

Luke 3:1 – 22 John the Baptist

What can we learn from the ministry of John the Baptist? Luke 3 begins with an overview of his method and his message, although he will be mentioned again, later in Luke's gospel.

Certainly, John was the forerunner of the Messiah, predicted by both Isaiah and Malachi. The Malachi passage (4:5 – 6) was cited by the angel, Gabriel, to Zacharias, John's eventual father, back in Luke 1. When Zacharias got his voice back, he cited Isaiah 40:3 about his eight-day-old son. So, let's get right into the story in the first six verses of Luke 3. The first lesson: the right kind of change makes life simpler.

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Isaiah's point, written seven hundred years earlier about the purpose of the forerunner, was that he will make the introduction of the Messiah to Israel smoother. He will be the advance advertising who will convince a significant number of people to prepare themselves for this Messianic kingdom for which they had been waiting for 1500 years.

John's approach to this "making the path smoother" task centered around a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This immersion idea was not foreign to the Israelites, because something similar was part of the "becoming clean again" ceremony. When Israelites came to the temple, they needed to be "clean," in a legal sense, not a health sense, before they could enter one of the several gates and steps to the Temple platform. To aid in this process, baptistries, called mikvah, were constructed adjacent to those steps. More than 50 have been excavated on the south side of the Temple Mount. There are more, but getting an excavation permit adjacent to the Temple Mount is very difficult because that location is now the site of the Dome of the Rock, the second most holy place in Islam. And, since the Muslims are paranoid about someone blowing it up, they don't let non-Muslims get too close. The mikvah were constructed for assembly-line baptisms. If you needed a bath to remove the dirt from the road, there was a bathtub at the top, because cleanliness was not the point. The reasonably-dirt-free people then walked down some steps into a pool of water, which was about 4'6" deep. (The typical height was about 5'6".) At the bottom, you ducked your head so as to be totally immersed, then stood back up and walked up the other half of the same steps by which you came down. There was a railing between the two sides so that the "clean" would not be re-contaminated by the unclean coming down the steps. The big difference was that John did not baptize at the Temple Mount, but out near the Jordan River.

The people of Israel had been losing touch with "doing the right thing" for centuries. Their anticipation of this eternal kingdom of God was falling into the background, mostly due to the high level of corruption in the leadership of the various denominations within Judaism. This

immersion by John was to signal their neighbors that they were making a drastic turnaround for the purpose of being ready for this Messianic kingdom. A public announcement of our intentions keeps us on track better than just deciding within ourselves. Under the Law of Moses, the sacrificial system was a celebration of forgiveness. This baptism was to aid in returning to that attitude, as opposed to ritualism and rules. Judaism of that day was terribly complex, mostly because complexity hides corruption and allows the leadership to fleece the flock under the guise of being acceptable to God.

But how does such a change make things smooth, easier, more focused on the real objectives of this kingdom of God? We get back to the point: do the right thing. Don't hide behind rituals and rules. Just do what's right.

We have a slightly different perspective because the kingdom is already here, recorded in Acts 2. We are not waiting for it to start. But, re-committing ourselves to behaviors in keeping with that kingdom is still a good start. We adopt good behavior not to qualify for heaven but because if we don't, (1) no one will believe what we say, (2) because it is "fitting," and (3) because it grieves God. We listen for that which is simple and direct, knowing that, in religion, if it sounds complicated, it's probably wrong. The desires of God have been communicated by the master communicator, so ordinary people can easily understand. Anyone who claims that you need the explanations of a specially trained intermediary is really saying that God is not able to be clear to His creation, so you need to listen to me. Remember 1 John 2:27, "...you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing [the indwelling Spirit] teaches you concerning all things..." John the Baptist's message still resonates, "Give up trying to make it in the outside world, go the other way, and just do the right thing."

The second lesson we can draw from this summary of the career of John the Baptist is "excuses won't hide the obvious." Verses 7 through 9:

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

John accused his audience of hypocrisy and what I call righteousness through rationalization. The "wrath to come" most likely was a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that had been predicted by both Zechariah (in his chapters 12 through 14) and Daniel (9:24 – 27) to happen immediately after the time of the Messiah (which happened in 70 AD). I apply it there instead of Judgment day because of the line about the ax already being laid to the roots of the tree, which sounds pretty close to them, time wise.

