

SETTLING DOUBTS ABOUT JESUS

Luke 7:18–35

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“John’s disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’ When the men came to Jesus, they said, ‘John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”’ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.’

After John’s messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: ‘What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.) ‘To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

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we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.” For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” But wisdom is proved right by all her children”” (Luke 7:18–35, NIV).

There are times when we may be disappointed with Jesus. Times when life does not appear to be working out like we would want and He doesn’t seem to be using His power to change things for us. John the Baptist is at such a time. He is disappointed in Jesus.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had a time in your life as a Christian when you have been disappointed in Jesus. There’s a gospel song that says, “There is no disappointment in Jesus.” But sometimes there are moments when we as human beings question why God is doing something the way He is doing it and we’re disappointed.

I think the time I would identify most in my life as being disappointed with God’s answer to prayers that were being offered was about fifteen years ago, with a young man named Cricket. Cricket had been a young person in my youth group when I was a youth pastor and associate pastor at Central Assembly of God in Springfield, Missouri. Cricket was everything you’d ever want a teenage boy to be—a dynamic, young leader. Popular with his peers, well respected by adults, very musically inclined—a leader. His father, a missionary to the Belgian Congo, had been martyred and his body had been thrown to the crocodiles by the rebels. His mother and the other children had come home after that event. Cricket, one weekend, had gone down to Arkansas with some other kids from the youth group to build a log cabin. While working on the log cabin, two guys—Cricket on one end and one of his friends on the other—were carrying the log to its place in the cabin and they had it balanced on their shoulders. On the count of three, they were to drop the log. Somehow, there was a misfire in the count and the log, instead of

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being dropped cleanly, came down on the back of Cricket's skull. He was unconscious. He was taken to a hospital. Ultimately, weeks later, he was transferred to the hospital in Springfield, Missouri. He was not coming out of the coma. I visited him many times. His family was with him constantly. We were praying and singing to him, asking the Lord to bring this young man out of this coma condition.

Kathryn Kuhlman was scheduled to come to our church. We really felt that when Kathryn came, Cricket—if he could get to the meeting—would be healed. Extreme efforts were taken to get him to the meeting. I'll never forget standing at the back of that 2,300 seat sanctuary watching as, during the course of the meeting, the ambulance unloaded the stretcher with all his life support systems and respiratory systems attached and brought him in the vestibule area of Central Assembly; praying somehow that during the meeting there might be the gift of healing given to him. But when the meeting closed and the benediction had been given, Cricket left that meeting the same way he had come in. He was not healed and, in fact, several months later he passed away.

I was at Evangel College the next day. There had been many healings that day in the Kathryn Kuhlman meeting. One of the Evangel students was recounting to me that the previous week he had broken his little toe and that he had been unable to place any weight on that foot without suffering great pain. During the Kathryn Kuhlman meeting, while she was preaching, suddenly he realized that his toe was being made well and he put pressure on it and, indeed, there was no pain; and after the meeting, he'd stomped on it a number of times and determined that it had been made well. And indeed it had been.

I was unable to rejoice with my young brother when he shared that testimony. Instead, I was very angry with God. The power that healed a boy's toe certainly could have been turned instead, it

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seemed to me, with greater usefulness and purpose toward Cricket, who was lying critically ill in the back of the sanctuary. I struggled with God for many months over the fact that I knew He had the power to heal Cricket and yet Cricket was not healed, and a kid with a little toe that would have healed on its own natural time and order was instead sharing his testimony with me.

I don't know if you've ever had an experience like that, but if you have, you can immediately identify with John the Baptist and the problem we see him encountering as we unfold this Scripture today.

John the Baptist is at a time when he is disappointed with Jesus. Things are not working out as John feels they should be working out.

I. There are several things that would lead us to suggest why John was disappointed with Jesus and why we sometimes get disappointed with Jesus.

A. First thing, John has every right to feel disappointed because God has not rewarded him for doing what was right. If ever a man was right, lived right, talked right, walked right, spoke right, it was John the Baptist. His entire life had been given over to the Lord. He was a forerunner of the Messiah. He preached righteousness and he even took on denouncing King Herod for having wooed Herod's brother's wife and marrying her. John rebuked the king, and for his effort, he had been rewarded with prison. John was not rewarded for doing what was right.

