

**Luke 3:7-14, 18-20**  
**The Message of John the Baptist**

Despite the fact that “among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist,” (Matthew 11:11) we have very little information regarding his active ministry. This is probably as he would have preferred it. “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals,” (Matthew 3:11) was the perspective John the Baptist had.

The ministry of John overlapped that of Christ by several months. Yet it is clear that John knew who he was, and he knew what his job was. He proclaimed the Messiah in unmistakable and unrelenting terms, and in so doing, set a standard by which we all must measure ourselves when we share the gospel.

**A Message of Reality**

As we pick up the story, John is preaching in the wilderness area near where the Jordan River enters the Dead Sea. This was a crossroads for travelers, and “multitudes” were coming out to not only hear him but respond to his message by being baptized.

“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come” (v.7). John did not seek the approval of men. He did not fear to give offense. He was not concerned with being politically correct. He was not afraid to call sin what it was . . . sin.

We should always be gracious in our speech as we, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). But withholding or watering down the truth is not gracious. We cannot be subject to the fear of man. We do not have the right to change the Gospel message to assuage our insecurities about being rejected.

Scripture contains many warnings to those who choose to dilute the truth of the God’s word to please men:

Luke 6:26, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.”

Galatians 1:10, “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

Isaiah 30:9-10, “<sup>9</sup>For this is a rebellious people, false sons,  
Sons who refuse to listen  
To the instruction of the LORD;  
<sup>10</sup>Who say to the seers, ‘You must not see visions;’  
And to the prophets, ‘You must not prophesy to us what is right,  
Speak to us pleasant words,  
Prophesy illusions.’”

The reality is that there is a hell. Christ spoke not only of the way to heaven but of the wrath to come. If some are saved, then others are lost.

Matthew 13:41-42, “<sup>41</sup>The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, <sup>42</sup>and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Luke 13:28, “In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out.”

This wrath is deserved by us. Our sin nature requires it. It will ultimately be poured out at the final judgment. Without salvation we cannot escape it, but by God’s grace, those who receive Christ will be spared.

It is important to preach the reality of judgment because it counters Satan’s first delusion was “you surely shall not die” (Genesis 3:4). Also, some people will not seek heaven until they are convinced there is a hell.

But it is also important to remember that even Pharisees could be saved if they repented. The worst of sinners is not beyond the saving work of Christ. His death is sufficient for all.

### **A Message of Repentance**

Isaiah 1:16-20:

“<sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;  
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.  
Cease to do evil,  
<sup>17</sup>Learn to do good;  
Seek justice,  
Reprove the ruthless,  
Defend the orphan,  
Plead for the widow.  
<sup>18</sup>‘Come now, and let us reason together,’  
Says the Lord,  
‘Though your sins are as scarlet,  
They will be as white as snow;  
Though they are red like crimson,  
They will be like wool.  
<sup>19</sup>If you consent and obey,  
You will eat the best of the land;  
<sup>20</sup>But if you refuse and rebel,  
You will be devoured by the sword.’  
Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

“Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance” (v.8). The Pharisees no doubt hoped that baptism was merely another religious ritual to perform. But baptism is not a simple religious rite that imparts some magical divine gift. John had no intention of letting his message be misunderstood.

Religious profession has no value unless accompanied by religious practice. Repentance must produce fruit. There is a great difference between talk and action. Isaiah 29:13, “This people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lips service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote.”

As true religion is not a matter of ritual, so it is not a matter of race. “Do not begin to say to yourselves ‘We have Abraham for our Father’” (v.8). Our relationship with the body of Christ serves us well but it does not save us. Religion must be personal before it is corporate.

It was not Abraham’s blood that saved him, but his faith. God cares little for externals. The argument of being a descendant of Abraham was used against Christ as well, to which He made the perfect reply. In John 8:39 it records His confrontation with the Pharisees. “They answered and said to Him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham.’”

To be sure, the historical sequence of God’s plan of salvation was “to the Jew first and also to the Greek,” Romans 1:16, but under the new covenant “there is neither Jew nor Greek” Galatians 3:28.

Finally, we must understand that we can be replaced with a bunch of rocks. “God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham” (v.8). Was John thinking of Ezekiel? “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” Ezekiel 36:26. God is sovereign in salvation. Neither ritual, nor association saves. God alone does that.

### **A Message of Response**

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down,” (v.9) reminds us that sins of omission are as damnable as sins of commission. It is not enough simply not to do evil. We must do good as well.

Galatians 6:9, “Let us not lose heart in doing good”

2 Thessalonians 3:13, “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good”

Hebrews 13:16, “Do not neglect doing good and sharing”

There is a practical, as well as spiritual, response to the gospel. There are things for us to do as a result of coming to faith. As faith without works is dead, so is repentance without fruit. That is why, “then what shall we do?” (v.10) is a great question we can ask when presented with the gospel.

Keeping in mind that our repentance does not atone for our sin, it is nonetheless reflected in the fruit we bear. This fruit is always specific to ourselves. It is not enough to rail against the sins to which we are not susceptible. We must actively, practically, individually respond to the gospel.

Notice that John's instructions do not allow of half measures. They are uncompromising and straightforward. And they are specific to the people involved. There are practical ways to love our neighbor.

To all, John says we must share our abundance with those less fortunate (v.11). Notice that he does not say it is sinful to have abundance, nor is he stating that we must impoverish ourselves in so doing. To those in authority, John states that they must exercise their authority graciously. Again, he is not stating it is wrong to serve the government (he does not tell the tax authorities and soldiers to quit their jobs), nor is he arguing that they should shirk their responsibilities. They are to collect what is owed and enforce the laws. The practical response to the gospel is not to take advantage.

### **A Message of Resolution**

There is a long history of martyrs of the faith. Peter, Paul, James, and Stephen come to mind in the early Church. Then the saints Polycarp, Ignatius and John Chrysostom. John Wycliffe and Jan Huss during the late medieval period, and then hundreds during the Reformation. Today there are still those who make the ultimate sacrifice of the cause of Christ around the world.

John did not back down from either his preaching, nor the directness of his message because of fear of reprisal. His rebuke of Herod was persistent and pointed. He "reproved him" (v.19) for the specific issue of the marriage of Herod to Herodias. But it is clear that this rebuking was a regular event. The marriage was just one of "the wicked things which Herod had done" (v.19) for which John held him accountable.

Herod was married to the daughter of the king of the Nabateans when he met Herodias, who at the time was the wife of Herod's half-brother Philip. This particular Philip was just a private citizen (not the Philip who was tetrarch). Herodias was eager to advance so she and Herod agreed to marry after he put away his other wife.

This marriage was sinful for three reasons. First, they divorced their spouses to marry. Second, their relationship was incestuous since Herodias was Herod's niece. Finally, it violated the Jewish law which allowed a man to marry his brother's wife only if he had died without offspring. Philip was not only very much alive but had children as well.

While Luke relates in this passage that Herod "locked John up in prison" (v.20), we know from later events that John would die at the hands of the executioner for his speaking against the behavior of Herod.

### **Take Aways**

Let us never fear man when presenting the gospel, nor let our fear cause us to compromise its message.

Let us be thankful to remember that the reward of saints is not of this world, and being with God in heaven will make amends for all our earthly suffering.