

Expectations and Doubts

Luke 7:18-35

INTRO & REVIEW

Ch. 6 - Sermon on the Plain (beatitudes, woes, radical instructions...)

Ch. 7 - Jesus heals the servant of a Centurion, and raises the dead son of a widow in a town called Nain

THIS MORNING

In the next section of Luke's gospel, Luke is going to return to a familiar theme, the theme of doubt...

If you remember from the first sermon in our Luke series, Luke gives the main reason for his writing the gospel in the opening verses of chapter 1...

Luke 1:1-4

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, **2** just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, **3** it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, **4** that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

So, Luke wanted to put together an orderly account of the life of Jesus, his teachings and miracles, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and then with the book of Acts an account of the early days of the church. And he does all of this so that Theophilus, and by extension anyone else who reads it, will grow in their certainty about the identity of Jesus.

We mentioned in that first sermon, that it is absolutely normal to face doubts about Jesus. And though it is not healthy or mature to celebrate those doubts, it is right and healthy to acknowledge them. It is good to look into them, take them to God, pray for the strong faith we ought to have. Again, some level or season of doubt is a normal experience for most honest Christians.

But in our text this morning doubt is expressed not by a seemingly outsider to the life and ministry of Jesus, but from an unlikely doubter, John the Baptist...

Luke 7:18-19

18 The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, **19** calling 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?”

So the context here is, John the Baptist is in prison. If you remember from chapter 3, John, who was characterized by bold preaching, calling sinners to repentance, has not shied away from calling even the king to repentance. King Herod married his brother's wife and is in general not a great guy, John speaks out against him and because there is no first amendment in Galilee, John is thrown in prison. So, now in chapter 7, John's still there.

John's disciples would, of course, visit him, keep him updated on the ministry and especially give him news about Jesus. But on this occasion, John decides he wants to communicate with Jesus and he sends two of his disciples to him with an incredibly important question, “Are you really the promised Messiah that we've all been waiting for? Are you really who you say you are? Are you really who I thought you were?”

Sitting in a dungeon somewhere, John has a moment of doubt.

And this really is surprising. Remember who John the Baptist was. He was not an obscure character in the story of Jesus. John's mother, Elizabeth, miraculously conceived him in her old age after being barren her whole life. John was set apart for a ministry that had been prophesied generations earlier, to be the forerunner of the coming Messiah, Jesus, and he first fulfills that while in his mother's womb. John certainly did not care what other people thought about him, living in the wilderness, eating a strange diet, and boldly telling people that they need to repent and be baptized because judgment is coming. John announced to the crowds as Jesus shows up, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” He had the privilege of baptizing Jesus, seeing the Spirit descend on Him and presumably hearing the voice of God say, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (John 1:31-34).

If there is anyone who should have a rock solid faith, it ought to be this divinely chosen prophet who had this incredible experience with Jesus himself. But now, that faith that seemed so unshakable, shakes.

And so we wonder, why? Why now? After all that he saw, all that he heard, after seeming so confident in Jesus, why does he now doubt?

It's safe to say that John probably held some wrong expectations about Jesus.

The common assumption of the day was that the prophesied Messiah who was to come was going to come as a victorious King. He was going to show up with judgment and overthrow oppressive Rome and reestablish the kingdom of Israel once and for all. John probably held that belief. You can hear his emphasis on impending judgment in his sermon in Luke 3, when he warns the people....

Luke 3:9
“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees...”

He is in effect saying, “Judgment is here, because the Judge is here.”

So, John is in prison and hears the reports that Jesus is doing some great things, but he’s not bringing judgment. He’s hardly confronting Rome and establishing himself as the king as many thought the coming Messiah would do.

Jesus seems to be acting differently than what was expected of him.

Plus, if I’m in John’s shoes, I know myself, I would be experiencing a bit of envy. Jesus is doing some great things, but it’s all in other people’s lives. Sick people are being healed, blind people are receiving their sight, the dead are being raised, but me, I’m in prison. I mean, I’d be thinking to myself, “I’m not the Messiah, I get that...he must increase and I must decrease...but there were prophecies about me too. I did hard things for God. I stood up for truth. I called people to repentance. I lived a separate life. And now my reward seems to be suffering in prison. Something seems off here.”

