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Luke 7:18-35

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# A TIME TO MOURN, A TIME TO DANCE

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

“Hail to the Lord’s Anointed, great David’s greater Son.” We easily sing these words. We read the gospels as privileged readers: we know the identity of Jesus and of John the Baptist. But those experiencing the events recorded in the gospels were not so privileged: they did not know the identity of these two key figures. In the gospels we see these people ask, “Who is Jesus? Who is John the Baptist?”

John and Jesus were cousins, but we read of them meeting only twice: the first time before they were born, and not again until some thirty years later. Luke’s gospel begins with parallel accounts of John and Jesus: the annunciation of their births to John’s father and to Jesus’ mother, and the births themselves. Between the annunciations and the births, when both were still in the womb, their paths crossed when Mary visited her much older relative Elizabeth, who was then in her sixth month of pregnancy. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting the baby in her womb leaped for joy. For three months Mary stayed with Elizabeth as their babies developed *in utero*.

Then the two mothers and the two as yet unborn babies went their separate ways. Elizabeth remained in her unnamed town in the hill country of Judea, traditionally Ein Kerem, today on the southwest outskirts of Jerusalem. Here John was born, but when he was grown he went into the wilderness “until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (1:80). Meanwhile, Mary returned to Nazareth in Galilee, then journeyed to Bethlehem for the birth. The holy family returned to Nazareth where Jesus grew up, joining his father in his trade as a “carpenter.” Did the two boys ever meet? Many artists have depicted the two boys together, but the gospel writers do not.

Some thirty years after their births it was time for both John and Jesus to enter into their public ministry. Their paths crossed on the banks of the Jordan River in the Judean wilderness. Luke wrote that John “went out into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3). So distinctive was this call to baptism that John became known as the Baptizer, or, as we know him, the Baptist. Crowds came out to be baptized, submerged by John into the waters of the Jordan River. They realized that this was an act filled with symbolic significance, and so, filled with expectation, they were wondering who this John might be:

**As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:15-16 ESV)**

In preparation for his public ministry, Jesus also went out into the Judean wilderness, having journeyed south from Nazareth. There he, too, was baptized by John. Immediately, “the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form” (3:22). Thereafter the cousins went their separate ways, never to meet again. John was locked up in prison by Herod Antipas for reproving him for marrying Herodias who had divorced his brother Herod Philip to marry him. Jesus, “full of the

Holy Spirit” (4:1) and “in the power of the Spirit” (4:14), returned to Nazareth and began his public ministry preaching, teaching and healing in Galilee. He preached, proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God. He taught as a rabbi with his disciples. He healed people of all sorts of diseases. It is these activities which we have been following over the past few months.

Reports about Jesus spread throughout the region of Galilee (4:14, 37), like ripples spreading out across a pond. Just as the Judean crowds had wondered about the identity of John, so the Galilean crowds wondered about the identity of Jesus, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people” (7:16). The Judean crowds had wondered if John might be the Messiah; the Galilean crowds have now concluded that Jesus is a great prophet. In our text today we find out if they have come to the right conclusions, as Jesus talks about who both he and John are. John and Jesus don’t actually meet; they can’t meet for John is in prison. What brings them together, albeit at a distance, is the spreading report about Jesus. The report about Jesus had previously spread throughout Galilee. Now “this report” spread throughout all of Judea (7:17) where it eventually reached the ears of John the Baptist.

Our text (Luke 7:18-35) is a difficult text, full of issues that puzzle scholars and commentators, who reach differing conclusions. The text is in three sections, each featuring questions: John asks who Jesus is (18-23), Jesus asks who John is (24-30), and Jesus asks who the people are, especially in their responses to John and Jesus (31-35).

## John asks about Jesus (7:18-23)

**The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Luke 7:18-23)**

The report about Jesus, having already spread throughout Galilee, had now spread southwards throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. It reached the ears of John’s disciples who then reported “all these things” to John, who was in prison in Machaerus, one of Herod’s many palace fortresses, this one high above the east shore of the Dead Sea, in the territory of Perea, which Herod Antipas ruled along with Galilee. John sent two of his disciples north to Galilee to ask Jesus about his identity. Luke gives us, the readers, a privileged position by calling Jesus “the Lord.” John’s two disciples conveyed his inquiry, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for

another?" "The one who is to come" was a Messianic title, originating in Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD" (Ps 118:26). When the crowds had asked John if here were the Messiah, he had responded that there was another one coming, one who would be mightier. So John was asking Jesus if he be the Messiah.

We don't know John's state of mind in asking this question, but there has been much speculation. Did John doubt that Jesus was really the Messiah, because he wasn't doing the things he expected him to do? Or did John send two of his disciples because they doubted? Or did John ask his question because he realized that this Jesus was more than a great prophet as had been reported to him? We don't know; Luke doesn't tell us. Luke's interest is in the reply that Jesus gives to this question.

