

***John the Baptist's Relationship to the Kingdom***

Luke 7:18-35; Matthew 11:2-19

***7:18 The disciples of John reported to him about all these things.******7:19 Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?"******7:20 When the men came to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'"***

John the Baptist (7:19) was the forerunner of Messiah. His father Zacharias prophesied of him saying, "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS" (Lk. 1:76). John 1:6-7 says, "There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him." Then John 1:29-34 records John's testimony. When he saw Jesus he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water. . . . I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." Later, he told his disciples that Jesus must increase and he must decrease (Jn. 3:30). However, by the time we reach Luke 7 John had been imprisoned for perhaps a year, during most of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Carson, 261; Broadus, 235; the circumstances of John's imprisonment are mentioned in Matthew 14:3-5). Though he had heard of Jesus' teaching, miracles, and the advancement of His mission through reports brought to him by his disciples, he was beginning to have doubts if Jesus was the Messiah, so he sent delegates directly to Jesus for clarification (Lk. 7:19).

In Luke 7:19, John refers to Jesus as "the Expected One" or "the Coming One" (ὁ ἐρχόμενος). This was not just a descriptive term, but a proper noun, a messianic title used of Jesus in both the OT and the NT. In an OT messianic passage, the psalmist declared, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD" (Psa. 118:26). On Palm Sunday the crowds were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) in the name of the Lord. . ." (Matt. 21:9; also see Matt. 3:11; Mk. 1:7; 11:9; Lk. 3:16; 13:35; 19:38; Jn. 1:27 where the same thought is expressed).

Considering John's position as Messiah's forerunner and the things which he had heard and seen, some wonder how he could have questioned if Jesus was truly the Messiah. Many suggestions have been made, but most likely doubts arose when Jesus failed to fulfill John's preconceived ideas about Messiah's work. Prior to the resurrection no one understood the sequence of events in Jesus' life, so unless John received special revelation he would naturally share the beliefs of his day. The Jews knew that the Messiah would heal and help the people of Israel; but it was also prophesied that He would judge the world and deliver Israel from her oppressors. John the Baptist often spoke of the coming judgment. In Luke 3:7 John preached to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him and said,

"You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" In Matthew 3:12, he said of the Messiah that "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." In Luke 3:16 John had said, "someone is coming soon who is greater than I am -- so much greater that I am not even worthy to be his slave. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." In other words, John correctly understood the dual roles of Messiah - that He would both bless and judge the people - but when he looked at Jesus' ministry, what did he see? Did he see Messiah clearing the threshing floor? Was Jesus baptizing with the fire of judgment? No! Instead he saw an outpouring of blessing, not even a hint of judgment. The question then arose: Is this the Messiah?

The problem was not with John's theology; it was that John could not see God's timetable in the outworking of prophecy. John *wasn't* wrong in believing that Jesus would judge the world; He will judge all mankind. In John 5:22, Jesus even said that the Father has given all judgment to the Son. No man knows when judgment will come, so it is always proper to warn of it. But John could not foresee the cross or the fact that the Messiah's judgment would come at the end of the age.

This was probably the major reason for John's doubt, but it wasn't all that was on John's mind. The reports coming back to him from his disciples also caused confusion. In Luke 7:18 it says, "The disciples of John reported to him *about all these things*." "All these things" refers to the events in Luke 7:17. In other words, John's disciples had told him about the healing of the widow's son in Nain (Lk. 7:11-17), and may have also reported the healing of the centurion's servant (Lk. 7:1-10). One can only speculate what their reaction would be; not only was Jesus doing a miracle for a Gentile, He proclaimed that this Gentile's faith had exceeded that of the chosen people, Israel (Lk. 7:9 and see Matt. 8:11-12). Needless to say, this wasn't what they expected to hear from the lips of the Messiah. Previously, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. They weren't expecting to hear that either.

