



**Luke 7:18-35**  
**“Jesus Deals With A Friend”**

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18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

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**“Following Christ from City Center”**

VIB: LUKE 7:18-35 "JESUS DEALS WITH A DOUBTING FRIEND"

**1) vv.18-23 JOHN'S DOUBLE QUESTION AND JESUS' DOUBLE ANSWER.**

Notes:

Mt. 11:2-6, John in prison (3:15-20, 5:33, Acts 18:25, 19:1)  
4:14-15, 7:1-10, 11-17 (Healing/ Raising Dead)  
Lord (6:6, 13), Deut. 2:15, 19:15  
3:16, Jn. 6:14, No Fiery Reformer, Question 1  
7:16, Even John Struggles To Understand Jesus' Ministry!

- 18 a The disciples of John told him of *all these things*.  
19 And John, calling to him two of his disciples, sent them to **the Lord**, saying, *Lord* (6:6, 13), Deut. 2:15, 19:15  
"Are you **'HE WHO IS TO COME'**, or shall we look for another?" 3:16, Jn. 6:14, No Fiery Reformer, Question 1  
20 b **And when the men had come to him, they said,**  
**"JOHN THE BAPTIZER** has sent us to you, saying, **Where Is The Fiery Reformer (3:7-9)**  
'Are you *'he who is to come'*, or shall we look for another?" **Important (2x), Question 2 (3:15-16)**  
**They See His Works, Who Is Jesus?**  
21 b' **In that hour he (i.e. Jesus) cured many of diseases and wounds (plagues) and evil spirits,**  
and on *many* that were blind he bestowed sight. **v.21, A Gentle Messiah, Jesus' Answer (Deeds)**  
**Human Restoration: What Scripture Says, I Fulfill**  
22 a' And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: **v.21 (L), Jesus' Answer (Word)**  
'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.' **4:18, Climax! 4:16-30, 6:20, (Is. 26:19, 29:18-19, 35:5-6, 61:1-2, 58:6)**  
23 And blessed is he who takes no offense (*skandalizo* = stumble, falter) at me." **2:34, 20:18, Beatitude: Be Warned**  
**Aware Of Opposition, Don't Miss What God Is Doing!**

**2) vv.24-27 JESUS EVALUATES JOHN'S MINISTRY: PART I- THE PROPHET.**

Stands At Bridge Between Two Ages

- 24 When the messengers of John had gone, he began to speak to the crowds concerning John:  
"What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? **Question**  
A reed shaken by the wind? (No) (Spineless: Antipas' Coin) **Answer**  
25 What then did you go out to see? **Question**  
A man clothed in soft (*malakos*) clothing? (No) (Moral Issue) **Answer**  
Behold, those **who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury** are in kings' courts. **Comment**  
26 What then did you go out to see? **Question**  
A prophet? **Yes, I tell you,** and more than a prophet. (Word from God, 1:76) **Answer**  
27 This is he of whom it is written, **LXX Mal. 3:1, Ex. 23:20, Comment**  
'Behold, I send my messenger/ before thy face,' 'who shall prepare/ thy way before thee.'  
**Elijah Prophecy**

**2') vv.28-30 JESUS EVALUATES JOHN'S MINISTRY: PART II- THE KINGDOM.**

John : Last OT Prophet, Bridge To New Reality: *Great Privilege*

- 28 **I tell you,** **Authority Formula**  
among those born of women/ none is greater than John; (Old order) **John As Transition Figure**  
yet he who is least in the kingdom of God/ is greater than he." (New order) **New Era Dawns With Jesus**

