



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

The Unexpected Christ

Luke 7.1–23, 36–50

David Anguish

Introduction

In prison for reproving Herod the tetrarch for his illicit relationship with Herodias, his brother's wife, "and for all the evil things that Herod had done" (Luke 3.19–20), John the Baptist wondered: Was Jesus really the Messiah (7.18–19)?¹

You'll recall that John had come "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3.3), a message believed to be tied to the arrival of the Messiah (3.4–6, 15–16). He had called Israel, even those in power, to repent and warned them of wrath to come if they did not do so (3.7–14). He had also pointed to the one coming after him as the one who would judge and send some to "burn with unquenchable fire" (3.15–17). That person is subsequently identified as Jesus (3.21–22).

Yet, in Luke 7, he is wondering whether Jesus was in fact the one who was to come. What was Jesus doing? Was he really the right teacher? Had John's preaching and imprisonment been for nothing? His questions in chapter 7 don't seem to fit his affirmations about Jesus and the reign of God that we read earlier in the book.

We gain insight into this dilemma by looking at all of Luke 7, the chapter in which John's questions appear. No doubt, he had seen and heard more about Jesus than is recorded in this chapter, but it will suffice to shed light on the reason he would ask his questions.

Jesus's Answer in His Context

John's question and Jesus's reply are recorded in Luke 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,

¹ Darrell Bock comments, "His question is specific. He does not wonder whether Jesus has been sent from God, he simply wants confirmation that his ministry is the promised ministry of deliverance" (Bock 1996, 210).

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.”

Jesus’s answer showcased his ministry and finished with the promise of a blessing (μακάριος, *makarios*) for anyone who accepted it (v. 23).

To appreciate the significance of Jesus’ demonstration, we need to recall two things. First, he announced and practiced an inclusive ministry, as stated in his programmatic mission statement (Green 1995, 76):

“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; from Isa 61.1–2).

Second, the people he served in front of John’s disciples were representative of those he typically served (cf. Luke 4.40–41; 5.12–32), people who were excluded from society for reasons related to their in certain groups, often determined by characteristics or circumstances beyond their control.² Lines were drawn based on ethnicity, conformity to a particular sect, ritual purity, gender, infirmities, and other similar matters.³ In contrast, Luke made a point of showing Jesus’s inclusiveness, as seen in multiple lists of people Jesus welcomed and served (7.22; 4.18; 6.20–24; 14.13, 21) (Green 1990, 81–82, 86–88).

Illustrating the Unexpected Ministry of Jesus

The people whom Jesus encountered in the sections of Luke 7 on either side of the section on John illustrate how Jesus carried out the mission defined in Luke 4.18–19.

Luke 7.1–10 tells of the Capernaum centurion who asked Jesus to heal his sick servant. The man represented the Romans to whom Israel was subject. While verse 5 indicates that he was a man of some means who had curried good will by building the town’s synagogue, he was nonetheless a Gentile and excluded. But he demonstrated exemplary faith that Jesus said surpassed what he had seen in Israel, and he healed the man’s servant.

Not long after the episode in Capernaum, Jesus went to a nearby town called Nain (7.11–17). As he entered the town, he encountered a funeral procession for a man whose death left behind his widowed mother. A widow in that culture was “a person of the lowest status who, according to the Scriptures, is to be the object of special concern (e.g., Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 24:19–21)” (Green 1995, 92). The loss of her only son would have left her alone, in need of support and

² See discussions in Green 1995, 79–94; Dunn 1990, 61–88.

³ Socio-economic divisions existed, but economic lines were not drawn then as they are now (Green 1995, 79–80). Some who were wealthy were excluded for other reasons (cf. Luke 5.27–32; 19.1–10). For how religious lines were drawn, see Dunn 1990, 61–88.

protection. Jesus had compassion—the verb *σπλάγχνα* (*splanchna*)— and raised her son. Under the law, the act of touching the bier would have left Jesus in an unclean state for seven days (Num 19.11), but his compassion overrode his concern about that.

