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JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHES GOOD NEWS

Luke 3:1-20

*(8 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)*

Over sixty years ago J. I. Packer warned believers against evangelizing in a flawed manner. He wrote that we wouldn't be preaching the gospel "if all that we did was to present Christ in terms of a man's felt wants. ('Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you want peace of mind? Do you feel that you have failed? Are you fed up with yourself? Do you want a friend? Then come to Christ; He will meet your every need . . .')—as if the Lord Jesus Christ were to be thought of as a fairy godmother, or a super-psychiatrist.) No; we have to go deeper than this."<sup>1</sup>

My guess is that all of us who know Christ agree with that statement from Packer, and yet you may be asking, "But what does 'going deeper' in our evangelism look like?" When we are speaking to someone about the glorious work of Christ coming, living, dying, and being raised so that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, how do we package that. How do we explain to them why this is good news? What do we tell them should characterize the life of one who professes Christ as Lord? Well, these questions and others are answered in Luke 3:1-20 as we look at the ministry of John the Baptist, and specifically as describes what John is doing in this text as "preach[ing] good news" (v. 18).

Before we get to John's ministry as Luke records it in our text, we need to be aware of what is perhaps obvious and might be left unsaid: some time has passed from the end of Luke 2. I noted last week that if Luke 1-2 were a movie, then before the story of Jesus staying behind in the temple, Luke would have had the screen go black with white lettering appearing with the words: "Twelve years later." Well, after that brief glimpse into Jesus' life at age twelve, the screen would go black again, and this time it would read something like, "Eighteen years later." I mean, the last time we saw John, he'd just been born, but Luke had noted, "And the child grew and became strong in the spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (1:80). Well, in Luke 3 we pick up with John's public appearance to Israel.

And as he appears on the public stage, he appears at a specific point in history (as Luke is sending the message once more that Christianity isn't based on some mythical tale but real events that happened in history), in the wilderness, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3). And though Luke doesn't focus on Jesus' identity in this section as much as he did in the first two chapters, there is another reminder that Jesus is the God-man. It's in verses 4-6 as Luke quotes from Isaiah 40:3-5 in order to explain what John is doing. He takes this quotation from a section in Isaiah where the Lord is announcing that though Judah will be driven into exile in Babylon because of their sins, he's going to come to them and bring salvation. And on that day when God comes to visit his people, it will be preceded by a voice

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1961), 61.

crying in the wilderness, preparing the people for his arrival. Well, Luke is telling us that's what John is doing as he prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. Therefore, if John is preparing the way for the coming of the Lord, and it is Jesus who is coming after him, then Luke is once more affirming that Jesus is the Lord. He is God the Son.

But, as I've noted, Jesus' identity isn't the focus of our text in the same way that it was the focus of chapters 1-2. Rather, the focus of this text is what John is preaching and doing in this section. And Luke tells us specifically that what John is doing is preaching the good news (v. 18). Therefore, what do we need to understand ourselves to communicate to others as we exhort them in proclaiming the gospel? What truths do we need to make clear in order to "go deeper" as Packer exhorts us in our evangelism. Well, a few things, and the first is that everyone outside of Christ is a sinner under God's wrath.

### **Everyone outside of Christ is a sinner under God's wrath**

This is our starting point in sharing the gospel, and this is what J. I. Packer was driving at in his quote we read earlier. The gospel isn't a proclamation that we make because man's great problem is loneliness, sadness, or the like. The gospel is good news because everyone outside of Christ is a sinner under God's wrath, and the gospel offers a remedy for *that*. This is the point that John makes, and he makes it in a couple of ways. He's first makes this point in "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3). Let me explain what I mean.

It's not entirely clear where baptism came from. What I mean is that John is baptizing people by immersing them under water and bringing them up from the water—which is why we call him John the Baptizer (or John the Baptist)—but it's not particularly clear where this precise practice came from. It may well be that John the Baptist made it up. If that's the case, he's saying to everyone, "You need to be baptized, proclaiming repentance for your sins," which is made clear from v. 3. It may also be that John got the practice from a Jewish practice of baptizing Gentiles who wanted to become worshipers of the God of Israel. The idea was that these Gentiles needed to be baptized because they were unclean and unholy. If, then, John was adopting baptism from this practice, he'd be saying to Jews that they need to be baptized, just like Gentiles, because *everyone*—Jew and Gentile alike—is unclean and unholy. Either way, John is making clear by inviting people to be baptized that all were in need of turning from their sin and finding forgiveness. Consequently, to proclaim to everyone that they needed to be baptized to proclaim repentance and find forgiveness for sins is to suggest that all people are sinners in need of forgiveness before a holy God.

