

Jesus or John

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[0 : 00] This morning we are continuing our year-long series of sermons going through Luke's Gospel. This morning we're in Luke chapter 7 verses 18 to 35, so please keep your Bible open on that page.

Page 1035. Last week I was in the Hague in the Netherlands and while I was there I went and visited an art gallery.

And in the art gallery, and you have this in art galleries all over the world now, they have headsets, audio guides that they give you and you put it on and you see you're wearing this headset and as you see each painting there'll be a number and you key the number into the remote control that comes with your headset and as you're looking at the painting, as it's before you, you start to hear a voice that explains the painting to you and the voice starts telling you when it was painted, who the painter was, what kind of a culture and a context this artist lived in and then it starts to point out details in the picture.

You know, look at the contrast between light and dark, symbolising the struggle between good and evil in the artist's mind, that kind of stuff. And because it starts to explain the painting in context, you actually start to get the painting that you're looking at.

For example, I was, when I was there I was looking at a still life painting and it had a vase that was full of different flowers surrounded by different pieces of fruit and I had never really got still life in the past because no one had explained it to me.

[1 : 46] But this time I was looking at the painting and I had the headset on and the voice starts to say, the flowers that you see never bloom at the same time, even though they're all blooming at the same time in this picture and the fruits are fruits that never ripen at the same time, although they're all ripe at the same time in this picture, pointing out that detail completely changed my understanding and my appreciation of the painting.

And that was when I first thought, you know, this is what still life is about, maybe. Certainly that's what this picture is about. Before I didn't get it, just the vase, flowers and fruits. Now I realise that it's an expression of hope that the artist was trying to convey, that all good things might happen at the same time.

And it was when I was looking at that painting and the audio guide is explaining this to me that I stopped and thought, wait a minute, this audio guide is like a preacher.

You see, the audio guide is filling in the background information that I didn't know and it's putting together the details, pointing them out. They're there to be seen but I'm glossing over them.

But the audio guide is saying, look at this and look at that and these are important because they're challenging me to understand what I'm looking at.

[3 : 07] Although preachers do something more than this in that they're taking biblical passages and we're saying, look at this, look at the details, look at the characters involved, look at the context. This is what this means and more than the audio guide and an art gallery we're telling you and your life needs to fundamentally change to come in line with what's happening in this painting that is the Bible.

And that's why we're doing these sermons on Luke. That's why we're taking it chapter by chapter, going through this book over a whole year so that you can look at the story of Jesus' life and his teaching and you can get it.

You can read Luke and see all of the details, have them pointed out to you. Who's Jesus? Who are the disciples? What are the significances of their different backgrounds?

What about the other characters? What about John the Baptist? What about Herod? What about the Pharisees? And so on. We want you to be able to read Luke's Gospel, understand it, think this

book is amazing and be changed by it.

Now this morning we're in Luke 7, 18-35. So to be your audio guide preacher, the immediate context which Derek was preaching on last Sunday is that Jesus has been travelling around and performing miracles.

[4 : 28] Already in this chapter he healed the Centurion's servant and he raised the widow's son. And the last miracle in particular, the raising of the widow's son has big Old Testament overtones.

It makes the people think straight back to Elijah and the first kings and they start to say Jesus is a great prophet sent by God. So that's the background. And then in this bit Luke records an interaction between three characters, John the Baptist, Jesus and the Pharisees.

So we're breaking it down into three parts here. The first part is John on Jesus. We're looking at verses 18-23. 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?

John the Baptist is a very important historical figure in Jesus' world. He is a religious leader. He's recognized as being of national significance and you see that throughout the gospels.

[5 : 39] He preaches at the river Jordan saying people need to repent and a huge crowd comes to hear him. And he gets the attention of the religious, political authorities as well because Pharisees and Sadducees all come out to listen to him.

He even catches the attention of the monarchy because King Herod has John beheaded because John criticizes his morality and his actions.

So he is an important man in his time. He has disciples, people who voluntarily gather around him to learn from him. But what's really important for us to grasp, so we'll know what this passage means, is that John sees himself as having a completely unique role in the history of God's redemptive plan for humanity.

He has the role of messianic forerunner. He is the man that God sends to immediately proceed and announce and proclaim the coming of the Savior.

That's John the Baptist's role. And that's the context in which John, the man who believes that he is here to announce that God's Savior is coming, sends two of his followers, his disciples, to ask Jesus if he is that Savior.

[6 : 57] Now why is it that John asks Jesus this question? Is it that John was having doubts about Jesus and he's asking because he's genuinely not sure, you know, that it's a bit shaky is he or is he not?