So, John is seemingly disappointed in the ministry of Jesus, he’s disappointed in his own life circumstances, and it causes him to doubt Jesus.

The truth is that many of us have been here. Maybe early on in our faith we were excited about what we experienced in the gospel, excited for our new life in Christ, eager to share with others the good news, passionate about the things of God. Things weren’t perfect but there was a new hope that was found because now we had Jesus.

But somewhere in the course of life, we find ourselves less excited about Jesus and the church, less eager to share the gospel, less passionate to serve, all because we realized life is still really hard. And if we experience this, it tells us that there was an assumption that Jesus would make things easier and when he didn’t, our faith that was once so solid, began to shake a bit. We wonder to ourselves, maybe Jesus isn’t who he says he is because he hasn’t done for me what I expected him to do. And we ask, like John, Jesus are you really the one I’ve been waiting for? Are you really the one I need or should I look for another?

This experience of John reminds us of a very important truth for our Christian lives. **Any kind of disappointments we experience with Jesus reveal not a flaw in his character but a flaw in our expectations.**

The work of Jesus did not fail John. John’s expectations of Jesus failed John. Because they were incorrect expectations.

It is the same for us. We all have some kind of theology, assumptions about who God is and what he does. How relates to the world and how he works in our lives. And sometimes that theology that we hold is simply wrong. And when our expectations about the Christian life don’t match what we experience, we end up questioning God as if he let us down.

Just one common example is the belief in a **Prosperity Jesus**. Some wrongly expect Jesus to come and make everything perfect in this life. Some teach, come to Jesus and he will give you health, wealth, and prosperity. Jesus will make life easier not harder. And so some live with that kind of expectation for their Christian life. But then they get sick, or experience financial struggles, or they lose a job, or their relationships continue to struggle and all of a sudden their faith is shaken. Why? Because their faith was founded on incorrect beliefs and expectations of God.

And again, this is a flaw in our expectations, and not a flaw in God's character.

Jesus is the One who is sinless, so he hasn't sinned against us. He is the One who has promised to never leave us nor forsake us, so he has not walked out on this relationship. He is the One who has come to give us life and life abundant. Again any disappointment we feel means we have wrong assumptions and beliefs about our circumstances, Jesus' promises, or God's character. The flaw is with us, not him.

So John, like many in his day, has some wrong expectations of the life and ministry of Jesus, so he doubts. But I want us to notice, John the Baptist doubts *toward* Jesus. In his moment of doubt he is not moving away from Jesus, he moves in even from prison to examine him more closely. He goes to him for clarity and guidance. That is good for us to do as well. In moments of wavering faith we doubt toward God, go to him with your doubts, seek clarity from him.

Look at Jesus' response to John's disciples...

Luke 7:20-23

20 And 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?'" **21** In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. **22** 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. **23** And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

So in response to the question of John, Jesus heals many people. He tells the disciples to go back and report to John what you've seen but we need to catch Jesus' answer is alluding to Old Testament passages about the prophesied coming Redeemer.

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." Each of those miracles are spoken of about the coming Messiah in Isaiah, a text that John would have been familiar with.

-Isaiah 29 says the deaf will hear, the blind shall see.

-Isaiah 35 says that eyes will be opened and ears will be unstopped.

-Isaiah 26 says that the dead will live again.

-Isaiah 61 says that good news will be preached to the poor.

And all of these are true in the ministry of Jesus.

Without it sounding snarky or condescending, Jesus' reply for John is, read your Bible. Go back and look at what the Scriptures say about me and compare *that* with my life and ministry rather than comparing your *expectations* of me with me.

The same is true for us today. When in our lives our faith is shaken because things seem different than what we expected the answer is to go back to Scripture and re-align our expectations with God's revealed truth.

John Calvin writes about this in his Institutes, calling out people for worshipping a god of their imagination rather than God as he has been revealed. He doesn't hold back either...