But John knows the response that the unbelieving Jews might make to this declaration. They would say, "No, John. We're fine. We're clean. We're holy. We have no need of forgiveness. We're children of God because we've descended from Abraham." And so John anticipates that and says, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (v. 8). Paul will go on to tell us in Galatians that it is only those in Christ by faith who are truly sons of Abraham, saying, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29). Thus,

John makes clear that all people outside of Christ are sinners. All need to come to Christ to become Abraham's true offspring. That's the first part of the sermon point I want us to see. But we also see the second part, namely, that as sinners we're *under the wrath of God*.

As some come to John but aren't turning from their wicked works, John says to them in verse 7, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Then, as he expands on this imagery of the wrath to come, he declares in verse 9, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And finally, when John describes the judgment which Christ will bring, he says in verse 17, "His winnowing fork is in hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Let's put this imagery together. As sinners, we're naturally under the wrath of God. This is why Paul can label all mankind outside of Christ as "by nature, children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). This wrath of God will show itself in a way that is fittingly described by John as being like a tree cut down and thrown into fire. And then John adds that the fire is "unquenchable." This last piece of imagery is especially sharp. After all, a fire is quenched when it is either put out by some outside force or has burned up and destroyed whatever it is burning. The imagery here is that neither of these is happening. No outside person or force is putting out the fire; nor is the fire consuming its object such that it is quenched. Rather, the imagery is of everlasting punishment. And this again is confirmed in many places, but one of them being in Revelation 14:9-11 where all those who do not bow the knee of Christ "will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and . . . will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night." There, we see the clear note of God's wrath poured out on those who do not bow the knee to Christ by bearing eternal torment, which allows them no rest day or night. It is a terrifying image, and reminds us why the author of Hebrews can say that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). But what I want us to see is that we have all these elements already right here already in the preaching of John the Baptist.

I think we can all understand why John speaking this way is actually gracious. That might seem weird in light of this terrifying imagery of wrath and unquenchable fire. But it's gracious because John is pointing them to a remedy. We can find forgiveness and eternal life (rather than eternal judgment) through faith in Christ. And if we don't proclaim this bad news as a warning, then we aren't gracious. Imagine a doctor who knows you have a fatal disease for which he has a cure, but he decides not to tell you about your fatal disease because he fears that it might frighten you to hear. That is not loving, because unless we know we have the disease, we will not see our need for the cure. And so we are reminded with John's preaching, which Luke describes and preaching "good news" (v. 18) that we must make sure that people understand that everyone outside of Christ is a sinner under God's wrath. We need to make clear the bad news of our state outside of Christ. Otherwise, the good news will not sound like good news. But John's message didn't end with this warning. He also reminds us that the appropriate response to our sinful condition is repentance.

## The appropriate response to our sinful condition is to repent

As John was preaching, he proclaimed, “a baptism of repentance” (v. 3). In other words, the baptism was a way to visibly proclaim that one was repenting. And this fits with the ministry that the angel had told Zechariah that John would carry out. Gabriel had said to Zechariah, “He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (1:16-17).

Note how Gabriel speaks of John’s ministry as “turning.” He’ll *turn* many of the children of Israel to the Lord. And he’ll *turn* the hearts of the fathers to the children and *turn* the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. His ministry was one of calling people to turn, or, we can say, repent. To repent means to turn. We turn away from our pursuit of sin toward the Lord. We turn away from reliance on our good works to trust in the work of Christ alone as sufficient for our salvation. And so this is the response we make of sinners as we preach the gospel.

And John shows us what this looks like. As he calls the crowds to proclaim their repentance in the act of baptism, they ask him, “What then shall we do?” (v. 10). In other words, what does repentance look like? John answers them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise” (v. 11). John was calling them to turn away from selfishness and greed. Then he answered the tax collectors, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do” (v. 13). The tax collectors would be authorized by Rome to collect, say, ten percent from people but only pass on, maybe, eight percent to Rome. Therefore, the two percent would be their commission. That’s a fine profession. However, they were notorious for doing things like demanding fifteen percent, passing on their eight percent to Rome, and keeping seven percent as their commission. John tells them they have to turn from that sin. That’s what repentance looks like. And finally he answered the soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (v. 14). Again, the soldiers could threaten people and collect bribes. John tells them that following the Lord means stopping that. Repentance means being content with their wages instead of basically stealing from others. That’s what we’re doing when we call people to repent. We’re calling them to turn from sin and obey the commands of Christ. There simply isn’t a response to the gospel that is sufficient apart from repentance, and we must make that clear as we proclaim the good news as well.

