

Luke 7.18-35

The Question(s) and the Answer(s)

Is he? Or isn't he? That, is the question. It's the question for the people in our passage today in the Gospel of Luke. It's the question for each and every generation of people since Jesus walked the earth. And it's the question for us today. Is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah?

Really, there are 3 questions asked in Luke 7.18-35. And each of them marks off a particular section of the passage.

The focal point of the 1st section, verses 18-23, is the big question, "Who is Jesus?" As John the Baptist asks Jesus in verse 19, "Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another?"

The focus of the 2nd section, verses 24-30, is the question, "Who is John the Baptist?" As Jesus asks the crowds in verse 24, "What did you go out to the wilderness to see?"

And then, the question of the last section, verses 31-35, is "What is this generation?" As Jesus asks in verse 31, "To what then shall I compare this generation?"

But it's the first question—John's question about the identity of Jesus—that's the big over-arching question that really defines the others. Once you get that one right, the others fall into place. So.... Who Is Jesus?

1. Who Is Jesus? (verses 18-23)

Here, starting at verse 18, we see that John the Baptist has re-entered the narrative. The *last time* we saw John was back in chapter 3, when he was baptizing and preaching to the crowds.

But Luke informed us in 3.20 that Herod threw him in prison. So that's where John is when he gets this report in verse 18 about what Jesus has been doing. He's in prison.

And in the section immediately preceding the one we're looking at today, Jesus raised a widow's son from the dead while a large crowd of people watched.

And they declared, "*A great prophet has arisen among us!*" and "*God has visited his people!*" And the report about Jesus spread throughout the region.

And so, John's disciples were either there, or they heard about it from reliable sources. And the news about what Jesus was doing made its way to John in prison.

Now, John was a prophet. He knew the Day of the Lord was at hand. He's been waiting for the coming Messiah his whole life.

His father, Zechariah, prophesied on the day of John's birth, back in chapter 1, the very thing the people said in response to Jesus' healing of the widow's son: The Lord God has visited and redeemed his people.

And John preached in the wilderness, in 3.16, "*I baptize you with water. But he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*"

So, John's now waiting in prison for deliverance. And he hears these reports about Jesus' ministry and miracles. And so, he asks Jesus in verse 19: "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*"

This is the question Jesus gets from his cousin, John, the prophet, right after he raises someone from the dead?! You'd think John would just be rejoicing, wouldn't you? But instead, he asks, "Are you really the coming one? Or are we waiting for someone else?"

Why? Well, because while miracles are great, they're really not all John was looking for. He was looking for deliverance. For freedom from oppression.

I mean, Jesus *even said* at the beginning of his ministry that he came to proclaim liberty to the captives! But John was still in prison! And the whole nation of Israel remained in exile. Ruled over by foreign enemies.

Remember the words of John's dad, *Zechariah*, in chapter 1, where he said that the Lord,
Has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David... that we should be saved from our *enemies* and from the

hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our *enemies*, might serve him without fear.

This is the hope John was brought up on. He's been waiting for this coming Deliverer of his people. But deliverance hasn't come.

Sure, Jesus showed he had power and authority in the things he did. But John's *still* in prison. The nation *hasn't been* delivered. So, he wants to know what's going on. "*Is this Jesus really the one, or was I mistaken? And if he is the One, then what's taking so long?*"

You see, John was expecting One who'd come in *judgment* with his winnowing fork in his hand to thoroughly clean his threshing floor and burn up the chaff with *unquenchable fire*.

That's just what he preached in chapter 3. But that hasn't started happening. At least not in the way John expected it to.

And so, although from our post-resurrection perspective, John's question might seem a little odd, we have to see that it really was a valid question. And we shouldn't be quick to discount it.

Remember, last week we saw that Jesus was doing basically the same *sorts* of things Elijah and Elisha did. But the ministries of Elijah and Elisha *never led* to the lasting sort of deliverance John was waiting for.

So, it's *not* that John was wrong to ask questions. But he should have *also* asked, *Who were the real enemies of God's people?*

Was it *really* the Romans? If so, then sure, you could see why John would be struggling with *whether or not* Jesus was *really* the One. I mean, Jesus *just got done* preaching,

"Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.²⁹ To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also."

Doesn't *really* sound like a very good formula for overthrowing the Roman Empire now, *does it?*

But in verse 21, we see that when these messengers came to Jesus, they saw him perform more miracles. And then Jesus gives them his response to John's question in verses 22-23.

Now, what he says is a little perplexing, *isn't it?* Because all he tells them is to go back to John and tell him basically the same sorts of things they must've told him before that provoked his question in the first place.

Verse 22: 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.

This is just what Jesus has been doing all along. It's nothing new. So why should that do anything to alleviate John's uneasiness? *But the key is verse 23: "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

You see, Jesus *did* come to deliver his people from their enemies. But not the way they, or John, expected him to. What he came to deliver us from is the bondage of sin, and Satan, and death.

