



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 7:18–35

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## What Do You Expect?

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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The story is told that a national magazine assigned a photographer to take pictures of a forest fire. They told him a small plane would be waiting at the airport to fly him over the fire. The photographer arrived at the airstrip just an hour before sundown. Sure enough, a small Cessna airplane stood waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and shouted, "Let's go!" The pilot, a tense-looking man, turned the plane into the wind, and soon they were in the air, though flying erratically.

"Fly over the north side of the fire," said the photographer, "and make several low-level passes."

"Why?" asked the nervous pilot.

"Because I'm going to take pictures!" yelled the photographer. "I'm a photographer, and photographers take pictures."

The pilot replied, "You mean you're not the flight instructor?"

Sometimes our expectations are more than a little off. And sometimes that can be dangerous. That can be true if you're trying to fight a fire or fly a plane; it can also be true in your relationship with God. One of things that keeps people away from God is that he doesn't seem to operate the way we think he should. Others start off on their journey with bright faith that God will take care of everything, only to find out that things get harder. Or perhaps a seasoned believer experiences a spiritual crisis when he realizes many of his own prayers aren't being answered.

This was the story of John the Baptist. As Jesus' ministry expanded, John was on the sidelines. He had been put in prison because he had the moral courage to condemn King Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law. He was incarcerated in the dungeon of Macharaerus, a desert fortress perched on a ridge overlooking the Dead Sea. It was here that John's head would eventually be given to Herodius.

### I. Wrong expectations cause us to question if Jesus is the Messiah.

As John languished in prison, he received a report. Look at v.18. "**The disciples of John reported to him about all these things.**" No doubt they told him about the sermon on the mount and the two miracles Jesus had just performed. They told him about healing the centurion's slave as well as how he raised a widow's son from the dead.

All that was well and good. But John's not sure

what to make of it. It's not what he WAS doing that perplexed him, but what he was NOT doing. Look what happens next. "**Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'**" (v. 19). John sends two disciples to Jesus to ask if he's the Messiah. It's clear that, despite his miracles, Jesus wasn't doing what John expected the Messiah to do. John expected the Messiah to clean house. On one occasion he said of him: "**His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire**" (Luke 3:17).

That's a prediction of judgment against God's enemies. But nothing like that had happened. You might say Jesus seemed to have a "kinder and gentler" ministry. The Romans were still in control of Palestine. There were no reports of any revolts. Their puppet king Herod was still living in comfort. The religious establishment was still as arrogant and self-serving as ever. And John, who had given his whole life to advance God's cause, was confined in prison. John's thinking, "What kind of Messiah is this? I'm glad he's helping poor widows and the Roman centurions, but isn't there more to the Messiah than that?"

One of the reasons I love this story is that John is so human. Up until now this guy has been kind of hard to relate to – living in the wilderness, eating bugs, wearing camel hair and denouncing the status quo. But now I can relate to him. He's has questions and doubts just like I do. It strikes me that even the best of God's servants have doubts from time to time. Life is not always crystal clear, even to those who are most committed to the Lord. One of things that has helped me is to realize that doubt is not the same thing as unbelief. Alister McGrath writes, "Doubt is natural within faith. It comes because of our human weakness and frailty. Unbelief is the decision to live your life as if there is no God. It is a deliberate decision to reject Jesus Christ and all that he stands for. But doubt is something quite different. Doubt arises within the context of faith. It is a wistful longing to be sure of the things in which we trust." This was true of John. We know from other gospel writers that John had already expressed his faith that Jesus WAS the one. Before he baptized Jesus he said, "You should be baptizing me. I'm not worthy to untie your sandals." Notice also he doesn't doubt that God will send the Messiah; he's just not 100% sure Jesus is the one. So he had faith, but now his faith shows some

cracks beneath the surface.

Notice how Jesus deals with John's questions.