That had to contribute to his disappointment, even as it contributes to ours when we feel like we have done what was right—we've tithed or we've made a right moral choice or we've not taken the easy path. We've served God and then somehow, a reversal comes to our fortunes, to our economics, to our health.

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B. Another reason John had been disappointed was that, I'm certain; he had to be going through a lot of self-doubt. Was his ministry in vain? Had he misheard the voice of God? Had he been consecrated from his mother's womb to the Lord in vain? Was, indeed, Jesus not the Messiah? When people are going through difficulty, we tend to have a lot of self-doubts about whether our life is really worthwhile, whether what we are really counts for anything, or amounts to anything.

C. A third reason John had for feeling disappointed is the demoralizing nature of his imprisonment. It is difficult to be shut up. Here a man who loved to roam the Judean wilderness freely was incarcerated. It's no fun being locked up. It's no fun being unable to change the circumstances that have locked you up. It's not prison, which makes a prison. It is circumstances that imprison us, which we wish could change and unravel and turn around. And they do not. And we're disappointed at such times.

Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, who invaded Judea in 722 B.C. and shut up Hezekiah and Jerusalem in a siege, says in an inscription in his annals, "I shut up Hezekiah like a bird in cage." I'm sure John the Baptist had that feeling. Maybe you're here this morning with that feeling—shut up like a bird in a cage.

D. The fourth reason for John's disappointment with Jesus, and the one that's closest to the text that is here, is that Jesus was not acting like John thought He should. John had a very Old Testament picture of the Messiah. That, when Messiah came, He would produce two results: The first result would be an unparalleled age of blessing for those whose faith was in God; the second was that, when Messiah came, He would bring judgment upon all who resisted God.

John speaks of the ministry of the Messiah in these terms: When the Pharisees come out to him as he is baptizing in the Jordan, in Luke 3:7 he says, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" He knew that the Messiah would bring the day of wrath. He says,

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in 3:9, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” He expected Jesus to be cutting down the backslidden and the wayward and the rebellious in Israel and throwing them into the fire of His judgment. He preached that the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

We Pentecostals have frequently misinterpreted that phrase—baptism with fire, as though it had to do with tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost and being energized by the Spirit. For John, it meant something entirely different. To be baptized with the Spirit was this age of blessing. But to be baptized with fire was the age of judgment. “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). That’s the baptism of fire that John was looking for. The Messiah would come and He would winnow and judge.

Now, as John sits in prison, he is hearing about Jesus’ miracles. But where is His judgment? Where are the plans to replace Herod? Where are the plans to get the Romans out of the region? Where are the plans to set up the physical throne of David? Where are the plans to cleanse the backslidden, corrupt religious establishment? So John is troubled. “Is Jesus the one?” he sends messengers to ask.

Jesus, from John’s point of view, didn’t appear to be doing anything. And John was troubled about that. That is what I suppose often troubles us when we’re going through difficulties in our life. God appears to be sitting on His throne with His hands tied behind His back.

Several months ago, I read James Michener’s book *Space*. He has a style of writing through which he tells fictional stories along with a lot of real data. There’s a point in the book where one of the figures in the novel, sort of a NASA kind of administrator, is out for a time of reflection. He’s having trouble at home with his boys and he’s wondering if his life has been worthwhile.

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He, by himself, begins to think about all the complexity of space, which had been his lifelong vocation. As he sits there with his journal thinking, he records this profound thought: “I am sitting on piece of earth 34 30 degrees north, which means, I’m spinning west to east at a rate of 860 miles per hour. At the same time, my earth is moving around the sun at 66,661 miles an hour. And my sun is carrying itself and its planets toward the star Vega at something like 31,000 miles an hour. Our sun and Vega move around the galaxy at the blinding speed of 700,000 miles per hour. And the galaxy itself rotates at 559,359 miles an hour. But that’s not all. Our galaxy moves in relation to all other galaxies, as they rush through the universe at a speed faster than one million miles an hour. So while I sit here absolutely still, I am moving in six wildly different directions at an accumulated speed of 2.5 million miles an hour. So I can never be motionless. I’m always traveling at incomprehensible speeds and it’s all happening in real time.” Next time you think God isn’t doing anything, remember that, in the midst of your sitting still, you are rotating wildly in six different directions, moving 2.5 million miles per hour.

II. What is Jesus’ answer to John’s doubt? And what is His answer to our doubt? Jesus has three answers that He gives to John.