John observed that they were really excited about the idea that the Messiah might come very, very soon, but were oblivious to the rest of the message from those same prophets. Further, he was describing them as snakes (a euphemism in many cultures for people who hide their evil intentions), hardly in keeping with those who were professing to be followers of the one true God. Their convenient rationalization was their lineage back to Abraham, "God liked our ancestor Abraham, so I'm undoubtedly on His good list, too."

Although we live long after the destruction of the Temple, people today still ignore the obvious, that Judgment will come; justice will prevail. If there is a Creator, there will be

Judgment. John's warning applies well today, too. We all have a concept of God and how His character is put together. Even if we get some of it wrong, just about everyone is pretty sure that justice is an integral part of that character. Of course, many people want justice for those who have hurt them or have done bad things, but, most people fail to take that to its logical conclusion, that the same justice will apply to me.

John was reminding them, and hopefully us, that we need to be consistent in our thinking. God won't fall for our excuses or rationalizations. In fact, other people really don't, either. Generally, our excuses are so pathetic that other people just leave it alone because, if you really believe that rationalization, you won't respond to the truth anyway. For the faithful, it's a good reminder that we need to be consistent in the way we live, with the choices we make, or no one will believe what we have to say about God.

And, like John said, don't put your confidence in the fact that you are in this or that group, but in your faith – which is trusting and acting upon the promises of God – which, of course, implies that we know what those promises are.

And, the third lesson from John's ministry to the Israelites just before Jesus began His earthly ministry, "Folks, this isn't rocket science," verses 10 – 14:

So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, but be content with your wages."

The Pharisees made the practice of Judaism difficult for the poor with their many rules, all of which took time and usually money, although this form of rationalized righteousness was affordable for the wealthy. The Sadducees made side-stepping the rules affordable for the rich, but the poor just didn't have the cash flow to buy their way out.

Notice that John did not address specific practices in his answers, just the basic concept: love one another (do what is best for others). The leadership of the day would have answered with a ritual or a sacrifice, both of which cost money but are of no real value. Rituals and sacrifices were symbols of important concepts, not means to an end.

John's point applies as well today as it did then. Tax collectors were expected by the general population to charge whatever they thought they could get. Tax collectors bought franchises from the government, then had to collect more than the cost of the franchise to make a living. The tax rates were not absolute. You can see the tremendous temptation to collectors. But, although the general population saw the tax collectors as traitors, since they collected Roman taxes, their variable tax assessments were just considered normal. The same went for soldiers. They could compel private citizens to carry their gear for a mile. If you were in a hurry and got stopped by a soldier, you would pay your way out. And, because soldiers were armed and trained in the use of those arms, they could extort money, food, or objects of value whenever they felt like it. John's answer was simple, "Just do the right thing."

And the fourth lesson from the message of John the Baptist, "Expect miraculous help and expect serious trouble," verses 15 – 18:

Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.

As people tend to do, they speculated instead of asking. Fortunately, God let John know what they were thinking. In his reply, John let them know that they should have been able to figure this out on their own. First, John referred to his practice of baptism in water, which is hardly a miraculous thing. As we will learn later, John did no miracle. While, apparently, his preaching was powerful, he did not have anything miraculous to mark him as definitely being from God. So, they should have known, based on the predictions about the Messiah from the prophets, John was not that. Further, John reminded them, I have not said anything about the Spirit, which three different prophets predicted would accompany the Messiah (Joel 2:28, Isaiah 44:3, Ezekiel 39:29). So, John could not be the Messiah. Thirdly, John countered a popular but misguided notion that the Messiah would usher in a time of immense prosperity and power for Israel. Obviously, they had skipped Isaiah 53, Daniel 9, and Zechariah 12 – 14. John reminded them that the Messiah period would be characterized by “fire”: suffering, affliction, persecution.

The chaff picture was another reference to the devastation shortly to come. Be fruitful (be the wheat), not the useless hangers-on (the chaff). While the faithful would come through the war without mass casualties, the Jews who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah would be burned up. Just to put the magnitude of the devastation in perspective, it took Hitler 10 years to murder 6 million Jews. It took the Roman legions less than a third the time to kill twice that number.

