



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Does Jesus Offend You? (Luke 7:18-23)

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The news of the centurion's servant being healed and the raising of the widow's son from the dead serve as the stimulus for John sending his disciples to Jesus. In the previous account Luke had chronicled that the report of Jesus being a great prophet had spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding areas. It was the talk of the country, the name of Jesus and his work was on everyone's lips. In discussing his teachings and marveling at his miracles a great hope would have been kindled in the hearts of the people, while much concern filled the minds of the religious elite as they came to terms with the fact that the whole world was going over to him (John 12:19). There was great anticipation among the Jews of this age for the arrival of Messiah and the day when they would be delivered from the oppression of the Romans. With Jesus doing the work of a great prophet, one like Elijah, and the people's expectations now raised to a fevered pitch this hope of independence seemed within their grasp.

As information about Jesus' miraculous work would reach the ears of John's disciples they would report back to him what they learned. John and his disciples must have been somewhat perplexed by their current circumstances. Initially John had been the leader of this revival and spear-headed the work that is now sweeping the nation by storm. Not only that, John was also the one who initiated the public ministry of Jesus and even willingly stepped aside because he understood that Jesus must be greater, and he must become less. However, he finds himself sitting in jail, while the notoriety of Jesus was growing to an unimaginable proportion. After learning of Jesus' miraculous work, John provides his disciples little clarity, but sends two of them seeking a re-confirmation from Jesus that he is the Messiah. This is amazing to consider, but such is the condition of all sinful men. In this passage we are confronted with this truth, Jesus is offensive to those who in their pride ignore his divinity and believe he exists for the purpose of meeting our expectations. It is a question of lordship; if we claim to follow Christ then he demands to be Lord. He will do things that will boggle our minds because he is God; and if he is God, then his wisdom is beyond ours. We are not called to understand everything, but to trust him in the midst of life's challenging circumstances

Luke 7:18-23 - (18) The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, (19) 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?" (20) 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?' " (21) In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. (22) 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. (23) And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

The disciples of John reported all these things to him - In John we see the effects that isolation can have on an individual. At this point all John's knowledge was filtered through those who had a great respect and affection for him. These followers did not abandon him when he was sent to prison, but remained committed in the face of this difficulty. They are also seen questioning Jesus on the issue of fasting. While this loyalty is understandable, John's disciples most likely view things from this skewed perspective and passed along this viewpoint inadvertently in what they communicate to him. In their hearts they wanted others to recognize the valuable contribution their teacher had made. Now in prison, John not only had a one-sided perspective on Jesus, but also had time to wrestle with the doubts in his own heart about this man who was supposed to be the Promised One of God.

"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" - In this statement a window is opened into John's heart. There is uncertainty in this question; John no longer knows if Jesus is the one promised by God. This question is set upon the backdrop of the crowds' confident belief of Jesus being a great prophet and exposes a hesitation on John's part to acknowledge this truth. He was the one who had pointed the way to Jesus, but now begins to question his messianic identity. It is not hard to image how these doubts began to surface in John's thinking. He had been a faithful and bold witness for God; he had challenged the people, the religious establishment, and King Herod to repent of their sins. He saw his message validated as the crowds responded, but this isolation of imprisonment had its toll. He now sits on the sidelines with his life constantly under threat and tries desperately to understand how Jesus' activity fits into his view of what the Messiah was sent to accomplish. These conflicting views of faith and doubt, joy and discouragement provide the fuel for the conflict in John's heart as he seeks to understand his circumstances in the light of Jesus being the Christ.

In seeking to understand John's conflicted heart it is necessary to reflect upon his life and remember what he has seen and experienced. John's birth was of a miraculous nature into the family of the high priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, both of whom were well advanced in years. Zechariah had lost his ability to speak when asking for proof from the angel of the Lord after being told he would have a son. After his father recovered his voice in a super-natural fashion, he then prophetically declares his son will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. From childhood John would have been told and prepared for his role in being the forerunner to the one

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who would come from God. Not only does he have these historical facts, he has also experienced confirmation of Jesus' identity from God. John had borne witness to seeing the Spirit descend on Jesus from heaven like a dove and remain on him (John 1:32). This was how he knew Jesus' identity because when commissioned he was told, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." John's message is that he has seen and bears witness that Jesus is the Son of God. We do not have time to mention the disciples whom he sent Jesus' way, the boldness of his preaching, or the crowds who responded to his message, repented, and followed him. When John begins to doubt it is not from an uninformed position, but one whose entire life was devoted to preparing the way for Jesus' ministry.