A. First is found in 18–23. He simply continues doing what He’s been doing. He doesn’t change His agenda because of John’s implicit criticism of Him. In fact, when John’s messengers come with the question, the text specifically says that Jesus went about healing. What was He doing? He was replying with action, not with words. Saying, “John has heard about My miracles and the miracles are continuing.” He does not change His agenda to match our expectation of what He should be doing. That’s what the sovereignty of God is all about, that He doesn’t change His agenda always to simply match our expectations. Sometimes, in His graciousness, He does. When He appears to us to have changed His agenda, it’s the will of the Lord to give us

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something very splendid, a miracle, a change of circumstances. But here, in John's case, He does not become the judge that John is looking for. He goes on healing.

He replies to John in a language they can understand; because John was a prophet who prophesied out of Isaiah. So Jesus uses language out of Isaiah 35:5–6 and Isaiah 61:1, which talk about the healing work of the Messiah and the preaching of the gospel to the poor. John the Baptist had said of Jesus, "Look, the Lamb of God," and Jesus is saying to him, "John, you've preached from Isaiah, now hear the words back from Isaiah that you can understand." I send My word to you. Yes, implicit in that word of Jesus is the acknowledgment that John need not look for anyone else. He is the Messiah.

We look at Jesus' activity then and now and say, "What a strange way to handle injustice." Is it not the case that He who has the power to heal the sick and raise the dead could also turn that power toward John and allow him to be released from prison? Why does He use his power in one dimension and not in another? Why doesn't Jesus just all at once cure all the suffering and the injustice and the terrible intolerance and awfulness that are a part of the human experience of life?

I struggled with that question. There are some things in Jesus that help us understand why He continues doing what He is doing and why He isn't changing everything right now. One of the things that makes it tolerable—in regard to Jesus' power—and makes it possible for us to be patient with His way of giving justice, is the fact that He Himself becomes a victim. He has not used His miracle power to soften His own bed. He takes the injustice in His own life that others are experiencing.

The story is told that a large group of people beyond the grave were gathered to protest to God about human suffering. They decided to select from their midst a delegation who would take a

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protest to God. In the delegation, they placed a Jew with a tattoo number on his arm from a concentration camp, a black who had been lynched, an untouchable from India, an illegitimate, a person from Hiroshima and a Siberian slave camp-worker. The delegation felt that, if God were going to exercise His prerogative to one day judge the earth, He should first be qualified to judge. And in order to be qualified to judge, He had to endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God would be sentenced to live on earth as a human being. But, because He was God, they wanted to make sure they set certain safeguards so He wouldn't use His divine powers to protect Himself. So they established these safeguards. Let Him be born a member of a despised race—a Jew. Let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted so that He would grow up with a stigma. Let Him champion a cause so right and so just that it would bring down against Him the might and the power of the establishment. Let Him try to describe what no one else has ever seen or tasted or heard or smelled. Let Him try to communicate God to people. Let Him be betrayed by His dearest friends. Let Him be indicted on false charges. Let Him be tried before a prejudiced jury and sentenced by a cowardly judge. Let Him see what it is like to be terribly alone and naked and completely abandoned by every living thing, including God. Let Him be tortured and let Him die. Let Him die a slow and agonizing death. When the group had finished their plan to present to God, there was a long silence and no one uttered a word. No one moved, for suddenly everyone knew God had already served His sentence.

Part of understanding the mystery of Jesus' handling of suffering is to know, first of all, that He Himself became a victim. But that's not sufficient to know the complete story of how He's handling suffering and why He's not setting everything straight, because the Gospels also tell us that John was right. The Messiah is going to establish justice and rule and reign. What John didn't see was the period of time between His coming in blessing and His coming in judgment.