Although we live 1950 years after that terrible time, the same principles apply. On the bright side, all the faithful receive the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8) – which is that “baptized in the Spirit” thing that pops up a few times – in Acts 2:2, 11:15 – 16, and 10:44 – whose primary task is character development or character repair in the faithful. On the negative side, the faithful on earth have been told quite plainly that suffering is part of the bargain (Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 2:21, 1 Peter 4:12) as a means of developing the kind of faith that will be necessary to be successful in the family of God for eternity.

And the fifth lesson from the ministry of John the Baptist: The powerful will not like those who expose their carefully rationalized flaws (verses 19 and 20).

But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.

In every period of history, the powerful have made their own rules of morality. Because of their power, the ordinary people are afraid to say anything about their questionable behaviors, so the powerful have the illusion of propriety. Historically, this Herod, grandson of Herod the Great, and Herodias both were married to other (living) spouses, plus she was his half-niece (daughter of his half-brother). Everyone knew this (they were royalty), but, like today, people did not speak openly about the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

In that era, and before and after, confronting the powerful concerning their misbehaviors was often fatal. John was not confronting random poor choices or the unsavory ways of the time, but rather the choices made by those who claimed to represent the people of God, Israel.

We get the idea that John was less than tactful. But, even presented gently and humbly, confronting ungodly behavior among those who claim to represent God still often produces an adverse and irrational response. And when one confronts those wielding immense power, a strong response is to be expected.

We do not want to be those who create firestorms by confronting bad behavior. We do not want to be guilty of justifying a lack of tact by citing a single passage. If we go through the whole New Testament, we find that confrontation should not be our primary method or we will just drive people away. The illustration of John has that additional feature that Herod and Herodias were purporting to be leaders of the people of God. The methods used among ordinary people were gentle and kind and humble, appealing with lessons about the nature of the one true God, attracting people to His nature (as in Romans 2:4, for example). But, I'm sure we will all, eventually, encounter those who claim to be leaders of the faithful yet live shamefully. Rest assured, they have the power and will meet you with force. John just accepted that as what comes with the territory.

And finally, the sixth lesson from the career of John the Baptist, "It's not about me, it's about being part of the eternal kingdom", in verses 21 and 22:

When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."

The parallel accounts of this same scene are in Matthew 3:13 – 17 and John 1:29 – 34, in which you will find a few more details.

A common question is, "Why did Jesus need to be baptized by John? He had no sin of which to repent." However, John's major thrust was not about repentance but about being ready for the soon-to-arrive Messiah and His kingdom. Repentance was a means of being ready for that kingdom. Jesus was pointed toward that eternal kingdom predicted by many prophets, so He should join in with identifying with that kingdom.

The dove illustration was for John's benefit (John 1:33), to let him know that Jesus was the Messiah. In John 1:35, John began proclaiming publicly that Jesus was the Messiah.

What Jesus was teaching here was, "It's not about Me, it's about the everlasting kingdom of God." Certainly, Jesus was the key to the whole gospel idea, but Jesus never let that make Him self-important. He remained humble throughout. Those with whom He interacted were always more important than Himself. If He had let that notion of being the most important individual in all of human history enter His conscious thoughts, He could have easily rationalized being too important to get killed in such a humiliating manner. He could have decided that He needed more time on earth. He could have decided that He needed to take His message to all the world Himself. Who would argue with such conclusions? Instead, He was selfless from start to finish.

As an illustration, most churches appeal to outsiders with a self-centered gospel (what's in it for me). Perhaps the message was to not go to hell, or of gaining control of an out-of-control life, or escaping a cycle of failure. Certainly, those are benefits of the gospel, but when they are

used as the appeal, we are trying to attract people on the basis of their self-centeredness. Then, we wonder why people have trouble with developing selflessness. But, the gospel is not about me, it's about being part of God's kingdom, God's family. The kingdom is not about sin, since Jesus paid everyone's debt to justice, even those who do not care a thing about God. It is about mutual trust and selfless concern among the family members.

We can learn from John the Baptist the simplicity of life for the faithful. Excuses and rationalizations only make sense to those who invent them. Everyone else can see through them. And, if the rationalizers happen to be powerful, the backlash will not be pretty. This is not rocket science. Expect miraculous help through the indwelling Spirit who is given to all the faithful, but also expect significant difficulties. The difficulties are God's way of developing our faith. Remember, it's not about me. It's about the eternal family.