John's disciples were also present when Matthew, the tax collector, had a big party for Jesus (Lk. 5; Matt. 9:14; Mk. 2:18). There the Pharisees questioned Jesus' association with outcasts and sinners. They also asked why their disciples and the disciples of John fasted and prayed, but Jesus' disciples didn't. (Lk. 5:33) What is instructive in this is that we learn that the disciples of John were doing the same things that the Pharisees were doing. They didn't have the same animosity toward Jesus that the Pharisees had, but they were still functioning in the old, traditional, Jewish way. They were still going through the ceremonies and the fasts that the Pharisees had prescribed. We might even assume that they had some of the same questions about Jesus' behavior that the Pharisees had. And all of these things, including their somewhat tainted perspectives, were being passed to John who was in prison.

The only information that John was getting was secondhand. The stories about Jesus were all hearsay. John was in conflict. His father had, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said that John would go before the Messiah. He praised the coming of the Messiah by saying the following:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of David His servant-- As He

spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old-- Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES, And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US; To show mercy toward our fathers, And to remember His holy covenant, The oath which He swore to Abraham our father, To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. (Lk. 1:68-75)

Yet, Jesus hadn't saved the house of David. He hadn't defeated all the enemies of Israel and set Himself upon the throne of David. He hadn't brought Abrahamic blessing. Everything that John expected to happen, hadn't happened. As a result, John may have felt demoralized and questions began to rise in his mind. "We need not suppose that he at any time wholly lost his persuasion that Jesus was the Messiah, but only that he became harassed by difficulties that he could not solve; and he shows great confidence in Jesus by referring the whole question to Him." (Broadus, Matthew, 237)

Therefore, John sent some disciples to ask Jesus directly, "Are you the Messiah?" "Are you the Coming One?" Jesus answers their questions in verses 21-23.

NOTE: It should be pointed out that incomplete revelation also caused others to misinterpret the events that unfolded. When Jesus was crucified the disciples hid, not knowing that He would rise from the dead. Even after He had risen, Jesus had to personally explain how His death was predicted in the OT. In Luke 24:25-27 Jesus said to the disciples, "'O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?' Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." After that instruction, but prior to His ascension, the disciples asked, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Jesus said it's not for them to know when the Kingdom of Israel will be restored. God will bring the Kingdom on His timetable. These were men who were in a better vantage point to understand than John was in. They had firsthand information; they were eyewitnesses to the events that John just heard about. Yet, they still could not see. In Luke 7 Jesus had not yet died; He hadn't risen; He hadn't ascended. He hadn't confronted the apostate religious leaders. John was in the dark, and that darkness began to eat away at the fringes of his faith.

***7:21 At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind.***

***7:22 And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.***

***7:23 "Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."***

"At that very time", that is, immediately, right in front of the disciples of John who asked if Jesus was the Expected One, Jesus instantaneously performed a massive display of miracles, curing people of physical diseases as well as casting demons. Then in verse 22 He said to them, "Go report to John what you've seen and heard. Tell John this: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them."

Jesus briefly summarized His own work in the language of Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1.

Isaiah 35:5-6: Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.

Isaiah 61:1: The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners;

Both passages are prophetic. Isaiah 61:1 refers to Messiah's work and Isaiah 35:5-6 to the blessings that accompany Him. Jesus was fulfilling what was said of Messiah, and the Kingdom of God was advancing as the powers of darkness were being pushed back just as Isaiah had predicted.

But there is a more subtle level to Jesus' response. John's father was a priest and John was very familiar with the book of Isaiah and quoted it freely (Matt. 3:3 cf. Isa. 40:3; Jn. 1:36 cf. Isa. 53:4-7). The passages Jesus chose speak of the blessings Messiah brings, but they also have judgment in their immediate contexts (Isa. 35:4; 61:2). Thus, Jesus is addressing John's question about Messiah's judgment, though He is doing so rather allusively. Jesus is showing an awareness of the passages that speak of judgment, but is pointing out that the blessings that would attend Messiah are present at the very moment.

