

Sermon – 08/05/2011 am

Questions from John the Baptist

Study Text: Luke 7:18-23

Jesus' ministry in Galilee was in full swing. Crowds were flocking to hear Jesus and to be healed by him. He healed them and he preached the Kingdom of God. He was meeting some opposition from the Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, but they were not very influential in the province of Galilee.

Where was John the Baptist at this time, the man who prepared the people for the coming of Jesus? John was in prison (Luke 3:20). John lived in the desert where he dressed in a camel hair coat and ate locusts and wild honey. He burst onto the scene before Jesus, warning people to flee the wrath to come (3:7). He baptised those who repented of their sin and turned to God. As a prophet John the Baptist had his own disciples. Some of these went off to follow Jesus while others stayed with John even when he was locked up by Herod.

1. Send

John's disciples kept him informed of what was happening on the outside, particularly what Jesus was doing. When John sent two of his disciples to Jesus they found him healing people, casting out evil spirits and giving sight to the blind (7:21). All that Jesus did was out in the open. He did not say or do things in secret.

Beware of any ministry that wants to do things in secret. It is a mark of false religions and of sects that they want to have secrets within the leadership. Think of the Masons. What about the Papacy? Jesus was completely open in what he did and said.

These two disciples were sent by John the Baptist to ask a particular question of Jesus: 'Are you the coming one or should we expect another?' (7:19). What an amazing question for John to ask! This was the same John who not only baptized Jesus but said of him *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). How could this man, this prophet of God now be questioning Jesus in this way? Was he having doubts about who Jesus was?

Some maintain that John had no questions himself but sent these two disciples to Jesus to confirm their own belief in Jesus. John knew his end was near and wanted those he left behind to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. 'But this is too artificial to carry any conviction' wrote Leon Morris. There is no need to turn the focus away from John himself.

John was a prophet, but still a man. He was living under the Old Covenant. He knew the Scriptures. He was a Jew who looked to the coming of Messiah. In the power of the Holy Spirit he announced his coming and identified Jesus as the Messiah or Coming One. That does not mean that he fully understood the nature of Jesus' ministry.

John was a fiery preacher. He warned people of the wrath of God that was coming. He said one mightier than him was coming. This one would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He spoke of this one as the judge, the one who would separate the wheat from the chaff (3:16, 17). But John did not hear of Jesus doing anything like this. All he heard about was Jesus healing people. He heard about mercy rather than judgment. John's faith was not failing; it was more a matter of his patience.

2. See

Jesus answered and said to them 'Go and tell John the things that you have seen and heard' (7:22). Jesus did not express any disappointment with John – far from it! He went on to praise him as the greatest of all the prophets. Nor did Jesus give them any formal declaration of his being the Messiah. He simply told them to go and tell John what they saw and heard.

Jesus listed the fruits of his work: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised. These things would have reminded John of the words of another prophet called Isaiah. Jesus was in fact pointing John to the Scriptures, to what was written about Messiah. Read Isaiah 35:5-6 – ‘the eyes of the blind shall be opened ... and the ears of the deaf unstopped’. Jesus was doing just what was written about him in the Scriptures. Jesus ministry was foretold in another chapter of Isaiah, chapter 40:3-5. John was aware that he was preparing the way for the One to come after him, the Messiah.

The poor have the gospel preached to them (7:22). Isaiah also told this particular thing about the Messiah. *The poor among men shall rejoice (Isaiah 29:19).* *The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor (Isaiah 60:1).* Jesus told John’s disciples that this was exactly what he was doing. Jesus referred to these words in his Nazareth manifesto (Luke 4:18).

‘Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard’ said Jesus. He was fulfilling what was written about Messiah in the Bible. Jesus was gently reminding John of what was written. Popular teaching about Messiah had departed from what was written. Many thought Messiah would come with great power and deliver the Jews from Roman oppression. John was incarcerated because of corrupt administration backed by the Romans. He felt the full force of imperial power. We can understand his desire for justice and freedom.

When the apostle Paul went to the city of Berea he preached in the synagogue of the Jews. The people listened to him and they also *searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether the things he said were true (Acts 17:11)*. Paul was not offended by this any more than Jesus was offended by the questions of John the Baptist.

A faithful minister of the word will be prepared to give an answer to those who question what he says and what he does. We must always test against the Scriptures the things that men preach, to see if what they say is faithful to the word of God. This is difficult of course if they are not preaching from the word of God! We must examine not just what they say but also what they do. Jesus invited John’s disciples to examine all that he did and said.

Jesus’ ministry was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Let each one of us be serving the Lord with a ministry that is full of grace and truth.

3. Stumble

Blessed is he who is not offended because of me was the final word that Jesus spoke to John’s disciples (7:23). Why would anyone be offended by Jesus? The gospel is good news. It is a simple, straightforward message. It is a gospel that even children can comprehend. Jesus does not play tricks with us. But still thousands are offended because of Jesus. Why? They are offended by the grace and truth that are found in Jesus.

One day I saw a woman fall down some stairs. She lay flat on her face at the foot of the stairs. Some girls rushed to help her up. They were her students. Do you know what this woman did? She yelled at those girls saying she did not need any help. ‘Leave me alone’ she yelled.

Many people respond to the grace of Jesus in the same way. Jesus says 'come to me all who are weary and burdened'. To all who are dying he says 'follow me and I will give you life'. But many tell him 'go away, I do not need your help'.

J. C. Ryle writes 'So long as the world stands, Christ and his gospel will be a stumbling block to many. To hear that we are lost and guilty sinners, and cannot save ourselves, – to hear that we must give up our own righteousness and trust in One who was crucified between two thieves, – to hear that we must be content to enter heaven side by side with publicans and harlots, and to owe all our salvation to free grace, – this is always offensive to the natural man. Our proud hearts do not like it. We are offended.'

Pride is the deadliest of sins. Pride leads people away from Jesus like nothing else. Sinners do not like the truth, especially the truth which tells them they are sinners (Romans 3:23). The truth hurts, as we say. But we also say that without pain there is no gain. What pain is involved in following Jesus? Simply this, the hurt to our pride. So many prefer to live the lie, rather than to hurt their pride. So many prefer to live the lie rather than humble themselves and repent of their sin.

'Free grace' is what Ryle said. When we do humble ourselves and repent of our sin, Jesus forgives us and we are set free from this bondage to sin. We are set free from the burden of living the lie. Free grace sets us free. The grace of Jesus in forgiving is entirely free.

Do not think you can earn his grace and favour in any way. Many try to do this in order not to offend their pride. They like to think that they can help themselves, at least a little bit. They think that salvation is by grace plus good works. If this is what you think it will stop you being offended by the Cross, but you will be offending God grievously. Why? Because he gave his only begotten Son to save you from your sin. He gave Jesus to die for you. Do not make the Cross of Christ of no effect. Do not insult the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:29).

Blessed is the man who is not offended because of me. Jesus was aware that he would cause some to stumble (e.g. John 6:66). It is a blessing, a divine blessing, when a person does not stumble because of Jesus. It is a blessing of the Spirit of God.

Jesus did not in any way change what he was saying and doing because he caused offence to some. He did not send an apology back to John saying he was sorry if he was offended – not that John was offended. Jesus did not apologise to the religious leaders who were offended by what he said and did.

Yet today we see preachers desperately trying not to offend people with the gospel. In their preaching they try to please everyone, in contrast to the preaching of Jesus, and the apostle Paul. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ will cause offence to many. Blessed are you if you are not offended.

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