

# Great Unexpectedations

## Luke 7:18-35

What do you expect Jesus to do? In your life? In this world? And what if that doesn't happen? Do you decide that Jesus is getting things wrong? Or that He isn't the God you thought He was? Or that your expectations about Him were wrong?

In Luke 7:18-35, Jesus shows that who He is and what He has come to do might differ greatly from our expectations of Him. And He gets us to see that it's our expectations of Him that are questionable, not His identity.

This passage is written in three clear parts, which we'll look at in turn. Firstly, in vv.18-23, we find John the Baptist asking the question, 'Who is Jesus?' Secondly, in vv.24-30, Jesus flips that round, and He asks the question, 'Who is John?' And thirdly, in vv.31-35, Jesus asks the question, 'Who is the culture around us?'

We start in vv. 18-23, where the greatest ever follower of God (according to Jesus later on in the passage) has a crisis of faith. John the Baptist expresses his doubts. He asks whether Jesus really is the One that God was going to send into the world to change everything forever - the Messiah.

John spent all of Luke 3 telling people to repent - to change course - and pointing them to Jesus. He spoke the truth to power, and got thrown in prison for it. And there, he hears from his own disciples what Jesus and His disciples have been up to. v.18 tells us that John heard about all 'these things.'

Things like Luke has just narrated about Jesus healing and restoring, showing grace and mercy to an outsider to the people of God, and even raising the dead son of a widow.

Remarkably enough, even in the face of that greatest possible miracle, John says, 'Who are you really, Jesus?' The thing is, John was expecting something quite different. In Luke 3, you'll read John saying that the One coming after him was going to come with powerful judgment - sorting the wheat from the chaff, bringing down the hammer on humanity and its sin.

Then Jesus arrived. But not with great pyrotechnics of power or displays of kingliness for all the world to see. He was doing something more gradual and gracious, more restorative and quiet, than John had imagined.

When John's disciples directly ask Jesus the question, 'Are you the Messiah, God's chosen King?', Jesus' answer in vv.21-22 is to show them and tell them what He is doing, and *how Jesus' identity and activity is consistent with what He said He'd do.*

When He started His ministry in Luke 4, Jesus said He'd come to preach good news to the poor, give sight to the blind and release the oppressed. Here in Luke 7, He reports that He's doing that - both by speaking about it, and actually doing it right before the eyes of John's messengers. He's doing more than anyone imagined. The lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see, and even the dead are raised.

This is the mission of God. To release human beings who depend on Jesus from everything that robs them of wholeness in their lives. Illness, debt, poverty, exclusion - even sin and death. Jesus had both promised it, and delivered it.

More than that, John would have heard from Jesus' answer *how Jesus' identity and activity was consistent with what God promised He would do.* The language of Jesus' answer in v.22, like the language of Luke 4, all comes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The blind seeing. The lame leaping. The deaf hearing. Good news for the poor. The dead being raised.

That comes from various chapters in Isaiah's prophecy, but especially Isaiah 61. The point is, this is what God told His people to expect from the King that He was going to send to this world.

John the Baptist wasn't expecting someone doing the things that Jesus was doing. But Jesus points out, he should have been. It's not that Jesus was doing something different to what the Bible said He would do. It's that a human being called John had got his expectations about how God would work out of kilter with what the Bible actually announced.

The Old Testament did teach people to expect that the Messiah would bring judgement upon the world with clear authority and power, and that's what John was focused on. And actually, Jesus and His followers taught that Jesus will indeed do that at the close of history.

But to the surprise of John, and many like him, there's an in between bit called history, where God is at work to release, restore, rescue and reconcile with as many human beings as will depend on Jesus. He wants to heal and

save *before* He wants to judge and perfect His creation of Heaven and Earth with the final destruction of human sin. That's why Jesus and His mission matters. That's why your response to it matters.

The other thing about Jesus' answer to John's disciples is this: He told them to look at the evidence for themselves, and come to their own conclusions. Jesus showed them that *His identity was consistent with the evidence of His activity.*

Have a look at vv.21-22. Jesus doesn't say, 'Yes, that's me, take my word for it.' He doesn't say, 'I really hope you'll believe me, guys - can I persuade you?' He says, 'See for yourself what I'm doing, and decide for yourself where that evidence leads.' 'Go back and report to John what you have *seen and heard,*' Jesus says.

The transformative effect of Jesus' power in people's lives is enough to show that Jesus is who John first thought He was - The King sent by God to this world. And what Jesus is doing is amazing, isn't it? Opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, restoring hope and community to people who had been outcast, telling people with authority 'you are forgiven, be free of the guilt you have been carrying around,' raising the dead to life. This is amazing, isn't it?!

The same transformative power is at work in people's lives today. When I ever wonder about Jesus being the amazing God I thought He was, two things convince me to stand firm on my convictions about Him once again.