Jesus' miracles were evidence that the Kingdom had been inaugurated. Perhaps Jesus was telling John that what he was seeing was what the prophet Isaiah said would happen when the King came. Even though the earthly fulfillment of that Kingdom is future, the inauguration of the Kingdom had already occurred. John was correct when he had preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand, for the Kingdom was inaugurated when the King came. John should see that the power that Jesus displayed was a preview of the power that He will display across the face of the earth when His Kingdom is consummated.

As OT prophecy unfolded it became clearer that the Kingdom began with the coming of Jesus; it was present where He was present. Thus Jesus could say "the Kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21). Nevertheless, it was not yet manifested in its fullness; Jesus taught the disciples to pray "Thy Kingdom come." The Kingdom of God encapsulates all of these ideas. It was present with Christ, is present now and will come in the future. John's confusion was that he was expecting to see the consummated, final stage of the Kingdom; Jesus was telling Him to see its inauguration.

Jesus ends with "Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me." The blessed do not find Jesus' ministry an obstacle in believing. Though Jesus was doing what was predicted of Messiah, the Jews stumbled over the things they expected Him to do that were left undone (Broadus, 238; Marshall, 292). The warning is an explicit command to keep from stumbling and implies that perhaps John needs to re-evaluate his presumptions about what he thought Messiah should be and do in light of Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy (Carson, Matthew, 262).

After Jesus' reply, John never asked another question; he never needed more evidence. Shortly after this he was beheaded and it says in Matthew 14:12, "His disciples came, took away the body, buried it,

and they went and reported to Jesus." The implication is that Jesus was John's Messiah; for that reason his disciples came to tell Jesus of John's death. John had faithfully completed his work as Messiah's forerunner, and would in a short time see Jesus clothed in messianic glory as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

**7:24** *When the messengers of John had left, He began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"*

**7:25** *"But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces!"*

**7:26** *"But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet."*

**7:27** *"This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'"*

Though John had borne witness of Jesus, now Jesus bears witness of John; but, as it turns out, even Jesus' witness of John points back to Himself. Jesus discusses John the Baptist, not just to honor him, but in order to explain how John the Baptist's ministry connects with Jesus as Messiah.

Most people in Israel perceived that John was a prophet. All of Judea had gone out to him. For a time, they even wondered if he was the Messiah himself (Jn. 1:19-21). The problem was that though they listened to John, they had rejected Jesus.

Jesus begins by asking rhetorical questions in order to eliminate obviously false conclusions.

**"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"**

Isaiah 40:3 says that John was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." His public ministry began in the desert. Mark 1:4 says, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus asked what the reason was that people went out there to hear him? Did they go to see a reed shaken by the wind? A reed moves with the wind. It is pushed to and fro instead of being stable and inflexible. A reed in the wind is indicative of a fickle man whose opinions changed depending on public response or personal misfortune (a similar idea is found in James 1:6-8). It is as if Jesus were saying to the people, "You went out into the wilderness because you believed that there was a prophet. You didn't go out there to see somebody with no convictions, blown this way and that with every change in the wind. You were drawn to the man because of his uncompromising conviction and boldness."

**"What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?"**

They did not see John as one who wore fine clothes, who resided in high places, and responded to the king's beck and call. John had refused to play courtier, as the people knew, and had gone to prison for it (cf. Matt. 14:3-5). John was not a person who valued pomp and power and worldliness. John didn't have

a life of ease; he didn't own anything; he lived out in the wilderness; the stars were his ceiling. This was a man of self-denial. This is a man who lived the way a prophet lived.

### **What did you go out to see? A prophet?**

The people had gone out to see John because they saw him as a prophet (Lk. 7:24). They saw him as a person with tremendous conviction concerning divine truth, a man who called people to repent or face judgment; they saw a man who called people to be cleansed in their hearts and told them to be ready for God to appear.