And that leads us to our last note—true repentance will bear the fruit of a transformed life.

## True repentance will bear the fruit of a transformed life

Now, perhaps we might say that this is already apparent in what we’ve seen in the text. After all, John called them to repentance and illustrated what it looked like. Therefore, if the tax collector claimed to repent and then stopped collecting more taxes, you’d say that his repentance led to a transformed life. And you’d be right. But the fact that repentance must bear the fruit of a

transformed life isn't simply implied in this text. John makes it explicit. When the unbelieving Jews were coming to be baptized—which would have suggested they were claiming to be repentant—John responded, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (v. 8). In other words, he was saying that repentance isn't just words. It must result in a transformation of life.

This was a key point that wasn't stressed much in my upbringing. I am so grateful for the church that I grew up in that taught me the gospel and the authority of God's Word. But on this point, there was great confusion. Our Sunday morning service (like so many at that time in that area) involved a buildup to the moment at the end of the service where we would invite people who weren't believers in Christ to come and “accept him as their Lord and Savior.” This would involve a time of singing while the pastor waited down front to receive them. And though I think there are better ways to do this, there isn't anything necessarily wrong with that approach. The problem would come when people came down front to meet with the pastor to be saved. They were asked some questions to see if they understood the gospel, then they were led in a prayer, and then they were told that they'd been saved and that they should never doubt that they'd been saved (oftentimes even being told to write down this date so that no matter what happened in their life they would look back at this date and say, “Well, at least I don't have to doubt that I'm saved.”).

Now, here's the problem. What if that person's life was never transformed? Do we want to assure him that he knows Christ? What if they went right back to the sinful behaviors that characterized their life before that moment? What if they did the equivalent of keeping on collecting more taxes than they were due or extorting money from others by threats and accusations? It would seem if we asked John those questions, he would answer that we need to tell them that they're not bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, that they're professing to have repented, but they obviously haven't because repentance bears the fruit of a transformed life.

That's why when we baptize someone we're not declaring without a doubt that this person is saved. Rather, we're saying that they're professing their faith in Christ. And if indeed that is followed by a transformed life that wants to pursue the Lord in obedience and faithful in repenting of sin, then their life will seem to suggest that this profession of faith was accurate. There was indeed saving faith there. This is James' point, isn't it? He tells us that faith that is not followed by works is not saving faith but dead faith (James 2:14-26). This is the same thing John is suggesting—repentance must be followed by a transformed life.

But this leads to another question. How does this work? After all, if we're all sinners by nature, and then we decide that we want to turn from this, how can we change? Wouldn't something have to change in our very nature? Indeed, this is what John is saying to us when he speaks of what Jesus will do.

As John is baptizing and preaching in the wilderness, some begin to wonder if he's the Christ. So, he makes it very clear that he is not, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier

than I am coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 16).

The image of fire can be an image of judgment, as we see in verse 17. But it can also be an image of purification and cleansing, which it seems to be here. In other words, Jesus will cleanse and purify and refine those who turn to him in repentance and faith. Moreover, the reference to baptizing with the Holy Spirit is a fulfillment of what the Lord said through the prophet, Ezekiel, saying, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek 36:26-27).

If you read the OT you’ll see that Israel is notorious for “repenting” but never really changing. This is why God describes them as profaning his name. They are known as God’s people but they keep disobeying him before the nations, sending the signal to them that God isn’t worthy of their obedience. Therefore, God promises that he’ll do something about this. He’ll establish a new covenant with his people, and this time he’s going to transform them—giving them new hearts and putting his Spirit in them—causing them to walk in his ways. This is what John is telling us that Jesus will do (and does).

He gives us new hearts and puts the Holy Spirit within us so that our very desires are transformed and changed. We have hearts that want to follow the Lord instead of rebel against him. We are born with sinful hearts, and when we are saved we are born again with new hearts and new desires. We are baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. This is why we can say that genuine repentance and faith is followed by a transformed life. And if we claim to repent and believe but keep living like we were with our old heart, it suggests our profession is wrong.

John was proclaiming the good news. What does that involve? It means that we let people know that outside of Christ that we are all sinners under the wrath of God. It means we call people to repent and turn to Christ in faith as the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. And it means that we expect there to be a transformed life in keeping with their repentance as we walk together in the context of a local church. May these realities help shape us so that we are more faithful in proclaiming the good news with others, as we see here in the ministry of John the Baptist. And may that be our desire as we come to the table. Amen.