

What a Baptist Can Teach a Presbyterian

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Bible Text: Luke 7:18-35
Preached on: Sunday, May 13, 2018

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The passage this evening comes from Luke 7:18-35. Luke 7, we'll begin to read at verse 18.

And his [that is, John's] disciples reported about all these matters to John, and when he had called for two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord saying, "Are you the coming one or should we expect another?" When the men arrived, they said to him, "John the Baptist sent us to you saying are you the coming one or should we expect another?" At that very time, he had healed many of diseases and torments and evil spirits and granted sight to many blind folks, and he answered and said to them, "Go, report to John what you've seen and heard, the blind see again; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; and the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have the Gospel preached. And how blessed is the one who does not get tripped up over me." Now when John's messengers had gone off, he began to speak to the crowds about John. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see, a reed shaken around by the wind? And what did you go out to see, a man decked out in fine clothes? Why those in gorgeous clothes and living in luxury are in royal courts. But what did you go out to see, a prophet?" Yes, I tell you, and far more than a prophet. This is the one of whom it stands written, "Look, I send my messenger before your face who shall prepare the way before you." I say to you among those born from women there is no one greater than John, but the least one in the kingdom of God is greater than he is. When all the people including the tax collectors heard this, they declared that God was in the right since they had been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the law experts rejected the will of God for themselves since they had not been baptized by him. To what then shall I compare the men of this generation and what are they like? They're like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to one another who say, "We played the flute for you and you've not danced. We've sung a funeral dirge and you've not wept." For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine and you say he has a demon. The Son of man came eating and drinking and you say a man who is a glutton and a wino, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is proved to be in the right by all her children.

Now if you think you have sufficient knowledge in something, you don't especially appreciate someone who tries to instruct you in that particular area of expertise perhaps. My father had a little story, kind of one of those stereotype stories. I don't know where he heard it but he used to mention it at various times and my apologies to you if you're from Texas. There's no malice intended, but the way it went was you can always tell a man from Texas but you can't tell him much. Well, that was pop's way of putting it and it may be so if you're Presbyterian, especially you may not want a Baptist instructing you.

Now I'm not thinking of general or particular Baptists, I'm not thinking of American or Southern Baptists, I'm not thinking of primitive Baptists or free will Baptists, I'm not thinking of GARBC Baptists or I'm not thinking of Missionary Baptists, but a Baptist long before the Baptist, John the Baptist. He has something to say to Presbyterians. He really has a good bit to teach you here in this text and what does he teach? Well, John has something to teach you about perplexity, first of all, verses 18 to 23. You notice the background here in verse 18. John's disciples that go and report to John about all these matters. Now what are all these matters or all these things in verse 18? Well, they're what happened before this in chapter 7, verses 1 to 10, how Jesus restored to health a prized servant of the Roman centurion who was almost on the point of death, and then in verses 11 to 17, how Jesus restored to life one who had already died in the village of Naan, and they tell John these things and John calls two of his disciples and sends them to Jesus. Well, why did John send disciples? Why didn't he go himself? Well, chapter 3, verses 19 and 20 give us the answer to that. You see, time was when John rebuked Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, for his marital relations. He had taken Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and made her his wife. She was also his niece as well as his sister-in-law. John rebuked him for this and Herod Antipas threw John in the slammer. He was in the dungeon perhaps apparently in Machabes five miles east of the Dead Sea.

So he sends a couple of disciples to Jesus to ask him something and John's concerned because these reports that John hears still give him difficulties and he says, "You're to ask him, 'Are you the coming one, the Messiah, are you the coming one or should we expect another?'" That might strike you as strange because in chapter 3, verses 16 and 17, John had heralded the coming, he calls him the one stronger than I. He said, "I indeed baptize you with water but the one stronger than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing shuffle is in his hand to clean out his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his storehouse, but the chaff he will burn up in inextinguishable fire." That seemed to be so certain there and indeed it is a little bit baffling especially when you put Luke's account here in our text together with what you can read of John in Matthew 3 and in John 1, that John apparently has perplexities about Jesus, and part of the problem may be in what John said in chapter 3, verse 17, "He will clean out his threshing floor, the chaff he will burn up in inextinguishable fire," that this coming one, the Messiah's work was partly going to be a work of judgment.

