HOW TO RESPOND TO JESUS

Luke 7:18–35

Key Verses: 7:29–30

“(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.)”

Have you ever asked the question, “What’s going on?” We may ask it when we walk into a room of children who’ve run wild. We may ask it to some adults who’ve been covering up things they shouldn’t have. Or we may ask it, more generally, of life itself, when things and events just make no sense. This question—“What’s going on?”—is at the heart of today’s passage, coming from all different angles. John the Baptist and his disciples ask it of Jesus. Jesus asks it of the crowds. And the religious leaders ask it of both John and Jesus. “What’s going on?” is a probing question meant to stimulate us to respond to Jesus in the right way. It’s also to help us see the bigger picture of what God has been doing in the world, and, in my own life. So, how can we know what’s *really* going on? And why *should* we? In this study we need to find answers. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words today.

Luke, the only Gentile author, records the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus, but with a special emphasis on history. We saw this in the opening chapters, where we see the stories behind the births of both John and Jesus. In his account, to remind us of what’s going on in the broader world at that time, Luke adds some historical markers (e.g. 2:1–2; 3:1). For Luke, history is not just a pet interest or hobby; it's essential to grasp the meaning of gospel ministry. God’s work in and through Jesus didn’t happen in a vacuum, but in the context of his history among his people Israel. So, in just those first two chapters Luke repeats the word “Israel” seven times. God gave his people covenant promises through the prophets of long ago, and God faithfully fulfilled those promises in the coming of the Messiah Jesus (1:72; 22:37; 24:44; cf. Ac3:18; 13:33).

At the same time, the main theme of Luke’s Gospel is that Jesus is a light for the Gentiles (2:32; cf. Ac13:47; 26:18,23). So Luke traces Jesus’ genealogy not just to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, but all the way back to Adam, the first human being (3:23–38). Luke shows how Jesus, at the start of his ministry, mentions two Gentiles: the widow of Zarephath, and Naaman the Syrian (4:25–27). Jesus says the faith of a Gentile centurion is stronger than anyone else in Israel (7:9). Later, Jesus will mention the good Samaritan, the Queen of the South, the men of Nineveh, the Samaritan leper—all Gentiles—as examples of faith that pleases God (10:31–37; 11:31–32; 17:15–19). He will describe God’s future kingdom as a place where Gentiles from east and west and north and south will be feasting, but where many Jewish descendants will find themselves “cast out” (13:28–29). He will predict how the Jews will kill him but how God will give his vineyard to other tenants, meaning the Gentiles (20:15–16). And he will predict how the times of the Gentiles will eventually be fulfilled (21:24). In recording all this, Luke is trying to help the man he's writing to, Theophilus, a Gentile and a new believer (1:1–4), understand what God was doing through Jesus to bring the gospel to the Gentile world.

Of all the events in Jesus’ ministry, today’s passage is unusual. It’s a time to pause and reflect on what’s been happening. And it’s necessary, because it’s not been easy to understand. Reports about his miracles have been spreading and attracting more and more people (7:17; cf. 4:14,37; 5:15). Now, these reports reach the ears of John the Baptist through his disciples (18a). And where is John right now? He’s been locked up in prison by King Herod, because he rebuked Herod for stealing his own brother’s wife (3:19–20).

Since John the Baptist is a main character in today’s passage, it’s good to briefly review his life. As we’ve seen, John was born to elderly parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. Later, John’s ministry was ignited like a wildfire when the word of God came to him in the wilderness (3:2). He went into all the region around the Jordan River, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3). When crowds came out to him, John warned them that God’s wrath was coming, and he rebuked them for depending on their false racial pride (3:7–9). His preaching was so powerful, crowds of people, even hardened people like tax collectors and soldiers, were asking seriously what they should do (3:10–14). John pointed them all to the one coming after him, who would be even “mightier” than he was, who would separate the good people from the bad and “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (3:16–17). People didn’t consider John as some crazy man yelling out on the street corner; his words hit home, and people were convinced he was a prophet (20:6). John’s getting locked up in prison fit the pattern of all God’s other prophets who’d been treated the same way—because people didn’t want to hear the truth (6:23; 11:47,49; 13:34a). The hardship of prison, the threat of death—these probably didn’t even faze a man like John. But the news of Jesus’ ministry might have bewildered him.

