

Luke 7:31-35 **Never Satisfied**

There is something endearing about being childlike. Indeed Jesus gave great praise to those who were childlike in their faith, ¹“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-4). But being childlike is very different from being childish.

There are many ways to define childish behavior. Wanting something right away instead of being willing to wait for it, for example. Short-term rather than long-term thinking is another. And never being satisfied is a third. Most children are not satisfied. Whatever they have, no matter how good it is, they want something else. Especially if someone else has it. This characteristic in adults is what leads to the “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” debt cycles that plague so many.

A few examples of how the bible views disobedient children:

Deuteronomy 27:16, “Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.”

Proverbs 15:5, “A fool rejects his father’s discipline”

Proverbs 29:15, “But a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother.”

Romans 1:29-30, “²⁹being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents”

Deuteronomy 21:18-21, “¹⁸If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, ¹⁹then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. ²⁰They shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ ²¹Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear.”

Jesus is addressing the crowds and comparing them to such children.

A quick summary of the recent exchange regarding John the Baptist -- John had been very successful with the crowds, but the religious leaders ultimately rejected his message of Jesus as the Messiah. They refused to repent, be baptized, and submit to the implications of John’s message (John 7:49, Mark 2:16, Luke 15:1-2, John 9:34).

This Generation

Jesus continued His teaching following the parenthetical interruption of Luke in verses 29-30. He had just stated that “among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). Yet here Jesus continues, “to what then shall I compare the men of this generation” (v. 31). One might expect the comparison to be favorable, but it definitely is not.

“To what then shall I compare” (v. 31) brings to mind the majestic words of God spoken through Isaiah,

“To whom would you liken Me
And make Me equal and compare Me,
That we would be alike?” (Isaiah 46:5).

In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus used the word translated ‘generation’ it was usually in a critical, condemning sense. “And Jesus answered and said, ‘You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you and put up with you?’” (Luke 9:41) and “as the crowds were increasing, He began to say, ‘This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah’” (Luke 11:29) for example.

This usage is continued throughout the NT. Acts 2:40, “with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation!’” and Philippians 2:15, “prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” allow us to apply this same sentiment to ourselves.

We can pause and consider how different were people in the time of Christ compared to people today. In some ways, their circumstances were quite different. Standard of living, understanding of the world around them, consciousness of space and time, etc. were all very different in the ancient world compared to today. But the people themselves were the same as us. They had the same wants and desires, the same fears and concerns, the same inconsistencies and failings.

The Children

This generation, Jesus said, “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’” (v. 32). The market place was the center of town. It was generally a large open, frequently visited area where business was transacted and social interactions took place. As mothers would haggle for the best deal and shop owners would insist that they were giving the lowest possible price, children would wander about playing, getting underfoot, and generally being kids.

The ancient world was a communal place. Villages were small and people shared experiences. As with the widow at Nain, perhaps the whole village had come out to mourn with her in her grief. Personal events became social events. Any distraction, be it the birth of a child, a wedding or a funeral, was a cause for general rejoicing or grief. It broke the monotony of ancient life. Those events contributed to a sense of interdependence that we have difficulty understanding in our garage-door opener world where we rarely interact with (or even know) our neighbors.

While cultural norms change, though, people do not. And like today, when kids play, children in the ancient world often imitated adult behavior. They did what they saw adults do. Since the most common forms of social interaction in the ancient world outside of the routines, were weddings and funerals, it was natural that when children played, they simulated those two events.

In ancient Israel, weddings were week-long festivals that involved not only the families of the bride and groom, but extended family who could make the journey, friends, and any others who wanted to escape

the monotony of daily life in a rural community. Matthew 25:1-12, and John 2:1-10 are biblical examples.

When the wedding day finally arrived the bridegroom dressed himself in his best attire, even wearing a crown of gold, or silver, or flowers if he could. He then proceeded with his friends to the bride's father's house. Young unmarried girls would be outside waiting along the way, and they would join him and proceed with him to the bride's father's house.

Meanwhile the bride was bathed, purified, perfumed, richly clothed, and adorned with as many jewels as the family could afford (always setting some aside for younger daughters), and was blessed by her family and friends. Her face was completely covered with a veil. The procession began from the bride's father's house back to the house of the bridegroom. The ceremony itself was called the Chuppa, and the bride and bridegroom would go under the canopy for all to see. Then there a celebration was held with musicians, and as many other friends and relatives who could attend. There was feasting and dancing; it was a time of celebration for all.

Funerals were a different kind of event. In the ancient Near East the custom prevailed of wrapping the dead. Usually the face was covered with a napkin, and then the hands and feet are bound round with linen cloth. The body was then put upon a bier, with a pole at each corner, and carried on the shoulders of men to the tomb for burial [recall the story of the widow at Nain]. Embalming spices were used when they could be afforded.

Due to the heat, it was not uncommon for people to be buried soon after they died, on occasion even the same day if it could be done. Bodies were buried in caves, tombs, or graves. Today there are thousands of rock-cut tombs scattered over the land of Israel, to bring to mind past decades. Such tombs were made by the wealthy. Not being able to afford such accommodations for their dearly departed, the poorer in the village buried their dead in graves. But even some of these tombs had many chambers in them. They were closed by a rolling-stone which ran down an inclined plane in front of the mouth of the sepulcher. In some cases natural caves were used, as in the case of the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob were placed (Genesis 49:31; 50:13). Only prophets and kings were buried within the limits of a city, as Samuel, who was buried in his house at Ramah (I Samuel 25:1), and David, who was buried in the city of David (I Kings 2:10).

