**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**FINDING OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST**

**Luke 7:18-35**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we resume our series in the Gospel of Luke called “Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”.

At some point in your life, everyone will ask themselves certain “big picture” questions about life. “Where do we come from?” “What’s the meaning of life?” “What happens after we die?” We ask these questions because we hope that their answers will help us find our place in life. Most people answer these questions using a smorgasbord of different sources. For example, it’s not uncommon these days to meet someone who turns to scientific evolutionary theory for their origins, the idols of culture for meaning, and mere sentiment for the question of the afterlife.

A couple years ago, I was doing some outreach at a local shopping mall. I was hoping to find opportunities to share the gospel, and I did that by starting conversation with people at the food court by asking them what they believed about these “big picture” questions. I remember speaking to several people in their early 20’s. They told me they believed that human beings came from random evolution, because God didn’t exist, and yet at the same time they believed that there was life after death in a spiritual world. I found this strange, because if someone believes that there is an unseen, spiritual world, then why wouldn’t they believe that there could be a God? When I pressed them on their answers, they admitted that their belief in evolution came from school, and their belief about the afterlife came from movies.

One of the most powerful things about the Bible is that it offers a comprehensive answer to every single one of the “big picture” questions of life. Those who read and believe the Bible don’t need to turn to other sources to find out where we come from, what we’re supposed to be doing, or where we’re going. The Bible tells us, and anyone who has found their answers to life’s big questions in the Bible will testify that they have found that they resonate with the deepest longings of the human heart.

In our text today, we’re going to look at Jesus’ answer to one of these “big picture” questions. It’s the question of identity. “Who am I?” It’s one of the most important questions we can ever ask ourselves. How would you answer this question? Some of you may reference your work, others your family, others your faith, others all the above. Whatever your answers may be, all of us would tend to root our identities in who *we* are.

Jesus challenges us today to root our identity not in who *we* are, but in who *he* is. Who we are is determined not by what we accomplish in life, but by how we respond to Jesus.

The title of this message is **Finding Our Identity in Christ**. My aim today is to show you that **Our Identity is Determined by Our Response to the Identity of Christ.** To get to this point, we’re going to ask and answer three questions that our text poses to us today:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Who Will We Be?
3. Who Are We?

(1) **WHO IS JESUS?**

Our text today begins with the return of a familiar character in Luke’s gospel, John the Baptist. Earlier in Chapter 7, Luke tells us that Jesus did two great miracles: he healed the centurion’s servant from far away with a simple word, and he raised a dead man to life. Verse 18 tells us that John’s disciples reported these miracles to him.

Back in Luke Chapter 3, Luke wrote about John the Baptist and his preaching ministry in the wilderness. Crowds of people went to see him in the desert, willing to suffer the oppressive heat and lack of water, just to hear him preach. As more and more people felt the power of his preaching, they began to wonder whether he could be the Messiah, the Saviour whom God had promised hundreds of years ago who would finally save God’s people from all their oppression.

John’s response was clear. He was not the Messiah. He was merely the one sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. This is what he said in Luke 3:

“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:16-17)

As mighty as John was, he was only sent to prepare the way for a mightier one who was to come. He was the forerunner of the Messiah, and not the Messiah himself.

So when his disciples reported Jesus’ amazing miracles to him in our text, you would expect him to say, “Finally! The wait is over! The coming one has come, for his mighty works testify that he is the Messiah!” But that’s not how he responds. Instead, he responds with uncertainty. We see that in verse 19: “And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” John was uncertain about whether Jesus was the one he was waiting for. Why was that?

The answer is that Jesus wasn’t doing what John expected the Messiah to do. Luke told us in Chapter 3 that John was expecting the Messiah to bring judgment. “His winnowing fork is in his hand”, he said, “to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” John believed that the Messiah had come to execute God’s final judgment on the world: some he would judge favourably and gather to dwell in God’s kingdom forever; the rest he would discard and burn like the useless chaff of the fields.

John’s expectation of Messianic judgment came from the book of Malachi. He would have been very familiar with this book, because it’s the book that speaks most of his role as the Messiah’s forerunner. In Malachi 3:1, God said this through the prophet Malachi:

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”

What was the messenger to prepare the way for God’s Messiah to do? Malachi 4:1 tells us:

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

John expected the Messiah to bring God’s judgment, but here was the problem: judgment seemed to be the one thing that Jesus *wasn’t* doing. Indeed, it seemed like he was doing the exact opposite! Rather than judging sinners, he was forgiving them. Rather than casting sinners out from his presence, he was eating and drinking in their homes. And rather than burning sinners like chaff, he was calling them to follow him and join him in the work of bringing the good news of the kingdom of God to all people.