Remember, Jesus' first recorded sermon in Nazareth in chapter 4, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

That's what Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would do. This is the program of his ministry. And Jesus followed that sermon by demonstrating *exactly* what the freedom from oppression that's brought by God's Kingdom looks like, by casting out demons and healing the sick.

And so, here in chapter 7, he tells John's messengers to go back and tell John he's been doing what Isaiah prophesied he'd be anointed to do—*Not* overthrowing Rome, but bringing liberty to the *spiritually* oppressed. To those *crushed* under the *weight* of mankind's fall into *sin and misery*.

And we've seen that throughout Luke in the nature of the miracles he's been performing.

As he's been *overthrowing Satan's kingdom* by casting out demons. He's been *forgiving sinners* and calling them to repentance. And He's been

showing his *power over death* by healing the sick and raising the dead by the word of his power.

And *all of this*, not like the prophets of old, but on the basis of his *own authority*.

4.35: "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm."

5.24: That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he said to the man who was paralyzed--"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God.

7.14: "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak."

You see, when you realize what the *true enemies* of humankind *really are*, then you *can't but* see that Jesus Christ is the Savior. Because he's the *only one* who's shown that he can defeat those enemies.

And *that's why* he points John back once again to the signs he performed and what they reveal about *his person*, about the *nature of his mission*, and about the *nature of his Kingdom*. He's releasing the oppressed by casting out sin, death, and hell.

So, John, *Blessed* is the one who is *not offended* by me. My kingdom is *not* of this world. It's *not* of this present age. It's a Kingdom that's *overthrowing* the powers of evil. And in a way you've never imagined!

And in this present age, John, you'll remain in prison. And you'll be killed for the sake of righteousness. But *nevertheless*, blessed are you in the age to come when people exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man.

2. Who Is John the Baptist? (verses 24-30)

Well, then in verse 24, Jesus turns to the crowd and poses another question: "*Who exactly is John the Baptist?*" First, *John* asked a question about Jesus' identity, and *now Jesus* asks the crowd about John's identity. And those two questions are intimately connected.

So, Jesus asks, “*What was it that you went out to the wilderness to see?*” In other words, “*Why did John the Baptist cause such a fuss?*”

Was he just some insignificant, everyday occurrence, like a reed shaken by the wind? Surely not. Maybe he was a big deal because he was rich and famous and dressed really nice, like a figure of royalty. *Of course not*—those sorts of people are in palaces, not the desert.

Well, then, Jesus asks, *What exactly* was it that you went out to the wilderness to see? *Who is John?* He’s a prophet. And *even more* than a prophet. John was in fact the Messenger foretold by Malachi sent to prepare the way of the Lord.

And, according to Jesus, verse 28: *No one* born by the time of Jesus was greater than John. *But*, the one who’s *least* in the Kingdom of God is *greater* than he was.

But, what does *that* mean? Well, it means that John was the *greatest* man of the age *before* the fulfillment of all God’s promises came in Jesus. But he *still belonged* to the time of anticipation, not fulfillment. He, and the *whole epoch* he belonged to, *pointed forward* to what was coming.

But the *fulfillment* comes in Christ. And so, *now* those who are *in Christ* have received the fulfilled reality of the Kingdom. And they’re *greater than* any of the prophets in the time of anticipation, *including John the Baptist*, who was the greatest of them all.

See, Jesus has the highest regard for John. But he *doesn’t* blow his status out of proportion. John was the greatest of the prophets. *But even so*, you can be *greater even* than John by following Jesus Christ. Because *that’s* how you get into the Kingdom of God!

And the people’s response in verses 29-30 to what Jesus said about John is pretty telling:

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

Here we have a split between two camps. In essence, these are two divided Kingdoms. Some declared God just on account of what Jesus said, because they received *John's baptism*. Others rejected what Jesus said, because they rejected John's baptism.

And notice, *specifically mentioned* in the *first group* are the Tax Collectors. And in the *second group* are the Pharisees and Lawyers. This points us back to that scene of at Levi the tax collector's house in chapter 5.

Remember that? Levi threw Jesus a big party at his house. And the Pharisees and Scribes *complained* about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. And Jesus responded to their complaints, "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.*"

Here, once again, we see that it's the tax collectors and sinners who're humbling themselves and entering the Kingdom of God.

While the supposed leaders—the Pharisees and Scribes—are rejecting the Kingdom and shutting themselves off from the blessing of the coming age.

And Luke says the Pharisees rejected John's Baptism because they rejected God's purpose for them. And what was that purpose? /// It was *repentance*. *That's what* they rejected. They saw *no need* to repent.

John warned them that the day of the Lord was at hand. And he declared to them, "*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*" But they *wouldn't* repent and be baptized by John.

And now, they won't accept the ministry of Jesus, *either*. They're still refusing to repent. Because they presumed they were righteous and didn't need to. But they were dead wrong.

And by contrast, Luke says all the people who did receive John's baptism, "*Declared God just*" after they heard what Jesus said about John.