**1') vv.29-35 JESUS' DOUBLE QUESTION AND ANSWER CONCERNING HIMSELF AND JOHN.**

(Luke's Commentary) **Accept God's Purpose, God Is In The Right!**

- 29 a When they heard this **all the people** and the tax collectors/ **justified God,** **Agreed God was right/ just in John**  
having been baptized with the **BAPTISM OF JOHN;** **Repentance of Outsiders**  
30 but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose (will) of God for themselves, **No Repentance of Insiders**  
not having been baptized by him. **3:3, 5:32, No Forgiveness, Rejected Messenger/Message**  
**Both Fraternalize With Tax Collectors! John & Jesus v. Current Leadership**  
(Double Question) **13:18, 20, Two-Age Schema**  
31 b1 "To what **then** shall I compare the men (people) of this generation (age)? **Dt. 1:35, Question 1**  
2 and what are they like? **Question 2**
- 32 b' (Answer 1: Image) **This Generation's Reaction To John & Jesus = Peevish**  
2 They are like children (*paidiois*) sitting in the market place and yelling to one another, **Parabolic Answer**  
'We piped to you, and you did not dance (i.e. playing Jewish wedding); **"Parable of the Brats"**  
we wailed, and you did not weep (i.e. playing Jewish funeral). **Non-responsive, Bunch Of Grumblers!**  
(Answer 2: Application) **God Comes To Us On His Terms, Not Ours!**  
33 1 For John **the Baptist** has come eating no **bread** and drinking no **wine;** **Nazarite, Ascetic, 1:15, 5:33**  
and you say, 'He has a demon.'  
**Odd Outsider, In League With Evil One**  
34 **THE SON OF MAN HAS COME** eating and drinking; **Dt. 18:18-21, Prov. 23:20-21, Non-Ascetic**  
and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! **Party Boy!**  
**Wisdom = Periphrasis For God In His Wisdom**
- 35 a' Yet wisdom is **justified/** by **all her children** (*tekna*)."  
**Wisdom Saying: Invitation To Make Your Own Judgment**

**A Brief Treatment Of Luke VB: 7:18-35**

This thought unit follows the two miracles of 7:1-10, 11-17 and in the larger structure of Essay V is parallel to B' 8:1-21 (see Appendix). Several themes tie the two together (*see and hear* [7: 21-22, 24-27 // 8:8b-18], *kingdom of God* [7:28 // 8:1, 10], *use of parables* [7:31-32 // 8:4-8, 16], *demon* [7:33 // 8:2, 12]. The question answered in 7:18-35 is, What is the relationship between the prophets who came before (epitomized in John) and the new regime of the kingdom of God? With the new reality come startling possibilities, as the healings illustrate (v.21). The old order yields to the new as the prophecies of Isaiah are fulfilled (v.22). What links the old and new regimes is division; in general, common folk are receptive and religious leaders resistant (vv.29-30). The structure is concentric (1-2-2'-1'") with the phrases *he who is to come* (v.19) // *the Son of man has come* (v.34) and *John the baptizer* (v.20) // *baptism of John* (v.29) as inclusions. At the center are two uses of the formula *I tell you* (v.26b // v.28a). This is Q tradition since there is a parallel in Matthew 11:2-16 but none in Mark. Luke received and then modified the tradition to highlight his concerns.

After a report of miracles from his followers, John sends two back with a question, "Are you *he who is to come*, or shall we look for another?" John's preaching of an imminent judgment of wrath (3:7-9) did not match Jesus' *acceptable year of the Lord* (4:19) with its lavish forgiveness and healings. Who then is Jesus? Where does he fit? Luke has the question repeated (v.20) which leads to Jesus' answer, not in words but in a flood of healings which echo Isaiah. The two are to "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard..." with an added caution not to be offended (v.23). Jesus is *the one who is to come*. This is what the rule of God looks like, however unexpected.

With the departure of the messengers, Jesus sets John in context (2. vv.24-27). In a series of three questions, the first two of which expect *No* answers, Jesus praises John as a prophet and more. He fulfills Mal. 3:1 and Ex. 23:20 as he goes before and prepares the way for the arrival of Jesus and the kingdom which are now on display! Coins issued by Herod Antipas were stamped with the image of reeds that grew around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus turns the image in John's favor; he does not bend with the winds like Antipas; John has spine and stands strong and straight. Neither does John wear *soft clothing* or live in *luxury* like the king and his court. People did not have to go into the wilderness to see self-indulgent leaders. It was, however, the place to go for a word from God through the last prophet of the old era. Jesus critiques those who cater to the world's obsessions and praises his prophetic cousin. Jesus knew that what was going on in and through his work was a fundamental change. The new age is breaking in and reordering expectations. This is the intent of v.29, "but he who is least in the kingdom of God is great than John." What an opportunity! In Jesus' presence a door is opened into God's new world, and all may respond if they will.

The fourth paragraph (1' vv.29-35) links Jesus and John; both are accepted by some (*the people* and *tax collectors*) and rejected by others (*Pharisees* and *scholars*). To *justify God* (v.29 // 35) is to agree that what God is offering his people is right. The right responses are: 1) to repent and accept John's baptism when offered, and then 2) to share the joy of Jesus' kingdom reality. But some cannot be pleased. John's plays funeral music, and they do not follow; Jesus pipes the joy of wedding music, and they do not follow. They slander John as a crazy man and Jesus as a party boy. Yet, even with this, God's wise ways find a way to gather a following of faithful children (v.35).

## JESUS DEALS WITH A DOUBTING FRIEND

*“And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.”*

A warning that Jesus is often difficult and surprising.