How so? While preaching about God’s kingdom coming, Jesus mainly has been healing the sick. It hasn’t seemed like that powerful ministry of separating wheat from chaff, but a gentle ministry of embracing outcasts. Who were these people? A man with an unclean demon, a woman with a fever, a leper, a paralytic, a tax collector, a man with a shriveled hand, a sick servant of a centurion, a widow with a dead son—why is Jesus spending time with *them*? What is this *accomplishing*? What’s going *on*? John sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him if he really is the one who was supposed to come, or should they be looking for someone else (19–20). Some think John had begun to doubt; others think he was just trying to get these two followers to finally start following Jesus. Most likely, they all were wondering, maybe even John himself.

Look at verse 21. Jesus’ ministry is going on, right when John’s disciples show up. What does Jesus tell them? Read verse 22. What does Jesus mean here? He’s repeating what he came to do. At the outset of his ministry he gave his mission statement: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18; cf. Isa61:1–2; 35:5–6). In Isaiah’s prophecy, these were all the things God had promised he would send his Messiah to do, to comfort and restore his people. Jesus didn’t *talk* about being the Messiah; he was just *doing* the things God said he would—*all* of them, and, they were all *miraculous*. As the saying goes, “It’s hard to argue with the facts.” When Jesus mentioned these things to John’s disciples, he was trying to help them see how Isaiah’s prophecies were being fulfilled. It tells us the other foundation of believing—not only facts, but also prophecies fulfilled. We tend to believe when we agree, or when we feel good. But real faith is not just about “feeling it;” it’s about looking at facts and at God’s word and realizing that God really is at work. This is way more solid than our changeable feelings.

Jesus concludes with a punch line. Read verse 23. In Greek the word “offended” is literally “scandalized.” It also can mean to stumble or fall away. Even great people of faith can stumble or fall, especially when what they expect to happen, doesn’t. How can we not be offended, scandalized, or stumble and fall? Jesus says it’s when we focus on him. Not on outcomes, not even on a certain message, but on the person of Jesus himself. It means to simply *trust* him, even when we don’t understand, and hold on to our faith in him to the end. This is the path to being blessed. Jesus gave these words to his partner John, to prepare him not just for disappointment in ministry, but also to soon be beheaded (9:7–9). These words of Jesus have been a great blessing to many in history who were tortured and killed for their faith. They’re a source of strength and comfort to those who are still suffering, facing all kinds of hardships and confusion in this crazy, mixed-up world. Instead of falling into doubt, unbelief and despair, we need to endure by simply remembering and trusting in our Lord Jesus.

After these two disciples leave, Jesus doesn’t let it go; he keeps talking to the crowds about 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” (24b–25). With these stirring questions Jesus is reminding the people of what a great man John was. He was a man who never gave in to pressure, who really suffered to carry out his mission. Some people might gloat over a rival at a moment of weakness, but Jesus upholds John as an authentic man of God. In fact, Jesus says he was even greater than that. Read verses 26–28. Why is Jesus reminding people of John’s greatness? This is no mere hero-worship. Jesus wants people to see how God used John greatly. To really know what’s going on, we all need to see how God has used people for his greater purpose. God used John the Baptist to prepare people for the Savior Jesus. Jesus also wants us to see the new era God has ushered in, through both John’s ministry and his own. It’s the new era of the kingdom of God. It’s when God gives his grace to the most undeserving of sinners, because of what Jesus his Son did for us on the cross. We’re in it now! This is why even the least in the kingdom is greater than John, who had yet to receive that grace. John the Baptist had worked ferociously to get people to repent. He proclaimed God’s Law and the Prophets (16:16). Now, Jesus had come to give repentant people God’s tender mercy and forgiveness (1:77–78). He proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. This was all from God himself, not from man (20:3–8). As God’s people, we should not be living on a shallow, superficial level; we need to learn how to interpret the present time, to see what God is doing (12:56).