John wasn’t wrong in expecting Jesus to bring judgment. We will hear Jesus speak much about judgment later on in the Gospel of Luke. But here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus chose to emphasize mercy, not judgment. Jesus came first to save sinners, not condemn them. He came to draw them to himself, not cast them away. There will come a time when he must judge, when he must condemn, when he must cast away and burn. But Jesus wants us to know that, before he acts as our Judge, he acts first as our Saviour. As Jesus said in John 3:17,

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Today, if you fear God’s judgment, take comfort in our merciful Saviour. Yes, Jesus will one day bring judgment, but if you come to him with faith, he will come to you with mercy. And the amazing thing about his mercy is that it is sufficient to save you from his judgment. Through his death on the cross, Jesus took the judgment we deserved so that we could receive the mercy we could never deserve. Our guilt was placed on him, and his innocence was placed on us. This incredible mercy is offered freely to anyone who would believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, who saves us from our sin.

Jesus wanted John the Baptist to believe as well, so he responds to his question about whether Jesus was the Messiah. First, he demonstrated his miraculous power for John’s disciples to see. Verse 21 says, “In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight.” Then in verse 22, Jesus gives the disciples a word to bring back to John: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”

What is Jesus doing here? He is quoting Messianic prophesies, not from Malachi, but from Isaiah. For example, Isaiah prophesied that, when the Messiah came, this would happen:

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” (Isaiah 35:5-6a)

Jesus also says in verse 22 that “the poor have good news preached to them.” Sound familiar? Jesus used this phrase back in Luke 4, when Jesus announced that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” This was another prophesy from Isaiah, and Jesus was saying that he had come to fulfill it.

In other words, Jesus is reminding John in verse 22 that the Messiah wouldn’t just fulfill Malachi’s prophesies. The Messiah would fulfill all the Messianic prophesies found throughout Scripture. He would surely fulfill prophesies about judgment, but he would also fulfill prophesies about mercy.

Jesus ends his message to John in verse 23: “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Jesus had just pronounced a series of blessings in Chapter 6. “Blessed are the poor”, “Blessed are the hungry”, “Blessed are those who weep”, “Blessed are those who are hated and persecuted for Jesus’ sake.” To be blessed by God is to receive his favour through a right relationship with him. Here in verse 23, Jesus gives us one more blessing that sums up all the rest. He’s saying that whether someone receives the blessing of God ultimately depends on how they respond to Jesus. “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me!” Jesus is the channel from which the blessings of God must flow to us. There is no other way to receive God’s blessing. The poor are blessed, the hungry are blessed, not because they suffer, but because their suffering leads them to Jesus.

John came to Jesus with a question: are you the Christ, or should we wait for another? That may have been John the Baptist’s question, but our text today invites us to ask ourselves how we would answer this question as well.

Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord of your life and the Saviour you’ve been waiting for? This is the central question that all of us must answer in order to determine whether we will receive God’s blessing, or God’s curse.

(2) **WHO WILL WE BE?**

Where we stand with God determines our identity, both in this life, and in the life to come. If we turn to Jesus, we will be one person, and if we turn to something other than Jesus, we will be a different person. This is what Jesus talks about in the next part of our text, which leads to our second point: who will we be?

After John’s disciples return to their teacher to report everything they had seen and heard, Jesus turns his attention to the crowd. He has something important to teach them, and in order to do that, he first teaches them something about John the Baptist.

In verses 24-26, Jesus emphasizes the greatness of John the Baptist by reminding the crowds of how much trouble they went through to hear John preach in the desert. There’s nothing nice to see in the desert. There’s no scenery. It’s so dead there, and so hot, that the only sign of life you might find is one solitary reed shaking in the wind, and no one would travel to the desert just to see that. That’s what Jesus is saying in verse 24. Then in verse 25, Jesus says that there are some things that people are willing to travel far and wide to see, such as the beauty and power of kings and queens, but you would never find such people in the wilderness.

Therefore, the only plausible reason why so many people went into the desert was because John the Baptist was a great prophet.

Jesus confirms this in verses 26-28, but he adds something more. He says that John wasn’t just a great prophet. He was in fact the greatest person who ever lived: “What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.”

John was not only a great prophet. He was *the* prophesied prophet spoken of by Malachi who was sent by God to do the most important task ever assigned to a prophet: prepare the way for the Messiah. This task was so noble, so crucial to God’s plan of salvation, that no one who ever lived before John was greater than him.

But the greatness of John is not the point. Jesus points us to the greatness of John to show us just how great those who believe in him will be. Look at verse 28: “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” Yes, John was great, and yes, Jesus wants everyone to know it. But the only reason why we need to know how great John was is so that we can see how much greater everyone will be who is a part of God’s kingdom. As Darrell Bock says it in his commentary:

“The point of the remark is not only to explain John’s greatness, but above all to show the greatness of the coming era of fulfillment, when all relative scales of evaluation will be completely rewritten. Those reborn in the kingdom are greater than the greatest person born by human generation.”

