John. He said in verse 28a, **"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John."** Why is no one greater than John? Well, all the Old Testament prophets pointed forward to Jesus. They spoke about different aspects of his birth and life and death. But, here was John who actually knew and saw and baptized Jesus! He actually lived during Jesus lifetime! So, you can mark in the margin of your Bible next to verse 28a, contra Muhammad Ali, "John is the greatest!"

Now, read on. Jesus said in verse 28b, **"Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."** Oops!

What is going on here? Didn't Jesus just say that John is the greatest? Now, John's not the greatest? What does Jesus mean?

John lived in the old covenant system. He died a short while later and was not alive when Jesus himself died. John did not know that Jesus was raised back to life again. He did not know that Jesus ascended into heaven. He did not know that the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and fills all believers.

Every believer after the death and resurrection of Jesus is part of the new covenant kingdom of God. And so every believer after the Gospels is greater than John. Listen! You could have been sitting in your Sunday school class this morning, and for the first time in your life you put your trust in Jesus and repented of your sins. You were born again 45 minutes ago and so, according to Jesus, you are greater than John! Why? Because you are a member of the new covenant kingdom of God. That is astonishing! But that is true because of the privileges that belong to believers who live today.

Luke then makes a comment about two groups of people: those who believe in him and those who do not believe in him. Those who believe in Jesus are described in 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."** On the other hand, those who do not believe in Jesus are described in verse 30, **"But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him."**

Isn't that still what we find in our own day? There are two groups of people. Some agree with God and others reject the purpose of God for themselves. Some say "yes" to God and others say "no" to God and his truth about Jesus.

III. An Illustration of the Perversity of the People (7:31-35)

And third, Jesus gives an illustration of the perversity of the people.

Jesus asked the third key question in verse 31, **“To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?”**

Children in those days, like children in our day, liked to play make-believe games. The two common games in those days were playing weddings and playing funerals. One group of children would pretend that they were in a wedding. There was a bride and a groom and maid of honor and a best man and parents and friends and a party! They would play a flute and dance. Another group of children would pretend that they were in a funeral. There was a corpse and pallbearers and family members and mourners and a funeral procession. They would sing a dirge and weep.

That is what Jesus was describing in verse 32, **“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.’”** These children are bickering. The one group wants to play weddings and the other groups wants to play funerals. And the children refused to play each other’s game. By the way, some commentators refer to this illustration as “the parable of the brats”!

So, Jesus applied the illustration to himself and John. On the one hand, speaking of John, he said, **“For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’”** (7:33). John was a prophet declaring judgment and the coming wrath of God.

On the other hand, speaking of himself, Jesus said, **“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!’”** (7:34). Jesus was the long-expected promised Messiah who brought a message of hope and grace.

The people of that generation rejected both John and Je-

sus. And what do the people of our generation say?

Some say of churches, including ours, “Oh, your church speaks too much of sin. It is very serious and sober. Your church is too traditional and formal. I am not sure that I want to be part of a church that speaks of God’s law and justice and wrath and sin.”

Others say, “Oh, your church speaks too much of grace and joy and hope and forgiveness. It is very upbeat and cheerful. Your church is too contemporary and informal. I am not sure that I want to be part of a church that speaks of hope and grace and mercy and forgiveness.”

We need to recognize that God called and used both John and Jesus. God called both with their different styles to proclaim the message of the gospel.

Even today God reaches people with the gospel through different means.

Finally, Jesus said in verse 35, “**Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.**” That is, God’s way is shown to be right by those who really do receive Jesus and Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

Jesus is the long-expected promised Messiah who was born some 2,000 years ago. John was the greatest of all people living under the old covenant. However, every believer today is greater than John because of the enormous privileges that we enjoy. We have the entire word of God. We know of Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and present session at the right hand of his Father. We have received the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live moment by moment for the glory of God. Let us embrace Jesus then as our Lord and Savior today. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that he performed so many miracles to authenticate himself as your Son. Thank you for the ministry of John the Baptist who prepared the people of his day for the advent of Jesus. And thank you for using so many different people and styles in bringing people to yourself in salvation.

And will you give faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to everyone who longs to know the power of Christ's resurrection in his or her life?

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!