

Sermon – 08/05/2011 pm

Jesus Reflects on John

Study Text: Luke 7:24-35

Jesus went through the towns and villages of Galilee healing the sick and preaching the gospel. One day he was approached by two of John the Baptist's disciples. John could not go himself because he was in prison. They came to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah or not. Jesus sent them back with a reassuring message for John.

After they were gone Jesus took the opportunity to speak to the crowd of followers about John. Some in the crowd, maybe quite a few, had been baptised by John the Baptist. Those who had come to John were told by him that Jesus was the Son of God, and *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29).

In the passage before us we read what Jesus had to say about John the Baptist. He spoke positively about John, saying how the Scriptures referred to him. He spoke positively about John, even though his life and ministry was quite different to the life and ministry of Jesus. John represented the end of the Old Covenant. Jesus came with a New Covenant. Jesus proclaimed *the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel* (Mark 1:15).

In a religious discussion on the radio the host expressed surprise that the three great religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have so much in common. Their teaching, particularly moral teaching, and their worship, particularly the lack of idols, have similarities. If this host had known the history of these religions he would not have been so surprised by these similarities.

Christianity is the fulfilment of Judaism. The Old Testament is common to both. Judaism tragically rejects the New Testament which tells us that Messiah has come. Islam arose out of Judaism and Christianity. It is like a sect promoted by one man. This man changed the story of Abraham to make Ishmael the son of promise. He perverted the gospel, making himself a prophet and denying Jesus to be the Son of God.

1. John's ministry

'What did you go out in the desert to see?' Jesus asked the crowd (7:24). He was asking them about John the Baptist who lived in the desert, where he ate locusts and wild honey and dressed in a camel hair coat. They went out to see John as he preached with power a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Those who repented he baptised in the Jordan. What did they think about John the Baptist?

Jesus posed a couple of rhetorical questions. Was John like a reed blowing in the wind? Reeds were found in the countryside, especially along the river. Was John easily swayed by popular opinion? Did he preach what itching ears wanted to hear? Was he a populist preacher? Certainly not!

Was John the Baptist like a prince who emerged from a royal palace? Did people flock to him because of the grandeur that surrounded him? Were they like the thousands who flocked to the royal wedding the other day? Hardly! John was a pauper, not a prince.

What then did they go out to see in John the Baptist (7:26). Why did crowds flock to hear John and be baptised by him? Because he was a prophet. Because he spoke and even dressed like the prophets of old, prophets we read about in the Scriptures.

For over 400 years there had been no prophet in Israel. God was silent. He did not send any man to speak his words. Suddenly John the Baptist burst onto the scene. He was dressed like a prophet and he spoke like a prophet. He spoke with authority. He warned of the coming wrath of God. Yes, John was a prophet indeed.

2. John's Greatness

But there was something else about John. He spoke about someone coming after him who was mightier than he was (3:16). He not only spoke about this One but pointed to Jesus of Nazareth saying 'Behold the Lamb of God'. Jesus told the crowd that John was a very special prophet. He was the man the prophets of old spoke about as the messenger, the one to prepare the way of the Lord (Malachi 3:1, Isaiah 40:3).

John had the unique task of announcing the arrival of the Messiah. He had the unique task of baptising the Messiah, the Son of God. For this reason he was the greatest of all the prophets. There was no greater prophet than John the Baptist.

But John belonged to the Old Covenant. With the coming of Jesus a New Covenant was instituted, the covenant of grace. With the coming of Jesus a new kingdom was inaugurated; the kingdom of God. Jesus came in fulfilment of all that was in place under the Old Covenant. He fulfilled the law; he fulfilled the temple with its sacrifices and priestly ministry; he fulfilled the prophetic ministry.

In the past God spoke through the prophets. John was the greatest and the last of the prophets. *In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son who he appointed heir of all things... and who sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high* (Hebrews 1:1-3). In this new kingdom even the least is greater than John the Baptist. So wonderful is this kingdom of God then even servants, even tax collectors and prostitutes who enter in are greater than the prophets of the Old Covenant.

Verses 29-30 are put in brackets in some versions, indicating that they are a comment by Luke, the gospel writer. Our New King James Version (NKJV) leaves these verses out of quotation marks which has the same effect. You will note that the word 'Him' in verse 29 is in italics. This is because in the Greek there is no object to the verb 'heard'. This is where the problem arises – not that it is a serious problem. Some versions insert the word 'things' – 'the people heard these things'. Our NKJV has 'Him' with a capital, indicating Jesus, while the King James Version (KJV) has no capital indicating John – the latter is preferable. It is best to read these two verses as a continuation of what Jesus was telling the crowd about John the Baptist.

As we just indicated, the least in the kingdom of God could be a 'terrible sinner' like a tax collector (publican). Tax collectors were among those who came to John the Baptist. They came repenting of their sin and asking 'what shall we do' (3:12). Tax collectors who were baptised by John the Baptist were in the crowd following Jesus. In doing so they showed that they listened to John and saw him as the forerunner of the Messiah. They were now following the Jesus, the Son of God.

All that was written in the Bible was true. What was written about John was fulfilled, and what was written about Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus. Such is the unity of the Bible. There is no contradiction. There is no confusion. God's plan is perfect. God's way is right. This is what is meant by *the tax collectors justified God* (7:29).

The Pharisees and lawyers on the other hand rejected the will or plan of God. Some of these were hanging around, spying on Jesus. They had not submitted to John's baptism and now they were rejecting Jesus. 'They were concerned with the law of God but not the will of God' wrote Leon Morris. They did not examine their own hearts. If they had done so they would have seen their own sin and repented, as both John and Jesus called them to do.

It is not God's will for any to perish but that all should come to repentance (II Peter 3:9). At the same time from the doctrine of election we know that God has chosen some and rejected others.

3. John and Jesus

To what shall I liken the men of this generation asked Jesus, as he concluded his address to the crowd (7:31). He had just referred to the Pharisees and experts in the law who rejected John the Baptist. The same men now rejected Jesus. What did they want? John was a complete ascetic who lived in the desert eating only locusts and wild honey. He never touched wine. The Pharisees thought him a bit strange. They said he was demon possessed (7:33).

When Jesus appeared on the scene he went to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. He also went to a dinner hosted by Matthew the tax collector. The Pharisees turned around and said Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. They called him a glutton and a drunkard. They also said he had a demon. Just what did these men want! Clearly they were impossible to please.

Jesus likened them to children who were never satisfied (7:32). He quoted a little poetic couplet which children apparently used when other children would not join their games. They would join neither their dancing nor their weeping.

You know children like this, I'm sure. Do you also know adults like this? In our Lighthouse club kids come up whingeing 'Mr Dennis I don't like this game, it makes me tired'. The next game involves sitting down in a circle. 'Mr Dennis, I don't like this game it's too boring' – the very same child will say this!

It is impossible to please some people. The worship service is never at the right time for some. Some are never happy with the songs or with the Bible that is read. Some are never happy with the preacher or his sermon. The fundamental problem is, as J.C. Ryle puts it, 'they do not like God himself'. It is futile trying to please some people because they will never be pleased until God works on their stubborn and proud hearts.

Wisdom is justified by all her children said Jesus (7:35). In other words, God is shown to be just or right by such responses. By rejecting John and rejecting Jesus they showed that they did not want to hear the truth. People who reject this and reject that, and are never satisfied, lack wisdom. They are blind to God's revealed truth. Remember what happened to those who grumbled against Moses in the desert.

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