

Games People Play *Luke 7:29-35*

Ragweeds lined the rutted road to the old nursing home. And a dusty sign said what the residents knew all too well. Dead end.

Shopkeepers, cattle farmers and housewives in the area called it an old folks home. But it was not much of a home.

Shutters clattered with the wind. Window screens were ragged and torn. Cockroaches scurried across the floor in the dining room. And the halls smelled of must and mold and urine.

The ministerial association carefully avoided the ratty old place. So my friend Gene and I made it our mission.

Gene sawed out off key church hymns on an old violin. A withered old woman with eyes like cloudy gray marbles pounded out chords on an upright piano. And I led singing.

It was not much of a ministry. But Gene loved it. He loved leading the youth group at his home church, too. And he planned to be pastor one day.

But that day never came. Instead, Gene moved to Arkansas and went into business selling real estate.

Business of good. And Gene got rich. He bought a big house with a manicured lawn, tall trees, and green pastures in back. And his two car garage was always filled with shiny new cars.

But Gene was not happy. There was an empty longing in his eyes. Only when we talked about the old nursing home, the songs we sang, and the sermons we preached did his eyes gleam again.

Gene did not just think he missed something in life. He knew it. And he not only knew what it was. He also knew how he missed it.

The Purpose

True, the dusty mountain road down the steep slopes and hairpin turns from Jerusalem to Jericho was packed with people. And a sea of faces listened to the Baptist preach.

But most of them came out of curiosity. Only a few out of each crowd really responded to what John said.

When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. Verse 29 Luke

was first class historian with passion for accuracy. So if he did not know the exact words Jesus spoke, he summarized what the Savior said. That is what he did here.

John's message was all about God's holiness and righteousness. He spoke of a God who not only asked and expected men to turn from their sins and live for Him. He demanded it.

Of course, most of the people who heard the desert prophet preach did not believe that. Only a few did.

Those few also believed the Lord was just in condemning them as sinners who deserved nothing but His righteous wrath. We do not have to suppose or assume that, either. We know they agreed with David that God's judgements upon them were well deserved.

Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge. Psalm 51:4

When crooked tax collectors and shady shopkeepers waded past the reeds and rushes into the Jordan to be baptized, all doubt drained away. Their actions proved they agreed with God.

But most of the people did not. So they waited beside the shore and watched.

Temple scribes and wealthy Pharisees stood at the back of the crowd with their arms folded. They did not think they were missing anything by resisting the prophet's message and refusing his baptism. But they were wrong.

But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John. Verse 30

They did not realize it. And most people today do not, either. But the great and glorious God of eternity has a wonderful plan for each and every person on this planet.

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Jesus said He came to bring us eternal life. He did not merely mean a life that is eternal only in length, either. He also wants us to have a life that is just as limitless in depth.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:10

Bill Bright was the founder and director of Campus Crusade for Christ. He also wrote a little booklet called the Four Spiritual Laws. And the first of those laws puts it best.

God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

The Problem

However, only those who asked John to baptize them ever experienced the wonderful plan God had for them. Most likely, the others did not even believe the Lord had a plan for them.

But even if they did, it did not make much difference. They did not want to submit to God's plan for them. They wanted Him to submit to their plans for Him. That, Jesus said, was their problem

To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' Verses 31-32

While their parents haggled with shopkeepers over the price of beans and lentils, Jewish children played games in the market place. Sometimes they pretended there was a wedding. And they would sing and play happy tunes.

Other times, they would pretend someone had died, and there was a funeral. Then they would sing and play sad songs.

And both times, the ones who started the game wanted all the other children to play along. If they played happy tunes, they wanted their friends to dance. And if they played sad songs, they wanted them to pretend to weep and wail.

That is just what the proud priests and Pharisees did with God. They did not want to do things His way. They wanted Him to do things their way.

When John the Baptist strode down out of the Judean desert, He told the Jews they should weep and mourn over their sins. But that was not what the proud temple leaders wanted to do.

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!' Verse 33

They did not want to play by God's rules. They wanted to make up their own. And they did. But God would not play along.

When Jesus came, John pointed Him out as the Son of God who came to lay down His life for sinful men. But Jesus' message was much different than John's.

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Verse 34

The Savior did not say men should mourn. He said they should rejoice while He was with them.

John was a Nazarite who had dedicated his life to serving God. And according to the Law of Moses, he was not to drink any wine at all. But Jesus did not fast.

He not only attended banquets. He sat down to eat and drink with notorious sinners, even tax collectors like Matthew Levi and Zachaeus.

