

Resetting Expectations

Passage: Luke 7:18-35 | From the series: Luke

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Good morning! My name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here.

It is my joy and privilege this morning to take us into God's Word. We are going to be in Luke 7:18-35 today as we continue our study through this incredible gospel.

A few years ago, I was up in Tahoe with our Young Adult Fellowship, and a group of us were on the shuttle at Northstar on our way to the ski resort. I took a drink of water that went down the wrong tube, and I coughed. We've all been there before, but this time every eye on the bus turned to me in horror.

It was March 14, 2020, and news of the Coronavirus was on everyone's mind, and that whole bus was sure that I had it.

Two days later, Santa Clara County issued their first "shelter-in-place" order. Three weeks. Three weeks to work from home. Three weeks to livestream our worship services. Three weeks to have the kids home from school. It sounded like a long time, but we all thought, "We can do three weeks." Does anyone else remember this?

Well, three weeks came and went, and the shelter-in-place order continued... for months. It would be years until our world was back to normal.

There were a lot of things that made Covid difficult, but one of them was how hard it was to set appropriate expectations -- expectations about how long it would last, when vaccines would become available, when protocols would change and policies would adapt.

Expectations, it turns out, are like guard rails in our lives. When you know what to expect, you can endure a lot. But when you don't know what to expect, or even worse, when your expectations are not met, disappointment is hard to overcome.

Our passage in Luke this morning is all about expectations. We will meet a few different people who have expectations of Jesus. None of those expectations turn out to be accurate. As we look at this passage, we will consider the expectations that we may have of Jesus, and how Jesus wants to reset those expectations for us.

Unmet Expectations about Jesus

Last week, Rolana took us through the first part of Luke 7, where Jesus healed one man and raised another from the dead. After witnessing these miracles, the crowd says, "This man is a prophet! He comes from God." The authority and power that they recognized in Jesus could point to no other conclusion.

However, as that scene ends and the next scene begins, we see that not everyone is so convinced of Jesus' identity. But the person who is confused is not who we would expect. The person who is confused about Jesus is a prophet himself, John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus.

Let's take a look at this story, beginning in **Luke 7:18-20**

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?'"

John the Baptist played a fairly prominent role in the first three chapters of Luke, but now it has been a while since we have seen or heard from him. This is because, back in chapter 3, John was thrown into prison by Herod. After spending what has probably been a few months in prison, John begins to question whether Jesus is really the messiah. John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

The word that is translated as "look" can also be translated as "expect." Shall we *expect* another? This question is a question all about expectations. John had already identified Jesus as the messiah. He believed that Jesus was the one whom God had promised to send to save his people.

And yet it seems that John had some faulty expectations about what Jesus would do and when he would do it. These unmet expectations are significant enough that he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him again, "Are you really the one?"

What was John expecting of Jesus?

First, John clearly expected Jesus to come in judgment. After pointing to Jesus as the Messiah in chapter 3, listen to what John said of Jesus, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Lk 3:17).

John preached a message of judgment for those who reject Jesus, and yet Jesus' ministry has largely been characterized by grace, compassion, and restoration.

Now we know that Jesus is coming back to judge the world one day, but it seems that John expected Jesus to come in judgment the first time. He understood what Jesus was going to do, but he misunderstood *when* Jesus was going to do it. And he was so confused.

But it wasn't just the timing that John misunderstood. It was also how the good news that Jesus preached applied to John specifically.

In his first sermon in chapter 4, Jesus said that he came to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and good news to the poor. We have seen Jesus do much of that, but here John is behind bars. He's in prison. Liberty to the captives? Jesus, what are you talking about? It seems that it was hard for John to reconcile Jesus' "good news" with the reality of his current life circumstances.

I wonder if you have ever felt that way. Maybe even through our study in the gospel of Luke, you have felt that way. Jesus has made it very clear that he has the power and ability to heal. And yet the reality is that many of us here today have prayed for healing for ourselves or someone we love, and God has not answered that prayer.

Jesus, how can you be the great healer when you leave my spouse, my parents, or my friends sick?

God, how can you be the God of justice when so many vulnerable people are suffering under the weight of injustice?