LUKE 7 : 23

A privilege of being a pastor is hearing people’s stories, particularly stories of their life of faith: how the journey started, major turning points, important people along the way, any miracles or divine illuminations, any besetting sins and encounters with evil, the setbacks and wanderings, where they are now.<sup>1</sup> Doctors take histories and physicals; I listen for signs of grace so I can go where the action is. It’s not uncommon for those raised in the church to say, “I’ve never *not known* about Jesus,” or “I’ve walked away several times, but I always knew he was there,” or maybe, “We went to church most every Sunday; it’s just what our family did,” and then sometimes this one, “I was taught not to question, not to doubt, only believe.”

At this point I punch the pause button, “Tell me about your doubts, about your emotional and intellectual struggles with Christian faith.” They often look surprised, as if that were an odd question from a pastor. But when they know I’m serious, and once they get started with the two or three big issues, there’s an immediate sense of relief; they can breathe again. God’s not mad at them for telling the truth; I will not scold or shoot Bible verses at them to drive them back into silence; there are good responses to make from the church’s rich treasury of reflection, but no easy, quick answers.<sup>2</sup> Faith is more than screwing down your will to believe harder or better.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to mapping faith journeys, see Bob Whitesel, *Spiritual Waypoints* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2010), and- in abbreviated form- his *Waypoint: Navigating Your Spiritual Journey* (same publisher and date).

<sup>2</sup> I often recommend Mark Mittelburg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Colorado Spring, CO: Tyndale, 2010); Some of the questions are: Why are

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Faith is not trying harder with an exercise of raw will; it is trust based on evidence and proved true in experience, and evidence- both pro and con- requires patient examination. Many a spiritually-stalled adult has launched into a larger realm of vitality by naming and facing their doubts as a fresh starting point. In this they are in good company, no less that John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin and prophetic forerunner. John was jailed and soon to die at the request of an exotic dancer and her mom,<sup>3</sup> and at the end of life had a pressing question. “Are you *the one who is to come*, or shall we look someone else? You’re different than I expected, a lot less fire and judgment, a lot more mercy and acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Are you the end of the line, the Messiah, or just the one after me?” John took his questions to Jesus, and that is what we are invited to do. If John had questions and concerns, how much more the rest of us? And guess what? Jesus can handle it! His question to us is, “Do you trust me with your doubts, and will you follow me in the midst of them?”

But first, before we get to the story, a little primer on faith and doubt from yours truly! Doubt is not the opposite of faith; the opposite of faith is indifference. Doubt is honest and open and passionate and teachable; indifference shrugs its shoulders and walks away to more manageable and less mysterious matters. Doubt is engaged; indifference doesn’t give a rip. So don’t try to banish doubts as a strategy to strengthen faith. It won’t work. Take your doubts and unresolved questions seriously. Don’t fear them; befriend them. Bring them to church. Talk about them openly. Study the church’s serious responses. Let your questions be a map of as-yet-unexplored territory. File them in the folder labeled *Things I Do Not Yet Understand*. Doubt is not faith’s opposite; doubt is the growing edge where faith presses against the mystery of God’s unknown. Os Guinness said, “Find out how seriously a believer takes his doubts, and you have the index of how seriously he takes his faith.”<sup>5</sup> Alister McGrath makes a move that sets doubt within the circle of faith:

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Christians against gay marriage? Why do you believe God exists? Why would God allow evil and suffering? Why trust a Bible full of mistakes? How could a loving God send people to hell? What makes you think Jesus was more than a good teacher? Why are Christians so judgmental?

<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:14-29 // Luke 9:7-9.

<sup>4</sup> Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality Of God: A Reading Of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Albert M. Wells, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 60.

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“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 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. But it is not and need not be a problem.”<sup>6</sup>

Along the way preachers pick up slogans about our craft. To the question, “What shall I preach?” the answer is, “Preach about God, and preach about twenty minutes.” My favorite is on the preparation of sermons: “Read yourself full; think yourself clear; pray yourself hot, let yourself go.” But here’s one that requires reflection, “Preach your certainties, pastor, not your doubts.” It is based on a quote from the German philosopher Goethe, “Give me the benefit of your convictions if you have any, but keep your doubts to yourself. I have enough of my own.”<sup>7</sup>

I understand the intent. Preaching is not about spouting doubts, but those who preach only certainties leave the impression they have no doubts and that all the questions already have clear answers. Pastors then become *givers-of-correct-answers* rather than *fellow-travelers*. Faith is not false certainty; faith embraces the unknown and therefore doubt. Doubt is a reminder I don’t have God all figured out and that surprises are always part of this journey with Jesus. God often draws outside the box of our expectations. The inherited categories of Jesus’ Jewish culture were not adequate to *who he was* or *what he came to do*. Some categories he stretched out of shape; others he broke altogether. In Jesus God created some new doubts about old certainties, even with his cousin John the Baptist.

