

# How to Come to Church

LUKE 7:24-35

When I was a senior in high school, I entered a national science contest conducted by NASA called the Shuttle Student Involvement Program (SSIP), in which high school students from around the country proposed science projects that could be conducted on the space shuttle during one of its missions. My proposal was entitled, “The Effects of Low-Frequency Vibrations Caused by Transient Disturbances of the Gravitational-Inertial Environment on the Micro-Segregation of Dopants Found in Crystals Grown under Micro-Gravity Conditions.” (Just don’t ask me what all that means.) By some miracle I happened to be a regional winner and had the privilege to travel to the national contest at the NASA compound in Palo Alto, CA.

Now, this contest was a very special and uncommon opportunity, for its winner was given all sorts of valuable prizes, not the least of which was a big fat scholarship. Thus, becoming the national winner really could have changed my life in a number of ways. However, there at the NASA compound, I became enamored with one of the female contestants, a knock-out from Texas named Julie, and I instantly became far more concerned about winning her affection than winning the scholarship. In fact, in one severely misguided attempt to impress her, I gathered together a group of fellow science “nerds,” and we actually picked up the event organizer and tossed him in the swimming pool. Well, needless to say, I didn’t win. Had I focused on the competition, who knows, I might have had a chance. However, because I was there for the wrong reason, I missed what might have been a golden opportunity.

I relate this story this morning not to boast about winning a science contest. (To be honest, I still don’t really understand what my paper was even about.) No, I tell this tale because that which was true for that teenage boy at NASA remains quite the same today for us as God’s people. That is, if we come for the wrong reason, we too are going to miss the chance for real change. Thus comes the question implied by the title of this morning’s message: How should we come to church? And *the big idea* of today’s message is this: *The way in which we come*

***to church will go a long way to determining the degree to which we are changed by church.***

-- Read Luke 7:18-35

-- Pray

As we begin our exposition of our text for this morning, let us first consider its context. To that end, look with me at verse 29, where Luke provides us with an insightful description of the people who were gathered around Jesus on this occasion. It says, *“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.”* From this description, we learn that the people Christ is addressing on this occasion are, for the most part at least, people who had personally received John’s message of repentance and had been baptized by him. In addition, recall the events of verses 17-23, which we examined two weeks ago and that we read again this morning. Recall that John was experiencing a moment of real doubt and had sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* Finally, in verse 24, we see the immediate context of the words Jesus speaks in our text today. It says, *“After John’s messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John.”*

Therefore, the direct situation of our verses for today finds Jesus addressing a group of people who had been monumentally blessed by the ministry of John the Baptist but yet now found themselves flooded with unexpected doubts about him. Consequently, more than just addressing this crowd, we witness the tender compassion of Jesus Christ in the fact that He speaks forth to defend John’s reputation. Jesus seems to recognize here that people were starting to give up on John, partly because of the doubt expressed by John’s messengers and partly because of the fact that John was locked away in prison. And in verses 24 through 28, Jesus pleads the case of His absent friend and forerunner with forceful, yet affectionate, words.

Jesus begins His defense of John the Baptist with the question that we encounter at the end of verse 24, where He asks the crowd, *“What did you go out into the desert to see?”* Now, as we contemplate this question, remember from verse 29 that these were people who had not only gone out to see John, but, moreover, they were people who had accepted his message of repentance and demonstrated their submission to it through baptism.

Therefore, as Jesus asks this question, there is much more in play here than the fact that they had merely *seen* John. This crowd was comprised of people who had not only seen him but whose lives had been remarkably and gloriously affected by him. So when Jesus asks them, “*What did you go out into the desert to see?*” we can safely infer that most of this crowd took His question to mean something like, “Why is it that your lives were so powerfully impacted by the ministry of John the Baptist? What was so convicting about your encounter with him that you repented and were baptized?” In essence, Jesus was asking this crowd, “Why did you come, and how were you changed?”

