

Prayer

Bless those we love this day, Lord Jesus, and bless all those who are close to us who we ought to love. Keep them in Your care and protect them from all evil. If there are problems between us, may we be humble enough to allow you heal us; and when we are at peace together, may we give You the glory, for in Your great wisdom, You have given us each other. Praise be to You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Listen to the news and pray for those who report it, that a fair representation of the facts will be given

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** Pray for those who are new Christians, ask the Lord to help your church welcome all who love Jesus
- Give thanks to God for the work of the charities you support
- Continue to pray urgently for Haiti and its peoples, still in shock

Meditation

When the spirit is low, Jesus speaks,
But the soul finds it too hard to hear;
For sin has hedged itself around the bruised heart
Like a barrier of brokenness; a barricade of stress.

Too often, we are brought this low
By things going wrong, unawares;
The enemy has hurt us through the things we love,
Our family, our work, or God's people, the Church.

One who loves the Lord suffers most,
From losing sight of God's providence;
Our best is inadequate, and our spirit is distressed,
But only confession to the Lord brings forgiveness.

So bring all to His gracious embrace;
In Him, the heart is laid painfully bare;
But in surrendering to Him, the enemy is exposed,
And our brokenness is redeemed by Christ's love.

Bible passage – Luke 3:7-14

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Yield fruit consistent with repentance. Don't try to justify yourselves by saying, ' We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ⁹ Even now the axe is set against the root of the trees, so every tree that does not yield good fruit is about to be cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ 'What then should we do?' asked the crowd. ¹¹ John replied, 'Whoever has two tunics should share with whoever has none, and whoever has food should do the same.'

¹² Then, tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'

¹³ He said to them, 'Do not collect more than the amount authorised.'

¹⁴ After this, some soldiers asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't take money by force or by false accusation; be content with your pay.'

Bible Study

Review

John the Baptist was a remarkable man, and he drew a great deal of attention through his preaching of repentance, his unique practice of baptism, and his announcement of the coming of the Messiah. It is little wonder that many people came to hear John preach, to respond to his call for baptism and to consider his prophecy that God was about to act in power amongst His people once again. As we find out in our reading today, those who came out to see and hear this great man received more than they anticipated.

John held nothing back, and each Gospel reports his strong preaching and vigorous response to questions. The Gospels of Mark and John focus on John's identity as the one who announced the Messiah (Mark 1:4-8 and John 1:19-28). Matthew and Luke both report John's preaching and his warning to those who came seeking baptism (3:7-9 – see Matthew 3:7-10), though Luke alone tells us about his advice to the crowds, tax collectors and soldiers (3:10-14). Surely, John would have welcomed those who heard his message, but he was uncompromisingly harsh in his judgement, and it is not surprising that the different people who come to him asked '*what then should we do ...*' (3:10f.)? His response to this came in the form of clear moral teaching and practical examples (3:10-14), which link strongly both with the Old Testament and also the teaching of Jesus, yet to come.

It would have been shocking for a Jew to hear this sermon (3:7 to 9); John prophesied God's wrath coming on His own people (3:7), he virtually insulted the 'children of Abraham' (3:8) and he talked of the collapse of Israel (3:9). However, there was a reason for all this. John did not want people coming to him for baptism believing that the performance of this ritual act would be the answer; baptism itself could not put the human heart right with God. Baptism was for those who wanted to repent and change, but his stunning verbal pictures explained to people why they needed to change.

The dramatic expression '*you brood of vipers*' reminded his hearers that they were no better than their parents, just like a brood of newly hatched snakes are snakes just like their parents! The rebellion of God's people in past generations had resulted in repeated punishment or 'wrath' from God, so John warned that something more was required. He called for the people to '*Yield fruit consistent with repentance*' (3:8), and reminded the Jews that it was God's intention that they should be a moral people. At the time, the Jews were known as 'people of the Law', but through his cutting remark about children of Abraham (3:8), John warned that God was about to break apart previous perceptions about who the 'children of God' were. His last picture of the '*axe set against the root of the tree*' (3:9) is a prophecy of imminent action. It picks up Isaiah's prophecy about God's destruction of His vine (Isaiah 5), and looks forward to Jesus' own remarkable words about creating a new vineyard (13:6f. and John 15, Jesus' description of pruning the vine).

First, the crowds came to John asking '*what shall we do*' (3:10), to which he responded by calling on people to act with justice and moral courage by sharing possessions and food. The ancient community rules established by Moses (see Exodus 21-23) required that all God's people be cared for, but despite their detailed attention to the Law, Jews were not living the true heart of God's law. John's advice to the tax collectors and the soldiers followed the same pattern, asking them to act with common humanity and decency. Even today, we can easily imagine the appropriate moral advice to people of almost any profession who might want to come to God.