There is a severe aspect to his work and he didn't hear anything about that. There wasn't much of that going on apparently in what he heard. Oh, he hears about him restoring the

centurion's servant to health, he hears about him bringing a widow's only son back to life, but this other aspect of bringing judgment and separating believers from unbelievers, that doesn't seem to be happening and this may be part of John's problem. Well, because Malachi 3:2 indicated that the Messiah would be such where it says, "But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears for he will be like a refiner's fire?" But Jesus in his ministry so far didn't seem to be doing too much of that refiner's fire kind of work, and so John's perplexed about this apparently, and probably it's a problem too that he's in a dungeon in Michaeus, and you have to be careful there because we Americans love to psychologize things and he's in depression and that may well have been the case, but we don't know. We can't go into flights of fancy about that, but that probably didn't help that he was in the slammer and isolated that way. You see, for John there seemed to be apparently, the way it looks to me is he seemed to think there was something missing in Jesus' ministry if he was the coming one. No one less than John the Baptist is doubtful about Jesus. He didn't seem to be all that John thought he should be. Where is that judgment aspect of his work?

So what do you do? They ask him, they ask, John's two disciples ask Jesus and Jesus gives his answer in verses 21 and 23. At that very time, he had healed many of diseases and torments and evil spirits and granted sight to many blind folks, and then Jesus answers and he says, verse 22, "Go and report to John what you've seen and heard." And notice the itemization: the blind see again; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; and the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have the Gospel preached. And how blessed is the one, John, who does not get tripped up over me. What did Jesus do there? Well, he alludes especially to Isaiah's prophecy and there are about three or four different passages in Isaiah that this material in verse 22 comes from, but especially Isaiah 35:5-6. Well, Isaiah 35, 5-6, what does it say? "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." That's Isaiah 35:5-6, and these works in Isaiah 35 describe the time when God comes to deliver his people and these works in Isaiah 35:5-6 are the signs of the age of Zion's restoration.

You know, I tend to think that the book of Isaiah is divided in two, yes, it's a unity but there are two big parts of it and I think the second part starts at chapter 34 rather than chapter 40, and chapter 34 you have the judgment on the nations, then in chapter 35, a companion chapter, it's the restoration of God's people. So the nations are going to be judged but God's people are going to be restored as well, and in this section, Isaiah 35:5-6, there are these aspects of what it's going to be like when God restores Zion, when he restores his people, and that's what Jesus cites here, to a large extent, in verse 22. They are the evidence, then, that Jesus really is the coming one even though he hasn't yet brought much of that judgment aspect of his work in a pervasive way. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Tell John to think about what the Scriptures say." What's that? Well, it's as Jesus says these evidences from Isaiah 35 that he cites in verse 22. "These are already occurring, John. Although the Romans are ruling the land, the scribes and the Pharisees are sniffing around everything I say and do and you are rotting away in a dungeon under Herod Antipas, but don't you see the age of restoration has already begun?" That's Jesus' answer.

Now what has all this got, this perplexity of John and so on? Well, I think in terms of application. Don't be surprised, then, if you have perplexities about Jesus even though you may have known him for some time, and often your perplexities will be the same in principle as John's perplexity. What do I mean by the same in principle? Well, it would be John's perplexity was essentially this: why isn't he working in the way I envisioned he would? That's where a lot of your difficulties will come with Jesus. Why doesn't he seem to meet my expectations of what a Messiah should be? Now John had scriptural expectations but he apparently thought that they were all going to be joined together at the same time, but that Jesus' judgment work would be going on as well as his more positive restoring work. But it's still in principle, that's where we run into our difficulties. Why doesn't he meet my expectations of what a Messiah should be?