What a fantastic question! And it remains a question that we must not neglect as Christ’s followers today, for just as the people had gone out to see and hear John’s message from God, so you and I have come to church this morning to worship God and hear His Word preached. And just as they were transformed by what they saw and heard, so, I pray, it is our goal to come here to be transformed by God’s grace through all that transpires here. Yet, for this blessed transformation to actually take place in our lives, our passage this morning indicates that there are at least three attitudes with which we must come, the first of which is this: To be changed for the glory of God, we must...

1.) Come for the message, not the messenger.

With that in mind, consider again the question that Jesus asks in verse 24, because not only does Jesus ask it, but He also goes on to answer it. Look there with me, Jesus asks, “*What did you go out to the desert to see?*” or, as we rephrased it, “Why did you come and how were you changed?” And in response, Jesus asks a few rhetorical questions.

First, in verse 24, He asks, “*[Was it because of] a reed swayed by the wind?*” A reed swayed by the wind conjured up two images. First, a reed swayed by the wind would have been among most common and ordinary sights of the day. Thus, Jesus was, in a sense, asking them, “Were you changed by John’s ministry because it looked and sounded the same as everything else?” Second, a reed swayed by the wind would have invoked a picture of something fickle and insignificant. In other words, the question would mean something like, “Did you come out to the desert to hear a message that you could bend to make it say whatever you want?”

Next, in verse 25, Jesus asks, “*If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?*” In other words, Jesus might have asked, “Did you come to John because of his worldly fame and human stature?” or “Were your lives

changed because of John's great material wealth? "No," Jesus answers, "*those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces.*" Of course people do not go out into the wilderness to find luxury clothes or palaces. Besides, worldly wealth is utterly useless for those who find themselves in a spiritual desert, for what our spirits most desperately need will never be found among even the greatest riches of this world.

Finally, then, look with me at verse 26, where Jesus says, "*But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.*" You see, the masses had not gone out to John to hear a commonplace message, nor were their lives changed by him because of his great worldly appeal. They certainly did not repent because John wore fine clothes...no, he wore clothes made of camel's hair. Neither were his hearers transformed because of the impressive palace in which he lived...no, he wandered around the desert eating honey and locusts. In reality, the reason why the people were so blessed by John had little to do with John at all, but it had everything to do with Whom he represented. The power of John's preaching wasn't about John's voice...it was about the Voice that spoke through Him. This crowd had come to John and was changed by his message for one reason and one reason only—because He was a prophet of the one true God. In short, John's ministry was so attractive and so effective, not because he was such a gifted messenger, but because he preached such a glorious message—he preached the very truth of God.

And that must be the principle for us as God's people today. No matter how gifted a messenger may be, the message itself is always greater. Listen, meaningful transformation will never happen in our lives simply because the messenger is eloquent. Real change comes only by the power of God, and the power of God is revealed through authentic preaching of His Word. If we are to change for the glory of God, then we ought to come to church for the message, not the messenger.

Wait a minute now... I don't think like the sound of that. Hey, can I take that back? Now that I think about it, I want you to come for me, not the message. I am the pastor; it's all about me, isn't it? I mean, you all come here because I am such an impressive preacher, right? Here watch this! (Preach while balancing a banjo on my chin). Look at that! Who wouldn't come to see a pastor who can do that?! Boy you all are blessed to have me here!

That would be completely shameless and ridiculous, wouldn't it? The egregious misunderstanding of true Gospel ministry represented by such an attitude is astounding. And yet, it is not far from our common experience, is it?