We Methodists love to celebrate the conversion of John Wesley, May 24, 1738, when- in his own words- his heart was *strangely warmed* and he received a personal assurance that Christ had died not for humanity in general but for John Wesley in

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<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 135; also Alister McGrath, *Doubt in Perspective: God is Bigger Than You Think* (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Wells, *Inspiring*, 60.

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particular.<sup>8</sup> But hear an entry from Wesley’s journal only a year later. It was not all *happily ever after*; he wrote, “I know that I am not a Christian. I know it because I do not feel that I love God and His Son Jesus Christ as my Saviour.” Wesley doubted what had happened to him, whether or not he was even saved. Great women and men of God have doubts, even times of despair.<sup>9</sup> They may not preach them, but the honesty of faith compels them to acknowledge doubts.

**A Question Among Colleagues (vv.18-23)**

So it was with John. He was the miracle child of two old-faithfuls, Elizabeth and Zechariah, called of God from conception, filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb, out in the wilderness with the whispers of God, Elijah costume and sparse diet, a Nazarite who drank no wine, warning the crowds of the coming wrath and the need for repentance, baptizing them in the Jordan as if they were entering the promised land as outsiders, a man outside conventional religious circles, a prophet of the coming kingdom of God, naming the sexual sins of King Herod, locked up in the mountain fortress of Machaerus for mixing politics and religion, hearing about the miracles of Jesus, wondering in his own mind and then through his two emissaries, “Are you *he who is to come*, or shall we look for another?” What an amazing life! What a loaded question from a young man in a dark cell!

John wasn’t sure; he had doubts. Life was soon to end. So he turned his uncertainties into questions and went to Jesus for an answer. Mark Littleton put John’s example into a memorable formula: “Turn your doubts into questions; turn your questions into prayers; turn your prayers to God.”<sup>10</sup> Spiritual maturity does not mean doing away with doubts; spiritual maturity is naming them and knowing *who* to take them to. In his preaching John pointed beyond himself to *the coming one*, and in his doubting went to Jesus personally. If we hide doubt under fear or shame or pride, it may push us into the valley of despair, but if we expose doubt to the light of open dialog, it can drive us up towards Christ. Odd as it seems, to take our doubts

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<sup>8</sup> For analytic essays on Aldersgate, see Randy Maddox, editor, *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Raymond McHenry, *The Best of “In Other Words,”* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 76.

<sup>10</sup> Wells, *Inspiring*, 60.

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and fears to Jesus is a great act of faith, and here John the Baptist is our patron saint. Thomas is the doubter we know, but John is also a member of that elite fraternity.

For the sake of heightened drama, Luke has the question repeated twice, first by John in prison to two disciples, then a second time to Jesus in public, “Are you *‘he who is to come,’* or shall we look for another?”<sup>11</sup> John knew a *stronger one* was coming and that he was pointing beyond himself to the ultimate activity of God.<sup>12</sup> John knew he was not the main act, but was Jesus? He wasn’t certain.

As it unfolded after his baptism, Jesus’ ministry was something of a surprise. So full of mercy and the power of healing and deliverance. What was thought to be *only for the future* had erupted in the present. So unlike John’s ministry in style, though both spoke of the coming kingdom and the necessity of repentance.<sup>13</sup> John expected the crowds to come to him in the wilderness; Jesus went from place to place taking the kingdom to people. John was an ascetic under vows- he drank no wine; Jesus was a party animal. Some said he drank and ate too much, particularly with the wrong kinds of people as if he loved and accepted them into his new reality which was shot through with joy. John sang the dirges of Jewish funerals because God’s people were headed toward death; Jesus sang wedding songs and invited people to a party with God picking up the tab. But Jesus as Son was graced with something John was not, and that was the authority and power of the Holy Spirit to heal broken bodies and deliver tormented souls from evil. No miracles are attributed to John the Baptist in Jewish or Christian tradition. Conversions aplenty, but no physically verified miracles, no signs and wonders. John might open spiritual eyes to the need for God, but Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. As our charismatic friends might say, “They had different *anointings*, different spiritual job descriptions.”

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<sup>11</sup> My judgment is that Luke has edited his Q source (// Mt. 11:2-6) which consisted of a single question (v.3) and answer (vv.4-6) without demonstration. Luke has doubled the question and answer (vv.20-21) for effect; his belief is that signs and wonders are sometimes a catalyst for faith. Luke makes explicit what is implicit in Matthew ; he is faithful to the tradition and creative with it, like any skilled storyteller.