So how does that work out in particular instances? Well, it goes on from there. Why does he take so long to deliver me from this particular distress? Why doesn't he exercise more severity when there are matters that need to be put right? And so on. Perhaps a response that we need to see here or make here is don't go by your expectations but by what Scripture says about what Jesus will do. Notice that Jesus sent essentially John back to Isaiah 35 to see what Scripture said about the age of restoration and about the Messiah's work.

If you have perplexities, these will come, you will have them about Jesus and the way he's at work, but if you have perplexities about Jesus, about the way he's working or the manner of Jesus' work, it seems to me that you need to balance it with a certain anchorage in what I would call the competence of Jesus. I'm very impressed with a little one-liner in John 6:6. Remember that's where before the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus said to Philip, "How are we going to buy bread that all these may eat? This," John says, "he said testing him for he, himself, knew what he was going to do." It seems to me that helps me when I have perplexities about why Jesus is acting the way he is. I may not know and I may not be able to figure him out and I may have my own perplexities or distresses about Jesus, but it helps me if I have a basic bottom-line assurance about the competence of Jesus. In whatever dilemma I face, I bring into the equation where he, himself, knew what he was going to do. Jesus knows what he's up to even when we're perplexed about it. Perplexity.

Secondly, John teaches us about privilege, verses 24 to 28, and you notice that Jesus after John's disciples went off to report to John, he spoke to the crowd about John. "What do you go out into the wilderness to see, a reed shaken around by the wind? Is that what you saw in John?" Is that what happened? Is that the kind of guy he was when he said to the people coming out, "You brood of snakes. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." That doesn't sound like a reed blown around by the wind. When he told Herod that he was not right in having Herodias, his brother's wife and his own niece as his wife and so on, you don't do that if you're limp. So, no, he wasn't a reed shaken by the wind. You didn't find that. What did you go out to see, a man decked out in fine clothes? Verse 25. That doesn't really fit. John sort of like is saying if you see one of those women who is working on a highway construction crew, you don't expect to see her in an evening gown and high heels, do you? No, no, that's not appropriate. Did you expect to see a fine

dandy fellow in John in the latest threads and so on? No, no, those kind of folks are in royal courts.

So Jesus asked, "What did you go out to see, a prophet? Oh yes, and far more than a prophet. He's not just any prophet in the sequence of prophets. John is a very special prophet. This is the one," he said, "that Malachi 3:1 talks about when it says, 'Look, I send my messenger before your face who shall prepare the way before you.'" He is the one announcing the coming of the Messiah at the hinge-point of redemptive history. Not just any old prophet. You have to get the sense of it. He takes, Jesus in verse 27 takes that from Malachi 3 and it's an interesting context there because at the end of Malachi 2, the beginning of Malachi 3, Malachi, the prophet Malachi is dealing with people who are, well, they're just bitter and they're complaining and they're cynical. They're supposed to be covenant people but they are so cynical that they say, "Everyone who does evil is good in Yahweh's eyes, and he delights in them." Or they say, Malachi says, "Where is the God of justice? Why isn't God putting things right? Why are we on the short end of the stick, etc. etc.?" So they're complaining and so then the answer comes in Malachi 3:1. Yahweh answers them and he says, "See, I'm sending my messenger and he shall prepare the way before thee and the Lord whom you're seeking," remember they said where is the God of justice? Well, "the Lord whom you're seeking will suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant in whom you're delighting. Yes, he is coming, says Yahweh of hosts, but who can endure the day of his coming and who will stand when he appears for he is like a refiner's fire?" That's kind of the whole context of that element there, that quotation. Jesus is saying, "Now the one whom the Lord calls my messenger there in Malachi 3:1, announcing the coming of the God of justice, the Lord whom you're seeking, even the messenger of the covenant, well, that messenger that comes and prepares the way, that's John," Jesus says.

