

Prayer

Lift our hearts in praise, Almighty God, our Lord and Saviour. Fill our hearts with a desire to praise You in the midst of everything that happens to us; may we sing Your praises, speak of Your greatness, and do all our work as if for You. May everything we do be a worthy sacrifice of praise, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for time, and do this by finding opportunities to give praise to God in all manner of different situations during the day. Be creative!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the ministry of God's people on TV:** *Pray for the organisations that manage Christian TV channels, and for churches that do the same; pray about how they are funded and for those who donate to them*
- *Pray for the continuing unrest in North Africa and for Egypt in particular*
- *Give thanks to God for the weekend past, and the opportunities you have had for enjoyment and for the worship of God*

Meditation

Lord Jesus, when dread silence descends upon our souls;
We call on You to fill the emptiness that comes to us unwanted

When something we have done for You goes wrong;
When the prayers we offer feel like groping in the dark;
When others we respect reject the work we do for You;
When sin raises its ugly head within us, when least expected;
When the enemy finds a way to hurt someone we love;
When situations unfold which compromise our faith;
When people we love and trust let us down badly;
When we disappoint those who we love and trust;

We call on You, Lord Jesus, to fill our emptiness with Your Spirit;
Break the silence of our pain with Your eternal Word of Love.

Bible passage - Luke 7:29-35

²⁹ All the people heard this, so together with the tax collectors, they accepted God's righteousness having been baptised with John's baptism. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's plan for them by not accepting John's baptism.

³¹ 'To what then will I compare the people of this generation, what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a sad song, and you did not cry."

³³ 'For John the Baptist has come neither eating bread or drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon';

³⁴ 'The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say,

'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

Bible Study

Review

In today's passage of Scripture, Jesus places Himself together with John the Baptist at the centre of God's plan of salvation. Now the evidence of their lives and work may make the two appear completely different, for John lived the frugal life of a prophet whilst Jesus was accused of excess (7:33,34). However, Jesus identified strongly with John, and He had just praised this great man of God and his role in God's plan of salvation (7:24-28). He went on to say that those who rejected the two of them rejected God (7:30) and those who accepted the two of them receive the wisdom and righteousness of God (7:29, 35).

It is easy to read through this reading and assume that what it says is obvious. Certainly, some will think they have understood it as soon as they have read it, but the closer we study this passage, the more we will find about its importance within Scripture and within Luke's Gospel. This is because in this passage, Luke summarises the different ways in which the people of Israel responded to Jesus' ministry and God's plan for the salvation of the world.

Christians today often speak of God's 'plan', meaning either God's plan to save the world or His plan for those individuals who respond to Him by faith. However, the word 'plan' is found only rarely within Scripture. Luke is the only Gospel writer who uses the word, and a good example of it is found in his record of Peter's first sermon, found in Acts chapter 2:

Jesus of Nazareth ... a man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, (who) you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. (Acts 2:22,23)

The message of our passage today is this; there is no halfway house between accepting or rejecting God's plan. God's plan for the world is not to be debated or played with, it is to be accepted or it is rejected by default.

In verses 29 and 30, Jesus commended all those who, together with the 'tax collectors' (Luke's way of referring to sinners), had first been baptised by John for repentance and for the forgiveness of sins and had gone on to accept that God was at work in their midst. Of course, Jesus meant those who had accepted Him as Messiah through the evidence of His deeds (7:22,23). Jesus then condemned the Pharisees and the lawyers for not accepting John's baptism and rejecting God's plan for them (7:30). His words were a simple challenge to those who heard Him to choose which way they would respond.

Jesus illustrates His point with a story about children squabbling in the market square, and he seems to say, 'make up your mind!' He describes children fruitlessly calling out to each other first one thing and then another, because in their immaturity they are unwilling to play someone else's games! The children represent 'this generation', people who like the Pharisees have rejected the evidence of God's plan placed before them in both Jesus and John the Baptist. As a classical prophet, John represents one aspect of this(7:33), and as the Messiah, Jesus represent a very different testimony (7:34). What more can God do to persuade His people of His love?