<sup>12</sup> 3:16-17.

<sup>13</sup> For a summary of recent scholarship on John, see Darrell Bock, *Who Is Jesus: Linking the Historical Jesus With The Christ of Faith* (New York, NY: Howard Books, 2012), Chapter 2, “John the Baptist: Washings, a Prophet, and Jesus,” 26-38.

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Was Jesus the *one to come*, or was he just the next voice before God finally came in person to restore his people and fix the world? “Are you the end of the line, Jesus, or is there someone after you? Are you *he who is to come*, or shall we look for another?” This is John’s dying question. It’s about the divine timetable and the cast of characters. “Where do I fit? And Jesus, where do you fit? Have I missed God?” Reviewing your life from a jail cell is not an easy task, and easily filled with doubt.

The double question is met by a double answer from Jesus in verses 21 and 22. First in mighty deeds without words, and then in Scriptural words to interpret the deeds. Luke is not at all bashful about displays of raw spiritual energy in the form of God’s healing love in and through Jesus for the sake of broken people. John’s two disciples were treated to a spectacular display of kingdom activity: verse 21, “*In that hour* Jesus cured *many* of diseases and wounds and evil spirits, and on *many* that were blind he bestowed sight.” It was first show and then tell. Even Marcus Borg, one of the most skeptical of modern critics, writes, “Despite the difficulty that miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist.... By admiring followers and skeptical foes alike, he was seen as a holy man with healing powers.”<sup>14</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Charles Spurgeon, the great English evangelist, wrote words that spark my imagination and move my emotions each time I read them. This is sanctified speculation at its best:

“What a mass of hideous sickness Jesus must have seen. Yet he was not disgusted but patiently healed them all.... What sickening ulcers and festering sores. Yet he was prepared for every type of evil and he was victorious over its every form.... The heat of fever, the cold of fluid buildup, the lethargy of paralysis, the rage of madness, the filth of leprosy, the darkness of blindness. All knew the power of his word and fled at His command. In every corner of the field he triumphed over evil and received honor from the delivered captives. He saw, and he conquered everywhere.”<sup>15</sup>

I confess that often as I walk down the pain-filled and disease-ridden corridors of hospitals and nursing homes my imagination gets the best of me. I wonder, What would Dr. Jesus do if he were here? I think I know, but does he want to do anything

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<sup>14</sup> *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 54-55.

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today? After years decades of serious study and praying for people, here's how I see it. We do not live in closed system but an open one into which God can interject his loving presence and its amazing effects wherever he chooses. The law giver brings unexpected ends by bypassing or speeding up processes. But, and this is a big but, such events are not under our control, though we may ask for them in faith. We often don't get because we often don't ask. Learning to cooperate with God in prayer and in the various giftings and powers of the Holy Spirit is a lost art we must relearn.

In June of 1999 on the Friday before going to Annual Conference, I did something many might consider silly. I stood in the ICU of Georgetown Hospital and anointed with oil a man whose brain was dead. Hubie Hendrick, early 40's, a Murrell's Inlet professional fisherman, *Top Hook* to his hard-living friends, captain of the *Still Crazy II*, heart attack at a convenience store, anoxia, no appreciable brain activity, heart alive and brain dead. His mother Joyce, a prison guard from Greenville, asked me to pray for a miracle. That is what pastors sometimes do; we voice not our own but the prayers of others because at the moment they can't. I prayed, "Lord, think of what glory would come to your name by touching this man. It would shake the whole coast of South Carolina." It's not easy to pray such prayers under the watchful eye of high-tech nurses who call and say, "Pastor Phil, can you come? This is Donna. There's a dying man here who doesn't have a pastor, can you come *right now*?" I met with the family and was impressed with their love for one another and their deep Baptist faith, so I went in and prayed for Hubie.

God did not answer my prayer, at least not as asked. Hubie died Monday, and on Wednesday eight family members met me in the church library to plan the service. As I read the obituary I noticed that Hubie graduated from Sandalwood in Jacksonville. I looked up and said, "My sister-in-law was once Miss Sandalwood-Kristi Furches." There was a gasp. Joyce grabbed my arm, "I know Kristi. She used to date Hubie!" One of his sisters said, "I used to sing with her brother Rick in the chorus." When I showed them Lori's picture, the oldest sister said, "I remember her."

Here I was in Georgetown planning the funeral of my sister-in-law's old boyfriend! Hubie could have gone to Grand Strand Hospital. He didn't. It could've been when I was out of town. It wasn't. They could have called some other pastor. They called me. I could have said No. I didn't. At such moments of providence I get goose bumps. God had not healed Hubie, but something was up, and it was with a new sense of faith that we prepared the rest of the service together.