The Pharisees were quick to notice the difference, too. And they were bold enough to ask Jesus about it.

And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."

And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?" Luke 5:33-34

The Savior insisted that men should not mourn but rejoice and serve God with glad and happy hearts. That was the exact opposite of what John said.

So you would think those proud men of the temple would be pleased. But they were not.

They still had the same problem. God was telling them how they were to relate to Him. And in their minds that was backwards.

They had the same problem many of us do. We do not want to do things the way God has prescribed for us.

We want Him to relate to us in whatever way we decide is best. We want to make up our own rules.

God did not stop the proud Pharisees when they wanted to live by their own rules. And He will not stop us, either.

So we can choose build a marriage and raise a family by our own rules if we want to. We can handle our finances and set our priorities our own way, too. We can even reject God's rules for His church and run things the way we want to.

But there is a stiff penalty for doing that. When God told His people to mourn, they refused. And when He commanded them to rejoice, they still refused.

So they never experienced God's perfect plan for their lives. They lived a shallow life that ended with a sob. They lived out their days, long for peace and purpose. And if we do what they did, we will too.

That is the penalty for refusing to do things God's way.

The Pattern

John the Baptist was a comet streaking across a desert sky. His ministry was specifically defined and short lived. His message was that men should not only regret their sins. They should mourn.

Jesus' ministry was much different than that. Yes, He preached that men should turn from their sin. But He also proclaimed that men should spend their lives so completely in love with God that they could not help but rejoice and be glad.

So who was right? Was John preaching the truth when He said men should mourn? Or was the Master right when He said we should serve God with glad and happy hearts?

In the end, Solomon was right. He said there is a time for all things.

A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance. Ecclesiastes 3:4

Both Jesus' message and John's are accurate and applicable to our lives. And that is not all. The order in which those messages appeared is also pure and perfect.

It was not by accident that John the Baptist appeared before Jesus did. Not only was he the herald who prepared men's hearts for the coming of God's Son. He also gave us God's first requirement.

So John's message must always come first. We cannot approach our God expecting to serve Him in any way at all. We are unclean, unholy, unrighteous and unacceptable in His sight.

Our sins cannot be simply ignored or overlooked, either. Our God cannot and will not pass over our sins and pretend we never dishonored His name and disobeyed His commandments.

That is why Jesus poured out His blood and laid down His life. He paid the penalty of blood and death our sins justly deserve.

But the only way we can experience the power of His blood to forever cleanse away our sins is to confess both our sins and our sinfulness to God.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

But our confession cannot be empty and unfeeling. We cannot admit to our sins by rote or ritual.

We must not only confess our sins. We must also hate and abhor all our lusts and lies. We must mourn with sincere sorrow that we are so unclean and unholy in the sight of the God who loves us so much He laid down His life for us.

We must confess our sins as both David and Ezra did long ago.

There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. Psalm 38:3-4

O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. Ezra 9:6

That is how publicans and prostitutes confessed their sins when they were baptized by John in the Jordan. And when we do that, God does not merely forgive us.

He completely cleanses all our sins away. In fact, He removes them so far from us, even He cannot remember them any longer.

I, even I, am the One who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Isaiah 43:25

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Psalm 103:12

When we trust in our Savior's sacrifice and both confess and forsake our sins, we become God's own children. And our names are written down in Heaven. But that is not all that happens.

Our Lord's own Spirit also comes to live within us. And that Holy Spirit fills us with God's limitless love, His unspeakable joy, and overpowering peace.

John's ministry was suddenly cut short. And for good reason. The sinless Son of God was in the world. So there was no more room for tears and sorrow.

And when Jesus Christ comes into our lives, we are not to live in mourning any longer. Even when we choose to spend precious days in prayer and fasting, we are not to do so out of sorrow and regret over our sins.

Our sins are forever cleansed away. We are children of God and citizens of a grand and glorious, eternal kingdom.

So every sacrifice we make, every stand we take, and every service we render is to be offered to God out of a glad and grateful heart.

Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing. Know that the Lord Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name. For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting and His faithfulness to all generations. Psalm 100:2-5

Yes, we are to serve God joyfully and gladly. But there can be no rejoicing until there is mourning.

That is God's perfect plan for us. It is the path to the wonderful purpose He has for our lives.

And we do not have to take it by faith that obeying God's perfect pattern for us is right. It will prove itself as we experience our loving Lord plan for our lives.

...wisdom is vindicated by all her children. Verse 35

In the end that is our choice. We can prove God is right by living in His joy. Or we can prove we are wrong by missing His purpose.

The choice is ours.