

Questions Jesus Asked, Part Eight

Luke 7:18-28

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Luke 7:18-28

Today we are celebrating baptism for several individuals in our church family. This is an amazing day – right up there in significance with the day you accepted Christ; in fact, in many ways, this solidifies that decision.

So before we do, I want to encourage us with some challenging words from Jesus. We are continuing in our summer sermon series called, “Questions Jesus Asked.” The question we want to consider today is a strong, strong word for each of you being baptized. It is a strong word for each of us who are here to celebrate with them and witness this event. It is also a strong word for every one of us who has been baptized.

The question that Jesus asked, that we are going to look at today, is found in Luke 7, verses 18-28. You can turn there in your Bibles because you’ll want to follow along. I’d like to read the passage to us that we’re going to look at today, and as always, do your best to be a participant in God’s Word, not just a spectator. Put yourself in the story, as if you are there, in order to experience what God has for you today. Would you stand with me as I read it to us? We do that to show our honor for God’s Word. Thank you.

John called two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord. They were to ask him, “Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?”

When they reached Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you. He asks, ‘Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for someone else?’”

Right then, Jesus healed many of their diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and he gave sight to a number of blind people. Then he replied to John’s disciples, “Go, report to John what you have seen and heard. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled now walk. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. And good news is preached to the poor. Happy is anyone who doesn’t stumble along the way because of me.”

After John’s messengers were gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who dress in fashionable clothes and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What did you go out

¹ Resources:

- Bible Study Series: Best Questions in the Bible <https://jesusplusnothing.com/series/post/JesusQuestions>
- David Neale, *A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition: Luke 1-9* (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2011)
- William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: Luke* (Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1975)
- Daniel Cash and William Griffith, *8 Questions Jesus Asked* (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA 2017)
- Dale and Sandy Larsen, *Questions Jesus Asked* (IVP, Downers Grove, IL 2019)
- Ken Heer, *Luke: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)

to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it's written: 'Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you that no greater human being has ever been born than John. Yet whoever is least in God's kingdom is greater than he." (Luke 7:18-28, ceb)

(You can be seated) So we've got to really step into this story if we're going to understand what's going on here, and realize how important it is to those who are being baptized today, to those here to celebrate, and to all of us who have been baptized.

So you might wonder what in the world was John the Baptist doing, asking if Jesus was the Messiah? You'd think John would know that by now. That's a very good question that we need to understand. First let's see...

1. John's *discouragement*.

Some people read this story and think that John the Baptist didn't believe who Jesus was or was having some sort of crisis of his faith, but that's not what's going on.

First of all, remember that Luke's Gospel starts with the birth of John the Baptist and then Jesus' birth and then the two of them meeting – while they were still in their mother's wombs. Then, after the birth of Jesus, we are fast-forwarded to John the Baptist as an adult, out in the desert, calling people to repent of their sins, to devote themselves to God, and baptizing people. Luke tells us in chapter three that after John baptized Jesus, he was arrested and put in prison. Luke describes Jesus' baptism, and the story takes off from there, all about Jesus. We don't hear from John again until this chapter.

John's disciples had been visiting John in prison and updating him on what Jesus was doing (John had been arrested by Herod and thrown in prison with plans to murder him). So John sent them to ask Jesus the question: "Are you the one we have been waiting for, or should we start looking for someone else?"

Think about it; John didn't expect to be put in prison with his life being constantly threatened. By this time he's been sitting in the loneliness of a prison cell, seemingly second-guessing whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. Could he have lost confidence in Jesus? It sure looks that way.

Put yourself in John's shoes, sitting there alone, in the filth and stench of that prison. John – who had lived in the desert in the wide open spaces was confined to a dungeon cell. If that was you, you might wonder, too, "Was I wrong? Did I misread or misunderstand the situation?" Add to that second-guessing the stress of a personal crisis – the constant threat of being killed (and, as we know, he was soon beheaded). Life was not turning out the way John had planned at all. But in addition is...

1. John's *discouragement* ... and *deficiency*.

John had a deficit in his understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do. We learn some things about John from his question, that are confirmed from what we know about him in the Gospels. We learn more as we contrast John's question with Jesus' answer. John and his disciples were something called zealots. So Jesus' answer was not what they were expecting to hear. Let me explain – and when you understand this, it will all make much more sense.

When John's disciples asked Jesus the question, Jesus didn't answer right away. Instead, Jesus gave them a demonstration. He kept on teaching and healing for a while, and *then* Jesus said, "Tell John what you are seeing; this is the proof of who I am: the sick and the suffering and the humble poor are experiencing the power and hearing the word of the Good News." But that was not the answer they were expecting. If Jesus was the Messiah, God's anointed one, they expected him to say, "My armies are massing. Caesarea, the headquarters of the Roman government, is about to fall. The sinners are being obliterated. Judgment has begun." John would have expected Jesus to say, "The wrath of God is on the march!"²

But *instead*, Jesus said, "The mercy and compassion of God are here! See how God is healing and helping people." Instead of saying, "We are overthrowing the heathen sinners" Jesus said, "The proof that I am God's Son is that the Love of God is here! Go back and tell John *that*."

John and others fully expected something different. John's preaching indicated that he expects the Messiah to execute judgment on the wicked and usher in the new age of Jewish political rule, *not* relieve suffering and love people. But Jesus said and showed plainly and clearly that the Kingdom of God is about *love*. Jesus was a different Messiah than even John expected. That's why Jesus said, "Happy is the one who doesn't stumble along the way because of me." The word for "stumble" is where we get the word "scandal." The fact that Jesus came to show people the Love of God, not the fire and wrath and condemnation of God, was scandalous to those who expected the latter, including John. (By the way, judgement *will* happen after Jesus' second coming) But John had to realign himself and his thinking with who Jesus really was and what Jesus came to do and what it meant to be in the Kingdom of God, because it wasn't at all what he expected. Some of us need to do this.