The author Luke unusually interjects his own comment into the narrative. Look at verses 29–30. It’s a fascinating description of who understood Jesus. Read verse 29. This first group understood what was going on. Why? Luke says it was because they had “been baptized with the baptism of John.” What does he mean? He’s not just talking about a ritual. He means they had sincerely repented of their sins. Because they had repented, God opened their eyes. They could see what God was doing. Even the tax collectors—the most worldly, the most corrupt, the most unlikely people—even *they* could see it! It says they “declared God just.” They realized God did what he said he would. They realized they were wrong and God was right. They found God’s way of salvation. God works through our repentance to give us his grace of forgiveness through his Son, and knowing his forgiveness gives us spiritual sight. Based on this, we can see what God still so eagerly wants to do in people’s lives. He just wants us to acknowledge our sins and see the wonderful grace he wants to give us in Jesus. It’s revolutionary. It’s how he brings us back to his kingdom. Can we see it?

Then there’s the other group. Read verse 30. These are the “already religious” people. They’re experts in the Bible. They think they know it all. But despite their vast knowledge, *they* are the ones who are *blind*! In their blindness they’re making the most tragic mistake. What is it? They’re rejecting the purpose of God for themselves. That’s intense. What does it mean? In Luke’s writing, God’s purpose also refers to his plan. King David had served the “purpose” of God in his own generation (Ac13:36). Jesus himself was sent for God’s “purpose” (Lk4:43). Later, our Lord Jesus would appoint his servant Paul for his “purpose” (Ac26:16). Though Jesus’ enemies were working to kill him, God, in his own “foreknowledge,” was fulfilling his own definite “plan” (Ac2:23; 4:28). God was working out his great purpose for world salvation, advancing his kingdom. And through his witnesses God is still working out his own unstoppable “plan” (Ac5:38–39). God’s plan and purpose is to make his people a light to the rest of the world. His purpose for each of us is to use our life as part of his greater plan. God wanted to use even the Bible experts of Jesus’ day to bless the people of their generation. But in their pride and self-righteousness they rejected it. So what should we do? We have a choice to make. We either can repent of our sins humbly and receive what God wants to give us in Jesus, or we can reject what God is telling us, and in the process, reject God’s very purpose for our lives. It’s not a small matter. Actually, all our experience, all our knowledge can’t help us see what God is doing, what’s really going on. In fact, it can get in the way. The only thing that helps us see is our own repentance.

In the last part Jesus ends with some honest rebuking. Read verses 31–32. Jesus is basically saying the people of his time were too childish. It’s been called “the parable of the spoiled brats.” They just wanted to be entertained. He goes on to explain what he means. Read verses 33–34. They were criticizing both John and Jesus. Neither one did what they wanted. They thought John was too extreme. They thought Jesus was too liberal. They thought they knew best. They were so wrong. Instead of judging what God is doing based on our own ideas and standards, we need to humbly learn from it and submit to it. Otherwise, we’ll never understand what’s going on. Read verse 35. Despite the overall poor response, Jesus sees hope. What is it? It’s “wisdom’s children.” As Luke has just mentioned, they are those wise enough to repent. In every generation God is still working through such repentant, remnant people (Ro11:5).

So, what’s going on? God is doing his own salvation work. God is working in all kinds of ways, often in ways we least expect it. Can we see what’s going on? Do we know what God’s purpose is? Can we see his wisdom and his justice? Are we sure of his hope, that he’s bringing us to his kingdom through Jesus our Lord? May God grant us the spirit of repentance. May he open our eyes and use each one of us for his purpose and plan for our lives. May he grant us spiritual insight to really see what he is doing in our world, and to trust our Lord Jesus, no matter what, to the very end.