

## **Luke 7:24-30**

### **The Greatest Man Ever**

Luke has been discussing in some detail the ministry of Jesus in Galilee. We have seen Jesus heal the ill, liberate the demon possessed, teach the Scriptures, and challenge the Pharisees. While all of these things have been happening, John the Baptist has been languishing in the prison of Herod Antipas, several miles east of the Dead Sea.

John the Baptist had been imprisoned because he had spoken out against the marriage of Herod Antipas to his sister-in-law, “<sup>17</sup>Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. <sup>18</sup>For John had been saying to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife’” (Mark 6:17-18). Eventually, though “Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man” (Mark 6:20), the king made a foolish promise to his step-daughter who, under the influence of her mother, asked to have John killed. Thus John the Baptist was martyred.

While in prison, though, John was able to send and receive visitors, and he had taken advantage of this liberty to send two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?” (Luke 7:19). Jesus had responded by healing the sick, driving out demons, and generally demonstrating that He was, in fact, the promised Messiah. More than that, though, Jesus told John’s disciples to tell him that “the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Luke 7:22). That is, the true reason the Messiah had come was not to be a conquering king, but a suffering servant preaching the kingdom of God and offering salvation to all who believe. This had no doubt reassured John, as he lay in wait in the bowels of the prison of Herod Antipas.

#### **The Context**

While he was preaching, John had been very popular. The people had seen him as a true prophet. His popularity had been enhanced by the fact that there had not been a true prophet from God in four centuries. Crowds came out from all around to see and hear him, “then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan” (Matthew 3:5). His very popularity had dissuaded Herod from executing him while he was imprisoned, “although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd” (Matthew 14:5).

But more than simply coming out to hear him, crowds came to submit to John. They accepted his baptism as a sign of repentance for their sins. They acknowledged themselves to have been put outside the covenant because of their depravity. They admitted they were no better than Gentiles who also needed a ceremonial washing. They recognized John as who he claimed to be, a prophet of God who had come to announce the advent of the Messiah, “<sup>1</sup>now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Luke 3:1-2).

The problem was that even though the people acknowledged John as a prophet from God, they did not, in fact, accept Jesus as the Messiah. This inconsistency was the context for the conversation Jesus had with the crowds who had seen Him respond to John's disciples. Jesus was speaking to the crowds, pointing out

to them the lack of sense among those who acknowledged John but did not acknowledge Him. Simply put, if John the Baptist was a prophet, then He was the Messiah.

### **Expectations**

When the disciples of John had gone, Jesus “began to speak to the crowds about John” (v. 24). The crowds that remained had likely followed Him over the last few days/weeks. Perhaps some had followed Him to Capernaum when He had healed the centurion’s slave (Luke 7:1-10), and then continued to Nain where Jesus raised the widow’s son (Luke 7:11-17). Perhaps some had only just arrived, having heard the news that “went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district” (Luke 7:23).

Jesus challenged their acceptance of John as a prophet while denying Him as the Messiah by asking three rhetorical questions, or rather the same question three times, each emphasizing a different point. But He also had another objective. He wanted to defend John from the criticism of the masses. Jesus had no intention of letting the crowd go away with distrustful thoughts of John in their hearts. He defended John’s reputation boldly and without reservation. Perhaps because John was in prison, or perhaps because of the very question his disciples had just asked, it is likely that many began to doubt John’s ministry. Jesus would have none of that.

Let us remember that Jesus defends His own. The world may attack our reputation and disparage our character, but we have a defender Who is faithful. There may be times when we may feel that, like John, we have fallen from great heights to a prison, but still God is with us. Our calling is to remain faithful to the truths we know.

The first question emphasized the firmness of John the Baptist’s faith, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” (v. 24). This was especially poignant given that Jesus had just had to reassure John’s disciples concerning Who He was. As we spoke last time, Jesus did not rebuke John for his doubts, but rather assured him that his life had not been spent in vain.