-- Illustration – Olsteen videos

While some preachers are undoubtedly more gifted at the task than others, true preaching is not a question of a preacher's eloquence but rather a question of his authenticity. Although John may very well have been a very gifted preacher, that is not why he was commended by Jesus. No, Jesus doesn't acclaim John because of the *skill* of his message, but rather because of its *source*. Jesus commends John because he was a prophet, which is to say that John faithfully preached God's truth with God's help, and that is the mark of genuine minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul strongly stresses this very same point in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. In this passage, Paul is writing to a congregation that was bitterly bickering over which preacher was the best: Paul, Apollos, or Peter. And into this terribly divisive atmosphere, Paul writes:

*“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.”*

Clearly, true Gospel preaching is not about the preacher but about the message that he preaches.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that far too many Christians experience far too little change in our lives because we come to church to be entertained rather than to be edified; we come to be titillated rather than transformed, and the emotion of the message becomes more important to us than its meaning and validity. However, true preaching is not about entertainment but about the communication of divine truth. It is not about eloquence but about Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It is not about persuasiveness but about the very power of God to convict hearts and transform lives. Therefore, if you and I would be

changed by God for His great glory, then we should come to church for the message, not the messenger.

The second attitude we must put on is this: To be changed for the glory of God, we must...

2.) Come with great gratitude, not a bad attitude.

One of the fascinating truths that I have learned about God's Word is that some of its most glorious instruction is found in texts that present what appear, at first hand, to contain contradictions. Take for example the remarkable truths about the true nature of God's kingdom that we uncovered by examining the apparent contradictions of the beatitudes, such as these: "The poor will be rich; the hungry will be filled; and the sorrowful will rejoice." Therefore, whenever we find an apparent contradiction in Scripture, we are blessed indeed if we will meditate upon that contradiction until God makes us aware of the divine truth that it reveals.

I mention that interpretive insight because our passage this morning contains just such a contradiction. Please look with me in verse 28, and notice the statement of Christ, which, at first glance, appears not to make sense. Jesus says, "*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.*" How could this be? I mean, it is not too difficult to see why Jesus would say that John was the greatest among those born to women. He was a prophet of such renown that he had actually been the subject of prophesy himself. Jesus refers to a prophesy about John in verse 27, when He says, "*This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'*" Even more significant is that fact that John was blessed to be the one man in all of history specifically chosen by God to introduce His Son to the world. Clearly, John was a uniquely great man.

How, then, can Jesus say that "*the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he?*" Well, what Christ means by using this expression appears to be simply this: The religious light of the least disciple who lives after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is greater by far than that of John the Baptist who died before those glorious events took place. That is, the weakest believer who encounters New Testament truths about the infinite significance Jesus Christ will discover a bounty of beautiful truths that John the Baptist could never have explained. Although neither you nor I can expect to be greater in grace and in

deeds than John the Baptist, we are, beyond a doubt, greater than he in the privilege of knowledge.

This perspective ought to make us extremely thankful people, for we have been granted the unrivaled joy of knowing the Son of God, who is Himself the fullness of deity in bodily form and the perfect revelation of all that is true and good. Do we realize this morning how many glorious truths of our faith were never fully unveiled in their great fullness until Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross? As J.C. Ryle has stated, “The child who knows the story of the Cross possesses a key to religious knowledge which the patriarchs and prophets never enjoyed.” Let us, then, never allow our familiarity with the Gospel to blind us to the vast extent of this privilege. Rather, let us come to it with gratitude.

With that in mind, let me ask you: Are we sincerely thankful for the revelation we have received in Christ? Are we really as excited to hear the preaching of God’s Word as we ought to be? Do we understand how profoundly blessed we are to have these opportunities to gather together and encounter the message that God has recorded for us by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, remembering that this privilege has little to do with the skill of the messenger and everything to do with the magnitude of the message itself.

In the light of this profound privilege we have to know Christ, let me ask you: How often do we sit through the preaching of God’s truth with bad attitudes in our hearts?

-- One of the first few times I preached: At the top of the hour an elderly man with a terribly grumpy expression on his face held his beeping watch up high above his head and began slapping at it to impress upon me that it was time for the service to end.

