

Messengers from John the Baptist **Luke 7:18-35**

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 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?” 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?’” In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

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? 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. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ 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.” (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 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.’ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ 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!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- John might be troubled that Jesus exposes himself to potential ritual uncleanness (e.g. Gentiles and corpses) for the sake of healings (7:18-20). Then again, perhaps Jesus’ words simply do not fit John’s picture of the coming one he had proclaimed in 3:15-17, although John has no doubt that Jesus is at least a prophet who will tell him the truth.
- Jesus’ answer (7:21-23) makes use of language from Isaiah 35:5; these healings are signs of the messianic era. Some teachers compared the blind, lame and lepers to the dead, because they had no hope of recovery.
- John’s and Jesus’ styles of ministry differ; both are valid, yet the religious community rejects them both equally.
- Reeds were very fragile (Isaiah 42:3), so a “reed shaken by the wind” would be especially weak (1 Kings 14:15) and undependable (2 Kings 18:21; Ezekiel 29:6).

- Prophets were rarely well-to-do (7:25-26), and in times of national wickedness they were forced to operate outside societal boundaries. Now imprisoned by Herod Antipas, John is no court prophet, who simply tells powerful people what they want to hear.

- By fulfilling Isaiah 40:3, John is more than just any herald of God (7:27); he is the direct announcer of the Lord, who will act in a decisively new way by leading his people in a new exodus. The new exodus, a return from captivity, is a theme in Isaiah.

- This comparison in 7:28 elevates Jesus' disciples rather than demeans the disciples of John. One may compare the early rabbinic saying that Johanan ben Zakkai, one of the most respected scholars of the 1st century, was the "least" of Hillel's 80 disciples. This saying was not meant to diminish Johanan's status but to increase that of his contemporaries and, thus, that of his teacher.

- Since the once-for-all kind of baptism (7:29-30) was essentially reserved for pagans converting to Judaism, the religious people are unwilling to accept it for themselves. They questioned the religious commitment of less observant Jews, especially the tax gatherers.

- The marketplace was the most public part of town. Spoiled children having make-believe weddings and funerals (one later game was called "bury the grasshopper") represent Jesus' and John's dissatisfied opponents. Unhappy with other children who would not play either game, they are upset no matter what.

- John the Baptist fits the model of an ascetic prophet, like Elijah (see Luke 1:14-15 for John's abstention from wine), while Jesus follows a model more like David; both are proper in their roles. Demon possession (v. 33) was associated with madness. "Glutton and drunkard" (v. 34) was a capital charge (Deuteronomy 21:20); hence, a serious accusation.

- Jewish tradition often personified wisdom as divine (7:35), usually as a holy woman exhorting the righteous to follow her; here, wisdom is personified as the mother of the righteous.

Questions:

- + If John was sure of Jesus' identity before (see John 1:29-34), why does he seem unsure now? Who were you sure of before, but not so sure of later? What caused you to become unsure? Jesus proved his identity with evidence. Was John convinced? Are you? Why or why not? What kind of "evidence" might persuade an unbelieving friend of yours to believe in Jesus? What does Jesus mean when he says, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me?"
- + Jesus use six rhetorical questions to challenge listeners about John. Why does he do this? What does Jesus mean by saying that John is more than a prophet and greater than all men? What does Jesus mean by saying that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John? How do you think a man like John the Baptist would be viewed in America today, and why? What would it take for people to understand John's message today? How will you share it?