I don't think so. I don't think that's why John asks the question. You see, thus far in Luke's story, you find Jesus consciously keeping his divine identity quite close to his chest.

You know, you see Jesus not yet willing to come out explicitly and say, you know, directly to the whole world, I am the Savior. You know, earlier on we've seen demons knowing that he's the Son of God, but Jesus rebukes them and tells them to keep quiet.

And I think that that is why John asks him this question. It's not that John was having big doubts.

You know, maybe Jesus isn't the Messiah. It's that Jesus hasn't come out and explicitly stated it.

And John is sending his disciples to Jesus, you know, looking for confirmation, looking for Jesus to come out openly. Let's look at Jesus' response to the question, verses 21 and 22.

[8 : 08] At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, gave sight to many who were blind, and he then tells John's messengers, go back and report to John what you have seen and heard.

Jesus' response is very interesting when you start to look at the context closely. He responds in two ways. He responds in action. He heals a lot of people and he responds secondly in prophetic fulfillment.

Notice what he does. He heals people. Then he tells John's disciples, go back to John and tell him what you've seen. And then the next thing that Jesus does is he kind of puts together a collection of quotes from Isaiah, the prophet, and the Old Testament, and tells him, go and tell John that you've seen this.

And he gives a string of allusions back to things that Isaiah said would happen when the Messiah, when the Savior was going to come. When the Messiah comes, Isaiah says, he will give sight to the blind, the lame will walk, lepers will be cured.

Isaiah says, when the Messiah comes, the death will hear, the dead will be raised, and good news will be preached to the poor. All things that you find in Isaiah, that Isaiah says will happen when the Messiah comes.

[9 : 27] So John is basically asking Jesus, Jesus, can you confirm that you are the Messiah? And Jesus is basically saying, yes, I can, because I'm doing everything that Isaiah said the Messiah would do.

Then Jesus says in verse 23, blessed is the man who does not fall away unaccounted me. He gives John's disciples this interesting benediction. The ESV translates as well, an alternative translation. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. What does Jesus mean by that? That seems really strange to us, because in our culture, in popular culture anyway, we have this stereotype of Jesus as the least offensive person you could imagine, because we have this misrepresentation of him as so weak and passive.

But Jesus himself says that a lot of people are offended by him. The word that Jesus uses here for offense or to fall away is literally the word scandalize.

The Greek is a scandalitso, you know, scandalize. Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me. He doesn't think that what I am and what I'm saying is scandalous.

[10 : 51] And his scandal is that he is a 30-year-old man from the back of beyond in Palestine, a homeless preacher with no high social status or anything like that, claiming that he is God in the flesh and that you can only get to God through him. That's the scandal.

So what does it mean, blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Jesus? Well, if you hear Jesus saying this and you think, okay, this is true, then you go with it.

You are blessed because in getting Jesus, you have got God. Through Jesus, you have come to God. But on the other hand, if you see and hear Jesus and you think, no, I don't believe this, this is too much, and you either, you A, try to get to God some other way without going through Jesus, or B, you give up on getting to God altogether, Jesus is saying, you're not blessed because you've fallen away on account of me.

So that's John on Jesus, and that's the way this develops. Then we see that secondly, Jesus on John from verse 24 downwards. We move through the section where Jesus starts to give his opinion on John.

After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John, and he starts asking them questions about what did you go out to see. John has been consistently drawing crowds, come out to hear him preaching in the desert, preaching a message of repentance.

[12 : 31] And Jesus is asking them, why are you so drawn to him? Why are you all going out, flocking out to hear John and to be baptized by them? And he starts to ask them kind of rhetorical questions, you know, are you attracted to him because he's weak?

Is he a reed just blown about by the wind? Of course not, because John was not a weak character. He was really strong in every sense to survive in the desert.

Did you go out to see him because you're attracted by his fantastic luxury, by the high standard of his lifestyle? And Jesus is definitely not. If you wanted that, you would go to a palace, but you've gone out to the desert and you're drawn by this man.

It's not because he's got any kind of luxury that he can offer you. John lived in the desert wearing animal skin tied around him with a leather belt, getting his food from, he ate insects.

And he stole honey from bees. It's not an attractive lifestyle. It's not a lifestyle of ease or comfort. That's not why you've gone out to see him. Jesus knows that and that's what he's drawing out.

[13 : 40] He says in verse 26, 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 me.

They went out to see him because they knew that he was a prophet and Jesus doesn't stop there. He says that John was more than a prophet and then he makes another Old Testament, not just an illusion, but a fulfillment.