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What text would I preach? Most of the fishing fleet would be there. A hard-living, hard-drinking crowd, more honkey-tonk than holy-huddle, more Dixie Chicks than Charles Wesley. Luke 5 came to mind, the story of Peter’s miraculous catch, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing.” These guys will understand that!

There were not many suits and ties at the Goldfinch Chapel that day. At the front Hubie’s ball caps were on display, each a bumper sticker advertizing a different personal loyalty, from Budweiser to Mark Martin, and a collection of fish pictures and electric reels. When I called for a show of hands, about half were fishermen. Clean jeans and a fresh T-shirts, bronze peeling skin and windblown hair; this was their best for their buddy Hubie. In the minute before I stood to speak, it hit me. The first four disciples Jesus called- Peter, Andrew, James and John- were all fisherman. I was to be bold that day, and I sensed the Lord’s smile upon me. I looked out at one good-ole-boy with wild hair and gnarled forearms and said to myself, “That’s what Simon Peter must have looked like.”

Me in my blue suit and collar, they fresh from boats and hooks and nets and the smell of bilge and diesel. As I read the Bible story I could see it connect. It was the most alert congregation I’d faced in a long time. I spoke about Hubie; I told them about the Kristi connection (they loved it!). I spoke about a Jesus who was a man’s man and who had a special love for fishermen. I reminded them Jesus did not meet his first followers in the synagogue but in their work place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. I also told them that they were not eight feet tall and bullet proof, and that if their friend Hubie could die so quickly, so could they. Life was more than last night’s good time and the next day’s catch. I told them about praying for Hubie in the ICU. No bedside miracle, no raising of a dead brain, but that afternoon the last item in Jesus’ catalog was fulfilled, “... the poor have good news preached to them.” That was the climax for Jesus, not the healings, necessary as they were, but the message that with God there are no status games and no permanent outsiders.<sup>16</sup>

What a privilege to be John the Baptist that day and point men to the one who came and is to come again. Sure I have doubts, but deeper than any doubt is the adventure of being alert to what Jesus is up to in our world. God did not do what I asked. Instead, he let me participate in what *he was doing* and promised a blessing

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<sup>16</sup> On Jesus’ inclusion of those excluded by status or ascription, see the fresh perspective of Joel Green, *The Theology Of The Gospel Of Luke* (Cambridge, England, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995),79-84.

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if I didn't run away, "And blessed is he who takes no offense at me." Sometimes miracles, sometimes not, but always an adventure that leads to new questions and new doubts and new opportunities to learn the risks and rewards of trusting him in the midst of a messy life. "Did all that really happen?" "Yes it did, and I was there."

Did you notice Jesus never answered John's question? He never said a simple *Yes* or *No*. Jesus is not about fitting himself into the categories we create; he's about doing what God called him to do in the light of Scripture and then saying to each of us, "You decide who I am. And, oh by the way, blessed is he who takes no offense at me." The cure for doubt may not be to have my questions answered. It may have more to do with the Lord showing me something I haven't seen than telling me something I don't know. John wanted a *Yes* or *No*; what he got was richer and more provocative. He wanted an answer about the timetable and cast of characters; what he received was a window into the wonders of the kingdom of God. When we take our doubts to Jesus, we always get more than we bargained for.

### **Shift Of The Ages (vv.24-30)**

Part of the greatness of Jesus is seen in his eagerness to praise the ministry of John the Baptist. John brings private doubts; Jesus issues public praise. Jesus did not say to the reporters, "Let me tell you about this guy. We used to work together. In public and in good times when the crowds are large, he shows great faith, but in prison he's shot through with doubts." That is what ministers often do with one another in our gossip; we tear one another down, but that's not what Jesus did. Rather, he praised John as the greatest in a long line of prophets and the greatest man of his era.

For a season before Jesus appeared, John was in the spotlight. People went out in droves because of the holy aura that surrounded the desert prophet. Jesus' description of John tells me something about the kind of man or woman he admires. John was a man of conviction. He did not check to see which way the winds of political correctness were blowing before he preached. He was not like the reeds by the river Jordan, bending this way and that depending on which way the winds blew. John was not afraid to stand alone. "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?" Wrong place, wrong guy! Having convictions in a world of compromise can be a lonely walk.