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This week, all over the world, we're celebrating the end of World War II, forty years since World War II ended. Probably two thirds of this crowd was not alive at the end of World War II. June 6, 1944, marked a very important day on the road to ending World War II. It was D-Day, when the Allies landed in full force under General Eisenhower on the Normandy Beaches. The war went on for eleven more months until victory in Europe was proclaimed on May 8, 1945. The armistice was signed—on May 8. The older generation has more easily remembered the day for D-Day than the date for VE Day and until the last few years, when VE Day became bigger, it used to be that the big day was D-Day. D-Day was so big because it marked the turning of the war. Historians look back and say that's when the war was won. General Rommel, the Desert Fox, knew that when the Allies were successful at Normandy, the war was over, and urged Hitler to conclude the war. When Hitler didn't, Rommel ultimately committed suicide. But between D-Day, June 6, 1944, and May 8, 1945, there were tremendous casualties; more so than any other period of the war. Tremendous loss of life and devastation of property. But historically, the world says the war was won when D-Day was successful. That little story helps me understand the mission of Jesus, because His first coming—in Galilee and the cross and His resurrection—was D-Day. He landed. The war still goes on, injustice still continues, but be assured that because D-Day was successful; Victory Day is around the corner. He will rule until He has placed all enemies under His feet. Death, the devil, and sin will be placed physically under His feet. We, as Christians, know the tide has turned because we look at Calvary and because we look at the resurrection of Jesus. We also have an answer to suffering in that in the meantime the Lord has called us to follow Him in His work of healing and helping. John wanted to hear the wrath of God is on the march. But Jesus said go back and tell John the love of God is on the march. Go back and tell John the

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mercy of God is on the march. “Blessed are those who are not offended at Me” (Luke 7:23).

Whenever we like Jesus instead of curing the darkness do healing acts, forgiving acts, do acts of mercy and kindness and love in His name we join His approach.

Settling doubts about Jesus. Jesus does not necessarily change His agenda in our life because we’re uncomfortable with what He is doing or allowing to happen.

B. But the second great thing about how Jesus responds to John is that He doesn’t simply leave it by not changing His agenda, He understands our downtimes and in those downtimes is up on us.

Verses 24–29 tell us about that. What did you go to see? Somebody who is a reed shaking in the wind, somebody who waffles on every opinion? No, John wasn’t that way—wishy-washy. Was he dressed in fine soft clothes? No, that wasn’t John’s style. What did you go out to hear, a prophet? Jesus says, yes he was a prophet; but more than that, He was the special one to come.

He gives John a very high accolade. He says there is no one born of women who is greater than John.

When we’re down on the Lord, isn’t it great to know He’s not down on us. It’s so easy in a family relationship or a friendship relationship, when somebody gets down on us; we want to respond by getting down on him. He says something nasty about us, we say something nasty about him. It’s almost one-upmanship. But God, in His personality, which is perfect and therefore mature, always looks past that and doesn’t respond in kind to us. He praises us when we’re having struggles with Him. He praises John. Then He turns around and says that the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than John.

I struggled with that until I realized that John died before the Kingdom really came. Jesus was bringing the Kingdom, and His Kingdom really came in His death and resurrection and in His ascension, and in the early preaching of the gospel in the Upper Room and on. John died before

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any of that had come to pass. So those who were least in the Kingdom of God, that is, we who have seen the finished work of God, are in a position of greater privilege. Not that we're greater in character than John, but we're in a position of greater privilege than John. No one in terms of character and fidelity to God is greater than John the Baptist but we're greater in terms of privilege.

That's heartening to realize that Jesus lauds John. John had done his work and clearly announced the arrival of the Messiah. He emphasized conversion as necessary for entering into the Kingdom. Then he had done what everyone should do in regard to Jesus when they have announced Him. He gets out of the way and lets Jesus come to full measure and frontage. "He must increase," John says, "but I must decrease" (John 3:30, KJV).

The third thing that Jesus does in response to doubts about Him, is that He not only continues doing His work of healing and goodness without doing acts of judgment, He not only understands us and is up on us when we're down on Him, but the third thing He does is...

C. He calls us to be in harmony with Him. So Jesus uses the story that describes the generation like children in the marketplace playing games. Not a lot of toys, mechanical toys, in the Middle East in those days to play with. So mime was a great way of playing a game.

Who of us, as a child, hasn't had fun dressing up and playing some game? Remember those days? I played minister a few times as a kid. We got our parents older clothes, dressed up in them, and had a great time. My brother, one time, played minister in terms of practicing baptizing. Dad was holding a meeting in a tent and there was sawdust on the floor, and there was my brother, who was older than me, being dunked into the sawdust. My dad didn't think that was too funny. He thought it was sacrilegious, and my brother got in trouble for that. Sometimes Dad didn't have a sense of humor.

