

**Luke 7:18-23**  
**March 3, 2019**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Q: What is doubt? [Doubt is a struggle to believe. It is a struggle to believe. It is something that prevents me from fully believing. It can be momentary. It can be prolonged. It can be permanent.]

Q: Where do doubts come from? (Or, “In your personal experience, when does doubt strike the most?”) [John MacArthur – Primary source of doubt = *personal tragedy*. Doubt comes from our inability to deal with negative circumstances when we perceive ourselves as being faithful people. Now that doesn't happen to people who are not faithful. If you're a Christian and you're living in the shallows and you're playing around with sin and you're dishonoring God and you're disobedient, when things go bad you know why they go bad. Right? You say, "Oh that's exactly what I should be getting."]

Q: As Christians, is it okay to have doubts? [Let people engage. Yes]

**Fun Fact to Know (John MacArthur):** Whenever Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, i.e. the gospels, deal with a doubting person, *it's always a believer*. There is one occasion in John 10:24 where it says the Jews were saying to Jesus, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." But that wasn't honest doubt. That wasn't a struggling to believe. They were fixed in their hatred and unbelief. That was just their unbelief trying to put Jesus on the spot. Every true expression of doubt in the four gospels relates to believers. Doubt is something that is part of being a believer. There have been times in our lives, when in the midst of our believing, we struggled with doubts. Some of you may be going through that even now. *Doubt is presented as a believer's problem*.

**Transition:** All of that is to say, we shouldn't be surprised to find the apostles having doubts. We shouldn't even be surprised to find a believer, John the Baptist, a godly prophet, struggling with doubt. If the greatest man who ever lived had some doubts, if the twelve apostles who were with Jesus had some doubts, then maybe it's understandable that we have some doubts as well. Doubt is real, and that's why this is an important passage. It's going to help us to be able to deal with doubt. Let's read v.18-23.

**BOOK (NIV 1984):**

V.18:

- John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them,

V.19:

- he sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

V.20:

- When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

V.21:

- At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.

V.22:

- So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

V.23:

- Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”

### **Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: Where is John the Baptist when he summons his two disciples? [In prison for some months]

Q V.18-19: Why does John summon two disciples? [He wanted them to ask Jesus specifically, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”]

Q: Why do you think John had some doubt whether Jesus was the Messiah he had been prophesying about? [John had announced judgment, but Jesus was doing deeds of love and mercy. John had promised that the kingdom was at hand, but there was no evidence of it so far. So, his faith wasn’t failing him, nor was he losing confidence in Christ. John was understandably confused by the turn of the events and wanted reassurance from Christ Himself.]

Q: Think about John’s disciples. Do you think they faced any risks associating with John in prison? [Yes, it would take a good deal of courage to venture into the palace of wicked Herod to visit John. By going to his cell, they identified themselves with John the Baptist, yet they did not hesitate to answer his summons. Seeing John could have put themselves in peril. They could have been arrested too, for being his followers or friends. It would depend on the whim of Herod.]

Q: What does that say about John’s disciples? [They were faithful. They had courageously stuck with the prophet through thick and thin.]

Q V.21: While the disciples track down Jesus, what is Jesus up to? [He was curing many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind]

Q V. 20, 22-23: The disciples catch up to Jesus and present the question from John the Baptist. How does Jesus answer the question? [“Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.]

Q V.22: Why do you think Jesus chose not to answer with a simple “Yes, I am the One who was to come?” [Let people engage. Actions speak louder than words. Seeing is believing.]

Q V.23: Instead, He ultimately states, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away (be trapped) on account of me (or offended by me).” What does He mean by that? [John expected that the

Messiah would set up the kingdom as he had been announcing. But suddenly John found himself in prison and in danger of being put to death, and still the kingdom had not come. Thus, John was anxious concerning the Messiah. So, Jesus's response means that those who are not ensnared (cf. 17:1–2) by preconceived ideas of what the Messiah "should be doing," but instead judge Jesus by what they see happening. If they do that, then they will know that Jesus is indeed the Promised One and will as a result be blessed. Those, however, who are offended or stuck in their preconceived notions and by what they do *not* see happening (such as the judgment of the nations, or the restoration of political independence and greatness for Israel) will miss out on this blessing.]