Now, what does it mean to "*declare God just*"? Well it means to declare God's requirements and way of salvation as set forth by the ministries of John and Jesus to be right.

The Pharisees and Scribes, you see, were waiting for *God* to vindicate *their righteousness*. When what was *required* was *for them* to vindicate

God's righteousness by repenting of their sins and bearing fruit in keeping with that repentance.

Now, that's not to say there weren't any exceptions. Of course, it's not necessarily the case each and every single Pharisee individually fell under this condemnation. Just like not each and every tax collector and sinner repented and received blessing and salvation.

The point's just that, as a general rule, the Pharisees and Scribes did reject God's purpose as set forth by John and Jesus, while the ones who did accept the messages of John and Jesus were generally considered sinners and social outcasts.

3. What Is This Generation? (verses 31-35)

So then, in verse 31 Jesus brings a *third and final* question to the table. And this time it's a question about his hearers, "*What is this generation? To what should I compare these people?*"

The answer, 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.'*"

And thankfully, we're not left guessing about what that means. Because Jesus explains it in the very next verses.

John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.'³⁴ 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!

You see, What he's saying is basically, "*You people are never satisfied. You're like these little children, who on the one hand say, 'We played the flute and you did not dance.'*"

That's *John the Baptist*. He was just too severe. He was an ascetic out in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, preaching repentance and judgment. He *refused* to dance to their tune.

But on the other hand, these children of "*this generation*" also say they sang a sad dirge, and you did not weep. *That's Jesus*. His ministry was

about bringing freedom from oppression. He embraced the outcasts of society and ate and drank with them.

And just as John was rejected because he was *too severe*, so Jesus was rejected because he was *too loving* toward sinners. *John is too harsh*—he must have a demon. *Jesus is too accepting*—he must be a drunken sinner.

You see, the children of “*this generation*” are those who want to make the rules about what *is* and *is not* acceptable.

But John and Jesus *refused* to play by their rules. And so, according to the *presumptions* of *this generation*, John and Jesus were *nothing but* deviants. Because they refused to play by the script. And as a result, they were marginalized *just like* the people who accepted their message.

Ok, but *why* does Jesus make it a point to say that here? Well, because of what Luke said back in verse 30: “*the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by John.*” They *rejected* John. And now they’re *rejecting* Jesus.

And they’ll reject *anything* that challenges the *status quo*. Because they’re holding onto their own power. *This Jesus can’t be* the Messiah! Because he’s a friend of tax collectors and sinners! And *everybody knows* that’s *just wrong*.

He must be a sinner *just like* them! Because he goes to parties and eats and drinks with people. *But we* fast and show our righteousness by our austerity. *But we don’t fast too much* like that John guy... Man was he a *drag!*

So, what then *is* “*this generation*” like? It’s a generation *sort of* like the former generations. It’s a generation that takes God’s prophets and throws them into prison because they challenge its assumptions.

It’s a generation that *rejects* and *crucifies* the Son of God because it doesn’t like what he has to say.

But, *who exactly* is Jesus talking about? Well, given what he’s said here, it seems he has in mind specifically those who reject the purpose of God revealed through John’s ministry and now his own ministry.

And that's where this saying in verse 35 comes in: "*Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.*"

Now, to understand what Jesus means there, we have to go back to verse 29—where we saw that tax collectors and others *declared God just* at the words of Jesus. Because they received John's baptism. And to "*declare just*" there in verse 29 is the *same word* as to "*justify*" here in verse 35.

And so, Jesus is contrasting the children of "*this generation*"—the generation that has its *identity* in this *present age*, who *reject* the purpose of God's Kingdom—with the *children of wisdom*—the generation that has its *identity* in the *age to come*, who *repent* of their sins and accept the God's purpose for them.

The *children of wisdom*—the *children of the Kingdom*—*declare God just*. While the *children of "this generation,"* declare *themselves just*.

The children of "*this generation*" wanted to feast and dance, when *John's ministry* should've caused them to fast. They wanted to fast, when *Jesus' ministry* should've caused them to feast and dance.

You see, while the Pharisees and Scribes rejected John and Jesus as backwards people with a backwards message, *they* were really the ones who had it backwards.

Because they rejected the purpose of God for themselves and refused to repent, and so showed themselves to be foolish. But it was John and Jesus who were the teachers of divine wisdom.

And those who follow *them* are *children of wisdom*. And wisdom is declared just by them, because they declare God's standards of righteousness and his way of salvation to be right and true.

Now, *to which* generation will you belong? To the generation that finds its *identity* in this present age and rejects God's purpose for you? Or to the generation of wisdom that declares God just and finds its *identity* in the age to come?

Well, that'll be determined for each individual person by how you answer the question we started off with: *Is He? Or isn't He?*

Is *Jesus Christ Lord*. Is *he* the Messiah... the Savior of the world... the Lord of all... the Lord of your life? Or *is he not*? Will you *repent* and *follow him*? Or *will you not*?