

# No Greater Prophet Than John (Luke 7:18-35)

Sunday school November 20, 2016

I want to call your attention to **READ Luke 7:18-23**. We are about 7 months into our journey through Luke now. Back toward the start of this study in the first couple of chapters we had almost parallel accounts of Jesus and John. First we had the announcement of John's birth (angel to Zacharias in the temple), then the announcement of Jesus' birth (angel to Mary). Then John is conceived; then Jesus is miraculously conceived. Then John leaped while he was still in the womb when Mary greeted Elisabeth. Then John was born and named; then Jesus was born and named and dedicated.

Then in chapter 3 we got to John's baptism and preparation ministry. During his ministry, he had a lot to say about Jesus, the Messiah whom he was preparing the way for. He said, referring to Jesus, that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." That's Luke 3:6. He said the ax is laid to the root, meaning the Messiah's coming is imminent; that's Luke 3:9. He said, "one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose." That's Luke 3:16. When he saw Jesus, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." That's not in Luke, but it's John 1:29. So as part of his preparation ministry, John had a lot to say about Jesus. We haven't heard from John since chapter 3, when he was shut up in prison. This passage we're studying today is the last mention of John the Baptist in Luke. In this passage, John doesn't say much; he can't even speak directly to Jesus because he is in prison, but Jesus says a lot about John. In chapter 3 John said a lot about Jesus; here Jesus says a lot about John. That's what we're going to study today: what Jesus says about John.

**Transition:** So let me HAND OUT OUTLINES. First, we have...

**I. John's Question READ v. 18-20** When we recall what John said about Jesus back in chapter 3, this question seems like a very surprising question. If anybody knew who Jesus was, surely it would be John the Baptist because he was preparing the way for Him. Back in chapter 3, He was telling everybody else who Jesus was. Now we seem to find him doubting or at least questioning if his own message was true. You have to remember that at this point in his life John was in prison and soon to be executed because of the ministry that he had done, the baptism of repentance he had preached. Luke doesn't tell us about his execution, but Mark does in Mark 6:14-29. The Bible does not give John's motive for this question, but reading between the lines, John's ministry probably was not ending the way he thought it would or should. John probably thought, "Jesus is going to fix all of our problems; I'm going to prepare the way, and everything will be fixed." Then he gets thrown in prison. So behind the question he actually asked, John was probably really wondering, "Aren't you the one who is supposed to fix this?" We'll get to Jesus' answer in a minute, but to get ahead and paraphrase, His answer is, "Yes, but I'm going to do it God's way, not John the Baptist's way."

Many times in life things don't go the way we hope or plan or think they should. In my career, every job I have ever taken except for one, I took that job thinking it would be my last, that I would spend the rest of my life working that job. When I hired in at Liberty University back in 2009, I had my seminary degree from there, and I thought I would teach there for the rest of my life or at least until I couldn't function in front of the classroom any more. I pictured me dying in my office and being driven off of campus in a hearse; that's what happened to Jerry Falwell Sr. 6 months after I got up there, God through a sequence of events told me that I was at the wrong university. My time on the Liberty faculty didn't end the way I thought it would. When I hired into Anderson back in 2011, I thought that was the last move I would ever make and I would die here in Anderson. Now, maybe or maybe not. We'll see which way God leads. It's natural to doubt and question when things don't go the way you think they should, but you don't want to stay doubting and questioning. You want to respond with faith.

**Transition:** That leads to...

**II. Jesus' Answer READ v. 21-23** The answer Jesus gives is based on actions, not words. He doesn't talk about what He is going to do; He actually does things. Verse 21 says "that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight." So He answered their question by doing things right in front of their eyes. He doesn't just talk about what He is doing; He actually does them. I like that approach. Like a famous presidential candidate recently said, "I'm a man of actions, not a man of words." I don't like to sit around and talk about what we're going to do. I don't like to sit around and talk period unless there is business to be talked about. I want to be out doing it.

The actions Jesus does and references correspond to things Jesus was doing during His ministry. So far Luke has not recorded any specific people who were blind and were made to see, lame and made to walk, or deaf and made to hear, but other gospels and later in Luke's gospel he does. A leper was cleansed in Luke 5:12-16. A dead person was raised earlier in this chapter in Luke 7:11-17. The poor had the gospel preached to them in Luke 4:18-19, among other places. So these actions correspond to things Jesus was doing during His ministry. They also correspond to the Old Testament description of the Messiah, such as the one in **READ Isaiah 35:3-7**. The language here is almost identical to the language found in Luke 7. There are many places we could go to see that, but this is one of them; Isa. 61:1-2 is another. So Jesus' answer is, "Yes, I am who the Old Testament and you said I was."

Back in Luke 7, His final words to John are in **READ v. 23**. In all of His answer, He talks about what He is doing and the scriptures about Him. He doesn't talk about John's situation, the fact that he was in prison for preaching God's word. So His point is: your circumstances and situation do not matter. They aren't important. What matters is that you believe in me. If you believe in me and are not offended in me, you are blessed.

That's what He says to John the Baptist, and the same message applies to us also. Things don't always go the way we want them to, and we find ourselves in some circumstances and situations we don't want to be in. In this fallen world, that happens a lot, but that's not important. What matters is that we believe in Him. If we believe in Him and are not offended in Him, we are blessed, and we need to remember that when things don't go the way we think they should. Also, this incident reminds us that Jesus **IS** Lord regardless of who doubts or questions who He is. John the Baptist comes with high spiritual credentials. Jesus Himself will tell us just how credentialed John is in the next few verses. Even when someone as credentialed as John or less credentialed such as ourselves questions or doubts who He is, that does not change the fact that Jesus IS God. He is who He claimed to be. That's reassuring for us because the really important things we have (forgiveness, redemption, seal of the Spirit, etc.) all depend on who He is, not on who we are. He is Lord regardless of who questions that, whether it be me or someone else.