After all, it was John’s firm convictions that led him to challenge Herod Antipas in the first place and resulted in him finding himself in prison. Also, John had not recanted after several meetings with Herod, “Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him” (Mark 6:20). That John continued to challenge the king, and even brought Herod to a point of thoughtfulness and doubt himself, is an illustration of his unwavering hold on his faith.

John had not vacillated. He had not wavered even under the pressure of the chains of prison and the threat of imminent death. Jesus wanted the people to know that because such convictions are the mark of a true believer. John had preached with such passion that people traveled out into the wilderness to hear him and be baptized by him (Luke 3:7). People might come out for a while to be entertained or to marvel, but the fact that John had disciples who followed him in such a lifestyle, even after he had gone to prison, indicated that his convictions were evident.

The second question Jesus asked continued to focus the attention of the people on John’s convictions, “But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?” (v. 25). Perhaps a rumor had begun to

spread that John was not really in prison, but simply had become the guest of Herod. Maybe, some suggested, John had changed his tune and had become one of the many hangers-on at the palace who tickled the king's ears. Such foolish ideas evolve despite the most obvious facts against them. In fact, under the pressure of Herod Antipas, John had not given in to the fear of man and changed his story. John was no flatterer, no courtier to the king who only told him what he wanted to hear. When brought before Herod, John had stuck to his beliefs.

Jesus is asserting that John was not "soft" or pampered. He was not a member of the elite class that enjoyed the delicacies of court life in the Roman empire. Those people earned their place by submitting to the political authority over them without comment. They eviscerated themselves of any opinion and simply obeyed those in power regardless of their own personal convictions. People like that, Jesus said, "are splendidly clothed and live in luxury [and] are found in royal palaces!" (v. 25). John was no such person.

One cannot help but be reminded of Nathan and his confrontation with David (2 Samuel 12). After David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then orchestrated the murder of her husband to hide his sin, his prophet, Nathan, had the truth revealed to him by God. Nathan then was sent by God to confront this king. With a sorrowful story of a poor man who had lost his one little lamb to the greed of a rich man, Nathan compelled David to acknowledge the guilt of anyone so cruel. "You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7), said Nathan, and David stared sin in the face.

John had never been such a person. "John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4). This asceticism was often the mark of a prophet. John had abstained from alcohol (Luke 1:15), a far more challenging task in the first century when clean water was at a premium. He had lived in the Wilderness, renouncing even the most simple of worldly pleasures to fulfill his calling. He practiced self-denial, and validated his ministry by his commitment to the truth.

The third question Jesus asked pointed directly to the calling of John the Baptist. "But what did you go out to see? A prophet?" (v. 26). Of course they had. That was why they had journeyed into the Wilderness in the first place. The crowds had acknowledged that John the Baptist was a prophet. In fact, so impressed were the crowds with John that many "were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ" (Luke 3:15).

John was indeed a prophet. Jesus was reminding His listeners that John had preached with power and authority. He had confronted sin and called for repentance, "he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). Like the prophets of the OT he did not seek the favor of men, "he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance'" (Luke 3:7-8).

Like the prophets of ancient Israel, John also challenged the religious convictions of his day, "do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham." (Luke 3:8). John sternly warned of coming judgment, "indeed

the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). Finally John understood his purpose as the forerunner, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Such deep and profound humility is found among the prophets of God, and is attributable only to the filling of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15). In all of these ways, John’s message validated that he was a prophet like Elijah, Isaiah, and others.

But he was more, and this was the point Jesus wanted to make. He was “one who is more than a prophet” (v. 26). John was more than a mere prophet, because he, himself, had been prophesied about, “This is the one about whom it is written,

‘Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,  
Who will prepare Your way before You” (v. 27).

Jesus was quoting Malachi 3:1, which foretold of the prophet who would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. As Isaiah had spoken, one day such a prophet would come.