**"When the men came to Him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'" At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind. And He answered and said to them, 'Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me'" (vv. 20–23).**

He doesn't rebuke John for his questions. He simply responds by continuing his healing and preaching ministry. And then he tells John's disciples to report back to him what they had seen and heard. It may seem like Jesus is skirting the issue. But Jesus is reminding John that what he was doing was actually in fulfillment of OT predictions about the Messiah. He's turning John back to Scripture. Listen to just a few of the things the prophet Isaiah wrote about the Messiah: **"But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead... Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy..."** (Is. 26:19; 35:5-6). Jesus is saying, "John, have you read Isaiah? I'm doing just what he said I would do. Are your expectations in line with Scripture?" And then he adds, **"And the poor have the good news preached to them."** That's from Isaiah 61. That's the climax. Not only does he relieve suffering and raise the dead, but he preaches the good news to those who live in spiritual poverty. Jesus says, "Go and tell John that. I've not organized a revolt. Instead I'm bringing good news to the poor in spirit. Good news that brings eternal freedom rather than just temporary political freedom."

And then Jesus closes with a beatitude to take back to John: "Blessed is he who does not take offense at me." That's the punch line: "You'll be blessed if you don't fall away because of disappointment with the way I work. You'll be blessed if your expectations of how I work are informed by Scripture."

In 1996 Disney came out with the movie *101 Dalmatians*, and it was a box-office success. Many viewers fell in love with the cute spotted puppies on the big screen and decided to get one for themselves.

When they brought those adorable little puppies home, however, they found that living with a dalmatian is an entirely different experience from watching one on the movie screen. Soon, according to the Associated Press, all over the United States dog shelters saw a dramatic increase in the number of dalmatians being abandoned by their owners. A Florida organization called Dalmatian Rescue took in 130 dalmatians in the first nine months of 1997; usually they get that many dogs in two and a half years.

Dalmatians can be a challenge to own for several reasons. Dalmatians grow to be big dogs, weighing as much as 70 pounds. They are rambunctious and require a lot of exercise. They can be moody, becoming restless and even destructive if they don't get enough activity. They shed year-round, and ten percent of dalmatians are born deaf.

Tracey Carson, a spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Humane Society, says, "Although dalmatians are beautiful puppies, and can be wonderful dogs, you have to know what you're getting into."

Following Christ is no different. It's hard enough to begin with, but if our expectations are off, it's practically impossible not to stumble. Some people expect political salvation. When their candidate loses, they doubt God. Others expect God to remove all of their problems. People have fallen away when their marriage or their career or their health falls apart. I can recall a few years back when I realized that something I had prayed for many years was not going to happen. It wasn't a selfish prayer. It was a prayer that was consistent with what I know about God. But he didn't answer it. That was a tough time. It caused me to rethink my faith, my expectations.

## II. Wrong expectations cause us to miss God's purpose.

After sending John's disciples back to him with those words, Jesus sensed that some in the crowd might get the wrong impression about John. So Jesus seizes the opportunity to affirm the ministry of John. He does that by challenging their own expectations. Look at what he says.

**"When the messengers of John had left, He began to speak to the crowds about John, 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he'" (vv. 24–28).**

Three times Jesus says, "What did you go out to the wilderness to see?" In other words, "What did you expect to

see out there?" He says three things about John. First he says he was a man of integrity and character: "You didn't go out there to see a reed shaken by the wind." He wasn't spineless. He wasn't swayed by public opinion. He wasn't running for mayor. "And you didn't go out there to see a man living like a king!" He wasn't in it for the money or the perks. He didn't live in luxury. He had integrity and he had character.

And then he says a second thing about John: John was a prophet and more than a prophet. He was more than a prophet because he fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi 3:1 as the messenger sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He had a special role no other prophet had. His ministry was not at odds with Jesus; it was to get folks ready for Jesus.

