

LUKE

“Offended at God”

Luke 7:18-35

Sunday, January 21, 2018 (Sanctity of Life Sunday)

By David A. Ritchie

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.”

²⁴ When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. ²⁶ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is he of whom it is written,

“ ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” ²⁹ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

³¹ “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’

³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ³⁵ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” ¹

Heavenly Father, there are times in life when our pain and circumstances blind us to your presence and your ever abiding goodness. As we study your word this morning, may your Holy Spirit give us eyes to see your light even in the midst of our doubts and darkness. We pray this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, our merciful and faithful high priest. AMEN.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 7:18–35.

I. Introduction

In our text today, we are suddenly hoisted for a brief moment away from the growing and expanding ministry of Jesus Christ back to a character in Luke's gospel that most of you would have long forgotten about – John the Baptist.

For several chapters now, Luke has said absolutely nothing about John the Baptist. But if you go back to the beginning of Luke's gospel, it would have appeared that John was one of the most important figures of the story, second only to Jesus himself. Luke's gospel begins with an angel foretelling the birth of John the Baptist, followed by an angel foretelling the birth of Jesus. Then, Luke tells the story of how John the Baptist was born, followed by the story of how Jesus was born. Soon we hear Luke tell the account of how John the Baptist began his ministry, followed by the account of how Jesus began his ministry. Luke goes to great lengths to show us that John is very important. He is God the first man to speak the very words of God for four centuries. But Luke also goes to great lengths to show us that although John is great, Jesus is greater. John is God's prophet. Jesus is God's son.

But by the time you make it to the middle of chapter 7, a close reader of Luke might be asking, whatever happened to that John the Baptist guy? I mean, I know John once said, "Jesus must increase and I must decrease" (cf. Jn. 3:30), but John has flat out disappeared. That is until now.

As Jesus has grown in popularity, power, and acclaim, John has been literally confined and restrained to a prison cell.² You see John was a courageous man who was unafraid to speak the word of God, even when the word of God was unpopular and dangerous. John had even publically condemned the marriage of Herod, the ruler of Galilee, to his former sister-in-law. As a result, John was placed in a desert dungeon.

He did the right thing. But he was punished for it.

And now, it seems like everyone in Galilee is experiencing the power of Jesus – but not John. Understandably, this is hard for John to swallow, and he has some questions for Jesus.

Have you ever done the right thing and bad things happen? Have you ever felt like God was moving in the lives of others but somehow missed you?

John's experience flies in the face of an Americanized version of following Jesus is often "follow Jesus and life will only be better." A text like this forces us to ask, what happens when we follow Jesus, and things get worse? What happens when faithfulness to God causes us to suffer? What happens when there is a disconnect between the perceived faithfulness of ourselves and the perceived faithfulness of our God?

What happens when a faithful believer gets **"Offended at God"**?

I believe our passage today will help us answer those questions. This is a longer, interwoven, and complex text. But it is one primarily about the relationship between John and Jesus, and the impact

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 267.

that relationship has on the world. So we will focus our discussion under three headings: 1.) *What John thinks about Jesus*, 2.) *What Jesus thinks about John*, and 3.) *What the World thinks about Jesus and John*.

II. Text

1.) What John thinks about Jesus

John is hearing all about Jesus in prison. Well, miracles are great, John is thinking, but where is the baptism of fire of judgment that he prophesied (Lk. 3:7-9)? As R. Kent Hughes observes, according to John's view, "The Romans were still in firm control. Their lackeys, including Herod and Herodias, were living in comfort. The religious establishment was just as arrogant and self-righteous as ever. And John, sitting in prison, was getting no help from Jesus as far as he could see."³

John's question to Jesus is "This is good, but did I miss something?" Jesus heals in rapid-fire succession, and basically says, "Now, what were you saying."