It might be scandalous to you and me to learn that Jesus is more concerned with the poor immigrant or the transgender person than he is with whoever's in the White House. It might be scandalous to you that Jesus wants to show God's love to the rioter who is vandalizing and looting, more than he wants that person thrown in jail.

It might be scandalous to know that Jesus wants the people in the gay marriage to know that they are loved by God, more than whether civil laws say they can marry each other. It might be scandalous to know that Jesus wants the drug addict to be clean simply because he loves him or her. It might be scandalous to know that God loves the homeless person and wants them safe more than whether or not we need them off our streets.

² Barclay, pp 89-90

I'm not saying those issues aren't important. I'm saying that God's love for them is MORE important; more important than *anything* else.

So Jesus said, "The happiest people are the ones who don't get tripped up over how God loves the people that others think are undeserving." Even John the Baptist had to recalibrate his faith, because Jesus was doing things that John didn't expect, and wasn't entirely comfortable with. Maybe that's you too.

When you decide to follow Jesus, you agree that you must give up your preconceived ideas of who God is and how he works in this world. I don't care who you get your information from – even if it's from Facebook or the Pope or from Trump or Biden or from *me*. You must commit to follow Jesus and be willing to let go of what you *think* he should be and do. Hint: it also means you and I will have to do the very same things that Jesus does.

Okay, so after Jesus answers John's question and John's disciples get on their way, Jesus turns to his disciples and to the crowd and addresses them, and that's when we get...

2. Jesus' question.

Since Jesus' questions are the point of this sermon series and this one is the point of this sermon, let me re-read what it says. Why don't you stand up with me one more time:

After John's messengers were gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who dress in fashionable clothes and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it's written: 'Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you that no greater human being has ever been born than John. Yet whoever is least in God's kingdom is greater than he." (Luke 7:18-28, ceb)

Thank you; you can sit down again.

Okay, so first, know that Jesus' question, which he repeats, is a rhetorical one. Jesus knows that the answer should be obvious, so he actually gives us the answer. So of all the questions we've looked at in this series, this should be an easy one because Jesus is directly telling you the answer.

Jesus says, "Did you go out to see a stalk or reed swaying in the wind?" That's kind of a double metaphor. A stalk that bends with the wind, whichever way the wind blows, became a symbol for someone who is easily influenced by whatever comes along. Everyone knew that John wasn't like that. But also, reeds grow along river banks; they don't grow out in the desert. No one expected to see a reed out in the desert where John lived. So the fact that John was so devoted to God and being God's prophet that he lived out in the desert made this answer obvious – of course John wasn't like that.

On the other extreme, did they go out to see some fancy dressed, pampered, rich person in the desert? People who are after money and comfort and all the things the world has

to offer live in wealth, in castles and mansions and are all dressed up. John wasn't like that at all. If they went out there looking for those things, they were looking for the wrong thing. They were looking for a show, or a spectacle, to be entertained at an event.

Then, Jesus gives a powerful tribute to John in order to make sure the people knew how great a man John the Baptist is. Jesus says, "If you went out there, you saw a prophet, in fact, even greater than a prophet. John was THE prophet that the Old Testament told us would come and announce the arrival of the Messiah. John is the greatest human being ever born."

That's pretty high praise, coming from GOD himself! As some farmer friends of mine in Idaho used to say, "John is standing in some pretty tall cotton."

So let me help us apply this to today:

You who are being baptized: Why did you come here today? Did you come here to go through some ritual and have people cheer for you? Did you come here to check baptism off your list of spiritual accomplishments? Did you come here hoping to have some sort of religious feeling, or to try to get insurance into heaven, or because your parents or pastors told you to? If you came here for that, you've come here for the wrong thing.

Let me ask those who are family members and friends who came to watch the person be baptized. Are you here only because they asked you to? Are you here to see what goes on at a baptism? Did you hear that we celebrate and shout, and you are here to see what that's all about? Did you come out here to see some spectacle? Don't get me wrong - we're really glad you are here and showing your support. That's great. But if you came here for those things, you've come for the wrong thing.

Those of us who have been baptized: are you here because you just always come to church anyway? Are you here because you know how much fun we have at baptisms? Are you here to try and relive your glory days back when you were baptized? If you've come for any of those reasons, you've come for the wrong thing.

Maybe you are wondering what the right reason is? Well Jesus gives us the answer to that, too...

3. Join the *Kingdom*.

We are here to join Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus just said that John is the greatest human ever born up to that point, but then amazingly - Jesus says the very *least* person in the Kingdom of God is greater than John. John's greatness was not in where he lived or what he sacrificed or what he did or said; greatness comes from being totally committed to Jesus Christ and to living like a citizen of Christ's Kingdom. So here's the thing if you've come to join the Kingdom of God, if you've come to strengthen your citizenship in God's Kingdom, if you've come to be inspired and learn how to better be like Jesus in this world, if you are being baptized because you are sealing your

commitment to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God and his Christ – *then* you’ve come for the right reason.

Don’t follow just for the spectacle, for the show, for the good feelings, for the excitement, for the religious checklists or accomplishments. Follow Jesus, period. And as you do, know this: there will be some very challenging things that you will have to face. John got thrown in prison for it.

Jesus will probably not always behave in the ways you want him to. He will probably ask you to do things that you would rather not do. He will ask you to love and serve people you don’t want to. He will ask you to quit judging people even though you want to. He will ask you to live for him every single moment of every single day by loving him and loving people. To think like him, talk like him, act like him, and love and treat people like him.

If you want to make *that* commitment, you’ve come to the right place. I want us to pray about that before we baptize anybody.

Prayer