So there are two messengers in that Malachi context: there's my messenger, Jesus says that refers to John, my messenger who will prepare the way before me; and there's the messenger of the covenant who is the same as the Lord whom you seek and the God of justice, the divine Messiah who is coming. But you see the importance. John just isn't any prophet, he's the one announcing the coming of the Lord. He was a significant prophet. He's the one who's at the hinge, you might say, of redemptive history, the one who is at the end of promise and the beginning of fulfillment. He's the one who announces the kingdom of God because the King has arrived.

So John is very special. There are those points, you know, that are very strategic turning points that we notice so that they come at a certain point and things are never the same. For instance in 1862, there was an ironclad that the Confederates had and it was called the Merrimack or the Virginian, whichever you want, and it wreaked devastation one day on about three of the Federal warships. They were wooden ships and this ironclad just devastated them and it was going after the Minnesota when the tide went out and they had to call off their attack. So they went into a harbor or whatever and waited for the morning and the next day when they could go finish off the Minnesota. Well, they went to do that and as they did, they happened to see something that they sort of apparently took it as some kind of a repair vessel and so on, but here it came out from behind the

Minnesota, a strange looking craft, it was the Monitor, it was a Federal ironclad, and these two ironclads, the Merrimack and the Monitor, fought each other, one report is two hours, one report is four hours. They fought to a draw and each went off to lick their wounds. But one historian says that that day, March 9, 1862, was a significant day because all the naval experts all over the world recognized how crucial that day was. He says the building of wooden warships stopped almost immediately to be replaced by ironclads of better design, of course. But something up to that time was true and on that day everything changed and Jesus is saying John introduced the great event, he was the coming one who announced, he was the messenger who announced the coming one, who introduced the Redeemer to Israel, that crucial point in history.

So Jesus says in verse 28 before he goes on to talk about the status of the believer, he's still talking about the significance of John, he says, "Among those born from women, there is no one greater than John." Now you just stuff that in your mental pipe and smoke it for a minute. That's quite a statement. That means John is greater than Alexander the Great. John is greater than Socrates. John is greater than Julius Caesar. John is greater than Barack Obama. John is greater than Donald Trump. And no one of those born of women, that's pretty much everybody, there is no one greater than John, then he says, except those who are greater than John. It's a formal contradiction in order to make a point. Among those born of women, there is no one greater than John but the least one in the kingdom of God is greater than he is. That is the least, the humblest, the most obscure believer in Jesus who lives in the age of fulfillment that John announced, who lives in the wake of what Jesus has brought, that believer is greater than John.

That may puzzle you just a bit in a way and I think that's where it comes into this whole matter of privilege that is implied here with John, but let's think of an historical instance to try to get at the principle here. Susan B. Anthony was a big advocate of women's suffrage, trying to get women to vote. I don't recommend and I don't advocate her religious views. That's not the point here. But Susan B. Anthony worked for women's suffrage but she died 14 years before she died in 1906, she died 14 years before the 19th amendment was adopted. Now actually she tried to vote. She never voted, never got to vote. She tried to vote, actually, once in 1872 for Ulysses S. Grant, but she was fined \$100 for doing that, which she never paid, but in any case, she never got to vote. She advocated women's right to vote but she, herself, though that was one of her big concerns etc., never herself got to vote, but there are a number of women sitting here in this congregation who are greater than she was. A number of you ladies vote. Hello? You've done something that Susan B. Anthony never did even though she was one of the stalwarts, you might say, in the women's suffrage movement. She never got to reap the benefits of it but you have. In that sense, you're greater than she is. I think that's the principle here that Jesus is getting at when John announced the coming of the King and the kingdom, but even the humbles believer in Jesus enjoys the privileges of that kingdom and the benefits of it, which John for all his crucial importance did not enjoy.