John also distinguished himself by a simple lifestyle and sexual integrity. He did not milk offerings to buy luxuries. There is also implied here a contrast between

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John and the sexual license that was so much a part of Greco-Roman elites.<sup>17</sup> The technical name is *pederasty*, the use of boys by men, but the popular Greek street term was *malakoi*, soft. So the use of the word *soft* is both a critique of wealth and of sexual license which went together in that culture, even in the Jewish royal household. For Jesus it is praiseworthy to live simply and with integrity. That was John the Baptist. “What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in *soft* clothing. Behold, those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in king’s houses.” If you love the easy life, the *good life* as defined by pop culture, a life of sensual experimentation and promiscuity, don’t go down to the desert and listen to John. He will make you miserable. But, if you want to do business with God, he’s your man!

There were some things John was not. Not swayed by public opinion, not part of a culture than worshiped luxury, indulgence and pleasure. John was a prophet who heard from and spoke for God. Even more, he paved the path for Jesus. Courage, conviction, integrity, time alone in the wilderness to hear God, straight preaching, simple lifestyle, speaking truth to power, honesty about doubts and struggles, doing what God has called you to do without complaint and whatever the cost: these are the things Jesus praises in John and wherever he finds them in a pulpit or a pew. Such people are rare; John sets a sobering standard for a life Jesus praises. It sobers me. Where have I bowed to influences not of God? Where has career overpowered conviction? Where have I indulged in needless luxury? Where am I tempted to compromise? Where have I been too busy to listen to God? I come up short, but that doesn’t leave me in despair, for by grace I can take even serious doubts about my own commitment to Jesus. I don’t have nearly as many doubts about him as I have about me. I believe the classic Christian faith is both true and defensible, that nothing makes as much sense of life as it does in its totality. What I often doubt is my ability to be true to it and not end up as the next embarrassment.

But for all his praise of John, there was a distinction. With Jesus preparation gave way to actualization; what was promised was now unfolding in fulfillment; a new era had begun. There was now more available to the least in the new era than to the greatest of the old. The flood gates of God’s love and power opened to the public in Jesus. As Christians we have access to so much more than John did. He was the last of the old era; with Jesus a new era has begun. We have the church, the

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<sup>17</sup> See Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel for the Third World, Volume Two-B, Ministry in Galilee [Luke 7:1-9:50]* (Collegetown, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999), 48-54 for technical discussion of the vocabulary in light of ancient philosophy and social critique.

sacraments, the New Testament, the person and gifts of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ incarnate and risen, a hope of heaven and the kingdom that is clearer than anything the old covenant afforded. “I tell you,” said Jesus, “among those born of women none is greater than John; *yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*” More access means more accountability. And if John could live the kind of life he lived in the old era, what about us in the new? What kind of excuses do we have for lack of courage and integrity and simplicity? None at all.

**The Great And Necessary Divide (vv.29-35)**

If at times I seem to be overly negative about my occupational grouping, the clergy, it’s only because I read the Bible and observe that Jesus had more trouble with us- *the Pharisees and scholars*- than with any other group in Israel. The religiously unsophisticated and the outcast tax collectors responded in droves to John. They knew they needed God and could not hide behind the veils of piety and learning. They were baptized by John and accepted what God offered them through him, which was an opportunity for confession and forgiveness. It would have cost a little too much status for the Pharisees and scholars to join the common folk and outcasts in the shallow waters of the Jordan. They rejected the movement, rejected the message, rejected the man, but finally theirs was a rejection of the God who sent the man with the message and started the movement: verse 30, “but the Pharisees and the lawyers *rejected the purpose of God* for themselves, not having been baptized by him.”

Tragic, isn’t it? They missed the blessing but not the judgment. Some ministers have entered the waters of the charismatic renewal and found the release of spiritual gifts among their people refreshing. Others stand on the bank of propriety and mock. Some ministers have entered the waters of the Emmaus movement and found their love for Christ and his church increased. Others stand on the bank of business-as-usual and mock. Some ministers have begun to share ministry with laity as real partners and found their churches enlivened. Others stand on the banks of ordained privilege and mock. Some pastors go on mission trips and take their people with them. Others stand on the banks of non-involvement and claim that sending money off to the experts in New York is enough. The purpose of pastors is to lead people into the purposes of God, not resist them! I want to be *on the way* not *in the way*. How many good faithful Methodists are dying in dried-up, dead, boring, has-been, glory-gone, business as usual, ingrown churches because their pastors are blocking the way? Too many I tell you, and God willing, Main Street is not going to be one of them! I don’t want Jesus to have to tell stories about us that no matter what he offered, we wouldn’t go along. If it’s *from him*, then I want it *for us*.