We see the same bad attitude, if not one that is much worse, at work in our text this morning. Look with me at verse 30. There, the immensely sour spirit of the Pharisees is revealed. It says, “*But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.*” And then in verses 31-34, Jesus offers this comparison:

*“To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’” For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor*

*drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners.'"*

I wish I had time this morning to break these verses down into more intricate detail, but for our purposes this morning suffice it to say this: The Jews who rejected Jesus were simply never satisfied with anything. John the Baptist had come living an ascetic life of fasting and self-denial, and the Jews accused him of having a demon. Jesus on the other hand, ministered to the so-called "sinners" of the day, and the same people accused Him of being "a glutton and a drunkard." This was nothing new, for the Jews had a long history of dismissing and even killing God's prophets of all types and personalities.

The root of the problem had nothing to do with the personalities of the prophets, but with the fact that the Jews were simply unwilling to receive any message from God at all. They didn't want to change their darkened hearts, and so they levied their objections as a smokescreen for their hatred of God's truth. It really wasn't God's messengers that they didn't like; it was God's truth, and what they were really rejecting was not God's messengers but God Himself. Because these Jewish leaders came to God's messengers with such a bad attitude about God's will and His Word, they came with no real hope for change. Therefore, if you and I are truly going to be changed for God's glory, then we must come to His Word with great gratitude, not a bad attitude.

Finally, and I will make this point very brief, the third attitude of those who are changing for the glory of God is this: They...

3.) Come to obey, not to observe.

The key verse for this point is verse 35, where Jesus says, "*But wisdom is proved right by all her children.*" This point amounts to the exact opposite of Forrest Gump's favorite saying: "Stupid is as stupid does." It reminds us that the true character of our beliefs will not be revealed not by our words, but rather by our actions. Foolish beliefs, like those of the Pharisees, lead to foolish, even dreadfully foolish actions, such as the greatest mistake possible of rejecting Jesus Christ. Wise beliefs, on the other hand, give birth to wise actions, which are wisdom's children. Here, Jesus is telling us that those who put His wisdom into action will discover how wise it really is.

We should not need to cover this point in much detail this morning, because this very truth, we discovered, was the main point of the entire Sermon on the Mount, which we recently examined in significant detail. In fact, not just the Sermon on the Mount but the entirety of Scripture is replete with this foundational truth. As Jesus declares in Luke 6:44, “*Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.*” And James makes this point in James 1:22, saying, “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*” The Pharisees, you see, believed that they were wise, but here Jesus is telling them that their actions revealed their great foolishness. They heard His message, but they refused to put it into practice, and thus they dreadfully missed the point and forfeited any real chance to change their hard hearts.

Listen; here is the point: If you and I sincerely want our lives to be changed by God, then we absolutely have to stop coming to church as mere observers and start coming as obedient children. If we are convinced that God’s Word really says it, then we must be determined to do it. Please understand, I am not asking you to take every single thing that I say as a mandate directly from God. That would be outrageously unbiblical, for although I labor diligently by the Spirit of God to guard against any error in doctrine or application, I know that I am human, and I am bound to err.

However, inasmuch as any of us is convicted by the Spirit of God that the message preached is truth from His Word, then we absolutely cannot be content to merely hear it; we need to do our very best to put that truth into practice. Otherwise we become like those children in the marketplace, who are only interested in being entertained. Otherwise, we become those Pharisees, making any and every excuse to avoid the changes God wants to make in us. If we would be changed for God’s glory, then, we must come to obey, not to observe.

How then shall we come to church? First, let us come for the message and not the messenger. That is, let us not be enamored with eloquence but come to hear and receive truth from God’s Word. Second, let us come with great gratitude, not a bad attitude, for we are blessed beyond imagination to hear from God about all that He has done for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Third, let us come to obey and not just to observe. None of us will ever be changed merely because of what we see or hear but because of what we do in response. How will you come to Jesus Christ this morning?

