

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL AFFIRMATION (Luke 7:18-35)

3.14.21

INTRODUCTION

OK; by a show of hands, how many of you have ever experienced a moment of being “discouraged?” I love Charlie Brown — he does “discouraged” so well. But what does it mean to be discouraged? Well, according to the dictionary, to be discouraged is “to lose confidence or enthusiasm; to be deprived of courage, confidence, hope or spirit.” To be discouraged is pretty much a universal reality; everybody alive has shared at one time or another that particular journey. I myself, as a fan of Minnesota sports teams, have found myself incredibly discouraged any of a number of times. The truth is that many things can come along that cause us discouragement. What’s more, discouragement can strike at any one of us — no matter our education, our talents, our strengths, our experience, whether a person of fame and celebrity or a person of absolute anonymity that nobody’s even heard of. Simply put, discouragement is going to happen.

That is one of the wonders of the Bible — how relevant it is in speaking to people in their needs, and how applicable it is to everybody and anybody. No wonder Paul wrote to the Roman church: *[E]verything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope — Paul, Romans 15:4.* That’s one reason the Bible is so important: It states as its purpose the exact opposite of discouragement — that through its stories and teachings it might encourage us, so much so that we might have hope, that is, confidence, in the God the Scriptures proclaim.

So, today’s story from the gospel of Luke tells a story of discouragement that centers on a most surprising source, reminding us that discouragement can happen to anybody. So, as we dive into this story, **let’s begin with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS

Now we need to set the stage a little bit here. John the Baptist is sitting in a prison — sent to that place by Herod Antipas due to John’s continuing condemnation of Herod’s having married his brother Philip’s wife Herodias while Philip was still alive. The place of this prison was a fortress palace called Machaerus, also known as “The Black Fortress,” located about nine miles east of the Dead Sea in the extreme desolation that remains in that part of the world to this day. Archaeologists have been working both to explore and reconstruct this magnificent 2,000-year-old palace.

Now while John was essentially taken out of circulation by his imprisonment, he was apparently still able to receive visitors, such as those who remained his disciples, thereby allowing him to “keep tabs” on what was going on in the world — including the developing ministry of that guy from Nazareth that he had once had the privilege of baptizing. Remember John’s testimony of that moment? *“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him. And I myself did not know Him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who*

will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One [God’s Messiah]” — John 1:32-34.

But much had changed from that moment. While John now sat in prison, facing an ominous, unknown future, his God-declared ministry seemingly come to an end, Jesus was building ministry, amazing people with both His words and works. Certainly, this had been fulfilling John’s own words that he had shared with his followers as they had brought him news that people seemed much more inclined to be following the Nazarene: ***“You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of Him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for Him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete” — John the Baptist, John 3:28-29.*** His joy had been found in knowing his place. And then he had concluded with some of the most famous words in Scripture: ***“He [Jesus] must increase, but I [John] must decrease” — John the Baptist, John 3:30 (NKJV).***

Bottom line: John had known both who he was and who he wasn’t. Just as important, he had known his role in the unfolding of God’s messianic plans. He knew he was to be, as the prophet Malachi had heard from God Himself: ***“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before Me” — God speaking, Malachi 3:1a.*** John was God’s messenger, his herald, going before the Anointed One to tell everyone who would listen that God’s Anointed One was on His way. And of all these things must be remembered as we go forward with this story:

John’s disciples told him about all these things — Luke 7:18a.

Now as John is receiving his visitors, they are keeping him up to date on all what’s happening in the outside world — particularly what’s happening in regards to Jesus of Nazareth. So, the “all these things” being referred to is all that Jesus has been doing — including moments like what we talked about last week in the healing of the centurion’s servant, and the raising from death of the son of the widow of Nain.

Now we have mentioned several times in talking about Jesus that there was an expectation that had grown up among the people as to what the Messiah’s coming would mean. Far from the establishment of a spiritual kingdom built on a washing away of the world’s sins, they had begun to anticipate a savior who would bring their nation out from under the yoke of Roman occupation and restore the fame, glory, riches, prestige, and power that Israel had enjoyed during the reigns of David and Solomon. And John was not immune to that idea; in fact, one hope that he had was in the prophet Isaiah’s words: ***The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair — Isaiah 61:1-3a.*** So much hope, so much expectation. John’s remembering these promises from the great prophet had lifted his spirits in moments of doubt, that the one he had baptized would soon be the One that would, among so many other things that He would accomplish, free him from this difficult incarceration.

But days went by, and weeks, and months, and his circumstances weren't changing — I mean, not the least little bit. And, over time, discouragement set in. He was feeling more and more isolated, more and more stranded. And he began to think in his solitude: Had he been wrong? Had he somehow misunderstood what God had in mind? Had he missed the meaning on what “messiah” actually meant? And the longer his imprisonment lasted, the more discouraged he became. Finally, a couple of his disciples came to visit. And he decided that he needed to have them go to Jesus to ask him the only question that ever really mattered to John:

Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” — Luke 17:18b-20.