*"Mingled vanity and pride appear in this, that when miserable men do seek after God, instead of ascending higher than themselves as they ought to do, they measure him by their own carnal stupidity, and neglecting solid inquiry, fly off to indulge their curiosity in vain speculation. Hence, they do not conceive of him in the character in which he is manifested, but imagine him to be whatever their own rashness has devised...With such an idea of God, nothing which they may attempt to offer in the way of worship or obedience can have any value in his sight, because it is not him they worship, but, instead of him, the dream and figment of their own heart."*¹

He would go on and say that many times rather than holding a distinctly biblical, Christian faith many hold nothing more than a *"vague and wandering opinion of Deity."*²

So, what do we do? As Calvin said, we must *"ascend higher than ourselves."*

J.I. Packer explained, *"We cannot know Him unless He speaks and tells us about Himself. But in fact He has spoken. He has spoken to and through His prophets and apostles, and He has spoken in the words and deeds of His own Son. Through this revelation, which is made available to us in Holy Scripture, we may form a true notion of God; without it we never can."*³

What should we do when we experience confusion about Jesus, disappointments in our relationship with him or our experience of the Christian life? We go back to God's revelation of himself found in Scripture and conform our understanding and expectations to that.

Then in verse 23, Jesus gives another beatitude, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." That is another allusion to a passage in Isaiah. Isaiah 8 the prophet says that the Lord will be a rock of offense and a stone of stumbling to many. And Je-

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.1.

² *Ibid.*, 1.4.3.

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 43.

Jesus is saying, for the one who won't stumble over their false expectations of me, that person will be blessed.

If you are able to come to Jesus and accept him for who he is without trying to force him into who you'd prefer him to be, you will be blessed, because you will come to truly know the Son of God.

Luke 7:24-28

24 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?"

25 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. **26** What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

27 This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'

28 I 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."

So here, Jesus talks about John to the crowd, almost defending him to the crowd. He's saying, despite a moment of doubt, John isn't a reed shaking in the wind. He's not soft. He has stood up for truth in the face of authority and now is in the opposite place of the kings' courts, he's in prison. He says John is the prophet who was prophesied in the OT.

In fact, John is the greatest prophet of them all. Among those born of women, none is greater than John.

The truth is that weariness and discouragement was experienced by other OT prophets as well. Jeremiah was the "weeping prophet" and he questioned the Lord (Jer. 12) and would say "woe is me" (Jer. 15:10). Of course, Jonah would question the Lord and his work to relent against Ninevah. And Jesus here hasn't responded with harsh words against John but rather shown him mercy and defended him with those who heard this conversation.

And this should be our response as well with those who are experiencing some doubt or uncertainty in their faith.

Jude 23

And have mercy on those who doubt.

Be patient. Walk alongside them. Help them grow in their understanding of what Scripture says about Jesus, what Scripture says about the Christian life, what Scripture says to expect in this life and what to expect in the life to come.

So Jesus defends John and says he is the greatest of all men born to women, however, "the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

What he means is that we, now on this side of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are in a more privileged place in salvation history in that we have a fuller understanding of the gospel. And beyond that, we are under the new covenant in Christ's blood, the Bible calling it a "better covenant" (Heb. 8:1, 6). This statement by Jesus was not given to diminish John, but to exalt the privilege of being partakers of the kingdom of God. We are extremely blessed to be welcomed into God's people and to have him as our king.

Luke 7:29-30

29 (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 see the only two possible responses to Jesus. There were some who who heard the message of Jesus, his teachings on the kingdom of God, and "declared God just," meaning they agreed with God about their need to repent and turn in faith to him. They said I agree with God, I agree with his assessment of my sinful condition, I might not like the assessment, nonetheless, it is true. And so they repent and in faith turn to Jesus for salvation.

However there are others, Luke specifically pointing out the Pharisees and lawyers, these were the religious professionals of the day, that rather than declaring God just, they "rejected the purpose of God for themselves." In other words, they rejected the purpose of their existence, to know God, to be in relationship with him, to enjoy him forever through repentance and faith. They preferred to rely on their own works, their own righteousness, believing that they were good enough to measure up to the standard of God's holiness. But catch here, that in rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting God.

And to illustrate their attitude, Jesus goes on...

Luke 7:31-35

31 "To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?

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."

