

Text: Luke 7:17-30 (see also Matthew 11:1-19, 10/24/2021)

Title: John the Baptist: Assurance and Praise

Truth: Jesus mercifully ministers to those in sincere doubt and promises greatness to those in His kingdom.

Date/Location: Sunday January 28, 2024 at FBC

Introduction

The flow of the narration is this:

1. The news about Jesus traveled throughout Judea and elsewhere.
2. John the Baptist was in prison and heard the news.
3. John asked questions which indicated his need for reassurance. The overall situation is confusing to him.
4. Jesus answers by demonstrating His power and giving a blessing to John because John has not departed from Christ.
5. Jesus speaks to the crowd about how great John the Baptist is, and how much greater are those who are least in the kingdom of God.
6. The crowd reacts with a typical two-fold response: Those who were baptized by John—even lowly tax collectors—declared that God was right. The Pharisees and lawyers rejected what Jesus said.

I. Background to John's Imprisonment

- A. Jesus knew about John being in prison from around the time of His temptation in the wilderness. John was not free for long after the baptism of Jesus. God arranged for Him to be set aside shortly thereafter.
- B. The whole story is told in a retrospective manner in Matthew 14:1-12. Herod imprisoned John for criticizing his marriage and calling him out on other evil that he had done (Luke 3:19). Herod had married his sister-in-law, brother Philip's wife. John protested that it was illegal for him to have her as wife. She was next of kin, and she belonged to his brother. He was so angry that he wanted to kill John. This shows how deep his illicit desire was toward his wife and says more about his lust than it does his love. Herodias was of the

same mind to kill John. Typical of sinners who are super-focused on themselves, they refused to heed righteous counsel.

- C. Yet Herod was constrained by his fear of the populace, who considered John to be a true prophet, like one of old. And a prophet he was. Herod knew this, because Mark 6:20 says that he feared John himself, because he knew John was holy. It might have been a case of some superstition that if he did not treat John well that he would be cursed. Of course, in his “fear” he overlooked the fact that he had put John in prison!
- D. Eventually circumstances came about in which there was an opportunity for him to carry out his desire, albeit at the urging of his stepdaughter, and even though he still had some misgivings about it in terms of his fear of John and of the political ramifications.
- E. How long John was in prison? Some suggest 6-10 months, others one year, others up to two years. The chronology is a bit murky to me because of the way in which the gospel writers arranged their text, not always in chronological fashion. A prime example is in Mark 6:14 where John’s arrest and murder are mentioned as having happened at some point in the past.

We can narrow in on the timing like this: Jesus began His public ministry sometime in 26 AD. Herod imprisoned John sometime in late 27 or early 28 AD. He sent messengers to Jesus near the end of that year. Shortly after inquiring, when the 12 were out on their mission, he was killed. Days or weeks later Herod was hearing reports of a great activity of preaching and healing around the nation and wondered if John was resurrected. This would mean John was in prison for around a year or slightly more.

II. John’s Inquiry, 7:17-19

- A. John also heard in prison about what Jesus was doing, but the psychological and physical pressures of prison life, the injustice of the situation, the expectation of impending death, the rejection by many people of Jesus’s ministry, etc. combined to cause him to doubt that Jesus was really the Coming One. Maybe he was suffering serious depression, perhaps malnutrition or other illness,

etc. But he was the one who had pointed out the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; he had baptized Jesus; he had seen the dove come down and light on him.

- B. Something was wrong. Perhaps John feels confused, and that there was someone else coming from God. John had been preaching that the coming One would baptize with the Spirit and fire. He would bring judgment to the brood of vipers, and anyone who would not repent. Then Jesus came, and John thought the judgment and kingdom would begin to unfold. But it did not. There was something else going on. Jesus was still offering the kingdom but not bringing it; He was still calling for repentance, but many people were not repenting. He was healing multitudes of people of their diseases. He was supposed to be king, but the Romans were still in power. Jewish leaders rejected Jesus. Many of the people did too.