And wow, did Christ give John an answer! ***At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases (literally “relieving them of their disease), sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So He replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard (in other words, tell John what you have “witnessed”): The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed (literally, good tidings of great joy are declared) to the poor (literally, the spiritually distressed) — Luke 7:21-22.***

In a phenomenal answer to John's question, He turned to the crowd surrounding Him and began ministering to everybody He saw, no matter their ailments — and in so doing provided a living, breathing fulfillment of OT prophesies that had foretold this day. The fact is, to be the Messiah, there were a number of boxes, so to speak, that anybody claiming that mantle simply had to check. So, let's see how Jesus did:

- 1) The blind receive sight:
 - a) ***[T]he Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous — Psalm 146:8.***
 - b) ***[O]ut of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see — Isaiah 29:18b.***
 - c) ***Then will the eyes of the blind be opened — Isaiah 35:5a.***
- 2) The lame walk: ***Then will the lame leap like a deer — Isaiah 35:6a.***
- 3) Those who have leprosy are cleansed:
 - a) ***[I]t was our sicknesses that He Himself bore, and our pains that He carried — Isaiah 53:4 (NASB2020).***
 - b) ***Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise — Jeremiah 17:14.***
- 4) The deaf hear:
 - a) ***In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll — Isaiah 29:18a.***
 - b) ***Then will . . . the ears of the deaf [be] unstopped — Isaiah 35:5b.***
- 5) The dead are raised:
 - a) ***[Y]our dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise — let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy — Isaiah 26:19a.***
 - b) ***“I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord” — God speaking, Ezekiel 37:6b.***
- 6) The “good news” (the gospel) is proclaimed:

- a) *The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord — Isaiah 11:2.*
- b) *“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor — Isaiah 61:1a.*

Now while these are just a sampling of verses that reflect these awesome messianic promises, the BOTTOM LINE is this: Jesus “checks” all the boxes!

And then Jesus concludes His message to John: *“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of Me” — Jesus Christ, Luke 7:23.*

John is discouraged, leading him to doubt Christ. But notice that John’s doubts are based on his own assumptions of what a messiah should be doing. As a result, he was becoming discouraged by what Jesus was not doing. Jesus is basically telling John, “Have faith. I know my business, John; I know what I am doing.”

After John’s messengers left (as soon as they put their eyeballs back in their sockets and picked their jaws up off the ground), Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ 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” — Luke 7:24-28.

It is possible that the crowd surrounding Jesus knew who these two men were, and that John had sent them. But regardless, Jesus begins talking to the crowd about the Baptist, asking a set of rhetorical questions: First, what did you all go out into the wilderness to see — a reed swaying in the wind? The picture is of something or, in this case, someone, who is weak and fragile. No; John was certainly not that. Considering his lifestyle and living environment, there was very likely absolutely nothing weak about him. Nor did he preach a message of weakness. John never compromised his message, no matter what that might mean for him personally. Second, Jesus asks, did you go out to see somebody dressed all fancy and classy, living a life of luxury? The Greek literally paints the picture of somebody wearing “soft raiment” and being “gorgeously appareled” and “living delicately or pampered.” Not exactly “Outdoor Man.” But no; you found John in the wilderness, not in a palace. And Matthew tells us: *John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey — Matthew 3:4.* Another generation or two back, we might have described his living conditions as a “hardscrabble” existence, meaning that his life was perpetually hard work and a struggle.

Then Jesus brings them to the right way of thinking about John: He was a prophet — a prophet raised up for a specific reason, proclaiming a very specific message. John was the fulfillment of God’s own promises: that He was sending a herald, a forerunner, to prepare the world for the One who was coming — the Messiah! And because of that incredibly unique role, that made him the greatest of all who had been born into this world. Wow — what a compliment, especially when you consider who that compliment is coming from.

But then Jesus qualifies John's greatness by declaring that somebody considered the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John. How could that be? Well, what Jesus is saying is that, because John will die before he has a chance to witness the death and resurrection of Jesus, he will miss the opportunity to fully understand and appreciate what the Messiah's coming was truly all about. Or, put another way, John was the herald of the coming King and His kingdom. Believers today are in fact related to that King (we're His kids) and members of that kingdom. John would also miss the new community born and united by a new covenant — the church — that Christ's death and resurrection will bring into being.

(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. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.) — Luke 7:29-30.

Very simply put, all those who had been baptized by John were acknowledging by that action both his message of announcing the Messiah and their need for repentance in preparing themselves for the Messiah. The religious leaders, on the other hand, saw themselves as having no need to repent as they viewed themselves worthy of God's favor; as Jesus Himself would later say: ***"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Luke 5:31-32.*** They saw themselves as healthier spiritually than anybody else around, so they rejected John's message as not applying to them, thereby rejecting God's intended purpose for them.

