BECAUSE THEY HAD BEEN BAPTIZED BY JOHN

Luke 7:18–35

Key Verse: 7:29

“All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John.”

The main thrust of today’s passage is being able to appreciate what God is doing. In Jesus’ time, God was doing great things. He sent John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah with a strong message of repentance. Then he sent Jesus the Messiah with the message of his forgiveness. But the religious people of the day were like critical spectators. They wrote off John as a demon-possessed religious fanatic. They wrote off Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. But the ordinary people could see what God was doing. Even the tax collectors who followed Jesus could see it. Why? It says in verse 29, “…because they had been baptized by John.” Today we want to learn what this means, why it’s still so important, and how we can be people who see what God is doing in our midst.

Look at verse 18a. “John’s disciples told him about all these things.” The last time we saw John the Baptist was back in chapter 3. Before Jesus’ ministry began, John had had a very powerful ministry. Even the hardened tax collectors and soldiers went out to him to ask him how to repent (3:12,14). The people were waiting and all wondering if John might possibly be the Messiah (3:15). But John pointed them to a coming one, who would be more powerful than him, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and who would bring God’s judgment on earth (3:16–17). For his fiery message of repentance, preached even to King Herod, John got locked up in prison (3:19–20).

Since then, Jesus began his ministry. Crowds came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases (5:15). Jesus soon had a large crowd of disciples, and people came to him from all over (6:17). He’d just raised from the dead the only son of a widow from Nain, and when a large crowd following him saw it, they were filled with awe and praised God (7:11–16). News about Jesus was spreading throughout Judea and the surrounding countryside (7:17).

But John, such a righteous man full of the Holy Spirit, was left in prison, and his disciples were disappointed. They probably wondered why Jesus, with all his power, wasn’t doing anything for John. And Jesus’ ministry wasn’t what they’d expected. Instead of bringing God’s justice (e.g. Mal3:2–5), punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous, all Jesus was doing was healing people, welcoming outcasts and making friends with tax collectors and sinners. So they went and told John about it.

What did John do? Look at verses 18b–19. “Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” By sending them to Jesus, John surely wanted to help these two men. And with his orders, they now felt released from their obligation to John suffering in prison to actually go to Jesus. In verse 20 they did exactly what John told them. What happened? Read verse 21. Now they were not just hearing reports; they were witnessing with their own eyes Jesus’ amazing healings. Still, they couldn’t appreciate what was happening. How did Jesus help them? Read verses 22–23. He didn’t say directly whether or not he was the one; he let the facts speak for themselves. The facts were the specific healings the Old Testament prophets had predicted the Messiah would do (Isa35:5–7; 61:1). John's disciples surely knew these prophecies of Isaiah. For us too, Jesus’ amazing healings are objective evidence that he really is the Messiah.

Of course, what had happened to John after serving God with all his heart was discouraging. Still, Jesus didn’t rescue John from prison or sympathize with him and his followers. He just said, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (23). With these words Jesus encouraged their faith. He was encouraging them to believe the facts about him so much that no hardship could make them stumble. Here, the word “stumble” can also mean, “to take offense” or “fall away.” Often, we believe emotionally, when God gives us what we want. When we don’t get what we want or have to suffer, we get offended. But to have genuine faith, we can’t be so self-centered; we’ve got to get past ourselves and see the facts of what God has done and is still doing. John’s imprisonment was really hard to bear, but they needed to get beyond it to see the great things God was doing through Jesus. Unfulfilled expectations, hardships, and even human loyalties can make us spiritually blind, too. Are there things in your life that have discouraged you? Do you feel your situation is too hard? We need to hear Jesus’ words, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (23).

The presence of the two messengers sent from John in prison must have made everyone in the crowd very quiet. After their leaving, many may have started feeling sorry and questioning God. So Jesus began to talk about the issue publicly. Read verses 24–25. At first we wonder why he's asking these rhetorical questions. But his point is to remind the people of how strong a man of God John was. Nothing and no one could shake John from his faith and God-given mission. John didn’t live a soft, luxurious life for his own pleasure and glory, like many people do; he embraced hardships for the sake of serving the Lord.

Jesus went even further. Read verses 26–27. John was more than a prophet because he was the unique forerunner of the Messiah God had promised to send. To carry out this special mission, John selflessly prepared the way for Jesus by doing all the dirty work of getting people to repent. To human eyes, preparing the way for someone else seems like becoming a “nobody.” But before God, it was and still is the greatest work any person could do—preparing the way for Jesus. Now that he was left in prison and Jesus’ ministry was booming, people may have forgotten John or even started thinking he was a loser. But Jesus didn’t allow that to happen. He stopped his own ministry and took the time to teach about John because he wanted people to have a sense of God’s work in history.