So if you're a relatively unknown believer in Jesus, and that fits most of us, doesn't it, you enjoy a package of privileges, you know? Well, since you can know a suffering Savior, it's not just that his suffering paid the price for your guilt and so on, it's also the fact that

in that suffering he shows himself to you as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and that is of immense comfort oftentimes to you as you walk in a path of suffering and distress and you have that. Or there is the victory of his resurrection and, therefore, the terror and the fear of death has been taken away from you, that you have that privilege and assurance. Or you have the privilege of the near and constant presence of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Or you know that Jesus, since he's arisen and ascended and is at the right hand of God, the term that the Bible uses for the place of supreme authority in the universe, and you know that Jesus there is making intercession for his people, he makes intercession always for his people, or as Professor John Murray put it, "The Redeemer is always preoccupied there with the welfare of his people," what a privilege that is to have an advocate at the throne of God who is concerned and preoccupied with your security.

Privileges that you have no matter how obscure a believer you may be, and what should you do? Well, it seems to me there ought to be a deep sense of gratitude. It seems to me that the goosebumps ought to come out on the spine just a little bit. It's like a situation I told you about, I don't just say that to throw away lines so that you know that I know that I'm repeating something that I said once before and so on. I told you about a little fellow who was in a Reader's Digest clip one time, about a grade school teacher who passed out a copy of the Declaration of Independence. I suppose it was a ?? or something, but there it was and probably kind of a long thing and so on. But there is all the Declaration of Independence and the signatures and so on, and was going from student to student. They would look at it and would pass it on. It came finally to Luigi who was a first generation American and he looked at that very reverently as he went down through it, and then before he passed it on to the next student, he very solemnly took his pen and added his own signature at the bottom of the others, as if to say, "This is mine as well." And if you realize the privileges that you have in your Redeemer who has come, there ought to be a deep sense of gratitude.

Now John was teaching that. So there are perplexities and there are privileges and then he teaches us about perversity or at least Jesus does by using John. Verses 31 to 35, perversity. Jesus isn't finished with John here and he's going to let him instruct us yet. You notice that in verse 31 Jesus says, "To what then shall I compare the men of this generation and what are they like?" Now that phraseology, "this generation," is important. This is the first time in the Gospel of Luke that that phrase occurs, "this generation." It's code, you might say, or a reference for those who are opposed to Jesus basically. So this generation is not a time indicator so much as a hostility indicator. This generation is not so much a chronological indicator as a character indicator. It really boils down to those who are opposed to Jesus.

Now what's the picture of the situation? He says, "What shall I compare the men of this generation, what are they like?" Then he says in verse 32, "They're like this picture of children sitting in the marketplace and so on and they call out to one another, 'We've played the flute for you and you've not danced. We've sung a funeral dirge and you've not wept.'" Now what is Jesus getting at there? Well, he's getting at trying to highlight the fickleness of what you see in children. It's as if some say, "We've played the flute. You need to dance. Let's play wedding." And they're saying, "Nah, we don't want to play

wedding." Okay, "We played a funeral dirge but you haven't wept." "Nah, because we don't want to play funeral. We don't want to play wedding, we don't want to play funeral." They're fickle. Nothing satisfies them. What Jesus is getting at is the irrationality of unbelief. It's fickle. It's perverse. Nothing satisfies unbelief no matter what approach you take.

That's what he's getting at and you find that, don't you? Sometimes it doesn't matter what you do, it's unsuited. There was a Peanuts cartoon I noticed once where Linus, I don't know who the little girl is, she's not Lucy or anybody I recognized in the Peanuts strip, but some little girl comes up and Linus apparently has been holding her cat all this time, and he says, "Well, where have you been?" And he said, "I thought I was going to have to hold this cat all day." And she said, "You don't like cats!" And Linus says, "I didn't say that!" He said, "It just upsets me when I get stuck with some girl's cat while she goes off someplace and spends the rest of the day." Then she says, "You don't like girls!" You just can't satisfy. You don't like cats. You don't like girls. It doesn't matter what you say, it doesn't matter what explanation you give, it's just rejected.