One is going back again to the Bible - the evidence that is there about who Jesus is and what He has done; His life, death and resurrection, and finding that God speaks truth by His Spirit through these pages like nobody else speaks it anywhere else.

And the other is the evidence of transformation in people's lives that I have witnessed as they have put their faith in Jesus. The difference between who they were, and who they are, because of the fulness of life that Jesus is bringing them - in character, in peace, in motivation, in incredibly changed circumstances, even in the look in their eyes - that shows me that Jesus is the real deal in His transformative power as God's chosen King.

*Based on what you have seen and heard of Jesus, do you think He is who He says He is?*

In vv.24-30, Jesus flips the question round. John had asked, 'Who is Jesus?'. Now Jesus asks, 'Who is John?' I wonder if you've ever considered this idea - that when you put Jesus in the spotlight, asking who He really is; that He might in turn put you in the spotlight, asking who you really are?

What Jesus has to say about John is impressive. Jesus tells us that John was someone who spoke the truth - about people, and about God. John was someone with a very special, prominent role to play in history. And there was no-one ever born before John who was greater than him.

In vv.24-25, Jesus is having a go at the Jewish King Herod Antipas, as well as speaking highly of John. At that time, the only pictures that most people would ever see would be those etched on a coin. And the Jewish coins bearing King Herod's name had a picture of a reed on them. These reeds were common on the shores of Galilee.

Jesus' audience would have picked up on what Jesus was saying (indirectly enough that He wouldn't get arrested yet). If you want to be in fashion, go the way the wind is blowing, and seek material comfort, you'd find that stuff in the palace. If you want plain, bold, unadorned truth - you'd find it in the desert, with the prophet John the Baptist.

Prophets were people who spoke the truth that God had revealed to them to pass on. No matter the cost, no matter who got their feathers ruffled. John spoke the truth to power and celebrity. That's what got him thrown in prison.

But plenty of people had an appetite for truth. They wanted to hear it, and in John, they found a man who spoke the truth about them and about God. Luke comments on this in vv.29-30.

He says that those who heard John's call to repent - that is, change course - and be baptised, were proclaiming that God had got it right. We human beings have gone astray from God, we need to turn back to Him and be washed clean by Him to be restored to Him. And Luke says that those who did not accept that truth John was telling were rejecting God and His mission to them.

Do you have an appetite for truth or for comfort? If you want comfort, you'll find that stuff in the palaces of our day - getting immersed in the world of celebrity, finding the fashionable clothes/trends/opinions and following them, and avoiding challenging words about who you are and what truly needs to change in you.

If you want truth, you'll find it in the message that John the Baptist preached - you've gone astray from the God who made you. You need to change course and walk to Him now, instead of away from Him. For God to come into your life, you'll need to be washed clean of the sin you're guilty of. So repent, be baptised, follow Jesus. That'll change you inside out.

In vv.26-27, Jesus says that John is more than a truth-teller. He's got a special place in God's plan and in all history. John is *the* one who was to come before Jesus to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. A figure who was announced in Old Testament prophecy, which Jesus quotes in v.27. One who would prepare the way for Jesus to come to us and us to come to Him.

John is the last great figure of the old way of things. The last and greatest of the prophets. The bridge between the Old Testament, which was all about showing our need for a Rescuer, and the New Testament, which is all about showing who that Rescuer is and what He has done for us.

Like nobody else in history, John pointed people to Jesus. His special and unique job was to roll out the red carpet for Jesus. But here's the surprising thing that Jesus says in v.28: 'I tell you, among those born of women there is no-one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he.'

There's at least two things to learn from that comment. Firstly, *the Kingdom of God arrives with Jesus*. It's His arrival in our world, and in your life, that brings you belonging with God in His community, and nothing else. Nothing before or after Jesus can do it.

The greatest inspiring world figure who doesn't put their trust in that is less than the littlest and the least person who does. Because the sinful messed up nobody from Inverness who repents and believes in Jesus has forgiveness, freedom, fulness of life, a forever future, and access to God Himself by His Spirit who is given to them. The great entrepreneur, politician or celebrity or even prophet who hasn't done that, doesn't have any of those things.

And secondly, *you can point other people to Jesus, but miss the point yourself*. Nobody ever pointed more people to Jesus, with such enthusiasm, as John the Baptist. But when John realised that Jesus wasn't doing things the way that John expected, he had a crisis of faith. And Luke hasn't told us how that turned out.

I'm delighted to be in a church where so many of us are so motivated about pointing other people to Jesus. But your enthusiasm for doing that is not the same as your own walk with the Lord. You can be a truth-teller, and still be caught out by the truth about Jesus yourself. Is your own trust in Jesus well enough founded that it can survive being surprised by Him?