Then Matthew's account of this story adds this: ***"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:12-15.***

Jesus points to the days before John's imprisonment but that also includes Jesus initiating his ministry. By Jesus declaring John to be "the Elijah who was to come," He is also explicitly declaring that He Himself is the outcome for all that John had presented to the nation concerning the Messiah. And as Jesus began the ministry that John had predicted, He most specifically had been met with increasing hostility from the religious leaders — the kingdom of heaven being subjected to violence to which He is referring. And that hostility is ratcheting up, with the opposition to Jesus becoming more and more intense and threatening. A lot of that hostility related to the transition from the Old Covenant — the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law — and the New Covenant that will take its place and will center on surrendering to Jesus Christ as the only way of being washed from sin and justified in the eyes of God. While the Old Covenant was a shadow of what was to come in Christ, the leadership felt that their ways were the only way to God. They would never listen to this radical rabbi from such a backward place as Nazareth and his radical message that God was somehow instituting some kind of a new covenant — and that that covenant was all about Jesus. No way was the leadership ever going to be persuaded by that idea.

Jesus then completed this moment by painting a rather unflattering picture of the people of that time and place, comparing them to a bunch of little kids who are determined to be pleased by nothing outside of themselves. He then gets to his point: ***"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.' But wisdom is proved right by all her children [by her deeds]" — Luke 7:31-35.

Now Christ certainly may have had the leadership in mind, judging by how they had reacted to the ministries of both John and Jesus. John had an unyielding message of judgment — not something they wanted to hear — so he must have had a “demon.” Jesus also had an unyielding message as well — a message of salvation and repentance mixed with a lifestyle that had him graciously mingling with anybody and everybody; therefore he was a “glutton and drunkard” with abominable taste in companions. But, as Jesus said, the proof in their messages was the “children” (deeds) of changed lives of those who repented and believed.

APPLICATION

There are three main ideas that we should take from this story from Christ’s ministry:

First, we need to understand the difference between doubt and unbelief. When considering doubt, that is something that is a matter of our minds in that it is difficult for us to understand what God is doing or why he is doing it. Unbelief, on the other hand, is a matter of the will, in that we are refusing to believe God and His word and are likewise refusing to obey what God’s word is telling us to do. In John’s case, he was frustrated with doubt: John had often been harsh in his language of judgment, but here was this Nazarene doing acts of love and mercy. John had talked about the coming kingdom but, from his vantage point in that prison, he wasn’t seeing much to confirm that. John’s lack of understanding led to his discouragement. But certainly, he was not alone in the scriptures when it came to having doubts: Moses (Numbers 11), Elijah (I Kings 19), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20) and Paul (II Corinthians 1) were among the most famous characters in the Bible who all dealt with moments of doubt and uncertainty. But these were all issues not of belief but rather of understanding what God was doing.

That is also why we will always graciously take all questions. We want to come alongside people in their moments of doubt, to minister to them in the middle of their wondering. We don’t judge — that’s for God, not us!

Second, we need to focus our attention not on any preconceived ideas of what Jesus should be doing but rather on what he actually is doing. That’s why Solomon wrote these famous words: ***Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes — Solomon, Proverbs 3:5-7a (NKJV)***, and why the apostle John wrote in his first letter: ***[D]o not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world — I John 4:1.*** John got in trouble because he assumed that the direction he thought the messiah should take was indeed the one that God was directing him to take. When things turned out different, when Jesus was operating differently than John’s expectation of Him, he didn’t understand.

So, what does that mean for us? Look from where God is working. That starts with seeing where the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is being presented. For instance, one of the joys of being involved with the elders is the conversations we’ve been having these days about

what God is doing here in our church. What do we see? We see God's momentum in action here. We see our church growing; it seems almost every week that somebody is coming to visit. We are growing in terms of membership; we have two individuals and four couples (of which three are young couples) working on membership manuals. We are seeing lots of little kids running around here. We are hearing and seeing fellowship that is lasting 45 minutes to an hour after the service. We are hearing a whole bunch of laughter. We have two baby dedications coming up, and one adult baptism as well. But what is behind all that? The truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the most fundamental priority for the church. Because that is happening here, God is working here. You will always see God working wherever His truth is found. So that makes us desire to be even more intentional in that focus.

CONCLUSION

And lastly, as we close, the biggest takeaway from today should be our biggest takeaway every day: Jesus checks all the boxes! In each and every area of our lives, in each and every circumstance, no matter anything, Jesus checks all the boxes! And because of that, as Paul celebrated: *[Y]ou are complete in Him — Paul, Colossians 2:10a (NKJV)*. We therefore know that all we will ever need in any and every area of our lives will be given us by Him who knows all, and who knows us best of all. That's why these promises are so precious:

- 1) *[M]y God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19.*
- 2) *“[S]eek first [God's] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:33.*
- 3) *He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all — how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? — Paul, Romans 8:32.*

Do you get what is being said in these (and so many other) wonderful verses? That because Jesus checks all the boxes for everything to do with our lives, we can absolutely trust all these wonderful promises as well. In other words, Jesus will continue to meet all our needs as he always, perfectly, completely has.

That also should fill us with an unconquerable confidence, that the One who died for me, who lives for me, who intercedes for me, will continue to fill my needs for me. For a world that sees less and less each day that it can count on, we have an amazing testimony and witness to share. The world needs to know the One — and only One — who promises to check every box they will ever have! Let's pray!