In Bible times it was quite customary for the family and close friends of the dead to fast up to the time burial. Then following the funeral, they would be offered bread and wine as a comforting refreshment. Such was called a mourning feast. The prophet Jeremiah refers to this custom: "Neither shall men tear themselves for them in mourning, to comfort them for the dead; neither shall men give them the cup of consolation to drink for their father or for their mother" (Jeremiah 16:7). This mourning feast brought to an end the period of deepest sorrow and strict fasting.

In the story Jesus tells, some children are trying to get their friends involved in mock wedding and funeral ceremonies. They wanted to act like adults, role-playing the most powerful events they saw in the village. The other children, however, did not feel the need to join in. First they tried to re-enact a wedding festival. "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance" (v. 32), the children complained to their

unwilling playmates. Taking a different approach the children then tried to get their pals to join in a mock funeral. But again they were ignored, “we sang a dirge, and you did not weep” (v. 32). In both cases, the stubborn, uncaring playmates refused to receive what was being offered. The issue was not the game that was being played. The point is that these children were not satisfied to join in playing either way.

The Point

Jesus then explained His meaning. He compared John's ministry to a funeral. “John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine” (v. 33), Jesus said, and the response of the people was “he has a demon!” (v. 33). Eating bread and drinking wine were the typical functions of everyday life. They were only voluntarily interrupted during times of mourning. But John had been different. His food was locusts and honey (Matthew 3:4). He had been committed to a vow of abstinence from alcohol (Luke 1:15). He lived in the Wilderness (Luke 1:80). He had deliberately chosen the lifestyle of one who chose to be outside of society, such as one might temporarily do during the period of mourning after a funeral in that culture.

John had done so to make a point. Like the prophets of the OT, John had brought a message of coming judgment for those who did not repent. His message contained little of grace and mercy, rather it was a severe judgment on those who were under God's wrath. John had no patience with hypocrites and boldly proclaimed, “⁸bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:8-9).

John had been anticipated since his birth and rejoiced and admired when he began to preach. At least for a time. Eventually the people turned against him and claimed “he had a demon” (v. 33). By using the phrase “you say” (v. 33), Jesus was looking into the eyes of the very people who made the accusation. These people had determined that the extreme behavior of John could only be explained by demonic possession. Like the wretched man at Gerasene (Mark 5), John was seen as someone whose antisocial and bizarre behavior had placed him beyond the bounds of society. That John had been imprisoned only confirmed them in their opinions.

Jesus, though, had lived a very different lifestyle. Yet, the response was no different. In this passage, Jesus used the phrase “Son of Man” (v. 34) to refer to Himself. It was His own favorite term of self-reference; He used it over eighty times. Jesus had come and lived very much a part of this world. He attended weddings (John 2) and funerals (Luke 7). He lived in towns and villages. He taught in public places. He socialized with people. He was no recluse baptizing in the Wilderness, but a rabbi teaching in Galilee.

This had only led to complaint, however. Jesus was considered “a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (v. 34). His behavior was characterized by things a good rabbi would never do. For example, He invited Himself to the house of Zacchaeus, a tax collector, but “when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). In fact, so comfortable were people around Jesus that “all the tax collectors and the sinners

were coming near Him to listen to Him” (Luke 15:1). And well they should feel comfortable, since one of His own disciples had once been a tax collector!

That Jesus, Himself, used this expression means He must have heard it mentioned among the crowds that followed Him. But was Jesus, in fact, a friend to sinners? Not in the sense that He was like them, or encouraged them, or spoke lightly of their sin. But in the sense that He sought them out, rebuked them when necessary, and died for them then, yes indeed, Jesus was a friend of sinners! We are sinners ourselves, yet forgiven and indwelt by the Holy Spirit if we have received Christ as Savior and Lord. If that is the case, then let us be a friend to sinners in the same way our Jesus was.

The point Jesus was making in His illustration was that though John had come with an attitude of severity and asceticism and Jesus had come with an attitude of compassionate involvement and interaction, people had been dissatisfied with both. Ultimately, the complaints of the people were only pretended excuses to cloak the hatred of God’s truth. John was too much of an ascetic, Jesus not ascetic enough. In fact, people objected to not the style but the substance of the message. God, Himself, could not please these people.

It is the same today. To the world, Christians will always be either too narrow-minded or too tolerant. People will always find an excuse to not believe. We ought to be reminded of two things. First, that the outward form of the message is less important than its truth. We ought never to let ourselves be distracted from the truth of God’s Word by the fact that the style of preaching is not to our liking or the worship is too (or not enough) contemporary. We cannot make excuses for our rejection of the truth.

Second, if the gospel is rejected, it is the gospel that is being rejected, not us. We ought not to take it personally, or let the fear of rejection hinder our willingness to share God's truth. We are called to present the gospel accurately and without modifying its substance to make it more palatable.

The Vindication

By God’s grace, not all are childish. Some who heard the message of John and Jesus were awakened, repented, and received salvation. We are reminded of God’s promise,

“My word be which goes forth from My mouth;

It will not return to Me empty” God promises (Isaiah 55:11).

The gospel cannot be thwarted by man. Some men may harden their hearts, but among mankind in general there will be those who receive grace. And their lives will demonstrate wisdom. “Wisdom is vindicated by all her children” (v. 35). The point here is that John the Baptist had done his job and Jesus was doing His. Those who followed them and submitted to their teaching received grace through faith, “by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Throughout time there have been those who are childlike and those who are childish. Some can exclaim, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). They have received “the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). For others sadly, “the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are

perishing” (1 Corinthians 1:18). After all “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Take Aways

We must do as God says, and not be discouraged if we don't please everybody . . . or anybody. To please men, after all, is not why we were created.