John should not be waiting in jail this long, nor be at the doorstep of death for his righteous preaching. Rather, maybe he thought a triumphant Jesus should rescue him and save the people and the nation. Like the prophets who suffered before him, he had trouble understanding the divine plan in its arrangement of the sufferings of Christ and the glory to follow.

Perhaps part of the problem in his mind was that the Lord was doing compassionate things, helping centurions, raising dead people, and the like, instead of pouring out judgment on sinners.

His situation is akin to ours—particularly when something bad happens to us or God is not doing what we think He should be doing. When we see vexing things happening in the world, we ask, “How long, O Lord?” “Why are you letting it happen like this?”

- C. Consequently, John sent to ask Jesus if He really was the promised One to come, or if there was another.
- D. We could take the role of critic and say that this is quite a weakness for a man of the stature of John, the greatest to ever live. He was even a prophet! But let me encourage you to be humble, brother and sister. He was a man of like nature with us, just like Elijah was (James 5:17). Elijah had at least one major bout of “prophetic depression” (1 Kings 19:4). He also was under threat

of death. Credible death threats put an enormous amount of pressure on a person.

E. Two things from this that we need to note. **First**, even the strongest Christians have seasons of doubt. We cannot draw together all the points of data that we are seeing and make sense of them. Maybe we are worn down and easily discouraged. Even the mightiest among us falter. Just because you have difficult feelings about this or that doctrine, or situation, or the world seems very gloomy and the difficulties never ending...do not throw away your confidence. We firmly believe that God will make things clear later.

Second, when John faced doubt, what did He do? He sent for help from the Lord Himself. When you face grinding doubts, nagging fears, lack of understanding, go to Jesus in prayer. Go to His word where He wrote about these things. Go to other Christians who will point you get to Jesus when you feel too dark to go there yourself. This is absolutely the best way to manage doubts. You are not going to succeed by yourself, nor by going to secular sources! Ask Him to show you; teach you; give you wisdom; lead and guide you. He will do it.

III. Jesus's Answer to John, 7:20-23

- A. Jesus instructed the disciples of John to return and tell them what they were observing with their own eyes. Jesus worked miracles in the sight of John's disciples so that they could be eyewitnesses of these marvels and tell John what they saw.
- B. Their report: The blind see. The deaf hear. The dead live. The lame leap. The dumb speak. Sinners are forgiven! People with leprosy are healed. Those with illness, affliction, and demon possession are healed. And He preached the good news to the poor (in spirit).

The combination of miraculous activities demonstrates that the One doing those activities is more than Moses, beyond Elijah, exceeding Elisha, or anyone else who has come before. He is the fulfillment of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He is the one who will fulfill Isaiah 35:4-6, and other Isaiah prophecies. There is far more to him than mere judgment. He exercises abundant mercy and gives aid to the children of Abraham.

C. Jesus then pronounced a blessing upon John, and others like him who were not offended at the person and message of Jesus. This reminds me of the blessing of John 20:29.

Blessed are *you*, too, dear one, if you embrace Jesus Christ and are not offended at his teaching. There are plenty of people who fall on that stone of stumbling (Romans 9:32-33); who are offended at the simple gospel message of Christ (Luke 2:34); who think it foolish to believe in a man from Nazareth who died on a Roman cross (1 Cor. 1:18). But blessed are those who believe in Him!

IV. Jesus's Explanation to the Crowds, 7:24-28

A. John would undoubtedly be encouraged by the report brought by his disciples. But God does not guarantee a soft landing for us in this life. John still was going to be martyred because He was a man of God and Herod was a vile king. The upcoming words of Jesus feel like a pre-eulogy before the murder of the Baptizer.