Though he was a prophet the term "prophet" was not an adequate description of John. He was more than a prophet (Lk. 7:26). He not only announced the Kingdom of God, he himself was a subject of prophecy (Lk. 7:27 cf. Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6). Malachi 3:1 had written the words of God who said, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me." For those who could accept it, he was the prophesied Elijah, the forerunner of YHWH (the Lord). Malachi 4:5-6 says, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD . . ." Jesus said in Matthew 11:14, "If you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come". In Mark 9:11-13, the apostles asked Jesus, "'Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' And He said to them, ' . . . I say to you that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him.'" (See notes on Luke 1:14-17, Jn. 1:21). John came in the spirit of Elijah, but they did to him as they wished (imprisoned and beheaded him), just as they did to Elijah in the OT (Elijah was hated, rejected, scorned, and the Jews tried to kill him, though they did not succeed).

Though John had questions, he was the prophet whom they had gone out to see (Lk. 7:25-26). If they accepted John, they should surely receive the One to whom John had pointed. If they rejected John, they would also reject Christ.

Jesus continues,

***7:28 "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he."***

On the surface, the people would agree with 7:28a. They held a very high view of John; anyone chosen to herald the Messiah would hold the greatest position imaginable. None would be greater than he except, of course, the Messiah Himself. Yet, Jesus says, "he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he!"

In what way is the least in the Kingdom of heaven greater than John the Baptist?

Jesus had already established that John was the greatest among the prophets. In fact, no one had held a position of higher honor than he. Nevertheless, spiritual privilege in the Kingdom is greater than any physical, temporal duty no matter how important it is.

Jesus is *not* implying that John did not enter the Kingdom of God; rather, He is simply contrasting the high honor of John's earthly position to the even greater honor of entering the Kingdom of God. The two honors cannot be compared.

***7:29 When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John.***

***7:30 But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John.***

Luke comments that many in the crowd acknowledged what Jesus was saying since they had been baptized by John. The Pharisees, however, had rejected John and his message.

Jesus then turns to the response of people to Himself and John.

***7:31 "To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like?"***

***7:32 "They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.'***

***7:33 "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!'***

***7:34 "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'***

***7:35 "Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children."***

"This generation" in the gospels always refers to those in Jesus' day that rejected the claims of the gospel upon their lives. It is a pejorative term. In Luke 9:41 Jesus spoke of an "unbelieving and perverted generation." In Luke 11:29 He said, "This generation is a wicked generation." Then in v. 50 He charges this generation with the blood of the prophets since the foundation of the world. In Luke 16:51 the "this generation" refers to the unrighteous. Other examples could be offered.

In the present passage, "this generation" is like children playing in the streets who refused to respond no matter what game was suggested. When the flute was cheerfully played for them, they did not dance to it. When a sad song was sung, they did not mourn. Whatever was offered was rejected for one reason or another. In the same way, when John the Baptist came leading an ascetic lifestyle, neither eating delicacies (Mk. 1:6) nor drinking wine, they said, 'He has a demon' (Lk. 7:33; Matt. 11:18). Jesus, on the other hand, ate and drank; that is, He lived life normally not following the severe, austere life of self-denial that John practiced, but they said of Him, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners"' (Lk. 7:34; Matt. 11:19a). Like children who refused to play, the people complained no matter what was offered them. They rejected John for deviating from the norm and rejected Jesus for following it.

"Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children." In this case, wisdom is most likely the wisdom of God revealed through John and Jesus. According to Proverbs 1:2-33, scoffers lack wisdom because they refuse to listen, hate knowledge, and do not fear God. The audience Jesus was speaking to fit into that

category of people. They lacked wisdom for rejecting God's wisdom. Wisdom's children, however, will demonstrate their relationship to God's wisdom by their response to the gospel. They will become living witnesses to the wisdom of God. Whether God reveals Himself through John or Jesus, they will recognize what is true and will *not* walk in the ways of those who can never be pleased.