But Jesus kept John's two disciples waiting. Instead of answering their question he engaged in a rapid flurry of healing activity "in that hour." He then told the two disciples to return to John and tell him what they had seen and heard, listing six things that had happened: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." What sort of an answer is that? These are not random healing events. They are exactly the sort of events which Isaiah announced would happen in the Messianic age when God would come to save his people:

**Behold, your God  
will come with vengeance,  
with the recompense of God.  
He will come and save you.  
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.** (Isa 35:4-6)

In the Nazareth synagogue Jesus read from Isaiah:

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** (Luke 4:18-19, quoting  
Isa 61:1-2)

Saying, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he announced what his ministry would be. Jesus was doing what he said he would do. And he was doing what Isaiah said would happen when God visited his people. Jesus' actions and words were thus a powerful implicit claim to be the Messiah.

Jesus added, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (23). The verb here is *skandalizō*: blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me. People were faced with a choice over how to respond to Jesus as he went around preaching, teaching and healing. Some accepted him, but others took offense, stumbling over him. Simeon had warned Mary that this would be so:

**"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many  
in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce  
through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts  
may be revealed."** (2:34-35)

Simeon compared the baby Jesus to a stone laid in place. Some would find him to be a cornerstone on whom their lives could rise.

But others would stumble over him and fall; to them he would be a stumbling stone (Gk *skandalon*), a scandal. So Jesus' reply is only partly about who he is; it is also about who the people are in their response to him.

We are not told John's response to what Jesus said. Presumably, reassured that Jesus was indeed the "coming one," the "greater one," the Messiah, he would realize that his work was done. And so he lived out his remaining days in prison until Herod killed him (9:9). What had John's work been?

### Jesus asks about John (7:24-30)

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? 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. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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." (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) (7:24-30)

As soon as John's disciples left, Jesus asked the crowds who they thought John was. Why had they gone out into the wilderness? On a sightseeing trip to see the local vegetation, reeds waving in the wind? No, of course not: they had gone out to see a person. Well, then, was it someone dressed in royal robes they went out to see? No, of course not: they went out to see someone wearing skin garments. Was it a prophet they went to see, a man proclaiming God's word? Yes, but he was more than a prophet; he came to prepare the way for someone else, as it is written in the Scriptures. Jesus' quote is drawn from both Exodus and Malachi. To the Israelites whom he had just brought out of Egypt, the Lord said,

**"Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way  
and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful  
attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him,  
for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in  
him."** (Exod 23:20-21)

The Lord would send a messenger ahead of the people to lead them into the land, but he solemnly warned them not to rebel against this messenger, whose word was tantamount to God's word. A millennium later the Lord spoke through the last prophet Malachi,

**"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. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."** (Mal 3:1-2)

Here we have four figures: the LORD of Hosts, the Lord's messenger, the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant. It

is difficult to distinguish who these might be unless we read with the hindsight of the New Testament.

John was more than a prophet, he was the messenger whom the Lord had sent to prepare the way. He was greater than all others born of women, the greatest of the old age. But a new age was dawning, the age of God's kingdom, which was the good news that Jesus had been preaching. John prepared the way for that kingdom but did not himself enter it. He announced that one was coming who would baptize with the Spirit, by which people would enter the kingdom. The least person who so entered would be greater than the greatest of the old. John was the last figure of the old age; Jesus inaugurated the new age.

Jesus had warned that people would be divided over himself, invoking a blessing on those who wouldn't stumble over him. Luke adds a parenthetical note to show that people were divided over John also, as indicated by whether they submitted to his baptism or not. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Submission to his baptism required acknowledgement that one was a sinner in need of both repentance and forgiveness. The common people, and especially the tax collectors, acknowledged this. They declared God just, that is, by accepting that they were sinners who needed to repent they accepted God's verdict as right, and found him to be a God who forgives. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law did not see themselves as sinners. They had no need to repent, no need to be forgiven. The sinners were "them," those people over there, especially the tax collectors and prostitutes. By not submitted to John's baptism, they rejected God's purpose for them. God had given a solemn warning of what would happen to his people if they rejected the messenger he sent ahead of them.

### Jesus asks about "this generation" (7:31-35)

**"To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 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.'**

**For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' 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!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."** (7:31-35)

"To what shall I compare the people of this generation?" These words sound innocent enough, but they are freighted with ominous undertones. "This generation" is never a positive term in the gospels. Elsewhere Jesus says, "This generation is an evil generation" (11:29), a generation that refuses to repent like Nineveh, even when facing one greater than Jonah, a generation that refuses to hear wisdom like the Queen of Sheba, when a greater than Solomon is here. It is a generation that will reject Jesus (17:25). The term is all the more ominous given the text Jesus has just quoted from the Scriptures. The Lord had warned the Israelites to listen carefully to the messenger he was sending ahead of them to lead them into the land. But that generation refused to listen, and so God disowned them:

**they are no longer his children because they are blemished;  
they are a crooked and twisted generation...  
The Lord saw it and spurned them,  
because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters.  
And he said, "I will hide my face from them;**

**I will see what their end will be,  
for they are a perverse generation,  
children in whom is no faithfulness."** (Deut 32:5, 19-20)

Luke has just compared the sinners who accepted God's verdict and responded to his messenger, John the Baptizer, with the Pharisees and lawyers who rejected God's purpose for themselves, rejecting his messenger. It is clear then that in asking, "To what then shall I compare the people of this generation?" Jesus had in mind the Pharisees and the lawyers.