Q: Do you think John was expecting that answer? [No! John would have expected him to say, "My armies are massing. Caesarea, the headquarters of the Roman government, is about to fall. The sinners are being obliterated. And judgment has begun."]

Q: Do you think John was comforted by Jesus's answer? [Let people engage]

Q: How do we overcome doubt?

- Honestly pray, Lord, we believe, help our unbelief. Help us where our faith is frayed on the edges. Help us where we struggle to believe because of personal tragedy
- Like John the Baptist, go directly to Jesus and ask Him to give you the truth that dispels the doubt.
- Go to His Word and find a clear understanding of His nature and His plan.

Q: As we close, what are your takeaways from today's lesson? What has the Spirit illuminated for you or solidified for you? [Let people engage]

### **LOOK:**

Are you in a dungeon right now and facing some doubts in your life about the Lord and His Word? Do you doubt His awareness of your problems or His ability to provide solutions? Be reassured! We have no evidence that He has ever forsaken us. He is FOR us, not against us.

### **Close in Prayer**

**Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 196-197). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

**John the Baptist: His Response to Doubt (Luke 7:18–23)**

*Confusion* (vv. 18–20). John had been in prison some months (Luke 3:19–20), but he knew what Jesus was doing because his own disciples kept him informed. It must have been difficult for this man, accustomed to a wilderness life, to be confined in a prison. The physical and emotional strain were no doubt great, and the long days of waiting did not make it easier. The Jewish leaders did nothing to intercede for John, and it seemed that even Jesus was doing nothing for him. If He came to set the prisoners free (Luke 4:18), then John the Baptist was a candidate!

It is not unusual for great spiritual leaders to have their days of doubt and uncertainty. Moses was ready to quit on one occasion (Num. 11:10–15), and so were Elijah (1 Kings 19) and Jeremiah (Jer. 20:7–9, 14–18); and even Paul knew the meaning of despair (2 Cor. 1:8–9).

There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is a matter of the mind: we cannot understand what God is doing or why He is doing it. Unbelief is a matter of the will: we refuse to believe God's Word and obey what He tells us to do. "Doubt is not always a sign that a man is wrong," said Oswald Chambers; "it may be a sign that he is thinking." In John's case, his inquiry was not born of willful unbelief, but of doubt nourished by physical and emotional strain.

You and I can look back at the ministry of Christ and understand what He was doing, but John did not have that advantage. John had announced judgment, but Jesus was doing deeds of love and mercy. John had promised that the kingdom was at hand, but there was no evidence of it so far. He had presented Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29), so John must have understood something about Jesus' sacrifice; yet how did this sacrifice relate to the promised kingdom for Israel? He was perplexed about God's plan and his place in it. But let's not judge him harshly, for even the prophets were perplexed about some of these things (1 Peter 1:10–12).

*Confirmation* (vv. 21–23). Jesus did not give the two men a lecture on theology or prophecy. Instead, He invited them to watch as He healed many people of many different afflictions. Certainly, these were His credentials as the promised Messiah (Isa. 29:18–19; 35:4–6; 42:1–7). He had not established a political kingdom, but the kingdom of God was there in power.

The Greek word translated "offended" gives us our English word *scandalize*, and it referred originally to the "bait stick" in a trap. John was in danger of being trapped because of his concern about what Jesus was *not* doing. He was stumbling over his Lord and His ministry. Jesus gently told him to have faith, for his Lord knew what He was doing.

There are many people today who criticize the church for not "changing the world" and solving the economic, political, and social problems of society. What they forget is that God changes His world by changing individual people. History shows that the church has often led the way in humanitarian service and reform, but the church's main job is to bring lost sinners to the Savior. Everything else is a by-product of that. Proclaiming the Gospel must always be the church's first priority.