I wonder if you wonder who Jesus is. Either because you haven't heard that much about Him before now, or because He's not behaving the way you assumed He would. When Jesus does things in our lives and communities that we weren't expecting, then we can respond the way this passage teaches us, for our faith in Jesus - and therefore, our very selves - to thrive, and not perish.

First of all, honestly expressing our doubts and questions, bringing them to Jesus directly without fear, just as John did. Not expressing that stuff to Jesus out of a misplaced sense of politeness or religiousness is only going to set you on a course for quietly withering faith.

But secondly, it's only constructive to ask questions of Jesus if we're going to listen to the answer that He gives us. So, looking again at the Bible to see how our expectations went astray from its teaching, as Jesus shows John here. And looking at the evidence of what Jesus is doing to see how it's wise and fruitful and better than the plan you had assumed.

*How has Jesus surprised you in the past? Has that changed the way that you tell other people about Him?*

Finally, in vv.31-35, Jesus asks the question, 'Who is the culture around me?' And what He observes is that the society around Him has this childish attitude of saying, 'You're not dancing to our tune, so there's something wrong with you.' And because neither John the Baptist nor Jesus are behaving in ways that the world around them thinks normal and acceptable, their culture rejects them.

They look at John - this guy who lives in the desert and doesn't indulge in food or drink any wine - and they say he's weird, he must have a demon. They look at Jesus - this man who throws parties with people that the world calls criminals, traitors and moral deviants - and they say He's a glutton and a drunk, who keeps very bad company. And it's their way of writing John and Jesus off, along with the life-altering message they bring.

How different is that from our culture? What might Jesus say of this generation? Well, I can't put words in His mouth. But if Jesus was troubled by a culture that said, 'Dance to our tune or we'll call you names,' He might have one or two concerns about ours, too.

Our culture says certain things which, if you don't just accept them as true without question, will see you written off as a fringe lunatic. 'Each to their own.' 'We can do whatever we like so long as it's not harming anyone.' 'This kind of thinking has no place in the 21st century.' 'There's nothing more important than family.' 'You only live once.' 'There are many paths to God.'

All of these kind of ideas are expressed as truisms - you're not supposed to argue with them, they're just self-evident. And if you don't think so, if you don't dance to this tune, you've no right to a voice. These sentiments are expressed in song lyrics, film plots and advertising that appeals to the spirit of the age, as well as in the words of the phrases I've just used.

But none of them are actually self-evidently true. All of them can be questioned. Does 'each to their own' really work? Is my definition of 'not harming anyone' and yours the same? What happens if it's not? What if we are responsible for more than just our own happiness?

*Why* does 'this kind of thinking have no place in the 21st century'? And are our thoughts and beliefs as a culture better than those of a previous century just because they're more modern? Is history really always progressing to get better?

Is your own flesh and blood family really the *most* important thing? What does that mean for your identity and security when you let them down and they let you down? What does that mean for a world where so many suffer loneliness because they don't have a family around them? What does it mean for a world so divided by people protecting their own territory?

Do we only live once? Is there no life beyond death? How do we know that? Can we really do just whatever we like in this life because there are no eternal consequences? Are there many paths to God? Who said so? Did God say that? Why would we assume that?

The thing is, into all of those cultural biases and assumptions, Jesus and His people speak. Their message challenges the whole tune that our culture is singing. Here's a person saying that human beings are guilty of sin and will be held responsible for it. We are responsible to God and to each other.

Someone saying that some of the behaviours we are enshrining in law are not progressive development, but a decaying departure from God's revealed will.

Someone saying that there is one family that matters more than anything, to which all are invited, from every tribe, tongue, nation, race, class, background, whether living in a family unity or living alone. A family adopted by a Father God, through this person's living, dying and rising.

Someone who says very clearly that though we die, we will rise. And it's either to judgement for the sin we are responsible for, or it's to eternal life because we have trusted Him to die for our sin to be destroyed within Him. Someone who said boldly that the *only* way to God was through Him.

Now that is emphatically *not* dancing to this generation's tune. And our culture does not like that. So people will shut Jesus up and write Him off. Like the people in the passage who say, 'Oh, He's a glutton and a drunkard,' they tell themselves and others certain things to explain why they're sidelining Jesus.

They'll say, 'Oh, He's for religious people, and I'm not religious.' Or, 'He was a long time ago, He's got nothing to do with life today.' Or they'll express a kind of apathy about Him. They're not bothered one way or the other about Jesus. But it's all a mask. A mask worn by all those who don't want to think about Jesus too much.

The truth is, nobody wants Jesus to come too near them, in case He changes them forever. They'd rather ignore Him or reject Him and stay comfortable than listen to Him, discover that He is God and life and truth, and have to dance to a new tune with Him.

Who do you say Jesus is? And who does Jesus say you are? Whose tune are you dancing to?