A few weeks ago, I was sitting around the fire in my backyard with a friend. It was one of those nights where the hours pass like minutes, and you find yourself talking about the deep things of the soul. As we both stared into those flickering flames, my friend talked about the reality that his life has not unfolded the way he expected it to. Approaching 40 while still being single and working a job that he doesn't love, his family life, his career, his financial situation, his relationships -- the big things in life -- none of them have unfolded the way he hoped, dreamed, or expected. And through all of that, it feels that God has done for him what he expected. And he talked about the pain and confusion of holding on to faith through his unmet expectations.

Have you ever been there? Expecting, hoping, asking for God to do something, and sitting in the pain and confusion of unmet expectations? That's where John finds himself. So he asks Jesus the most honest question that he could: *Are you really the one?*

Before Jesus answers the question, Luke throws in a summary of Jesus ministry activities. Let's pick back up v. 21 [**Luke 7:21-23**]:

²¹In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²²And 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. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

To answer John's question, Jesus just points to his life and says, "I may not be doing everything you thought I would do, but I am doing all of the things that I said I was going to do."

By answering the question this way, Jesus is trying to help John reset his expectations. He is trying to reset his expectations about what Jesus came to do. He came to save and restore life, particularly for those in desperate need. To seek and save the lost. That is his purpose. That is his mission. That is why he came.

But he also needed to help John understand that this beautiful and sweeping purpose -- to save and restore life -- does not mean that he will necessarily save and restore John's life *in the way that he expects*. John never gets out of prison. He gets murdered there. His story does not end the way he wants it to.

And yet God's plans and purposes remain intact. Jesus' mission is not threatened. So Jesus asks John to trust him even though he has not shown up in John's life in the way he expected.

It is easy to trust God when life is good, where your prayers are answered, and when things are going the way you expected.

But here is a question for us to sit with today: **Will you trust Jesus when he doesn't meet your expectations?** Will you trust him even when he doesn't answer your prayers in the way you hoped? Will you trust Jesus even when your life does not go the way you expected?

Unmet Expectations about the Kingdom

The theme of unmet expectations continues as our passage goes on. Let's look at the next few verses -- **Luke 7:24-27**:

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.'"

Here, Jesus asks three questions, and they are all about expectations -- not about John's expectations of him but about the crowd's expectations of John.

If you remember, John's ministry took place out in the wilderness. That's where he was preaching. That's where he was baptizing people. So Jesus asks some proverbial questions:

Did you go out into the wilderness to see some grass blowing in the wind? Of course not! Grass is all over the place. It's common. It's ordinary. But you knew John was no common man.

Did you go looking for someone rich and powerful? Of course not. Those people live in palaces.

No, Jesus says, you went out into the wilderness because you believed John was a prophet, a man sent from God, specifically the one who would prepare the way for the mighty work of God. John was indeed a prophet, just as the people thought. But then Jesus says something remarkable in the next verse. **Luke 7:28:**

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."

In this one verse, Jesus affirms their expectations about John while completely unending their expectations about the kingdom of God that Jesus came to bring.

You see, Jesus is speaking at the tipping point of redemptive history -- right on the seam between the old covenant and the new covenant. John, as the one sent to prepare the way for the messiah, was greater than anyone who came before him -- greater than Moses, greater than David, greater than Elijah. That's crazy!

And yet there is now a new possibility because of the life and ministry of Jesus. And that possibility is to enter the kingdom of God. To place your life under the rule and reign of God. To place your faith in Jesus, give your allegiance to him, and inherit all God's blessings as his children.

This kingdom does not operate the way you would expect. Jesus has made this clear already in his teaching and ministry. In the kingdom of God, the poor and the marginalized are given the place of honor. The people who you would assume are on the outside are actually right in the center. As Jesus will say later in Luke, the kingdom of God is where the first are last and the last are first, where the greatest are the least and the least are the greatest.

And so even though John is greater than any person who has ever come before him, in the kingdom of God, he is no greater than the addict at the end of their rope, the convict behind bars, or the unhoused person with no job, no money, and no hope -- provided those people look to Jesus.

So let me ask you another question: **Who do you consider great in God's kingdom?** Is it the people who have their lives together? The people who can manage their own sin? The people who know all the fancy theological words, or the ones who stand up here on this stage on a Sunday morning?