Then Jesus concluded with an amazing statement. Read verse 28. Jesus was giving John the greatest compliment he could give. But he didn’t just focus on the greatness of the man, John the Baptist; he drew people’s attention to the great thing God was doing—ushering in his long-awaited kingdom through his saving grace in Jesus. In this new era, even the least person is greater than John—not in character or in mission but in experiencing the grace of our heavenly Father. Now, even those who’ve lived a really sinful life can repent and turn to Jesus, be clothed in his grace, and approach God the Father with freedom and confidence as his dearly loved children. Because of what God has done in Jesus, we should no longer follow John the Baptist—we should follow Jesus.

Right after this, Luke inserts his own special parenthetical comment. These two verses are one of the most profound parts of Luke’s Gospel. Look at verse 29. Luke draws attention to the spiritual understanding all the people came to have through the help of Jesus’ words. Through what Jesus said, they stopped thinking about John’s miserable situation in prison and began to see that what God was doing was right. Literally, it means “they justified God” or “they vindicated God.” They grasped what the religious experts failed to grasp: that God’s way of working through John and then through Jesus was the right way to bring people back to himself and his kingdom. People first need to repent, and then they can receive God’s grace in Jesus. This is God’s right way (cf. Ac2:38).

How could these people understand this deep truth? Luke says “even the tax collectors” grasped the deep spiritual meaning of what God was doing. How could it happen? Luke says it was “because they had been baptized by John.” This is the clincher. But what does it mean? How could a ceremony of baptism give people such deep spiritual understanding? It wasn’t the ritual ceremony, but the repentance that went with it. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3). When they heard John preaching, the ordinary people and tax collectors were humble enough to repent. When they did, they could experience God’s grace in Jesus. It wasn’t great intellect, but humble repentance that opened their eyes. The word “repent” in some form is repeated 14 times in Luke’s Gospel, far more than in any other Gospel. And even when he doesn’t use the literal word, in his Gospel Luke gives several powerful illustrations of what it means to repent. Here he shows us the amazing results of repentance. Even the humblest people who repent gain deep spiritual insight to appreciate God’s work.

To reinforce this, Luke shows us the opposite. Read verse 30. These folks knew the word of God so well; in fact, they memorized most of it. They went to school for it and discussed its intricacies day and night. They kept all the religious rules and traditions strictly. But all this knowledge and religious discipline didn’t help them. In fact, it made them proud—too proud to repent. They may have acted humble, but in their hearts they thought they didn’t need to repent. They thought they were better than everyone else. Paradoxically, they were the spiritually blind ones; the former tax collectors who repented understood spiritual things way better than they did.

Luke says tragically that these religious experts rejected God’s purpose for themselves. What is God’s purpose? It’s to bring people his salvation. We can experience God’s saving grace when we repent and believe in Jesus. But when we become too proud for that, we’re rejecting God’s grace. In their pride and self-righteousness the religious leaders not only didn’t understand God’s grace; they also judged and despised both those who proclaimed it and those who received it. This principle still applies today: those who repent can see God’s grace and his great purpose; those too proud to repent, despite all their knowledge, become spiritually blind. Repentance isn't just a one-time thing at the start of Christian life; to grow we have to keep on repenting as God convicts us deeper and deeper. It's kind of like peeling away the layers of an onion. In Revelation 2–3 the Risen Jesus called believers in the seven churches to repent. Whenever we fall into some kind of sin, we need to watch ourselves, hold each other accountable, and in love, call one another to repent (17:3–4). Without repenting, sin creeps into our hearts, our spiritual life dries up and we become spiritually blind.

The rebuke for their blindness doesn’t stop there. Read verses 31–32. Jesus said these people were like snotty, spoiled children. One group wanted to dance; the other wanted to pretend to have a funeral. Neither would cooperate with the other. They wanted to be entertained in such a subjective, self-centered way. Jesus applied this directly to the religious leaders. Read verses 33–34. Instead of taking their messages seriously, in their hearts they made fun of both John and Jesus. John was so intensely preaching the message of repentance and trying to live it, but they said, “He has a demon.” Jesus was preaching the message of God’s forgiveness and living it in embracing all kinds of sinners, but they said, “Here’s a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” It may seem like an old story. But it’s not. It’s scary. We can become just like them. When’s the last time we seriously repented of anything? Are we sitting back like spectators looking at God’s work critically? Have we become super self-centered and proud?

But these critical people didn’t discourage Jesus. Read verse 35. Jesus rejoiced that God’s wisdom would be proved right. By whom? He says by the children of wisdom. Who are they? The children of wisdom are not children of some special people; they are children of God who repent and believe in Jesus. They are the truly wise ones.

Let's read verse 29 again. May God help us to be humble enough to repent, so that we can see and participate in the gracious work of his kingdom in our midst.