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It was an *attack* parable, what one writer called *The Parable of the Brats*.<sup>18</sup> “Want to know what this bunch is like?” said Jesus. “Let me tell you.... Like two groups of children sitting like petty judges and shouting judgments at their playmates. ‘You wouldn’t play our game.’ Nothing pleases them.”

“You want funeral? You want solemn and severe? John the Baptist does that well really well, a true ascetic.”

“No, we don’t want to play with John. He has a demon. He’s strange.”

“Well, how about wedding then? Joy, music, food, wine, a big kingdom party. I do that well. Will you join me?”

“No, we don’t want to play that either. You’re nothing but a pig and a drunk, a real party-boy, Jesus, a true embarrassment to your mother and father.”

When the church won’t repent, and the church won’t celebrate, what’s left? Is it possible we really don’t want to do business with God, that no matter what God runs by us we will not be satisfied? Jesus is the *friend of sinners*, but what does he do with the hard-headed and the hard-hearted and the never-happy? He leaves them alone to their own devices and lets whoever will follow him, “Yet wisdom is justified (or validated) by all her children.” It OK to have doubts. Jesus can handle them. It’s not OK to resist God. Jesus can handle that too, and will.

### CONCLUSION

There was once a small town southern politician who did his best. But, being fallible, he made mistakes and was criticized. His errors were spread across the news. One evening he got so frustrated that he drove into the country to visit an old farmer friend. “What am I going to do?” he moaned. “I try hard to do good for the people; why so much criticism?”

The old farmer could barely hear the complaint of his friend for the barking of an old blue-tick hound at the moon. The farmer shouted at the dog to hush, but he went right on baying. Finally the farmer said to his friend, “Want to know how to handle your critics?” The politician nodded. “Follow my finger. Listen to that coon hound. Now, look up at the moon. The dog keeps howling, but it don’t effect the shine of the moon not one bit.”<sup>19</sup>

John shined. Jesus shined. How ‘bout us?

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<sup>18</sup> Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 212.

<sup>19</sup> Edited, Brian Cavanaugh, *The Sower’s Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 52.

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**Appendix, Luke Essay V: 7:1-8:56**  
**Surface Structure (a-b-c // b'-c'-a'), Power Ministry (\*, 7 miracles)**

A. 7:1-17 Two Miracle Stories: One A Resuscitation **Power Over Disease/Death**

- \* 1. vv. 1-10 Healing Of The Centurion's Slave At A Distance **Gentile/Male**
- \* 2. vv. 11-17 Raising Of The Widow Of Nain's Only Son **Jew/Female**

Link words between the two stories: *Lord* (v.6, v.13), *word* (v.7, v.17)  
 Link words to the larger unit: *faith* (7:9/ 7:50, 8:25, 48), *prophet* (7:16/ 7:27, 7:39)

B. 7:18-35 Unit On Discipleship: John The Baptist And The New Kingdom **Prophet Greater Than John**

- \* 1. vv.18-23 John's Double Question And Jesus' Double Answer
  - 2. vv.24-27 Jesus Evaluates John's Ministry: Part 1, The Prophet
  - 2' vv.28-30 Jesus Evaluates John's Ministry, Part 2, The Kingdom
- 1' vv.29-35 Jesus' Double Question And Answer Concerning Himself And John

Link between units A-B, "told him all these things" (i.e. two miracle stories).  
 Link to unit C, "a friend of tax collectors *and sinners*" (v.34)

C. 7:36-50 Identity: Jesus As The Prophet Who Forgives Sin **Forgives Sin**

Question, "Who then is this who forgives sins?  
*Sin* (vv.37, 39, 47, 48, 49)

Link between units C-B': Women in community with Jesus (7:50, 8:1-3)

B' 8:1-21 Unit On Discipleship: The New And Inclusive Family Of Jesus **Redefines God's People Around Himself**

- 1. vv.1-3 Hearing And Doing The Kingdom
  - 2. vv.4-8 Parable Of The Seed And The Call To Hear
    - 3. vv.9-10 The Privilege Of Discipleship: Kingdom And Word
  - 2' vv.12-18 Allegory Of The Soils And The Call To See And Hear
- 1' vv.19-21 Hearing And Doing The Word: Jesus' Old And New Families

\* C. 8:22-25 Identity: Jesus As Lord Over Nature, Danger, Demons

Question, "Who then is this that he commands even wind and water...?"  
**Shares God's Power Over Chaos**

A' 8:26-56 Two Miracle Stories: One A Resuscitation **Power Over Demons, Death**

- \* 1. 8:26-29 Gerasene Dementiac (2 Stanzas: vv.26-33, vv.34-39) **Gentile/Male**
- \*\* 2. 8:40-56 Healing Of Two Women **Jew/Female**