33 For 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!' **35** Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

Jesus' illustration centers on a bunch of children playing in the marketplace. And if you've been around kids at all, you know that sometimes they just don't get along. Sometimes they cannot agree on what to play. I have three daughters and they will want to play together but sometimes they can't decide together and so instead of playing they bicker with one another.

In this illustration some kids are playing something fun and festive, probably a wedding, but there are some kids that just don't want to play that with them. So, they say ok, we can play something else like a funeral procession. These are all rituals kids would have seen in the city streets. And those same kids who didn't want to play wedding, don't want to play funeral either. They'd rather be by themselves than play with the other kids. So they say to them, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep." It doesn't matter what we play, you don't want to be a part of it.

What does Jesus mean by this? He is speaking of the spiritual condition of those who have rejected his grace. He is saying they are always looking for someone or something else to satisfy themselves. It did not matter who preached the gospel to them, they would always refuse to turn to God in repentance.

So first, John the Baptist came preaching to them, telling them of coming judgment. He was playing funeral, so to speak, not eating, not drinking, and the Pharisees looked at him and said he is crazy, he is demon-possessed. Who is he to tell us that we need to repent?! They were offended by the exclusivity of the gospel message.

But then came Jesus, and the Pharisees didn't want him either. Jesus, unlike John, had a ministry characterized by spending time with sinners and outcasts, feasting with them. Rather than a funeral, Jesus was playing wedding, so to speak. And though it was different than John's ministry, the Pharisees didn't like Jesus either. They were offended by the inclusivity of the gospel message.

Ultimately the Pharisees rejected the grace of God because of their self-righteousness. And that is what self-righteousness does, it makes excuses for not accepting the grace that is found in the gospel. It will cause you to reject Jesus by either hating the calls for you to repent or hating the forgiveness that is offered to others. Because of self-righteousness you will say both, "I don't need grace" and "others don't deserve grace."

And so, the self-righteous might look like they are interested in Jesus, curious about him and his message, but ultimately it does not matter what intellectual questions they need answered, their final barrier is a heart that will not submit to their need for a Savior.

And Jesus finishes this encounter by saying, "wisdom justified by all her children." In other words, wisdom is seen in the fruit that is borne in their lives. Eventually we will see who is truly wise, those who see and admit their need for forgiveness or those who are convinced that they can save themselves.

CONCLUSION

What can we walk away with from this passage?

First, we need to be aware that we all have incorrect expectations and beliefs about God and the Christian life and how we handle those moments when our expectations aren't met will tell us something about our faith. Will we lean toward God, seeking to know him better, using those moments to grow in biblical faith? Will we humble our-

selves and submit our expectations to Scripture? Or, will we walk away and look for another?

Second, God has demonstrated great patience with us in our doubts. We ought to walk patiently with others who experience confusion or disappointment in their Christian life. Let's seek to counsel them well, help them by reminding them of what Scripture says.

Third, if you are not a Christian this morning, if there's never been a time in your life where you've repented of your sins, turned away from your sin and turned to Christ, you need to be honest as to why? You might be here because you have questions, and that is great. We are thrilled you are here, we want to help answer your questions as best as possible, but there needs to be a moment of honesty and ask whether you haven't put your faith in Christ simply because you don't want to admit your need for him.

The bad news is that you cannot be righteous enough for a relationship with a holy God. The good news is that you don't need to be righteous enough. Jesus lived the perfect life you could not, and died on the cross for the sins of his people. And now by repentant faith in his finished work God extends his grace to us, covering our sin and our self-righteousness.

So, are you disappointed or confused in your Christian life this morning? Look to Jesus, go to Scripture, ask for help in understanding him better.

Do you need salvation this morning? Look to Jesus, go to Scripture, learn more about the glorious and gracious Savior he is and can be for you.

VERSES

Luke 1:1-4

Luke 7:18-19

Luke 3:9
Luke 7:20-23
Luke 7:24-28
Jude 23
Luke 7:29-30
Luke 7:31-35

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What false expectations about God, Jesus, or Christianity has been exposed in your life?
2. Where did those expectations or assumptions come from?
3. How did that affect your faith?
4. How did you navigate those moments of doubt?
5. How would the gospel encourage us to walk patiently with people experiencing doubt?