Following the section on John (7.18–35), we meet a woman who publicly interrupted a dinner at the home of a Pharisee to wash Jesus’s feet with her tears and anoint his head with the contents of an alabaster flask of ointment (7.36–50). She is identified only as a “sinner.” No specific sin is named, speculation and traditional tellings of the story notwithstanding; in fact, from Simon’s perspective, her offense could have been that she was not part of his group.

The dinner itself, and especially the fact that Jesus did not exclude her, illustrates his uniquely inclusive table-fellowship. His practice contrasted with that of at least some of the Pharisees, as Dunn notes: “*The purity of the meal table was an important concern among many of the Pharisees of Jesus’ time, or at least within a significant faction of the Pharisees*” (Dunn 1990, 65). That said, the fact that, despite their strictness and his repeated clashes with them, Jesus would accept an invitation to the house of a Pharisee is also an indication of his inclusiveness.

What stands out in the episode is that Jesus permitted such a public display by someone he had forgiven—the perfect tense of the verb *ἀφίημι* (*aphiēmi*) in verses 47–48 suggest that her sins had been forgiven prior to the dinner (Garland 2011, 329–330)—and then reprimanded his host for his exclusiveness and ingratitude.

Imitating Jesus’s Ministry

As the people commissioned to advance Jesus’s vision, we should reflect on what his ministry involved. “The Spirit of the Lord anointed [*χρίω, chriō*] [him] to proclaim the good news” (Luke 4.18). His task included teaching God’s word (4.31–32, 36, 43–44; 5.1, 17; 6.6; 7.22), a teaching that included a message of repentance and warnings of woes (cf. Matt 4.17; Luke 10.13; 11.32; 13.3–5; 15.7, 10). But it was also a message that offered good news to those who experienced exclusion and despair, not just for some time after this life in eternity, but during this life also. Thus, Jesus’s presentation of good news included both teaching and active service to those most needing to experience it (4.18–19).

The disciples who walked with Jesus formed the core of the community that ultimately changed the world. The apostles filled Jerusalem with Jesus’s teaching in spite of the concentrated effort of the authorities to silence them (cf. Acts 4.13; 5.1–11, 27–32). That group also included some women of means who supported Jesus and sat at his feet (Luke 8.1–3; 10.38–42).⁴ They were people from across the spectrum of society who succeeded by consistently serving as they had seen Jesus do (Acts 2.43–45; 4.32–37; 6.1–3). They show what is possible when his followers teach his message, serve as he served, and welcome people as he did, including those society often neglects.

We will do what they did when, collectively as a body, we practice the comprehensive life of teaching, serving, and welcoming that they practiced. It’s a life to be lived over time, not a singular program that immediately produces dynamic results. Can it work now? Based on history, the answer is *yes*. Will it work now? God only knows; people around us have the freedom and may resist our efforts. *But it is what faithful ministry that imitates Jesus looks like.*

⁴ For discussion of Luke 8.1–3 and its significance for the earliest church, see Anguish 2021, 421–426.

Conclusion

In mid-April 2012, I saw a story on Memphis's WREG-TV on the opening of the "Baby Shop" in Frayser, a poorer inner-city section of Memphis, to combat the problem of teen pregnancies that had garnered national attention in 2011. Led by the Impact Baptist Church, they provided a place where needy families could get baby clothing, bedding, and food. They also offered workshops, counseling, and similar assistance.⁵

I was struck by the fact that, prior to opening, the project had been in development for five years. That prompted me to think of Acts 5.12–16 which reports on the consistent ministry activities of the earliest disciples in imitation of what Jesus had modeled. Verse 14 says that "more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women."

What a marvelous vision for ministry!

Works Cited

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www.davidanguish.com

⁵ See Mike Suriami, "Store Rewards New Moms For Prenatal Care," WREG Memphis, April 17, 2012, <http://wreg.com/2012/04/16/store-rewards-new-moms-for-prenatal-care/> Retrieved June 11, 2024.