However, we cannot fail to address the eschatological hopes of the Jews of this age and the associated difficulties of seeking to fit Jesus in this rubric. In OT texts penned after the exile, one finds a renewed Davidic kingdom, often pictured with magnificent dimensions and qualities (Hag 2:20-23; Zech 9:9-10; 12:7-13:1).¹ The Jews came to view the Messiah as one sent by God, usually to restore Israel's independence and righteousness. In extra biblical texts, which allows a glimpse into the thinking of this era, the expectation about Messiah includes freedom of the Jewish people from Gentile domination, or a general longing for God's kingdom or triumph over unrighteousness and injustice. The Jewish hope for Messiah was never centered on religious concern for its own sake, but functioned as part of God's larger victory. These were the thoughts that most likely plagued John as he sat in prison and considered the ministry of Jesus. If Jesus possessed the power to raise the dead or to heal at a distance by the authority of his word, then why was he still in prison? Jesus should be confronting the Roman occupation or more specifically, the corruption of King Herod and the injustice of his imprisonment. The power Jesus has demonstrated should be utilized in a manner consistent with conventional thinking. Sadly, this is our struggle. We think God's power as demonstrated by Jesus should be utilized as we see fit, and hence, John's struggles and doubts also fill our own hearts

CONFRONTED WITH DIVINITY

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard" – John's disciples arrive and convey his question to Jesus. In typical fashion to those of faith, Jesus does not take a conciliatory tone or offer comfort to John for the challenges he now faces. Jesus provides him with the only thing that will help, the reliability of his divinity. For John, things will not get better, but worse and there will be no rescue from his impending death. Flowery words of

comfort will do nothing to help John face the injustice that will be carried out on him by the wickedness of King Herod. What he needs and what Jesus gives is something more powerful and secure than the hardships that await him. Jesus seeks to establish in John's heart an unwavering confidence in the person of Christ. He begins by pointing to the miraculous signs as his validation. In like manner Peter preached that Jesus was "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and signs and wonders that God did through him" (Acts 2:22). In doing the impossible, curing the lepers, raising the dead and restoring sight to the blind God's active involvement in Jesus' ministry is proclaimed. After this, he calls John to remember that the message of good news is being proclaimed to the poor. In this Jesus expects John to apply the confidence gained by the signs and wonders to his ability in fulfilling the messianic promises made. If Jesus is doing what only God could do, then one must subjugate their understanding of the Messiah's activity to the one whom God has authenticated. John was blind to Jesus' purpose as the Christ, as were Jesus' own disciples; but his call is for John to trust anyway on the basis of God's witness to Christ's divinity.

"Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." – In this statement Jesus is not seeking to explain his ministry to John but concludes his answer with this blunt challenge. The blessings of the kingdom are available to those who hold onto Jesus through the uncertainties of this life. Those scandalized by Jesus because of what they do not see happening will not be blessed. However, those who are not offended by preconceived ideas of the messianic task but instead judge on the basis of Jesus' ministry will know that he is indeed the Promised One, and will as a result receive the abundant blessings of the kingdom.

APPLICATION

How do we deal with the unfulfilled expectations of what we believe Jesus should be doing in our lives? Whether it is the heartbreak of personal suffering and loss, or the frustration in seeking to have a positive impact for Jesus in this world, we are all confronted with a dissatisfaction of our current circumstances. When faced with the emotional turmoil of our unmet desires we are tempted to become offended by Jesus and respond with either self-reliance or apathy. Jesus calls us to a different path. It is a life of unflinching trust in God the Son because he has shown himself faithful unto death and powerful in his resurrection.

1 - Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).