Lastly, Jesus says:

'wisdom is accepted as right by all her children' (7:35)

This unique saying of Jesus confirms our understanding of this passage. The figure of wisdom in the Old Testament represents God's just and wise plan for the world, for all time. Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, for example the book of Proverbs, describes how people can live their lives according to God's wise plan. So the last verse of our passage refers to Jesus' confidence that there will always be people who accept God's wisdom and plan of salvation. Jesus was not playing games with people as the Pharisees were doing, Jesus was looking for those who would accept Him and His message. He was then, and He is now!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What does Jesus mean by speaking of 'this generation' (7:?.
- What does the story of the children really mean?
- Comparing Jesus and John the Baptist

Notes on the text and translation

V29 **'they accepted God's righteousness'**

Other translations:

'acknowledged that God's way was right' (NIV)

'acknowledged the justice of God' (NRSV)

At this point, the Greek text says this: 'they justified God'. It would sound very strange if we translated the passage exactly like this, because as far as we understand faith, it is God who justifies us, and not we who justify God! However, we only make this assumption because we do not necessarily understand that the Greek word 'justify' can mean a number of different things. At its simplest, it can mean 'to agree with'; hence my translation *'they accepted God's righteousness'*.

V30 **'by not accepting John's baptism'**

Other translations:

'because they had not been baptised by John' (NIV)

'by refusing to be baptised by him' (NRSV)

The sentence here suggests strongly that the Pharisees and lawyers had made their choice not to be baptised by John. The text does not mention John's name, only using the pronoun 'him'. However, if we do not put in John's name, the English reader might mistakenly assume that this refers to baptism by Jesus.

V34 **'a glutton and a drunk'**

Other translations:

'a glutton and a drunkard' (NIV and most other translations)

The Greek word usually translated 'drunkard', refers to one who has drunk too much wine. The most correct English term for this is 'winebibber', but because this is not well-known, I prefer the term 'drunk', and could perhaps translate as 'alcoholic', but I have decided to avoid that term! In our day, this term has potential to shock, and Jesus clearly used this word to shock those who heard him speak.

V5 **'wisdom is accepted as right by all her children'**

Other translations:

'wisdom is proved right by all her children' (NIV)

'wisdom is vindicated by all her children' (NRSV)

This last sentence of our passage parallels the first. Here, Luke uses the same word, 'justified', that is found in the first verse, so I have translated it roughly in the same way, as meaning 'except as right'. It is a good translation, and it helps the reader make the proper connection with the first verse, thus enabling a good understanding of the text.

Going Deeper

What does Jesus mean by speaking of 'this generation'?

We can interpret Jesus' story of the children in the marketplace in a number of ways, and we will examine these under the next heading. He begins the story however with these words, *'to what then will I compare the people of this generation, what are they like?' (7:31)*. To whom is Jesus referring? On the surface, it seems obvious that Jesus is talking about the people of His own age who are in receipt of the prophecy of John the Baptist, and of His own ministry. However, Jesus does not often use the phrase *'this generation'*. So why did He use this expression and what does it mean?

Jesus was talking about a unique generation who had the privilege of seeing the end of one age of history and the beginning of another. The age when God revealed Himself to His people through His anointed (Old Testament) prophets, was coming to a close. John the Baptist was the last of the classical prophets of old, and he appears exclusively at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, the picture Jesus draws of John the Baptist in verse 33 is that of the man fasting, representing someone waiting for God to do something, and doing what is necessary to plead with God to come into His world and act.

Jesus came to demonstrate a new age in which God's Kingdom would break into the reality of this world, an age in which the things of God were accessible in God's Messiah, but not yet completed. The Bible frequently speaks of God bringing time to a close with a great heavenly banquet (Matthew 22:2f. Luke 14:8f.), so Jesus is the 'Son of Man' who gives His people a foretaste of this banquet. This is why He eats and drinks and is a 'friend of tax collectors and sinners' (7:34). God's Kingdom rule was becoming known through Jesus Christ, through His words and His deeds, and the evidence He showed of God's presence within the world.

