

## **Sermon 34: Luke 7:24-35: Jesus Vindicates John the Baptist**

### **OUTLINE**

John's character  
John's calling  
John's impact  
John's critics

### **INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever been slandered and gossiped about and totally misunderstood? John the Baptist was a faithful servant of God but who had been slandered, in v33 he was even accused of having had a demon. We have been looking at a section where John the Baptist has sent some of his disciples to ask whether Jesus is the Messiah, we see Jesus give a yes answer substantiated by evidence that the promises of God are coming to pass. After John's disciples leave we are left with Christ talking about John the Baptist before the crowds. Jesus defends John's reputation and puts his ministry in the clearest light. Remember John was languishing in prison, his public ministry was not always understood as some mistook him for the Messiah, but he has also been a victim of the fickle mass's swing in allegiance and a slander campaign from the opposition. Two things stand out already as we begin. Firstly, that Jesus rushes to defend a slandered believer, and secondly that Jesus helps us see things more clearly. By clarifying who John is and what he had come to do, we can see Jesus and ourselves more clearly. As believers we often share in John's experience of being slandered and not being able to set the record straight. Ryle writes, 'There is comfort here for all believers who are suspected, slandered, and falsely accused. Few are the children of God who do not suffer in this way, at some time or other. The accuser of the brethren knows well that character is one of the points in which he can most easily wound a Christian. He knows well that slanders are easily called into existence, greedily received and propagated, and seldom entirely silenced. Lies and false reports are the chosen weapons by which he labors to injure the Christian's usefulness, and destroy his peace. But let all who are assaulted in their characters rest in the thought that they have an Advocate in heaven who knows their sorrows. That same Jesus who maintained the character of His imprisoned servant before a Jewish crowd, will never desert any of His people. The world may frown on them. Their names may be cast out as evil by man. But Jesus never changes, and will one day plead their cause before the whole world.'<sup>1</sup>

As we look at this section we have four headings we want to explore: John's character, calling, impact and critics.

#### **John's character**

V24-25, 'When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>25</sup>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.' The first thing Jesus does is He draws attention to John's character. He does this by painting word pictures as He asks rhetorical questions. He asks the crowds who are following Him, 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see?' And then He uses 2 pictures. Both are intended

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1 <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/ryle/Expository%20Thoughts%20on%20the%20Gosp%20-%20J.%20C.%20Ryle.pdf>

to highlight John's character by way of contrast, a shaking reed and a pampered nobleman. Reeds could grow up to 16ft tall, and the picture here is of a reed subject to the effects of the wind, being shaken and bent. Jesus is saying that John is not like a reed. John was a man of firm conviction, he was a man who would not go with the flow but with what was right, he was not a coward who was governed by a fear of man but a fear of God. He had a clear sight of what God required and unapologetically stood for it. He stood up to kings, he stood up to Roman soldiers, he stood up to Pharisees as well as the masses. Not all of us have a personality or calling suited to public preaching, but we can all be convinced of the truth and stand for it. Will you stand for the truth of God before your family, your friends, your work colleagues, your fellow students? Accommodation, political correctness, compromising between two extremes, being inclusive, not being dogmatic, avoiding all appearance of conviction lest we appear judgmental, being silent when we ought to speak, these are the temptations peculiar to our times.

John the Baptist was a man who experienced revival in a time of spiritual deadness and who brought revival to Israel. If you look through the scriptures and the history of the church you will find that there were many different types that God used to bring about change. There were loud and soft spoken Christians, there were educated and uneducated, but what all had in common and enabled them to stand against the tide of their time was their knowledge of God. But as someone put it, it was more theophany than theology. These believers of the past were in the grip of the truth of who God is. They were convinced of His glory and worth, they mourned the fact He was not worshipped. John the Baptist and others were not a particular personality type that stirs up trouble but souls in the grip of the reality of who God is, and this is what made them bold. David Brainerd was a man who was used by God, he "...recalls the time when he was among the Indians in North America and, the night before a pagan festival he went to the woods to be alone with God. His experience during that night reveals the kind of men God can trust in revival: 'All things here below vanished, and there appeared to be nothing of any considerable importance to me but holiness of heart and life, and the conversion of the heathen to God. All my cares, fears, and desires, which might be said to be of a worldly nature disappeared, and were in my esteem, of little more importance than a puff of wind. I exceedingly longed that God would get to Himself a name among the heathen, and I appealed to Him, with the greatest freedom, that He knew I preferred Him above my chief joy.'<sup>2</sup>

If we are to be those who stand against a torrent of sin and public disapproval we can only do it if we know God. Our fear of man will grow or shrink in direct relation to our fear of God, and our fear of God grows or shrinks in relation to our knowledge of God. And our knowledge of God must move from the head into our hearts. The greatest antidote to worldliness is worship, not the act of worship, or to stir up emotions, but to have our whole selves confronted by the glory of God and have our whole selves respond to all of who God is.