“<sup>3</sup>A voice is calling,  
‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;  
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.  
<sup>4</sup>Let every valley be lifted up,  
And every mountain and hill be made low;  
And let the rough ground become a plain,  
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;  
<sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
And all flesh will see it together;  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

The other OT prophets had spoken of a Messiah to come; John had the distinct privilege of saying He had arrived. The Jewish world had moved from faith to sight for those who believed. No longer did they need to wait, now they merely had to respond. John the Baptist had not only spoken of the Messiah, he had seen Him, heard, Him, baptized Him.

### **Reality**

Jesus affirmed this reality when He pronounced to the crowds, “I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John” (v. 28). He was the greatest of all time. And yet, “he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (v. 28), Jesus continued. There are two ways to interpret this truth.

One way is in the sense of function, because in one sense the kingdom of God is eternal. It is spiritual, but nonetheless real. That is, John had the highest earthly vocation - that of proclaiming the advent of the Messiah. Yet in terms of salvation, he is among equals.

Another way to see this is in terms of the many manifestations of the kingdom of God. In the OT the kingdom of God was a literal one in which He ruled over Israel. This is best illustrated in the narrative in which the leaders of Israel ask for a king to rule over them,

<sup>4</sup>Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; <sup>5</sup>and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” <sup>6</sup>But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. <sup>7</sup>The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:4-7).

But with the coming of the Messiah, a new kingdom had been inaugurated as the fulfillment of what had been spoken of in the OT. John the Baptist had preached, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus had repeated the admonition with the same words (Matthew 4:17). John the Baptist had the honor of being the bridge between these two manifestations.

In the kingdom of God today, believers today enjoy greater spiritual privileges than John was able to enjoy. For example, believers today possess the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is given to guide and direct us if we submit to Him, “as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him.” (1 John 2:27).

Believers today also have the complete revelation of God. The narrative of the life of Christ is written, and the history and letters of the early Church inform and instruct us. The book of Revelation offers us the promise of His imminent return and the establishment of the millennial kingdom and eternal state. We have the full revelation of all that we need for salvation and godly living, “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (1 Peter 2:3). Believers today can have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Jesus, Himself, affirmed this. He told His disciples, “<sup>23</sup>blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, <sup>24</sup>for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things which you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them.” (Luke 10:23-24). John the Baptist saw the advent of all of this, but he did not see the miracles, the resurrection, or the coming of the Holy Spirit. Like Moses, he was able to glimpse, but not quite enter the Promised Land. Those believers today are greater than John in that we have the full and complete gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Choice**

The people understood that John was a prophet. In fact, when “all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God’s justice” (v. 29). They admitted the truth of John’s message and Jesus’ rebuke. They confessed they were sinners and needed to repent. They understood that judgment awaited those who did not. They even went so far as to realize that in God’s eyes they were no better than the pagan Gentiles and they, too, had needed the ceremonial waters of baptism.

Yet, not everyone felt this way. Despite the evidence that John was a true prophet, “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (v. 30). While Scripture is emphatic that God is sovereign in salvation, it is clear they made a choice. The Pharisees and lawyers were devoted to the study of the Law. They dedicated themselves to its details and its many and varied interpretations. They

had mastered the nuances of the teaching of the Torah and the rabbis. As a result, they chose to be proud and self-righteous. They chose to trust in themselves and their obedience to the Law for salvation. They viewed themselves as better than those who had gone to hear John (or who were now going to hear Jesus). One is reminded of Proverbs 1:25,

“And you neglected all my counsel,  
And did not want my reproof.”

Their dilemma was simple. After four centuries a true prophet had arisen. The people crowded about him and praised both his message and his work. But this prophet had identified Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, and if the Pharisees accepted John as prophet, they must accept Jesus as Messiah. This they were unwilling to do.

We should never be amazed at our power to do wrong. To do good we are impotent, without the help of God's grace, but to do wrong is easy. Man is capable of ruining himself for a day or for eternity.

### **Take Aways**

May God give us the grace to not let familiarity with the gospel blind us to appreciating its privileges. We have the full and complete revelation of Jesus Christ. We have great privileges and even greater responsibilities because of that.