

## Figuring Out Who Jesus Is • Luke 7:18-35

“The Truman Show” is a movie about “unreality”. The story begins with the birth of a baby boy on international television. From that moment until his adulthood every detail of his life is telecast for billions of people to see and hear. They watch him eat, sleep, go to school, get married and work at his job. Cameras are hidden everywhere in his world. Everyone can see him but he doesn’t know they are watching. He lives on the world’s largest sound stage and all the people in his life are paid actors. Everyone knows what’s going on except Truman. He thinks his make-believe world is real until one day when he begins to doubt. He can’t fit it all together. He begins to challenge relationships and beliefs, and his world begins to crumble.

As a child I wondered if I was Truman. It’s not that I knew his name, but I did wonder if my world was real. I used to think that maybe it was all a scientific experiment and I was the guinea pig. I wondered if my parents and family and teachers were all in on the research.

Now that I’m an adult I have finally decided that my world is the real world. My major regret is that I didn’t copyright my childhood fears and sell the script under the title “The Leith Show”. It could have made a lot of money!

Do you ever doubt the most fundamental assumptions of your life? Do you wonder if the world is really the way you have always assumed it to be? Do you have doubts about God or heaven or hell, about good and evil, about the Bible or about Jesus Christ?

The Bible is clear that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus came from heaven to earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay for human sin and he is the only way to salvation, to God and to eternal life. But, is all that really true or might it be a mistake? Could it be that Jesus was a fake? What if he was just another nice man but hardly the Savior of the world? What if he really isn’t the Christ?

All the responses of belief, unbelief and doubt swirled around Jesus in the story in Luke 7:18-35. Then, as now, some people seemed to easily believe. In Luke 7:29 we read, “*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.*” They heard Jesus and believed. They believed what he said. They believed who he was. They were ready to follow him anywhere. Even the tax collectors who were considered the least likely believers! They were irreligious, ungodly skeptics. If tax collectors believed that was a big deal.

The only reason given for their easy belief was that “*they had been baptized by John.*” You may remember that the prophet John baptized so many people that he was nicknamed “John the Baptizer”. Actually his baptism was somewhat unusual because Jews were rarely baptized. Baptism was for converts to Judaism, not for those who were born Jews. Yet these people volunteered by the thousands to be baptized by John as a symbol of their repentance from sin.

Apparently those who were baptized were inclined to believe. They had hearts for God and for truth. They were (or wanted to be) spiritual people. Baptism was more than a symbol of repentance of sin it was an act of persons who wanted to believe. Baptism was a dividing line of faith for them.

One evening I visited in the home of a couple I had never before met. As I recall they had no religious background. After getting acquainted I explained to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. I told them the

bad news that we are all sinners and there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve salvation. It doesn’t make any difference if our parents were Christians, if we grew up in a Christian home or went to church or were baptized or tried to al-

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ways do good things. I told them the good news that Jesus Christ came to die on the cross to pay for our sins. I explained that the only way we can get rid of our sin and go to heaven is to believe in Jesus. I told them that they should pray a prayer to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

After all this talking I said, “Does this make sense to you?” They both said that it made sense. I asked, “Would you like to pray to God and tell him that you want to commit your life to Jesus? They said they did. And I said, “You do????”

I asked, “Don’t you have questions? Are there some objections? Now is the time to deal with any barriers that stand between you and faith.” They had no questions. They couldn’t think of any objections. They said there were no barriers. They just believed!

Some people are believers—even tax collectors! They hear Jesus’ words, acknowledge that God’s way is right and they believe in Jesus Christ.

But then there are the unbelievers. Luke 7:30 tells us, “. . . *the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.*”

Understand that the Pharisees were very religious people. They claimed to know the Bible better than anyone else; they were the experts on the Old Testament. But they were unbelievers. And this wasn’t the first time they had said no. They hadn’t believed John the Baptizer and they refused to be baptized. They don’t need that. And if they didn’t need it with John, they didn’t need it with Jesus.