Finally he says, "John was the greatest man who ever lived." What an endorsement! But then he qualifies it: Yet those least in the kingdom are greater than he. It's greater to participate in the kingdom than to prepare for it. What would you rather do, announce the game or play in the game? Who would you rather be, the travel agent who books the flight and plans the trip, or the one who gets to experience the journey? That's why Jesus says that the least in the kingdom is greater than John. That doesn't mean John himself wouldn't enter the kingdom, but this is speaking of his role as forerunner. Sometimes we fail to realize the advantage we have over people like John. We think, "John had it made. He had grown up hearing all about Jesus. He got to meet Jesus. He knew exactly what his role and calling was. I would love to trade places with him!" But we have more! We have the cross to assure us of forgiveness. We have the resurrection to assure us of eternal life. We have the Holy Spirit within us to empower us and encourage us. As those who've entered the kingdom we have more than those who anticipated it.

But then Jesus goes on and he describes how people responded to John.

**"When all the people and the tax collectors heard this (John), they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John"** (vv. 29–30).

These verses can be taken two ways. They can be taken as Luke's comments about how people responded to what Jesus just said, or they can be taken as Jesus' comments about how people responded to John. I believe Jesus is continuing to talk about John. He says, "When all the people and the tax-collectors heard John, this is how they responded." When tax-collectors listened to John they showed they were in line with what God was doing by being baptized by him. On the other hand, when the Pharisees and experts in the law listened to John they rejected what God was doing and refused to be baptized.

Why would someone accept or reject John's

baptism? What was John's baptism all about? It was about repentance from sin. You would only go into the water if you believed you needed to be cleansed. And you would only refuse the water if you believed you were already clean. God's purpose was for John to prepare the way for Jesus by convincing people that they had a sin problem. Tax-collectors and the like got baptized because they knew they were sinful, but the religious establishment were too busy justifying themselves.

What does that have to do with expectations? Well, if they didn't listen to John and understand sin was the issue, they wouldn't be ready for Jesus. What did Jesus come to do? He came to save us from our sins. If we don't understand the depth of our own sin, we will miss out on God's purpose for sending Jesus because our expectations of what God does will be all wrong. Our need tends to determine our expectations. The ministry of John reminds us that Jesus came to deal with sin. But we spend a lot of time trying to maintain our innocence.

A woman was working at a Honeybaked Ham store. The store was equipped with security cameras and she was watching one of the monitors when she saw a woman come in the store, grab a ham off the shelf, and hide it under her dress. With the ham wedged between her legs, the woman began waddling towards the door. The clerk was stunned and wasn't sure what to do. Before she could decide, the ham dropped out from between the woman's legs. It hit with a loud bang and rolled down a ramp. The thief didn't miss a beat. She turned her head, yelled out, "Who threw that ham at me?" and ran out of the store!

That's how we are sometimes. We pretend it's someone else's fault. We hide behind a plethora of rationalizations: "That's not sin. It's just human nature. It's my personality. It's my upbringing. It's my situation. Nobody's perfect." The Puritan John Owen once wrote, "He that has slight thoughts of sin never had great thoughts of God."

### III. Wrong expectations expose stubborn pride.

It's that attitude of stubborn pride that Jesus exposes next. Look at vv. 31-35.

**"To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, '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, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by all**

**her children."**

Someone has called this the parable of the brats. I like that! Jesus compares the people of his generation who rejected God's purpose to brat-like children who won't play wedding or funeral. John's ministry was like a dirge; he was serious; he was solemn; there wasn't a lot of joy. It was like he was playing funeral. He announced the bad news that judgment was on the way if you didn't repent. People didn't like that: "Lighten up, man. Smile! Things aren't that bad. We don't need to repent. You're so intense. You must have a demon!"

But then he says they won't play wedding either. Jesus' ministry is more like a wedding. He engaged in a riot of healing, leading to unrestrained joy. The blind could see, the lame could walk, the dead were raised and they all whooped for joy. He enjoyed food and wine. He came with a joyful message of God's love and forgiveness. But people didn't like that either: "That's not the way a man of God should act. He should be more serious. He should be less worldly. He should come down a little harder on sin. And look who he eats with – tax-collectors and sinners. These are clearly the wrong kind of people."