What a sobering word. Have you ever felt the desire to make yourself great in this world? To leave a lasting legacy? To build an earthly kingdom? I have certainly felt that pull. The desire for personal, earthly greatness is one of the consequences of our fallen human nature. We want to make much of ourselves in this life rather than make much of God in the life to come. We want to gain power, and we want to increase in influence. We want to be able to say we’re better than others, that we’ve accomplished more in life, and that we lived more significant lives.

Jesus is telling us that none of this ultimately matters. There is no measure of greatness that we can achieve in this life that will compare to the greatness that God will give us in his kingdom. In God’s kingdom, gone will be the names of people who did amazing things in this world but never knew Christ, and in their place will be the names of people whom the world never recognized.

The Sunday School teacher who faithfully taught kids the gospel. The stay-at-home mom who faithfully prayed for the people in her life. The socially awkward introvert who faithfully shared the gospel with other people. These are the people who will never be recognized by the world, but will forever be recognized by God. Their names will be lifted high above the political leaders of history, the rich businessmen whose names plaster the walls of skyscrapers, and the most brilliant research scientists the world has ever seen.

Why is that? Why is the one who is least in kingdom of God greater than the greatest people who ever lived? It’s not because of what they’ve done. It’s because of who they are in Christ. “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me”, Jesus said in verse 23. What we believe about who Jesus is will determine who we will be in the future. If we reject him, then he will reject us, and our earthly legacy will be nothing more than a vapour in the wind. But if we receive him, then he will receive us into his Kingdom forever. We become eternal citizens of the Kingdom of God, where we will worship God unceasing joy for unending days. That is a far greater honour than the greatest rewards that this world could ever offer.

The world functions with certain rules for greatness. It says, “Achieve this milestone, earn a certain amount of money, or make this amount of difference in the world, and you will be great.” Jesus is rewriting the rules for greatness, so that there is only one criterion: become a citizen of God’s kingdom through your faith in him. Believe that through his life, death, and resurrection, he completed the work of the Messiah and brought the blessing of God on undeserving sinners like you and me.

When you have truly believed that Jesus is who he says he is, and that he has done what he said he will do, your priorities in life will radically change. Personal greatness will no longer drive you, because you already have greatness in Christ. These days, one of the world’s milestones for greatness is starting and running a successful business. There’s nothing wrong with Christians being successful businessmen. There is something wrong, however, when your business starts running you. Faith in Christ frees you from that, so that you can manage your business with the peace of knowing that your eternal legacy doesn’t depend on it.

And when you’re free from the world’s standards of greatness, you also become free to see your fellow Christians as they truly are. You start respecting your wife more than your business partners. She may not make as much money as them, but as a citizen of God’s kingdom, she is greater than they will ever be. Or if you’re ever tempted to think that your non-Christian friends are just so much cooler than your friends at church, you’ll start seeing just how special your Christian friends are when you start seeing them through the eyes of God.

Jesus is rewriting the rules for greatness, so that greatness is defined not by our beauty, or our net work, or our accomplishments, but by our response to him. The one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than the greatest people who ever lived without Christ. Let’s never forget that.

(3) **WHO ARE WE?**

Jesus has one more question for us to consider in our text today. The greatness that Jesus promises to those who trust him is already ours, but we don’t see it yet. It is future-oriented, because the kingdom of God has not yet come in its fullness. It describes who we *will be*. Before we get there, we have to look at who we are *now*. This leads to our third point: who are we?

Luke writes about the people’s response to Jesus’ teaching about greatness in verses 29-30. He writes that the common people, including the tax collectors, “declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John.” What does this mean? It means that the people who were least expected to respond to God were doing exactly that by agreeing with what Jesus was teaching. The uneducated commoners and the notoriously sinful tax collectors had “declared God just”, which meant that they believed that his plan of salvation through Christ and his radical ideas for true human greatness were *good*. They believed that they were the plans of a righteous God who did everything right.

Verse 29 tells us that these were the same people who were baptized by John. It appears that John did his job well. He laid the foundation the people needed in order to respond favourably to Jesus.

On the other hand, verse 30 tells us that the people you might expect to respond to God were not receptive to Jesus’ teaching. The Pharisees and the lawyers, also known as the scribes, “rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.” The “religious” people of the time, those who devoted the entirety of their lives to studying Scripture and learning what it meant to obey God’s commands, had missed the central point of the Scriptures entirely. They rejected Jesus, just as they rejected John, and in doing so they rejected God.