Not only did John the Baptist have a steel spine because of his knowledge of God He also lived a life of discipline and self-denial. He was not a man living in soft/splendid clothing nor living in luxury in a royal setting. Here was a man who lived in the desert not in palaces, who wore camel skins not luxurious clothing, who ate locusts not rich fare, and who observed a Nazirite vow and did not indulge in wine. He was a man of integrity whose life wrote in capital letters: CONSECRATED TO GOD. The message and the man agreed. This was part of what made John so effective. He lived by a different ethic to the one everyone else was following. When the tax collectors and sinners had to listen to someone tell them

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Edwards, Revival, p61.

they were sinners and needed to repent, they did not listen to the self-righteous Pharisees whose religion consisted in ceremony, ritual and man-made traditions, no they flocked to this man who lived as if God was real. If we seek to be faithful witnesses in our own generation we must study John closely on this front.

## **John's calling**

V26-28, 'What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup>This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." Jesus moves from speaking about John's character to John's calling as a prophet. Here He asks His third question about John's identity and answers it Himself. Jesus confirms that John was a prophet sent from God, but goes on to reveal more, that John is the prophet who was promised in the OT who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus references Malachi 3:1 and tells us that John is that foretold prophet.

Jesus paraphrases Malachi 3:1, here is the verse as it is found in the OT, 'Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.' The key thing to note is that where the foretold prophet is said to prepare the way for God, Christ applies that directly to Himself. Christ in confirming John's call drops two big bombs, 'I am the promised the Messiah;' and 'I am God.'

And as if a confirmation of John's prophethood, the announcement that the Messiah has come, and the surprise that Jesus identifies Himself as God, Jesus adds another startling revelation in v28, 'I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.'" It would be startling to think that John was the greatest prophet and they had heard him, but this is not the surprise. Jesus is announcing that the New age, the promised time of the New Covenant, the time of the Spirit poured out is here, and that those who follow the Messiah and are part of this new kingdom are incredibly privileged, even moreso than John the Baptist.

Jesus confirms the fact that John is a prophet but unpacks the full significance of that. If John is the promised preparer of the way for the Messiah and fulfils Malachi 3:1, then Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is God, the New Covenant has arrived and those in Christ's new kingdom are more privileged than any saint that belongs to the OT. So as we appreciate John we are brought to appreciate our own position. This raises for us the question what does Jesus mean that the least saint is greater than John? John was the greatest OT prophet, he saw and handled what all the other prophets only saw from afar. Yet we are told that the least saint is greater than he is. We are not greater in holiness, John was profoundly holy, He had the Holy Spirit from the womb. But we are greater in privileges and knowledge. The privileges of the New Covenant saint are greater than those in the OT. The OT had certain privileges like an inheritance of land, promises of physical blessing for obedience, but the New Covenant promises things more perfect and that are eternal. The least saint also surpasses any OT prophet in the knowledge we have as well. There are various mysteries that had been hidden even from the prophets that we have inside info on. 'They include:

- The mystery of Christ's incarnation (Col. 2:2-3); that He would be both God and man, a truth hinted at in the Old Testament (e.g., Isa. 7:14; 9:6), but not made clear.

- The mystery of Israel's unbelief (Rom. 11:25–29).
- The mystery of Gentile salvation (Rom. 16:25–26).
- The mystery of Jews and Gentiles united in one body (Eph. 2:11–22).
- The mystery of the indwelling of Christ in believers (Col. 1:25–27).
- The mystery of lawlessness embodied in the future antichrist (2 Thess. 2:7–8).
- The mystery of the summing up of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:9–10).<sup>73</sup>

To know who John is, is to know who Jesus is, is to know the profoundly privileged position that we are in.

### **John's impact**

V29-30, '(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John,<sup>30</sup> but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)' We have seen John's character and his call as a prophet, now we see the impact that his ministry had. We are told that John the Baptist split the nation in 2. On the one side were those who heard John and were baptized by him, and this included those who were perceived to be enemies and beyond mercy, the tax collectors; on the other side were the religious teachers and authorities in the law of Moses who rejected John's message and baptism. John had come at a time in Israel's history where religion was prevalent but it was misguided. He came telling people that they were sinful and needed to prepare for God's kingdom; they thought they were righteous. He called upon them to repent in order to be forgiven; they did not see themselves as sinners in need of it. John called them to repent individually; they rested in their racial affiliations and family lineage. John came with a baptism from God calling people to repent and be baptized as a symbol of being cleansed; they preferred the ceremonial washings of their traditions. John warned them that if God came He would judge Israel; they wanted God to come but only expected Him to judge the Gentiles.