You can see that these people can't be pleased. But what's the basic issue? And what does this have to do with expectations? It seems like they didn't know what to expect. Did they expect one like John or one like Jesus; a funeral or a wedding? Jesus says it doesn't matter, because beneath their wrong expectations is stubborn pride and stubborn pride is the one thing that will keep you out of the kingdom. The bottom line is they wouldn't acknowledge their sin. So they rejected John because he wanted to convict them of it, and they rejected Jesus because he wanted to forgive them of it.

It reminds me of my experience coaching Little League baseball. Once in a while I end up coaching a boy who is hard to handle. He won't listen; he wants to do things his own way; he's not coachable. Often times these same kids have parents who try to place the blame on the coach. If I try to be a strict disciplinarian, they say, "You're too hard on my boy. Why can't you make it more fun?" But if I try to lighten up and make it more fun, they say, "You're too loopy-goopy. You have to take control. You have to let him know who is boss." So I can't win. The bottom line is their kid is a brat! Until they admit that, nothing I do will make them happy.

If we will not acknowledge our sin and need, if we will not acknowledge that basically we're brats, we'll reject God's purpose for our life, regardless how it's communicated. But if we do acknowledge our sin and need, we'll accept God's purpose and his wisdom will be seen in our lives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me try to summarize what we've learned today about expectations. *First, even the greatest men and women of God have doubts.* You can have all the advantages of John and more – parents who believed; a sense of calling; but still experience a crisis of faith centered around unmet expectations. One of the things we can learn from John is to tell someone. When John realized that he was no longer certain that Jesus was the Messiah he did not try to cover that up. He did not redouble his efforts to act spiritual or seek some mystical experience so as to make the doubts go away. He did a very simple thing: he asked Jesus for help. It is amazing how hard it is for us to take that very simple step, to admit to somebody, "Look, I'm really struggling with this whole thing. I don't know where I fit anymore. I need some help." But John was courageous enough to not hesitate. He went directly to the Lord and said, "Help me answer my question. Are you the one or not?" Don't be embarrassed to admit that you need help. There is nothing unusual about you. The greatest man ever born of a woman doubted that way, yet he was wise enough to send to Christ and ask, "Help me. Answer my question." If you need help, ask for it. Let some of the Lord's servants who are doing all right that day help you.

Second, the reason why this is important is that *our faith can be derailed by unbiblical expectations.* Jesus says, "Blessed is he who does not take offense at me." That's a nice way of warning us: "Be careful. Don't stumble over me because you're looking for me to do something I never promised." You see, we have to become more and more men and women of scripture, not of habit, not given to some sort of cultural version of Christianity that pertains to this day and age, but knowing what the Scriptures say about life and what it is supposed to be like. What should prayer be like according to God's Word? What should Christian fellowship be like? Be ruthless with the expectations that you have allowed to creep into your thinking. Tear them out if they are wrong and replace them with the Word of God, the truth of God. That is the greatest defense we can have against the kind of wrong expectations that John the Baptist experienced.

*Finally, be careful that your crisis of expectations is not simply masking a deeper problem of stubborn pride.* You say, "I come to church and those Christians are just too serious. They're too intense. They need to lighten up. All they talk about is sin." But then you get around another group and you say, "I come to church and those Christians are so pollyanna. All they do is smile and sing their saccharine songs. They talk about joy and peace and love and how their sins are forgiven. Why don't they join the real world? Why don't they open their eyes." But that's not the problem. The problem is pride. You don't want to admit your own need, your own sin. You see, Jesus came to meet the expectations of the poor in spirit who long for his work of forgiveness and redemption. If that's not what you're looking for, if you are unwilling to admit that is what you need, you will stumble over the very thing you need the most.

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