Jesus now challenges us to ask ourselves, “Are we like the tax collectors who responded to Jesus, or are we like the Pharisees who rejected Jesus?” Jesus speaks about the difference between the two in a parable found in verses 31-35. In this parable, there are two groups of children, one representing the Pharisees who rejected him, and the other representing the commoners and tax collectors who received him.

Jesus speaks of the first group of children in verses 32-34: “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 dirge, and you did not weep.’” What’s Jesus saying here?

Well, if you’ve ever played a game with kids, you’ll know exactly what Jesus means. Games always have rules, and for rules to work, they have to remain the same. They can’t change. Take the game of Monopoly. The main rule of that game is to accumulate more assets than all the other players, whether it be in the form of property or cash. Now imagine yourself playing with a bunch of kids. You’re halfway through the game, and you’re creaming them. You have hotels scattered around the board, thousands in cash stored up, and everyone in the game owes you money. You’re laughing, because you’re sure you’re heading towards certain victory. Then suddenly, one of the kids says, “I’m changing the rules! The person who has the least money wins!”

When you play with kids, you have to be ready for rules to change, and if you don’t play by their rules, they may just take their ball and go home.

Jesus is saying that this is what the Pharisees are like. They’re like kids who demand that others dance to their tune and play by their rules. The problem with this is that their rules are always changing. They play a wedding tune on a flute and expect you to dance, then they change the tune to a funeral song and expect you to mourn. When you don’t do what they want you to do, they take their ball and go home.

Jesus says this is exactly how the Pharisees responded to both John the Baptist and Jesus himself in verses 33-34: “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” The Pharisees told everyone that they genuinely wanted to test whether John the Baptist and Jesus were sent by God. The problem was that their test was subject to a shifting set of rules.

By changing the rules, they showed that they weren’t really interested in knowing whether either of them were truly sent by God. Why? Because if they were sent from God, then they would have to stop playing by their own rules, and they would have to start playing by God’s rules. They didn’t want that. They wanted to be their own bosses.

The second group is described much more briefly in verse 35: “Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” This is all Jesus says about the second group. They are the children of wisdom, and their desire is to justify wisdom. What does that mean?

Verse 29 tells us. Jesus says that the common people and the tax collectors who responded to John and to Jesus “declared God just”, which is the same as saying they “justified” him, which is what we see the children of wisdom doing in verse 35. This means that, in the parable, “wisdom” stands for God, and the children of wisdom stands for all who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by virtue of that belief, they have received God’s blessing.

There is a world of difference between the first group of kids and the second. The first group is radically man-centered. They only want to play by their own rules, not God’s. They are exposed as the children of foolishness as they choose to ignore God, who *is* wisdom. The second group is radically God-centered. They have no personal agenda, and no desire to play by their own rules. Their only desire is to help others see the righteousness of their father.

The question for us today is who are we? Whose children are we? Are we the children of foolishness, demanding that God play by our rules? I think more of us are inclined this way than we may think. We act like the children of foolishness whenever we say, “I will only obey God if he does this for me”, or “I will only believe in God if he answers this prayer”. We act like the children of foolishness whenever we demand that God act a certain way. But God doesn’t play by our rules, which are ever changing. He plays by his own, which never change.

Jesus urges us today to abandon our identity as children of foolishness and to embrace our identity as the children of wisdom, a people whose only desire is to show others that our God is righteous and good in all his ways.

**CONCLUSION**

Let me end with two practical steps for two groups of people.

The first is for those who have questions about their identity. You’re not really sure who you are. Day by day you are plagued by questions regarding your personal sense of self worth, your place in this world, your purpose in life. You feel like you are forgotten, that no one really notices you, and that your presence or absence really doesn’t make much of a difference. If this describes you, then Jesus today invites you to come to him.

If you don’t know who you are, Jesus invites you to know who he is, for it is in knowing him that you will know yourself. Find your identity in Jesus. He will make you a citizen of the kingdom of God, where even the least are greater than the greatest people in our world. Know Jesus. Believe in him. Trust him. Come to him with faith, and he will come to you with mercy. Read about him in the Bible. Pray to him. Ask him to save you. The Scriptures say that “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” And when you do call upon him, you will find that the questions of your identity will fade away, and you will finally find peace.

The second is for those who are secure in their identity in Christ, but are tempted to think about other people like the world does. You are wowed by the same people that everyone else tends to be wowed by. You even want to be like them. Jesus is challenging you today to remember that these aren’t the people who will ultimately matter. All their worldly accomplishments will not have a drop of significance if they did not trust in Christ and live for him.

Stop applauding the people of this world and start honouring those who matter in God’s eyes. Take time this week to recognize someone who would never be recognized by the world. Encourage someone who faithfully trusts Jesus and serves him in the background. Write a testimony about someone and share it at our next communion Sunday. Jesus told us that the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than the greatest person who ever lived in this world. Do you believe that? Then let’s make sure we treat others like we believe it.