Now what Jesus is doing here ought to really reverse some of our assumptions that unbelief is rational and thoughtful. Sometimes we think that, but no, no, Jesus is saying it's anything but. It's really irrational. You have both these styles and neither satisfies. It's just like they don't want to play wedding, they don't want to play funeral, and then he applies this in verses 33 and 34 to John the Baptist and to himself. He says, "Look at the options you've had," you might say, "for John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine and you say, 'He's a demon. The guy is wacko! He's weird! We don't want that.' The Son of man came eating and drinking and you say, 'Why, that guy's a glutton and a wino, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. We don't like him either.' No, you're not satisfied with anything. That's the perversity of unbelief. That's where you are," he's saying, at least the leadership of Israel here. Sometimes you have to go back to what causes it and it is the twistedness and the perversity of men that Jesus is getting at.

I remember, now granted my memory is a little bit fuzzy around the corners but I remember a time when a fellow and his family used to come to visit us. This man, everybody is pretty much dead now so his name was Paul G. and he was a member of one of my father's former congregations and my father went to another pastoral charge that was maybe 40 or 50 miles away, still in western Pennsylvania, so every once in a while Paul and his family would come down to my father's present congregation and worship there and then come over to the manse for Sunday dinner and so on. They might be sitting, Pop might be sitting out there with Paul etc. on the front porch.

Now there were two topics that my father liked especially to talk about, one was the Bible and the other was automobiles, and so he might say, "Paul, how do you like your car?" "Well, Darrell, it uses a little oil. About 800 miles and it's down about a quart of oil. That's not like it's going out like a sieve but, you know, a car that new oughtn't to be using a quart of oil in 800 miles." Okay, well, Paul had a way, it's like he had a different car every time they came, you know. So another year and a half goes by and Paul and his family are down and out there on the front porch and Pop said, "How do you like your

new car, Paul?" "Well, I'll tell you, Darrell, can't keep it lined up or something. It was wearing a front tire and so on. I took it in and they lined it up and it's still wearing them. It got so bad had to replace the front tires on that and took it in, I've had it in three times to be aligned and they still haven't got it right."

Well, time would go by and it might be another year or two and there's Paul and his family down, might be out on the front porch, Pop, another car, "How do you like your new car, Paul?" "Well, I'll tell you, Darrell...." Never satisfied no matter what the option or the make was, there was always something. And there's something about that here. Israel, these are covenant people, especially the leadership of Israel, they're covenant people, they're card-carrying Israelites, aren't they, and nothing satisfied them. There's a perversity that's at the heart of their unbelief and if Jesus is speaking to covenant people here, then he's speaking to us, isn't he? So he may be speaking to you as well like Hebrews 3:12 does, "Take care brothers lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief leading you to fall away from the living God." Now that's something Israel needs to hear.

So don't think that unbelief comes from a careful consideration of the evidence of weighing options and shrewdly rejecting the Jesus option. Oh no, no, I think Jesus would agree with Paul in Ephesians 4:18, though the context may be a little different, when Paul says, "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart." Never be surprised at the perversity and the twistedness and the irrationality of unbelief. That's why faith, if there's going to be faith, must be a supernatural gift. You remember Jesus said that in John 6:64-65 and it says in that context, John says that Jesus knew who was not believing in him and he knew who it was that was going to betray him. Then Jesus says, "For this reason I told you that no one is able to come to me unless it be given to him by the Father." Only a supernatural divine gift of faith can overcome such unbelief. So it's not that unbelievers are deeper thinkers than believers. Some of them may be in a general way, but it's not that unbelievers are deeper thinkers than believers but they are depraved in mind and perverse in heart and they will not be satisfied with the Gospel no matter how it is wrapped unless faith might be given them by the Father.

So the Baptist has something to teach Presbyterians, like be careful not to squeeze Jesus into the mold of your own expectations, like be sure you enjoy the immense privileges that he's brought to you, and beware lest you be one of this generation who has no place among wisdom's children.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we happen to think perhaps appropriately that that little snatch of a hymn would be something good to pray. Keep us, Lord, O keep us cleaving to thyself and still believing until the hour of our receiving honest joys with thee. Amen.