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But Jesus says that kids in the marketplace say, “Let’s dress up, play bride and groom and rabbi and celebrate, break the cup, have a good time,” and some of the children say, “No, we want to play funeral. We’re sad today. Let’s have a corpse and let’s have a procession and let’s have a wailing. Some of the girls put on the black shawls and begin to wail and we’ll have a great time wailing.” So they get out the box they’re going to put the body in and the kids are all ready to play wailing and mourning and the kids say, “No, we don’t want to do that either.” Jesus says that this generation is fickle. John came preaching the message of repentance. He came preaching righteousness and responsibility. I came preaching freedom and liberty, but people whose hearts were set against God didn’t embrace either one of us.

We need to take a moment to look at the statement. The Pharisees were saying of John the Baptist, “He has a demon” (Luke 7:33). John didn’t have a demon. They were saying of Jesus, “He’s a drunkard” (verse 34). And Jesus was not a drunkard. So those statements, neither of them, were true. But they reflect epitaphs that were placed on John and Jesus—demon and a drunkard.

John came alone, aloof, austere, thundering for moral change, for responsibility for righteousness and Jesus came gentle and loving and caring and very much with people and sensitive. What Jesus is saying is that wisdom is justified by her children. If you had been wise, you would have embraced the work of God in John and you would have embraced the work of God in Me, and not held them to be contradictory. But you rejected both John and you’re rejecting Me. But the wise person would understand the need for responsibility, the need for moral rectitude and, at the same time, understand the need for grace and for mercy.

I subscribe to the Jerusalem Post. It gives me an opportunity to know, on a first-hand basis, what’s happening in Israel from an Israeli point of view. I was reading an article a couple of

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weeks ago. The person was commenting on America and it was a fascinating observation. He said that America is symbolized by the fact that, on its eastern point of entry, there's a great statue—the Statue of Liberty. And America is known as the land of liberty. He said, “I think it's time to suggest that in America they appoint a committee and establish a fund for a new statue, to emphasize that America needs to be known as something else as well.” He said, “I propose that this statue be placed on the west coast to anchor the east coast. On the east coast, they continue, in America, to have the Statue of Liberty, but on the west coast they erect a new statue to guard the western gate into the country and they call it the Statue of Responsibility.”

I can't think of a better combination—the Statue of Liberty and the Statue of Responsibility to symbolize what God wants to do in our life and what He was doing through John the Baptist. John was talking about responsibility and Jesus was talking about liberty. You'll never have liberty without responsibility. And you'll never have responsibility without liberty. Both belong together. And the wise person will see that it's not just God's grace, it is also our response to that grace that produces righteousness and life. And it is not just the law and righteousness and rules in life. It is God's grace that makes us acceptable in His presence. We need in our lives a Statue of Liberty and Statue of Responsibility. When those are there, wisdom will be justified in us. Settling doubts about Jesus. When we're doubting, Jesus goes on being God, thinking well and speaking well of us and calling us, like a tuning fork, to get the pitch of our life into harmony with His agenda and His way.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we bow our hearts in a moment of prayer. That we, through this prayer, might take a moment to tune our heart to You and to Your will. Since You gave me this message for today, I'm sure, Holy Spirit, there are friends here that are going through difficult times, times when

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their faith in You has become unsettled and disturbed. Like John, they're expecting You to work in one kind of way and You're working in a different kind of way; and it troubles us, Lord, when You do that. We're honest to tell You that it does trouble us. We know that, in Your goodness and grace, You so frequently intervene in the natural order and do miracles. But there are times You call us to trust in You when things aren't changing around us in our circumstances, and when we feel like a bird shut up in a cage. It's Your Word that's sent to us that brings healing to us, Lord. When You get Your Word through to John, this calms his heart, and You're getting Your Word through to us today, saying to us that in Your time, You will make all things right. In your time, You'll make all things beautiful. You're asking, Lord, for us to wait between the times—the time of Your first coming and the time of Your second coming—when Your power is revealed in all its splendor and irresistibility, You're calling us, between the times, to lay aside the bitterness and simply respond by saying, “Lord, I don't understand, but some things I do understand. I know You love me because You died for me. I know You're working for the good in my life. I know You will never leave me nor forsake me. I know You care about me. I know You know every detail of my being.” So Lord Jesus, settle us on the inside—deep within. That quiet fixed hope in trust of You. In the name of Jesus we ask. Amen.