This is the one about whom it is written. And at this point, Jesus quotes another Old Testament prophecy, Malachi 3.1, which says, See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me, then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple.

This is so important to grasp what this passage is about, why it was written. In Malachi 3.1, God is promising that he himself will come, that God will return, and that before he returns, he will send his

messenger. And Jesus is saying, that messenger is John the Baptist.

Can you see where it's going? Can you see what Jesus is doing here? If John is the messenger, if he is the final prophet in the Old Testament sense, then Jesus has to be God.

[15:07] You have to center your life on him, because John is the prophet that God would send before he came himself. Therefore, Jesus is God.

Jesus then, he rounds off the section with another phrase, another kind of benediction. After saying, blessed is he who's not offended by me, he says, 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.

That is how significant it is that you get this. That is how high the stakes are. John, according to Jesus, is the greatest man of all time. But if you understand what's going on between Jesus and John, Jesus saying that I am God, and he is the messenger of God, and if you realign your life to come in line with that, then the very least of you becomes greater than John, the greatest man alive.

That's how life transforming the gospel is. That's how important it is that you understand what this passage means. Now, at this point, there's a kind of break, an interlude in the passage where Luke records, in verse 29, 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.

So you have the crowd who are watching all of this happening, and they're normal people, normal lives, normal jobs, and they're saying God's way is right. They've already gone with John, and because John is the one who points to Jesus coming as God, they worship Jesus as God. And Luke, he even throws in this detail that even the tax collectors, the most hated, despised, national traitors, were turning to Jesus. And then he writes in verse 30, but the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.

[17:13] The detail that Luke records is deliberate, it's conscious, it's important. He says that with the Pharisees, in rejecting John and in rejecting Jesus, it was a rejection of God.

They were rejecting God's purpose for their lives, and that Jesus is here as the revealer of God's will, of God's revealed will.

And they are rejecting that. So if you reject Jesus, you're rejecting God. That's what he's saying. You're building up what this passage is about. Luke is writing it to show us that we should not reject Jesus, he's telling us why, and he's showing us what happens to those who do reject him.

And the people that reject him in this passage are highly educated. They are committed religious people, Pharisees and experts in the law. And the third part of the passage that we're looking at is where Jesus gives his opinion on them, Jesus on the Pharisees, verses 31 and 32.

To what then can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace, calling out to each other. What Jesus says about the Pharisees, again, is such an important detail in understanding this.

[18:37] He basically builds up a fair, justified character assassination of them. He gives a parody of the Pharisees, which when you look at the details he picks, is so striking.

He says that they are like children sitting in the marketplace. Now, to get this, you need to bear in mind what the Pharisees thought of themselves. The Pharisees, you know, were grown men, very self-important, they would gather together in their religious councils, they would be the elders of their community.

They are people who claim to live in total submission to God, and they are the ultimate picture of people who thought they were at the very top of the tree. They took themselves with seriousness. And in addition to that, they were the leaders of a culture that took a really low view of children. Now, it was nothing like our culture, you know, of children's rights, where we really go to almost the opposite extreme to their culture, where we wrap children up in cotton wool, and a lot of the time we make them into little idols that we worship.

In Jesus' day, it was the exact opposite. Children had no rights. Child abuse was rife throughout the Greco-Roman world.

[19:58] There's even a classic Pharisee prayer from that time, Lord, I thank you that I'm not a woman, a child, or a dog. Now, that's the kind of low view that they took of children. And in that culture, Jesus is saying to them, you think you're so important, but you're just children.

He was, I mean, Jesus himself was very counter-cultural in his view of children. He's giving the Pharisees an insult here. He's pulling them down from the lofty pedestal they've set themselves

upon.

And he says that they are like children immature in a marketplace. Now, bear in mind that with all of their religious rules and their religious observance, the Pharisees honestly thought that they were the people when it comes to 100% submission to God.

God-centered living, the Pharisees, they are the people. God says that the Pharisees do it. But Jesus is saying, no, actually that's not how it works, because God is standing before you and you're not submitting, you're rejecting.

Here I am, and I'm Jesus, I'm God. There's John the Baptist, the fulfillment of Malachi 3.1, and yet you don't want either of these things. I'm not the product you want.

[21 : 15] I know that these people lived 2,000 years ago before the era of our modern free market capitalism, but the basic principles of market economics were basically the same.

You have a market where people are there to buy and to sell. If you don't like a particular product, you don't buy it. The customer is number one, he chooses what he likes and rejects what he doesn't like.