Jesus told a parable, likening them to children playing in the square. There is much debate about how this parable works, about who is playing which role. It is clear that the children are not in sync with one another, they're not playing the same game. However precisely the parable works, the meaning is clear from Jesus' subsequent explanation. He compared the ministries of himself and John the Baptist, both of whom have come. We might add that they have both come in the name of the Lord as his envoys, his messengers. John came eating no bread and drinking no wine. His was an austere life, eating locusts and under the Nazirite vow of no wine even from the womb. His ministry was a solemn call to repentance, summoning people to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. There was nothing celebratory about this. But thereby John was preparing both the way and the people for the "Coming One" who would bring celebration. Yet "this generation," that is the Pharisees and lawyers, rejected John's call, charging him with demon-possession. Conversely, Jesus came eating and drinking. It was time for celebration: the kingdom of God was at hand, and Jesus invited people to join the party. But the people he invited were those whom John had prepared, namely those who needed to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, namely sinners. And so it was sinners whom Jesus invited to dine with himself, to enter into the celebration. But "this generation" rejected his ministry also, charging that he was "a glutton and a drunkard." This is an ominous charge, for in Deuteronomy we read of what to do with "a glutton and a drunkard":

**"If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear."** (Deut 21:18-21)

It is the stubborn and rebellious son who is a glutton and a drunkard. But who is the stubborn and rebellious son? The Pharisees accuse Jesus of being this son. He must therefore be put to death so the evil can be purged from Israel. But the whole passage shows that it is the Pharisees and the lawyers who are the stubborn and rebellious son. They have failed to hear the messenger the Lord has sent, but have rebelled against their Father. The Lord will therefore disown them as his sons. They will perish on the way and not enter the land, just like "this generation" which the Lord brought out of Egypt. They will not enter the kingdom of God which Jesus has come to proclaim.

Who are the children whom the Lord does not disown? The tax collectors and sinners who find in Jesus a friend. They know they are sinners. Had they been present in the Judean wilderness they would have repented and been baptized by John, thereby declaring

God just. Now they accept Jesus' invitation to dine, to enter into the celebration for the kingdom of God is here. Yes, Jesus is the friend of sinners. The Pharisees intended this as an insult, but Jesus accepts it as part of his mission. When the Pharisees grumbled after Jesus dined with Levi the tax collector, Jesus said to them,

**“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”** (Luke 5:31-32)

And so “wisdom is justified by all her children.” This closing comment by Jesus has also puzzled the commentators: who are the children? what is wisdom? At the detailed level I don't know precisely what this means, but I do at the general level. Each of the three sections has ended with something of a climax. The first section ends with Jesus' statement, “blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (23). The second section ends with the contrast between those who did and did not submit to the baptism of John (29-30). Those who heard, and especially the tax collectors, did submit, thereby justifying God, that is declaring God to be right in his verdict. But the Pharisees did not, thereby rejecting God's purposes for them. The first statement was about how people responded to Jesus, the second about how they responded to John. Now wisdom is justified by her children. God's people showed by their response to John and to Jesus whether they really were God's children, children of divine wisdom, children who hear the messengers God sent, or whether they were disobedient and rebellious children whom the Lord would disown.

John and Jesus were close relatives, born just six months apart. Luke ties their births together. Their ministries were tied together: Jesus submitted to John's baptism in order to identify with Israel, and he didn't begin his ministry until John had finished his. Then they went in opposite directions: John to prison, and Jesus to proclaim liberty to captives. In many ways their ministries were opposite. The people were faced with a choice over how to respond to both John and Jesus. The ministry of John the Baptist, the way-preparer, was to call people to repentance, to recognize that they were sinners; once they recognized that they were sinners they would find a God who forgives. Then Jesus came announcing that the kingdom of God had come, and inviting people to join the party. The only people who had the ears to hear were those who knew that they were sinners. So, it is the same people who respond to these two messengers. It was sinners who found a God who forgives, and it is sinners that find Jesus to be the friend of sinners.

Those without ears to hear refused to accept that they were sinners who needed to repent and find forgiveness, and so they rejected John's call. Since they refused to accept themselves as sinners, they refused to accept Jesus' call to dine with him in the company of other sinners. They rebelled against the verdict of the old age: that they were stubborn and rebellious sons who had rejected God. They rebelled against the verdict of the new age: that God, in Christ, invites sinners to enter into his kingdom.

At first pass this passage seems to be about the identity of Jesus, but it is also about the identity of John. Yet at its heart it is about the response of people to these two messengers and their messages. This passage perfectly sets up the next story in which Jesus is invited to wine and dine at the house of Simon the Pharisee. But there is a sinner present in the room! The stage is set for a vivid illustration of the differing responses of Jesus and a Pharisee to the presence of a sinner in the room.

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