There is such a sad line in their brief report of unbelief: they “*rejected God’s purpose for themselves.*” This indicates that God had a purpose for each of them. God had a plan, a dream and a potential design for their lives—but they rejected God’s best when they rejected Jesus.

I assume that the same applies to us. God has a plan for each of our lives. God dreams the best for us. But God’s purpose for us is always tied to our belief in Jesus and following him as Lord. If we reject Jesus we miss out on God’s best for life. If we accept and follow Jesus, we say “yes” to God’s purpose and plan for our lives.

I’ve wondered if after death unbelievers will find out what their lives could have been. Will God run a film clip or open a “Could-have-been Biography” and show the difference Jesus Christ could have made in their lives?

How sad that the Pharisees were religious but unbelieving. How sad that they rejected God’s purpose for them.

Jesus explained to them that God had gone to great lengths to persuade unbelievers to believe. He tried many approaches but none of them worked. One approach Jesus used was an illustration from children at play. He told them to imagine walking through the streets of Jerusalem and seeing two groups of children. The first group is trying to persuade the second group to play with them and nothing seems to work. The first group plays a flute with fun music and invites the kids in the second group to dance with them, but they say, “We don’t dance.” So, they play funeral music and invite them to cry with them and they say, “We don’t cry.”

What Jesus is saying is that he has offered all different ways to bring unbelievers to belief. John shouted and preached repentance. He wore clothes made out of sackcloth, ate strange wild food, lived in the desert, gave up every luxury and looked super-religious—and they wouldn’t listen to him. They said he had a demon. Jesus came looking quite normal, hung out with ordinary people, eating and drinking and having a good time and they wouldn’t listen to him, either. They said he was a glutton and a drunk.

The point is that some people just won’t believe! No approach will work. They always find something to criticize. No matter how many books, how many churches, how many good deeds or how many arguments they will always find a reason for disbelief. No matter what, they are just unbelievers in Jesus!

Jesus summed it all up with a proverb of his time, saying, “*Wisdom is proved right by all her children.*” Today we would probably say, “Wait and see how it comes out in the end.” In other words, in the long run the results will show who was right, the believers or the unbelievers.

There is another category of people in this

story who are trying to figure out who Jesus is. They are the doubters. Doubters are people who sort of believe or mostly believe but aren't quite sure. Surprisingly, the doubter in this story was none other than John the Baptizer himself!

John was a powerful prophet from God. He was a fierce believer and a forceful preacher. He was sent by God to be the "warm up man" for Jesus, to get everybody to believe in Jesus. In fact, John had told his crowd of loyal followers that Jesus was the Christ sent by God. If anyone believed in Jesus, it was John.

But John also got tangled up in the politics of his day. The head of government where he lived was King Herod. Some would say he was a very effective king. While he had his share of critics, he did a lot of good for Israel. But during his reign Herod had an illicit sexual affair with a woman named Herodias – a woman he had no right to be sexually involved with! A majority of the people in the kingdom looked the other way saying that it was the king's private business. But John publicly and severely criticized King Herod for his immorality saying that what he had done was illegal and wrong. Herod became outraged against John for these accusations and criticisms and had him arrested and imprisoned in a dungeon at the fortress of Machaerus near the Dead Sea. Eventually the king had John beheaded.

While John was in prison he began to have doubts about Jesus. Apparently he was caught up in the popular expectation of the first century that the Messiah would be a great political and military hero as well as a spiritual leader. Perhaps he was waiting for Jesus to spring him from jail and maybe even zap King Herod. Like most of the people of his day John believed the Messiah would chase the Roman army out of Israel, attack sin and sinners, punish evil and scare people into following him.