**Martin, J. A. (1985). *Isaiah*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 222)**

2. JESUS'S TEACHING THAT HIS DEEDS AUTHENTICATE HIS MINISTRY (7:18–35) (Matt. 11:2–19)

Luke's purpose in recording the two previous miracles (7:1–17) was to lead up to the interchange between John's disciples and Jesus. It was important for people to believe in Jesus—His works and His words—for both showed that He is the Messiah.

a. *John the Baptist's request for clarification of Jesus' ministry (7:18–23).*

7:18–23. This event happened while John was in prison (Matt. 11:2). John had had a meteoric ministry which lasted for no more than a year. John expected that the Messiah would set up the kingdom as he had been announcing. But suddenly John found himself in prison and in danger of being put to death, and still the kingdom had not come. Thus, John was anxious concerning the Messiah. He knew the Old Testament well and knew of the works of the Messiah—but he did not see the kingdom coming. He sent two **disciples** to ask Jesus, **Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?** The disciples of John approached Jesus at the **very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.** Jesus, who was performing messianic miracles, reminded John's disciples of Isaiah 61:1–2 which He had read in Nazareth. Jesus' miraculous deeds pointed to the fact that He is the Messiah. His point was that one should not **fall away** (*skandalisthē*, lit., “to be trapped” and thus “to let oneself be ensnared away from”) **on account of Him.** One had to have faith in His message and His works. Neither Matthew nor Luke recorded the reaction of John the Baptist after his disciples returned to him.

**Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007).** *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 1526). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

**7:18–23** Did John the Baptist change his mind about Jesus? Though John had earlier identified Jesus as the Messiah (Mt 3:14; Jn 1:32–34), he now expressed doubts. However, this is not surprising. John was languishing in prison for a cause that was centered on the justice-wielding messianic power of Jesus. But Jesus' ministry was not turning out to be what John expected (Lk 3:16–17). He thus sent emissaries to find out whether he had made a mistake.

**Stein, R. H. (1992).** *Luke* (Vol. 24, pp. 224–228). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

### **Context**

After Jesus' miracles of healing (7:1–10) and raising the dead (7:11–17), Luke placed a trilogy of passages concerning Jesus and John the Baptist. The first involves John's question to Jesus (7:18–23), the second involves Jesus' testimony to John (7:24–30), and the third involves the judgment of Israel for their rejection of John and Jesus (7:31–35).

The historicity of this episode is supported by a number of factors. For one, John does not appear in this account as a witness to Jesus but as someone uncertain and questioning—hardly what one would expect if the church had created this account. John 1 clearly shows that the early church saw John the Baptist as an unequivocal witness to Jesus. Second, the description of Jesus is too vague to be attributed to the early church, which had at its disposal such titles as Christ, Messiah, Lord, or Son of Man. Finally, John's role as the “messenger who would prepare the way” (Mal 3:1) for the Coming One is not only attested here (Luke 7:9; cf. Matt 11:3) but also in Luke 7:27 (cf. Matt 11:10) and Luke 3:4 (cf. Mark 1:2).

Various attempts have been made to explain the question of John the Baptist in Luke 7:19. These include: (1) John used the question as a fictive device to help his own disciples better understand who Jesus was, but he himself had no such doubts. The problem with this explanation is that not only does the question come from John (7:19) but Jesus' answer is also directed to him (7:22–23). The fact that the beatitude in 7:23 is singular, even though the plural form is more normal in beatitudes (cf. 6:20–22), also indicates that Jesus' answer is directed to John. (2) John was now for the first time thinking that Jesus possibly was the “coming one” whom he and Israel had been awaiting. But this interpretation completely ignores 3:15–22 and that the question in this passage was, at least in Luke's mind (due to 3:16), one of doubt and not rising faith. (3) John experienced real doubt and questioning about whether Jesus, in whom he had originally believed, truly was the Christ because Jesus was so unlike what he had expected. This is the best interpretation and is in fact quite understandable. John, as well as the Twelve, had difficulty adjusting their preconceptions of what the Messiah was to be like with what they saw in Jesus' ministry. Thus, he experienced a period of real doubt. Jesus' reply in 7:22–23, however, erases these doubts. As we will see (see “The Lukan Message”), Luke used this doubt to address his own situation.