Who do you consider great in God's kingdom? Because the mystery of the kingdom is that those we expect to be on top are actually at the bottom, while those we overlook or wish weren't there have the place of highest honor.

Jesus is trying to reset our expectations -- our expectations for what success and greatness really look like. It doesn't look like good jobs and fancy cars. It doesn't look like elite status and positions of power. Instead, greatness looks like faith and humility, repentance and worship.

As Luke continues, he gives us a glimpse of how people respond to these words of Jesus. **Luke 7:29-30:**

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.)

Jesus' point comes to light here. Those who had repented, turned to God, and been baptized by John "declare God just," meaning that they accept the purposes of God as they are being revealed in Jesus. But the Pharisees, the lawyers, the ones who thought they were already at the top, they reject God's purposes, refusing to accept Jesus or become his disciples.

As Jesus continues, he draws an image from the world of children's make-believe. **Luke 7:31-35:**

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."

Jesus paints a vivid picture here. Imagine a world with no screens -- no tablets or TVs or video games to occupy kids. What do they do when they get together? They play make-believe. They pretend to be a family, they pretend to be explorers, they pretend to be dragons (at least that's what happens in my house).

But what happens when they can't agree on which game they want to play? That's the scene that Jesus is describing here. One group of children decides it would be fun to play "wedding." *We played the flute for you. You played wedding music. We put on the dresses and suits. But you wouldn't play by our rules. So we came up with a new game: funeral.* (Kind of morbid, but still creative.) *We played the dirge. We put on the sad music. Pulled out the black dress-up clothes. But you wouldn't play by those rules either.*

In this little parable, the Pharisees and those who reject Jesus are likened to the children trying to dictate the rules of the game. John the Baptist and Jesus -- two men sent from God -- are those refusing to play along. The Pharisees wanted John to lighten up on his message of judgment and repentance. And they wanted Jesus to stop hanging out with the "wrong crowd" and instead do what was socially acceptable. John was being too conservative for the Pharisees, and Jesus was being too liberal. They rejected God's purposes and said, "We will make up our own rules, thank you very much."

To that, Jesus says, "Who do you think you are? Who do you think that you are to call the shots? Who do you think that you are to make the rules of the game? This is not your game. This is my game. I get to make the rules.

Back in v. 23, while trying to correct John's faulty expectations of him, Jesus said something interesting that we just skipped over. He said, "Blessed are those who are not offended by me."

It's hard to think of anything more offensive in our culture than telling people that they aren't in charge of their own lives. Our culture says: *You do you. March to the beat of your own drum. Speak your truth. Play your game.*

Jesus says: *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Jesus says, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Jesus says, If you do what I tell you, you will be like a wise man who builds his house on the rock. But if you don't, your house will be swept away when the storm comes.*

Jesus says, *I don't play by your rules. You need to play by my rules.* So I have one final question for us to wonder this morning: **Will you let Jesus set the rules of the game?**

Will you play by Jesus' rules? Or are you trying to get Jesus to play by your rules? Will you submit to him as the king, or are you trying to be the king of your own life?

A few decades ago, trained monkeys were often used in traveling shows and street performances. An organ grinder would play a song, and the monkey would dance on command for the entertainment of the crowd. And people would stand around shouting, "Dance, monkey! Dance!"

Over time, that phrase became a degrading expression used to describe people with little power being forced to perform for those with real power. Dance, monkey. Do what I want. Follow my script. Perform for me.

That is exactly how many people treated Jesus in his own day.

"Dance, Jesus." Here's what we want you to do for us. Here's how you can meet our needs. Here's how you can advance our agenda. Here's the kind of Messiah we want you to be.

And unfortunately, the same thing still happens today.

"Dance, Jesus." Perform the way I want. Follow my script. Solve my problems. Give me what I want.

But Jesus says, "That's not the way this works."

We are not the ones who pick the music and tell Jesus to dance. He is the King. He sets the rules of the game — rules that are always for his glory and ultimately for our good, but his rules nonetheless.

So the question is this: Will you trust Jesus enough to let him set the rules? Will you follow him on his terms, even when he does not meet your expectations?