"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." (Luke 7:22, ESV) Jesus gives John a messianic checklist from Isaiah⁴, but he noticeably leaves out one of the things that the messiah is supposed to do – the opening of the prison to those who are bound. I'm sure John is thinking, "If signs are your thing, I know a captive who could really use a little bit of liberty."

Even John's preconceived ideas of who the Messiah was supposed to be clouded his vision of Jesus. We must be radically open to a Christ who is capable of surprising us and challenging us. This is the mark of a real relationship

Jesus concludes his message to John with a gentle rebuke: *"And blessed is the one who is not offended by me"* (Luke 7:23, ESV). The word for "offended" here (σκανδαλισθη) can also be translated as "stumble" (NIV)

John isn't losing faith. But he is stumbling into offense. It is possible to stumble, and not lose faith.

But here is what John does right. He brings his questions, his pains, and even his doubts directly to Jesus. *There is a distinction between healthy doubt versus destructive doubt.*⁵ *Healthy doubt humbly presupposes the goodness of God and is willing to listen. Destructive doubt arrogantly presupposes our goodness over against God and refuses to listen.*

³ Ibid., 267.

⁴ "At least four separate Isaiah texts were alluded to in Jesus' answer—26:19, 29:18ff., 35:5ff., and 61:1, the last of which was earlier quoted by Jesus when he began his ministry (cf. Luke 4:18, 19)." Ibid., 268.

⁵ "The difference between healthy doubt and destructive doubt is not the uttering of uncertainty but the response that follows it. The laments of the Psalter teach us that saints can be brutally honest on how they feel about God, but they also teach us that after they share their complaint with the Lord, they humbly await his reply. Disappointment often calls us to a deeper, less self-focused walk with God." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 215.

We too must learn to stumble toward Jesus not away from him Pray your pain, your questions, and your doubt. He is a savior who has entered into our pain.

John is a good man, but bad things have happened to him.

We can get offended at God when we think about bad things happening to good people. But the uncomfortable truth is that very thought presupposes a moral goodness that none of us possess. If we truly understood the utter holiness and justice of God, what would scandalize us is not that we get worse than what we deserve, but that we are almost always getting better than we deserve. As R.C. Sproul once said, “Why do bad things happen to good people? The truth is that only ever happened once, and He volunteered.”

John is jail headed toward death, but Jesus is not immune to suffering.

At the cross of Jesus Christ the very worst thing happened to the very best person, so that that the best thing could happen to us when we least deserve it. This radical love and grace have the power to heal the offended heart.

2.) What Jesus thinks about John

After this gentle rebuke, Jesus then publically affirms John in the greatest way possible: *“When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you’”* (Luke 7:24–27, ESV).

John is firm and unshakable, unlike a bending reed which was a symbol of conviction-less populism.⁶ John was not a comfortable man who preached to make people comfortable. John was not a man who used his spiritual influence to gain power. John is a prophet. But John isn’t just a prophet – he’s the greatest of prophets. He a prophet that prophets prophesized about; he is a pivotal character in the history of redemption

He is the messenger who prepares the way for the Lord himself: *“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts”* (Malachi 3:1, ESV).

What does this mean? Even in the midst of John’s offense, Jesus knows John better than John knows himself.

In the midst of your anger, your pain, your heartache, your doubt, know that God knows you and loves you and affirms you. He understands you better than you understand yourself.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 294.

And for Christians, we have access to see something even more: *“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he”* (Luke 7:28, ESV).

We have access to something John and all the prophets longed to see but could never see: the knowledge of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the ability to experience communion with God. We have a more intimate relationship to God that transcends even the best the old age offered.”⁷

We too have a call to prepare the way; to point to Christ with all of our life; even in the midst of suffering – especially in the midst of suffering

God is big enough to have reasons to allow suffering that we can’t or won’t understand right now. And like John, we too are a part of a story that is much bigger than us. Though we might experience dark chapters, we know the end of this story is one of joy. Our Savior who died and rose again, will come to make all things new; wipe away every tear

All will suffer, but not all have hope. We can have hope.