**Transition:** After John's disciples leave with their answer, Jesus next launches into...

**III. Jesus' Parable (about John) READ v. 24-28** Apparently many of the people Jesus was speaking to used to be followers of John. That makes sense. If I was following John and John said the things about Jesus that he did, I would probably switch allegiance too when Jesus came along. His point about John is that John and his message were really special. **Hold up pine cone** This is a pine cone. I picked it up from the loblolly and slash pines that live in my back yard. This past summer I drove out to California and Yosemite. There are a lot of things to see in Yosemite, but among them is the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, some of the biggest and oldest trees on earth. They have some other pine trees, like loblolly and slash pines there, but I didn't go all the way to California to see a loblolly pine. I can see them in my back yard. I went to California to see something really special, the giant sequoias. John was really special; among the prophets he was the giant sequoia. Verse 27 quotes Malachi 3:1, which talks about the one God chose to prepare the way for the Messiah. That's why John was so special: God used him to prepare the way for Jesus.

In verse 28, the phrase “Kingdom of God,” one of the key phrases in Luke, appears again. We first encountered it in Luke 4:43, and there it was a message to be preached: Jesus talked about preaching the kingdom of God. I mentioned back then that there are many angles to the phrase “Kingdom of God,” and you see another one here. Here it refers to the church, God’s people during the church age. He says that, though John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets, the least in the church is greater than he. What does that mean? In John 3:29, John the Baptist is called a “friend of the bridegroom,” the bridegroom referring to Christ. We, on the other hand, are the bride, as detailed in Ephesians 5:25-27. The bride knows the groom a lot better than any friend ever will. As part of my daily Bible readings this week I read the book of Esther. If almost anyone else had accused Haman of trying to kill him and his people, the king would not have believed him. Haman was his 2nd in command; he trusted Haman more than almost anyone else. But King Ahasuerus believed Esther and turned the tables on Haman. She was his queen. She had access to the king nobody else did. So everyone of us in the church, in the kingdom of God, has more privilege than John did because we are the bride, because we are in Christ.

**Transition:** Next comes...

**IV. The Hearers’ Response READ v. 29-30** Remember from Luke 3:3 that the baptism of John was the baptism of repentance, and that leads to the two very different responses in these two verses. Simply put, these two responses are repentance (like some of the publicans did in Luke 3:12-13) and no repentance (like the Pharisees in Matthew 3:7-9). These are the two possible responses to John’s message and the two possible responses to Jesus’ message. Verse 29 says the repenters “justified God,” which simply means to acknowledge His justice. They acknowledged that they were sinners worthy of hell and judgment, and it’s only by God’s grace and mercy and they don’t get that. Today, likewise there are only two responses to the gospel message: repentance, justifying God and accepting His payment for sin, and not repenting, continuing to rely on your own goodness. As an evangelist, Luke of course encourages his readers to give the former response.

**Transition:** That leads to the last point...

**V. The Wise Response READ v. 31-35** Verse 31 contains two rhetorical questions, with “this generation” referring to the non-repenters of verse 30. The answers are in verses 32-34: they are like kids who call out a game to play and then get mad when you won’t play their game. When I lived in Ohio, we had a Christmas tradition that my aunt and uncle who lived in the area would come over on Christmas Day and bring their 3 kids, my 3 cousins. I had a stack of board games sitting on top of a file cabinet, and the rule they imposed on me was I could pick the game but they could veto any game I picked. They knew what game they wanted to play so they kept vetoing games until I chose the one they wanted to play. That’s the comparison Jesus makes. The Pharisees are the ones calling out the games, that is, they are the ones with the (wrong) expectations of what the Messiah should be doing. John and Jesus refuse to play their “game,” that is, they won’t conform to the Pharisee’s desires. John and Jesus are more concerned with playing God’s “game,” that is, doing what God sent them to do. In John’s case, that was preparing the way of the Lord. In Jesus’ case, it was seeking and saving that which was lost.

Jesus closes this comparison with a pithy saying in **READ v. 35**. Back in verse 29, it says the repenters, the people who gave a good response, “justified God.” So when Jesus says “wisdom is justified,” wisdom is being used to represent God. A wise person, including the repenters of verse 29, would realize that both John and Jesus were sent by God. The Pharisees and scribes accepted neither of them. They rejected John even though he followed strict rules like they did. They rejected Jesus even though He freely did good to all men at all times. They did not justify God, so they weren’t God’s children. Elsewhere He calls them children of the devil (John 8:44). The wise response is to justify God and accept the teachings of the people God sent.

## **Conclusion**

As a final thought on this passage, Jesus and John both preach the gospel of who Jesus is, and they get two very different responses. There is the response of faith and repentance in verse 29, believing the message and trusting in Christ. Then there’s the response of rejection and lack of repentance in verse 30, rejecting the message and choosing to continue to trust in yourself. The application for us, the people who have trusted in Him, is: don’t get discouraged when people reject the gospel. Some of them rejected Jesus, some rejected John, some of them will reject you too. The apostle Paul had the same experience. Acts 28:23-24 tells us that Paul reasoned with people who came to hear all day out of the scriptures. At the end of the day, some believed, and some didn’t believe. So don’t get discouraged when people don’t believe. Keep giving the gospel, keep in fellowship with Him, and keep doing what He has called you to do.