## Comments

**7:18 John's disciples told him about all these things.** “These things” refer to Jesus' activity in general but especially to such things as the previous two miracles. In Matthew 11:2 John heard “what Christ was doing” (literally *the works of Christ*).

**Calling two of them, he sent them.** Luke may have mentioned the presence of “two” of John's disciples in order to provide, according to Deut 19:15 (cf. 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28), a sure testimony for John of “all these things” that witness to Jesus' messiahship. The sending out of disciples in pairs corresponds to Jewish and Christian practice.

Luke did not tell us where John was at this time, but Matt 11:2 states that he was in prison. Luke had alluded to John's imprisonment in 3:20 so that another reference to this fact was unnecessary. According to Josephus, John was imprisoned and later executed by Herod at the fortress of Machaerus, which was at the southern border of Perea near the Dead Sea. (See *Antiquities* 18.5.2 [18.116–19].)

**7:19 To the Lord.** As in 7:13 Luke used this title in the fullest sense in his narrative. Marshall rightly observes, “Although John may have his doubts about Jesus, Luke ... has none.”

**Are you the one who was to come?** This echoes 3:16, where John spoke of one more powerful than he who was coming (cf. 19:38). The phrase “the coming one” has a range of referents in the OT. It could refer to the religious pilgrim coming to Jerusalem (Ps 118:26), to Yahweh (Zech 14:5), to the coming prophet (Deut 18:15–18; cf. John 6:14), to Elijah (Mal 4:5), or to the Messiah (cf. Luke 3:15). Evidence for the future coming of a messianic figure includes Hab 2:3; Mal 3:1; Dan 7:13. While Jesus' contemporaries shared an expectation of the coming of a messianic figure, they were confused and uncertain about what this one would be like, and Jesus did not fit the common expectations well. Thus John's question is understandable. For Luke and his readers, however, there was little question about whom John was referring to in his question. John was asking if Jesus was the Christ-Lord-Son of God-Son of Man. The question refers to Christ's coming in John's day, not the future parousia of the Son of Man.

**7:20 John the Baptist sent us.** The full name appears here as in Luke 7:33; 9:19.

**Are you the one who was to come?** Luke emphasized the importance of this question by repeating it a second time (cf. 7:19).

**7:21** This verse appears to be a Lukan summary. In this verse the “all these things” of 7:18 is explained. The answer to John’s question is to be found in Jesus’ miracles, which the two men would witness and which Luke told about in 7:1–17.

**Diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits.** Although it is argued by some that no distinction was made between these categories in ancient times, Luke was able to distinguish between illness and possession, for in 13:32 evil spirits are “cast out” and cures are “performed” (RSV). Compare 6:18–19; 8:2; Acts 5:16; cf. also Mark 1:32–34; Matt 8:16.

**And gave sight to many who were blind.** This clause is literally *has graced many blind to see*. This verb is also used in Luke 7:42–43; Acts 3:14; 25:11, 16; 27:24 but is not found in any other Gospel. Whereas in Luke 4:18 the quotation from Isa 61:1 is interpreted metaphorically and thus more broadly, the present reference and the healing of blindness found in Luke 18:35–43 indicate that physical blindness is also included in Luke’s understanding of this prophecy. See comments on 4:18.

**7:22 Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard.** This refers back to 7:21. Jesus did not answer John’s question directly but told the two witnesses to report what they had seen him do. Both Jesus and Luke believed this would be sufficient to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ who was to come. If these things were taking place in Jesus’ ministry, then God’s kingdom, i.e., the messianic age, has already begun; and the one who has inaugurated that age must be “the one who was to come.”

Even as the two disciples of John returned reporting what they had seen and heard, so Luke in writing Luke-Acts was reporting what he had seen (the “we” sections) and heard (1:2–3). Christians throughout the centuries have continued to witness to what they have heard, seen with their eyes, and experienced concerning the Word of life (cf. 1 John 1:1–4).