But the reports John received from friends who visited him in jail were opposite of what he

expected. Jesus wasn't doing anything political. He wasn't denouncing sinners; he was going to their houses for dinner. He wasn't scaring people; he was loving people. And John began to wonder if he had made a mistake. Had he believed in the wrong man? He doubted that Jesus was really the Messiah he thought him to be. So John sent two of his closest friends directly to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Have you ever doubted like John? Even though you are a Christian? Even though you have told others to believe in Jesus? Maybe, like John, your doubts have come from a period in your life when you have been sentenced to some difficult dungeon. While probably not a dungeon in the basement of a Roman fortress, it could be the dungeon of disease, depression or disappointment. It is not all that unusual for believers to have some doubts about Jesus when he doesn't quite fulfill our expectations of him — when, like John, he doesn't do what we wanted him to do. Then, out of our doubt, we wonder if he really is the Christ we thought him to be or if we should start looking for someone else.

I have always been impressed with the way Jesus responds to doubt. He doesn't condemn or criticize those who doubt. Instead he helps doubters move toward belief. And Jesus didn't criticize John for doubting. To the contrary, when Jesus talked about John he described him as one of the greatest men who had ever lived.

Another follower of Jesus was such a doubter that "Doubting Thomas" has become part of our popular vocabulary. Jesus didn't kick him out of his band of disciples when Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Instead, Jesus appeared to Thomas and offered to let him examine and touch the crucifixion wounds on Jesus' otherwise healthy and alive body.

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If you are like Thomas or like John and have your own doubts you might expect Jesus to reject you, but he won't. Instead he will reach out to you. That is what Jesus does for doubters who truly seek the truth.

Some people doubt as an excuse for unbelief; others doubt with the desire to believe. Jesus encouraged those who questioned and doubted him to be seekers. It is fascinating that Jesus didn't just say, "Believe or else." He didn't even give them a straight answer like, "Yes, I am the Messiah!" Instead, in Luke 7:21-23 Jesus invited them to check out the facts:

"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."

Jesus was saying, "Check out the facts for yourself, but make sure that you don't fall away from belief just because you have made up your mind in advance about what the Messiah from God is supposed to be like." Check out the facts. Seek the truth.

There are many doubters who have become seekers who have become believers. One of the most famous was the English scholar C. S. Lewis whose seeking led to his best-selling book "Mere Christianity".

At Wooddale Church we had a debate between an atheist and a Christian. Over 2400 attended to listen and seek the truth. We also sponsored a forum with spokespersons from each of the major world religions. Regularly we sponsor FaithStudies, a seminar taught by a Ph.D. in biology who struggled with his own questions and doubts and objections, to honestly examine the truthfulness of the Bible and the credibility of Jesus Christ. All of this is based on the assumption that Jesus Christ has nothing to fear from careful scrutiny. Doubts do not threaten him. Doubters are welcome. Seekers are encouraged.

Suppose you were offered a part in a movie on the life of Jesus based on this story in Luke 7. Which part do you think you could most com-

fortably play? Are you a believer? If so, that is just great! May God bless you and all who are like you in fast, easy and strong belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Just be sure you clearly communicate to God that you believe.

Or, are you an unbeliever? Skeptic? Critic? Questioner? That is absolutely your right, of course. But let me suggest that you reconsider. Don't miss out on God's purpose for your life through following Jesus as Lord.

If you would describe yourself as a doubter you have some very good company. Doubt is okay, as long as you don't get stuck in your doubt. Let your doubts be temporary. Try to switch roles from doubter to seeker.

Maybe that's who you say you are—a seeker. That is good because Jesus welcomes seekers. Tell God you want to check out Jesus. Look him over. Read the Bible. Go wherever you need to go. Do whatever you need to do. Seek the truth. I believe that if you seek the truth your journey will take you directly to Jesus Christ.

Father, bless us all, I pray, as we seek to figure out who Jesus Christ is. Bless us in our belief and help us in our unbelief. Address our doubts and fulfill your purpose in our lives we pray.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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