There were those who agreed that they were sinners; that they deserved judgement and jumped at the opportunity for God to have mercy upon them and wash away their sins. But the others rejected God's messenger because they could not believe the truth about themselves and their need to repent or be judged. Which one are you? Are you someone who hears God's message that we are sinners who need to repent or do you think you are ok?

### **John's critics**

V31-35, "'To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? <sup>32</sup>They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.'<sup>33</sup> For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.'<sup>34</sup> The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'<sup>35</sup> Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

In this last section Jesus gives us what has been described as the parable of the brats. The basic point that Jesus will be making is that unbelief will look for any reason not to believe.

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3 MacArthur, J. (2011). Luke 6–10 (p. 158). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

Jesus compares the people of His generation to children. The fact that He generalizes this generation probably indicates that the larger portion of it had rejected God's messengers. Children are well known for playing all sorts of role playing games, it appears that playing at weddings and funerals were among them. Jesus characterizes those who reject God's messengers as those children who cannot be pleased and are always finding fault. The faultfinders made a happy tune and were angry when John the Baptist came with a message of repentance. The faultfinders then played a sad tune and found fault with Christ for eating and drinking with sinners. The picture here is of people who are impossible to please and end up contradicting themselves in what they refuse. John the Baptist is too strict; Jesus is too familiar.

Friends this way of thinking is a typical characteristic of our sinful hearts. This way of refusing to be pleased is the typical way in which unbelievers act in every generation including our own. Listen to hear whether some of these critiques sound familiar. The church is too harsh; the church is too soft. We are not allowed to say what God's word says about sexual immorality; and then we are criticized because matters of chauvinism, racial equality, and the poor are insufficiently handled by the Bible. The church is too holy; the church is hypocritical. So which is it? Are Christians holy Jews or hypocrites? The church is too dogmatic; the church is not dogmatic enough. When it comes to truth, doctrine, standing on a teaching of the Bible we will be seen to be too dogmatic; but when it comes to the latest politically correct issue and we refuse to enter into the media mayhem with our virtue signaling, then we are cowards and immoral. We are told that the church is too influential; and we are not influential enough. When it comes to moral values that the Western world has practiced for centuries and this generation wants to throw them off, we are too influential; but when it comes to ganging up on political parties, or corporations, or getting on board with public outcry we are condemned for our silence and not being influential enough. The greatest prophet of the OT and God Himself have been mistreated in this fashion and we should not expect anything less.

The application in all of this is: be faithful, don't try and please everyone, please God! Jesus warned that we would be hated, that we would be slandered, that we would be marginalized and legally resisted. We must do what Christ does here, preach the truth, be faithful and challenge the unbeliever to see the hypocrisy and recalcitrance of their unbelief, how they refuse to believe the truth no matter what. Jesus is drilling down into those who have rejected John and Himself. He is mercifully revealing that John was sent by God; that the Messiah has come and graciously demonstrated the obvious childishness in their unbelief, this is how He challenges each person here today. Do you see how unreasonable you are for not believing? The Jews had excuses, but when we dig deep into those excuses we see that this is all they are, weak, self-contradicting excuses. I always come back to the description of the human heart by Jeremiah 17:9, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' In our hearts we lie to ourselves, we accept those arguments that have merely a veneer of truth that will collapse upon inspection. Yet this is the way we are, we are liars, and we self-deceive. It is a mercy then that Christ helps us see our folly, the ridiculous ways in which we argue for why we should not believe. Will you continue in the obvious idiocy of unbelief, will you persist in childish resistance or will you accept what God is saying to you?

Jesus ends His parable with a proverb, 'Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.' There has been a lot of discussion about what this means but here is how I take it. There is a disagreement between the religious leaders and the masses who have followed John and Jesus, there are two types of people, those who are righteous and those who are sinners, those who carry on because they think they are ok and those who repent because they

recognize that they are sinners. Those who carry on in their false ways will not produce fruit, but those who hear the truth and believe it will prove the truth by the fruit of repentance that they bear.

Let's conclude. John the Baptist like us is a servant of God. We will be slandered and misunderstood but we must not be like a reed or pampered nobility. He is the prophet who prepares the way for the Messiah, and we have heard and believed and been brought into a privileged position. The world responded to him as it responds to the truth today, either it will accept the message that we are sinners who need to repent and can receive forgiveness from a God of grace; or they will persist in their self-righteousness and refuse to believe. Which are you?