

Luke 7/18-35: JESUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST (“Wild Man”)

At first glance, a seemingly shapeless passage – about nothing in particular and without any clear structure. But on deeper examination, there is a clear thread, in 3 sections, and each ending with a cryptic statement.

1. Who is Jesus? – Jesus from John’s point of view (v18-23)

v18 John is in prison (3/19f) but his disciples kept in contact with him there and continued his ministry.

“these things”: they told him about everything Jesus was doing, esp the healing and resurrection of v1-17.

v19f Given John’s testimony about Jesus (3/15-18,21-22 cf. Mw 3/13-15, Jn 1/29-34, 3/26-36), this at first seems a surprising question. John seemed to be having doubts, even disappointments, about his cousin, despite the spectacular miracles: was he the promised Messiah after all? This was probably because Jesus was fulfilling part of the Messianic expectation (teaching, miracles, forgiveness, etc) but not all of it (purifying Israel, overthrowing her oppressors, judging the Gentile nations and introducing God’s universal rule). John would not have been alone in this: what he and no-one else realized in advance was that God’s Messiah would come twice, fulfilling part of the expectation at his first coming but the remainder only at his second. Now Jesus would inaugurate the kingdom, but he would only consummate it on his return (and in between we would live in the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’). But we are the same: when Jesus does not do all the things we expected him to do, we can also begin to doubt Jesus after once having been so sure about him!

v21 John’s disciples arrive just in time to witness Jesus’ miracles of healing/deliverance and hear him preach.

This is already the 4th general reference to Jesus’ healing ministry in the Gospel (4/40f, 5/15, 6/17ff).

v22 Jesus sends them back to report to John what they had seen (miracles) and heard (preaching [“good news is preached to the poor”: cf. 1/53, 4/18, 6/20]). That’s his answer to John’s question (doubts); it’s the only answer he gives. These things are part of the predicted ministry of the Messiah. They are sufficient evidence of who he is; if they are not evidence enough for someone, then that person would not believe even if there was more. They show that God’s kingdom (and thus God’s king) has come in some way, even if the fullness of it is not yet here. This is the only answer Jesus can give and will give to John’s (and others’) questions and doubts.

v23 A cryptic and important statement. What does it mean – and how does it apply to us? The KJV reads: “Blessed is the man who shall not be offended in me.” People (then and now) take offence at Jesus (Mk 6/3, cf. Lk 4/22f,27f). The OED defines “offence” as: “[vb] striking the foot against something, stumbling, making a false step; [nn] a stumbling block, a cause of stumbling, an occasion for unbelief, doubt, apostasy.” Many people stumble over / take offence at / fall away because of Jesus. Sometimes it is because he does too little. (John was close to stumbling over, taking offence at, and falling away from his faith in, Jesus because of this.) Sometimes it is because he claims too much (as was the case in Nazareth): we want him to be just a man. And sometimes it is just because Jesus does not conform to, or meet, our expectations. Jesus did not want doubt or disappointment to ensnare John, to undermine John’s faith in who he was (and so cause him to miss his salvation). If we do not take offence, stumble and fall away on account of Jesus (because he does too little, or claims too much, or does not conform to our expectations), if we will accept him on the basis of the evidence he gives (and be happy with the only answer to our question that he can or will give: v22), then we will be blessed!

2. Who is John? – John from Jesus’ point of view (v24-28)

v24a John has already given his testimony about Jesus (3/15-18); now Jesus gives his about John.

v24b John was not a weak messenger, swayed by the pressure of human opinion.

v25 John was trustworthy: there was no motivation of personal gain behind his ministry.

v26f Jesus attests that John was a prophet; and, more than that, a unique prophet, one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah – the promised “messenger” who comes to prepare the way for “the Lord” (Mal 3/1). Notice how Jesus adds “ahead of you”, and changes “the/me” to “your/you”, so identifying himself with/as “the Lord”!

v28 The second cryptic statement. If John is so great a person/prophet (indeed, as great if not greater than every man who has ever lived until that point), how can the least in the kingdom of heaven be greater than he? John belonged to the OC (he marked the end of it: Mw 11/12f), which was merely preparatory to Christ. Jesus brings a new and better covenant, a perfect salvation. The least NT saint, as a member of the kingdom which has now come, has a higher status and privilege than anyone in the OC. Every Christian is part of Jesus’ bride, the church; John was ‘only’ the friend who attended the bridegroom (Jn 3/29). John was “born of women” (only a natural man); every believer is born also of the Spirit (Jn 3/5-8,31 – a supernatural person). [|| Mw 5/20]

3. Who are we? – John and Jesus from our point of view (v29-35)

v29 “All the people, even the tax collectors,” agreed with Jesus’ testimony about John, “because they had been baptized by John.” Their getting baptized (or not) didn’t determine their heart but reflected it: they got baptized because they acknowledged that John’s words were from God, whose way was right – and because of this same heart they accepted Jesus too when they heard his words/teaching (cf. Jn 3/33).

v30 Conversely, the Pharisees’ refusal to get baptized by John reflected the hardness of their (unrepentant) hearts – and, because of this same heart, they rejected Jesus’ words too when they heard them. In so doing, “they rejected God’s purpose for themselves”: too proud to admit they had been wrong in rejecting God’s messenger (John), they likewise rejected God’s Saviour too (and so missed out on his salvation).

v31 “generation” = (human) race. Jesus is asking about *us*: what are we like – the tax collectors or Pharisees? Will we accept the evidence of who he is or, like John, doubt it; will we accept who he says John is or not?

v32 The human race are like children sitting in a marketplace: idle, immature and indulged! They complain petulantly to each other about God: God does not do what they want; he does not conform to their expectations or accede to their demands (cf. v23 and notes).

v33f Proud, unrepentant man will never be satisfied. They reject John for not being X; then they reject Jesus for being X! Mankind will not receive John because he follows strict rules, because he is not like (will not associate with) us; yet mankind will not receive Jesus because he doesn’t observe these rules – and associates with everyone! Man rejects God not because he has any sensible reason to but because he is determined to.

v35 A third cryptic statement. [i] “Wisdom is proved right by all her children”, i.e. by the good consequences of right/wise decisions. [ii] “But” (despite the hardness of the human race), God’s “wisdom is proved right by all [the] children” it bequeaths him – those who acknowledge God’s way is right (v29), repent and are saved. [iii] The wisdom of “all the people, even the tax collectors” (v29) who repented and who thus enjoy the consequences (“children”) of their decision. In contrast to John and Jesus’ rejection by foolish critics, spiritually wise persons could see that the ministries of both John and Jesus, though different, were from God.

P.S. Appeal/Application to Believer and Unbeliever

Believe Jesus’ testimony about John – he was the messenger preparing the way for the Lord.

Believe the testimony (evidence) of Jesus’ preaching and miracles as to who he is: Jesus *is* the Messiah.

Do not stumble over, take offence at, and fall away from, faith in Jesus because of who he is / what he does. Do not be like a child in the market-place, rejecting both John and Jesus – and thus God’s purpose for you – for no reason. Acknowledge God’s way is right, and God’s wisdom and yours will be proved right by all its ‘children’ – good news, healing, blessing (‘Blessed is the man...’), and membership of the bride and kingdom!