In both this account and the Matthean parallel six works of Jesus are mentioned.

**Blind receive sight.** Compare Luke 4:18; 18:35–43; Isa 61:1 (LXX); 29:18; 35:5; 42:18.

**The lame walk.** Compare Luke 5:17–26; Acts 3:1–10; 8:7; 14:8–10; Isa 35:6.

**Those who have leprosy are cured.** Compare Luke 5:12–16; 17:11–19; 2 Kgs 5:1–19.

**The deaf hear.** Compare Luke 1:22, 64; 11:14; Isa 29:18; 35:5; 42:18.

**The dead are raised.** Compare Luke 7:11–17; 8:40–56; Acts 9:36–43; and possibly 20:7–12; 1 Kgs 17:17–24; Isa 26:19.

**And the good news is preached to the poor.** Compare Luke 4:18; Isa 61:1; cf. also 6:20; 14:13, 21. This is the climax of the six works and witnesses to the importance of this theme for Luke. The six works mentioned above divide neatly into two groups of three members each and possess a distinct rhythm: each work consists of two Greek words; the first word in all six examples consists of two syllables; the second word (each a verb) ends in either an *ousin* or *ontai*. Since the first and last members of the six works are mentioned in Isa 61:1, they also form a kind of inclusio indicating that all these works should be interpreted in light of Isa 61:1 and the programmatic sermon found in Luke 4:18–21.

**7:23 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.** This beatitude is unusual in that it involves not so much a proclamation of blessing (as in 6:20–22) but a challenge as in 11:28. Those who are not scandalized (cf. 17:1–2) by preconceived ideas of the messianic task but instead judge by what they see happening will know that Jesus is indeed the Promised One and will as a result be blessed. Those, however, who are offended because of their preconceived notions and by what they do not see happening (such as the judgment of the nations, or the restoration of political independence and greatness for Israel) will miss out on this blessing.

Although the beatitude is addressed in the original setting to John the Baptist (note the singular tense of the verbs—see “Context”), it is so worded that it also is applicable for Luke’s original readers and present-day readers as well. As in Jesus’ day, Luke’s time, and today, the final eschatological verdict is dependent upon people’s attitude toward Jesus. In the final judgment they will stand or fall based upon whether they are his followers (cf. 6:47–49; 9:23–26, 48; 12:8–9; 14:26).

### **The Lukan Message**

Some argue that Jesus in this incident was rejecting the role John the Baptist ascribed to him in 3:15–18. This was the role of *Elijah redivivus*, i.e., the role that the returning Elijah was to fulfill. Luke, however, did not suggest in any way that John the Baptist was incorrect in 3:15–18 in his assessment of Jesus’ ministry. On the contrary he affirmed that Jesus is indeed the one “who is to come” (7:19–20) spoken of in 3:16. See comments on 3:15–18. In this passage Luke used John the Baptist as a foil for those in his own day who argued that Jesus could not be the one promised in the OT because he did not fulfill their particular conception of what the Messiah/Christ would be like. Yet to those willing to look at the evidence (7:22), Jesus fulfilled the OT messianic promises. God has indeed visited his people (1:68, 78; 7:16); for the blind saw, the lame walked, the lepers were cured, the deaf heard, the dead were raised, and the poor were hearing the good news. In these works John’s questions, and the questions of Luke’s readers, find their answer. Luke ended the account (as did Matthew in 11:6) with a challenge to his readers to accept the witness of Luke 7:22 as proof that Jesus is the Coming One of whom the OT spoke. Later other evidence, such as the resurrection and the miraculous growth of the church, added additional support to this. Luke hoped that through this account his readers would be strengthened and would become even more certain concerning what they had been taught (1:4). See Introduction 7 (1).

Another Lukan theme found in this passage involves God’s visitation of the outcasts and needy. The healing and proclamation of the gospel to the blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead, and poor show the fulfillment of 1:50, 52–53, 79; 4:18. Still another theme found in this passage involves Jesus’ central role in salvation. Blessing (or woe) depends totally upon what people will do with Jesus. See comments on 6:47–49.