So although we may apply this passage of Scripture to our own time, we should remember that Jesus first spoke these words to that specific generation who would see a change in history brought about by His own life and death. These people faced a unique choice to accept the living Jesus or reject Him. Their decision would result eventually in His death, of course, but God turned that around to His glory. How much more can God work within our world today now that Jesus has died, to overcome the difficulties, the troubles and distress of all manner of people, in order to achieve His will and His plan. Despite the rejection of Jesus in His own day, God has proved able to do His will, and His Kingdom is now in evidence within the world. Surely, this should encourage us when nothing else will.

What does the story of the children really mean?

Jesus' story about children calling in the marketplace can be interpreted in a number of different ways. On the surface, the children's cries explore their fickle nature, and at least, Jesus is criticising the fickle nature of the people's response to His ministry.

Jesus' words could also mean that several groups of children were each calling out to the others, setting out their terms for playing and complaining that the other group had not joined in. Alternatively, we might spot the fact that Jesus speaks of children who are 'sitting'. In Israel, to sit down in the company of others was a demonstration of power and authority, and little children would have known this. They would have all been taught to stand in the presence of their superiors (adults). Could this mean that some of the children were like 'self appointed leaders' of their own groups, who had set out their demands for the more strenuous roles within the game, such as dancing, and were then peeved that their authority had been rejected?

It is possible that Jesus used this story to make a general criticism of the people of His day who would not make up their mind about Him? In this way, Jesus exposed the very real divisions within the Jewish people of the first century, and at a critical point in their history. Whilst seeking to demonstrate God's love, many of them could not make up their minds about Him, as is clear from what happened at Jesus' crucifixion.

The most likely explanation of this is that Jesus used this story to criticise the self appointed leaders of his day, that is, the Pharisees. They placed frequent and multiple demands upon the people of Israel, asking them to 'dance to their own tune' by defining ever more complex laws and regulations for what could or could not be done to please God. As well as 'Sabbath Regulations', their rules covered everything from weddings to funerals, as illustrated by Jesus' inclusion in the story of a reference to dancing (weddings) and 'sad songs', more literally, 'funeral songs' (7:32). From this point of view, the whole story about the children was a blatant attack on the Pharisees!

Comparing Jesus and John the Baptist

We have already noted that Jesus and John the Baptist are placed side by side within this passage, and the key comparison is found in verses 33 and 34. Jesus' words here go together with all the He said previously to applaud John and accept his ministry as essential to His own (7:18-28).

John the Baptist is not identified elsewhere in Luke as being someone who fasted or ate simply, because Luke's version of John's ministry (3:1-17) does not mention such things as his eating of food such as 'locusts' while living in the wilderness (see Matthew 3:1-17). Here, Luke is relying on the common popular picture of John as living according to the strict rules of a traditional prophet, or perhaps a 'Nazirite', one who was promised from birth to abstain from strong drink (see Numbers 6:3f. Judge 13:4f.). In Jesus' day, the two disciplines of a Nazirite and a prophet were somewhat intertwined in the minds of common people, and they appear to be so here.

The one unique feature of this story is the description of John by his opponents as having 'a demon' (7:33). We do read that all manner of Israelite people responded to John's call for repentance and baptism, and we read of little opposition. Perhaps this is the unique evidence in the Gospel of opposition to John from the Pharisees, who, as a strict sect would have avoided the baptism of John. Their own sense of identity as a 'called' people within Judaism would have precluded them from yielding to any other 'theology', and they would have had to do this if they had accepted John's baptism for repentance. It is easy to see that those who thought John had a demon were Pharisees. It was an accusation they quickly levelled at Jesus, as soon as they learned about His ministry (see Matthew 9:34).

There is ample evidence of the truth of Jesus' comments about Himself as found in in verse 34. Jesus began His ministry preaching the coming of God's Kingdom (Matthew 4:17, Luke 4:18), and His approach to religious matters was utterly unconventional. Early on in His ministry He had called Levi (Luke 5:27f.) and incurred the wrath of the Pharisees for cavorting with 'tax-collectors and sinners'. It seems that Jesus revelled in this accusation and subsequently used the expression 'tax-collectors and sinners' to refer to those who had responded to His preaching (Matt 9:10f., Luke 15:1)

Underlying Jesus' comments about both John the Baptist and Himself (7:33,34) was His denunciation of the indecision of the Pharisees, and all those who like them refused to accept that they were doing the work of God. The words of those who rejected Jesus and John were merely excuses for not accepting the truth that the world was changing, and God's Messiah had come in order to establish God's Kingdom.