B. The Lord asked the crowds what they saw in John the Baptist. I understand the shaken reed to refer not to an actual reed plant, but as a comparison of John to a reed waving in the wind. Was he shaken by the fear of man—like a reed blowing in the wind? Did he bow to and for with every popular thought, every wind of doctrine, every new idea? Not at all. Was he a soft man, a man of royalty, a wealthy man of renown? No there too. He was dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt and ate locusts and wild honey. He was the forerunner not only of Jesus, but also of the modern picture of a strange prophet. Only in this case, he was not strange. He was bringing a message that many people in Israel respected. They did not go out to see a king. They went out to hear from someone they needed to hear from.

C. Jesus then asked another rhetorical question: did you see in John a prophet? Indeed, Jesus says, you did. This is Jesus's evaluation of John, not just the opinion of the crowds. He said that John was a prophet and more. He was a special messenger just like the one who was prophesied in Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6—the last book of the Old Testament, as well as Isaiah 40:3. He was the way-preparer.

- D. In fact, John was the greatest man to that time. Not because he was wealthy or powerful, but because He was holy and dedicated to God, and because he was a servant (Matt. 20:26, 23:11; Luke 22:26). He conducted his mission faithfully. He was a prophet who then saw the fulfillment of what he prophesied! He had a great office and a great privilege. This does not diminish the OT prophets. It just says there was someone even more significant, someone even closer to the Lord.
- E. Surprisingly, the Lord Jesus says that all the people of God who enter and enjoy the kingdom of Christ will be even greater than John! The greatness of the greatest servants of God in this phase of life will pale in comparison to what will be possible in God's kingdom in terms of service and seeing God's wonders.

Think of that for yourself—you too can be great in the sight of God. If you have spiritual ears, listen. It is critical to hear what John preached and what Jesus says. Then, be obedient, even if you experience doubting from time to time.

V. Response of the People, 7:29-30

- A. Many people in the audience heard Jesus and took what He said positively. *Even the tax collectors* could see that what Jesus was saying was true and right. The fact that the lowest of the low in that culture figured it out is telling. They were baptized by John and continued to hear Jesus's message with some level of receptivity.

The text says that they "justified God." This does not mean that they *made* God right, but that they recognized God *was* right. They declared Him righteous.

When God declares a sinner to be righteous, He imputes to that sinner the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Then it can be truly said that the person is righteous in his/her standing before God. But when someone "justifies God" there is no such transfer of righteousness because God has that already inherently.

- B. On the other hand, the Pharisees and experts in the Law rejected what Jesus said. Notice how the text says it: they rejected the will of God for themselves. God's will was for them—and is for us—

abundantly clear. They were to repent and believe in the King. They were to receive baptism to demonstrate their repentant faith. They were to do works befitting righteousness. But they refused what Jesus taught and what John taught. They had their own program, and they were not going to be moved from it.

C. I never thought of this before: those who were baptized by John responded well to Jesus; those who were not baptized by John responded badly. I understand that two-fold fact this way: John's ministry had been effective. He *had* prepared the hearts of many to receive the Lord. But of course, not everyone was receptive to John, and being of that mindset, of course they would not embrace what Jesus was saying. John truly went ahead of Jesus and prepared the way.

These things would most certainly encourage John if he knew them. I do not know if he ever found out in this life what Jesus said about him after John's messengers left. He has his reward now.

Conclusion

Do you recognize God is right? And you are wrong? If so, you are right now ready to turn to Jesus and be saved.

If you have doubts about Jesus, look carefully at the historical record of what He did. Connect it back to the prophecies about the Messiah and see how they were fulfilled in Him. Pray to God. Look at His words. Trust that Jesus will mercifully answer your need as He did for John the Baptist. He will not necessarily give you a better situation immediately, but He will strengthen your faith to keep going!

And know that the praise you look for is not the praise of men (John 12:43), but the praise of the Son of God (like Romans 2:29). He will not forget all that you do for Him (Heb. 6:10). I trust that you do serve Him, not just in theory but in practice.

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