3.) What the World thinks about Jesus and John

Despite the contrasts John and Jesus’s ministry are united in this: they are both the from God, they speak the word of God, and they were both rejected because of this.⁸

“To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘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, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children” (Luke 7:31–35, ESV).

John was too serious, severe, and judgmental (demon possessed). Jesus was too radically gracious (a glutton, drunkard, and friend of tax-collectors).

Dr. Darrel Bock calls this “the parable of the brats.” He writes, “The parable of the brats indicates how superficially pious people sometimes want God to approach them on their own terms. They want God to respond to their music, rather than follow God’s tune. People are often uncomfortable responding to God’s call that they must come to him, recognizing their need for his grace and forgiveness. Do we ask God to serve us? Or do we serve him? The passage ultimately makes it clear that Jesus is the only way. The blessing of being greater than a prophet comes only from following his call to enter into God’s grace and to dance to the music of the divine musician.”⁹

⁷ Bock, 211–212.

⁸ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 233.

⁹ Bock, 216.

There is a cultural pressure to want God to play to our music. This is still true today. God will continue to confront and offend the world, but for vastly different and sometimes opposite reasons.

Today is Sanctity of life Sunday, wherein we acknowledge the Christian belief that all human life is sacred and worthy of honor and dignity because all human life bears the image of God. It is because of this belief that we support ministries like CareNet that serve and assist single moms. It is why we champion those who feel a call to foster or adopt children who need homes. It is why we vehemently stand against the social injustice that is abortion on demand.

However, I want to say very clearly that we are not “pro-life” church because a republican party tells us to be pro-life. We are pro-life because the Bible says that God knows every person in their mother’s womb. We are pro-life because we are called to defend the rights of those who can’t defend themselves. We are pro-life because God is the author of life. Nevertheless, there are those that would accuse of us of being too political and too conservative because of this issue.

On the other side of the coin, as a church we also unapologetically feel called to love, serve, and reach out the refugees in our community. We believe that they too bear the image of God. This is why we advocate for and support a ministry like the Refugee Language Project.

However, the reason we want to reach out to refugees is not because progressive culture tells us to be “pro-refugee.” We do this because Jesus calls us to love our neighbors. We do this because the same image of God that is on an unborn child is also on a refugee. We do this because Jesus told us to go into all the nations to proclaim the gospel, and the nations are right here in our own city. Nevertheless, there are those that would say that we are being too political and too liberal because of this issue.

But here is what I want you to see. Jesus is calling us to a vision of the kingdom that transcends political platforms and preferences. Our call is not to please the voices of culture, but rather to be faithful to our God. This is why we can say unapologetically on Sanctify of life Sunday that the same doctrine that beckons us to honor image of God in the unborn beckons us to honor the image of God in the immigrant, the refugee, the elderly, the special needs child, the single-mom, the slave, the starving, and the impoverished.

This will not please all itching ears. This will even offend some in our culture. *“Yet wisdom is justified by all her children”* (Luke 7:35, ESV),

Today, we can strive to be a church that will cater to the entertainment and comfort and preferences of the Christians who are already here, or we can mobilize into a church that will faithfully proclaim, display, and embody the kingdom of God in our community and world.

We can expect God to play to our sheet music, or we can become a part of his symphony.

Redeemer, let’s be a people who stumble to our Lord even in our pain. May we be a people who trust that we are a part of his story, even when we can’t see the ends and outs of our circumstances. May we be a people who play to God’s music and let him set the agenda. AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1) *Have you ever been offended at God? What were the underlying assumptions of your offense?*

- 2) *How does this passage (as well as many of the psalms of lament, like Psalm 77) encourage us to bring our pain and doubt directly to God?*
- 3) *Many people in the first century rejected the word of God through both John the Baptist and Jesus because John seemed too severe and Jesus seemed too gracious. How does the word of God continue to offend culture today?*