Application

This passage is one of many in Scripture, which challenges readers of the Bible to make a choice. They must either accept the evidence placed before them or reject it. The Bible is quite clear that those who reject the evidence it presents reject God Himself. Moreover, the Bible also says consistently that the people most likely to respond favourably to the Gospel and the message of God's love, are what Luke calls the 'tax collectors and sinners'.

If we are to prioritise the mission of the Church, is it therefore not wise that the Gospel should be preached, Sunday by Sunday, not so much to Christians, but to those who are living outside of God's love and care and who need to hear both the truth about God and the Gospel of Christ's love? When I attend church on Sunday myself, I hear frequent appeals from the pulpit asking me to response to God's love. My problem is not that I think I am beyond understanding God's love and therefore do not need to hear about it regularly, it is that I know that these words are needed outside of the church, where the modern equivalent of 'tax collectors and sinners', are living and working. Who will take the message of God's Kingdom love to where it is needed? No Christian can escape this challenge.

The idea that God has a plan for this world encompassing His Wisdom is profoundly biblical, but also rather dangerous. Whenever the Bible speaks about God's plan, it refers to His eternal plan of salvation, which is designed to present God's love to all people so that they might respond and be united with their Maker. It is a plan that is active at all times, and it leads to a single endpoint within time and Creation. The important question is this, does God have a single and unique plan for each of us?

Now I do not doubt that God has a plan for each individual within his greater plan for the world and the universe. However, there is little talk of individual life plans within the Bible, and little scriptural evidence for the idea that God has a single unalterable plan for the lives of individual people, which is broken if left behind. God is far bigger than the circumstances of life, and He alone is the judge of the lives we lead. The evidence of Scripture and the evidence of history, is that God's plan sometimes encompasses everything, even the most strange of events, and takes account of everything we can possibly experience, from ageing to mental problems and illness, and even death. Let each of us acknowledge His eternal plan of salvation and choose the way of faith in Jesus Christ. It is better to have confidence that Christ is leading us according to His will, than become obsessed with the idea that we must live according to some mysterious preordained plan for our lives, or that God is watching to catch us out if we do not keep to His plan at any particular moment. God's plans can encompass the reality of our lives. What He wants is our trust and our love, in abiding faith.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When you read Jesus' story about children squabbling in the marketplace, what does that tell us about how people respond to the gospel today?
2. What is God's plan for the world?
3. Does this passage of Scripture tell us anything about fasting or about eating and drinking? How does the testimony of John the Baptist and the witness of Jesus speaks to people today?

Personal comments by author

It seems to me that the vast majority of people in the Western world today prefer not to make up their mind about God and all that they have heard about Jesus. Frankly, they see the evidence of the church, and they

think that it demonstrates hypocrisy, so they do not wish to have anything more to do with it. This is a sad misjudgement, of course, and it is particularly sad when Christians who are themselves the church, persist in such a judgement when it is in truth a judgement upon themselves. In our day, we battle against both antipathy and disinterest, but as the years go by, it is becoming increasingly clear that the world cannot live peacefully without addressing the sharpest of questions. Who is right about God? The Muslims? The atheists? The Hindus? The Christians? We need to discern the truth about God and not prevaricate. Too many people today sit like children in the marketplace, without making up their minds.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take time to consider the characteristics of 'this generation'. Write down a list of what you regard as the characteristics of society today, including attitudes towards people, attitudes towards God, and attitudes towards the world, science, religion and whatever else you think appropriate. Return to this list after leaving it for a month, and then see if you agree with what you have written or whether you wish to amend it. Use this list for prayer, and discuss it with others if possible.*
- *Find a Bible dictionary, concordance or other reference work, and check out what you can find within it about God's 'plan', and God's wisdom.*

Final Prayer

Almighty God you see far into the future, and you know our end as well as our beginning. Reveal yourself to us today in power, so that we may respond to the truth in Jesus Christ that You have embedded within the history of our world of. May we have confidence in your eternal plan and your great wisdom, and may we rest in your love. AMEN