Jesus is saying about the Pharisees, that's what you're doing with God. They have not made God the absolute number one in their lives. They've kept themselves as number one and God fits into their agenda.

And for God isn't fitting in, they are ignoring, they're not buying. And you can see that in the fact that they reject Jesus. Jesus also says that they are like children and that they are impossible to please. This is what they say, we played the flute for you and you did not dance. We sang a dirge and you did not cry. For John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking wine and you say he has a demon.

[22 : 20] The son of man came eating and drinking and you say, here's a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. In Jesus and John the Baptist, you have two remarkably different people.

John is very austere in his personality, in his lifestyle. He is socially very conservative, he doesn't eat any fancy foods.

He lives a Spartan kind of lifestyle in the wilderness. Jesus on the other hand is socially much more liberal rather than austere. He goes to parties where he talks to tax collectors and sinners.

He enjoys good food and wine. Jesus is the flute that you dance to and John is the dirge that you cry to. What Jesus is saying is that both men came from God but neither could please the Pharisees.

John was too austere so therefore he must be demon possessed. Jesus is too socially liberal so he is just a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

[23 : 27] Either way with the Pharisees there is a basic unwillingness to accept God. Because God is not number one, because God is not their agenda. They have their own agenda, God has to fit into it and neither Jesus nor John the Baptist do so they reject them both.

He ends the section with quite a cryptic phrase when he says, But wisdom has proved right by all her children.

What does he mean here when he says this? I think this, Jesus so far has been speaking about God when he speaks now about wisdom. Everything in this passage so far has been about God's honour, about defending God's honour.

And if you reject Jesus and John you are making a de facto rejection of God. But he ends the passage saying that wisdom will be justified.

I think that God will be justified. And you say, well how does that work? Because it says wisdom has proved right by all her children. Well remember this was written in Greek rather than English.

[24 : 38] And if you study other languages apart from English you'll find in a lot of languages nouns have gender. They are either masculine or feminine. Greek is a language like that and Sophia the word for wisdom is a feminine word.

So it takes a feminine pronoun, wisdom with her children. Which children though? Well I think here, Jesus, I think he is speaking about himself and about John.

As the representatives of divine wisdom which the Pharisees are rejecting. And he is saying that even though the Pharisees reject Jesus and reject John, God will be justified.

God will be proved right. God will be vindicated by Jesus and by John and by all of those who follow Jesus and John.

Now to conclude there are a couple of questions on the sheet, the sermon outline for you to think over at home. And to conclude I just want to expand on them slightly briefly.

[25 : 40] To pose them directly to you in case you don't take the sheet away and think about it at home. I want to ask is going through Luke's Gospel week after week making you, making me, making us more Christ centered.

What we see chapter after chapter is that this book is all about Jesus. This book was written to draw you to Jesus to make you believe that knowing Jesus is the absolute best thing and that nothing else in the entire world could compare.

It's not a book that's primarily about how to behave differently, how to be more successful in your job or your marriage or whatever. That's not what this book is about. The book is about Jesus.

And as we go through the book that's the question for you. If this book is more about it's all about Jesus and I becoming all about Jesus. Question number one is it having that effect on me?

Question number two directly from this passage is my Christianity a marketplace of pick and choose? Is that how I relate to God? That I'm number one and he's number two and I buy the bits I like and I don't buy the bits I don't like.

[26 : 56] And even if that means rejecting Jesus altogether, is it a marketplace pick and mix Christianity that I have? Or is it what this book is calling us to because it's all about Jesus?

Is it a radical self-sacrificial discipleship? Is that my Christianity that it's entirely about Jesus and he doesn't fit into my agenda?

As we were saying a couple of weeks ago, he is my agenda. That is the hardest thing to do in our culture because we live in a capitalist consumerist society where every other area of your life where the world you live in breathes this air of you being the center, you being the customer, you being the one that's always right, you always having the right to pick and choose what you want and what you don't want.

And you know, that's the world that we live in. A hard world to be a Christian in because Christianity demands that you become number two and Jesus becomes number one. These are our questions to take away to think about to apply to ourselves.

Amen. Well, bow our heads and pray briefly. Lord God, we praise you for Jesus and we worship him. We thank you that you've revealed yourself and your son and his life and his miracles and his words and his death and his resurrection.

[28 : 26] We ask for you to help us to be drawn to Jesus. It is so hard for us to do that in our lives because of the culture that we live in, Lord.

But we pray that you will help us to place your son as king, as number one in our lives. We pray for him to become our agenda, for him to shake off the idolatry that is so natural to us and is a staple diet of the world we live in.

Lord, we pray for this in Jesus' name. Amen.