This, of course, is the point of Luke's record of John the Baptist. John exposed the deep human need amongst God's people (to begin with) to face sin and have a desire for justice and moral truth. In this way, he prepared people to hear the full message of God's love, found through Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What is the difference between Matthew's and Luke's record of these events (3:7-9)?
- Was the heart of John's message positive or negative (3:7-9)?
- What lay behind John's advice to the crowds (3:10,11)?
- What lay behind John's advice to the tax collectors (3:12,13)?
- What lay behind John's advice to the soldiers (3:14)?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V7 'wrath'

This is the only proper way to translate this phrase and it of course well known. There is a danger however, that people misunderstand the word 'wrath' today. We tend to think of wrath as unbridled anger; however, the Greek word means 'anger, retribution, or punishment', and implies something justified. The 'wrath to come' therefore, is God's just retribution, His righteous punishment for sin.

V7 'stones – children'

In English, we do not spot the play on words that makes sense of John's comment that 'God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones'. In fact, the word play is not visible in Greek; it is only discernible in Aramaic, the common language spoken by John and others in his day. When John first said these words in Aramaic, those for 'children' and 'stones' were very similar, being, 'benayya' and 'abnayya'.

V9 'set against'

John says '*the axe is set against the root of the trees*', and the true meaning of the word for 'set against' (often translated 'laid') paints a picture of a man who is in the process of cutting down a tree. Before the swing of the axe, he sets himself by holding the axe against the point he intends to hit with his first swing!

Significant phrases

V8 'Yield fruit consistent with repentance'

Other translations:

'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance' (NIV)

'Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance' (Authorised Version)

This phrase is straightforward translation, but it is worth knowing that the Greek word for 'consistent' (or 'in keeping with', or 'worthy') comes from the idea of scales or balances. It refers to what must be done to one side in order to balance the other, or as we might say, the notion of 'equivalence'. A scales or balance will determine the truth of something, and John was appealing for action truly equivalent to repentance.

V14 'Don't take money by force or by false accusation ...'

Other translations:

'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely' (NIV)

'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation' (NRSV)

Not all translations convey the sense of the Greek text, which indicates the obtaining of money by a combination of false accusation and violence; the two go together naturally.

Going Deeper

What is the difference between Matthew and Luke's record of these events (3:7-9)?

Clearly, John does not wish those who have come to him for baptism to go away and feel that they have done the latest 'right thing', and feel temporarily justified and right before God. Israel had been through too many false dawns in its long history for such a preposterous message to be worth preaching; surely, this is why John had to speak so strongly to those who came to him. In Matthew's Gospel, this entire passage (Luke 3:7-9) is repeated virtually word for word (Matt 3:7-10), but it is addressed exclusively to the Pharisees and scribes (see Matthew 3:7). It seems strange that Luke should use the same words but tell us this was John's message to 'the crowds'; does it not seem more real to believe that John said this to a group of religious leaders who were leading the people astray?

Whether Matthew or Luke truly had access to the original story, no one can tell, and it is impossible to determine whether Matthew wrote before or after Luke (though many assume that Luke copied Matthew). Look at the story in a different way, however, and it all seems to come into a clearer light. The fact that these words are reported word for word in two Gospels is strong evidence that John said these words exactly like this, but perhaps these words were John's general sermon; Matthew tells us what they mean for Pharisees, and Luke tells us that they meant something for everyone who came to hear John.

It does not help the Christian message today to read a part of Scripture and say 'that's for leaders, like Pharisees', as if we can lift the words and apply them to people who are a bit like Pharisees in our midst today. John's words are in Scripture to prepare all of us to hear and receive Jesus, the Messiah.

Was the heart of John's message positive or negative (3:7-9)?

Verses 7 to 9 contain a number of very negative word pictures, and each one warns us about the dangers of religiosity. Firstly, by saying '*who warned you to flee from the wrath to come*' John warned those who came for baptism that this ritual was not a means of escaping the coming judgement of God (3:7). Now, we might say that this applies to John's baptism not to the baptism of Jesus. Nevertheless, I reckon that John and Jesus would argue that no ritual can of itself be presumed to save the human soul. God saves the souls of those who love Him and act accordingly, and this is exactly what Scripture says in both Old and New Testaments (with the addition that this requires faith in Christ and His teaching);

'Hear O Israel, the Lord Your God is One, and You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength ...' (Deut 6:4)

'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' (John 13:34-35)

John did not give the Gospel form of this message because he was not the Messiah, but he reminded the Jews that God could do with His people as He wished (3:8) and was able to destroy His people and build them again according to His will (3:9). His warnings were stark, yet profoundly Biblical, and nothing in his preaching is inconsistent with the Old Testament.

The one positive saying in his sermon is this, '*yield fruit consistent with repentance*' (3:8). This, of course, remains a vital truth for all of God's people to this day. Being ready to turn from sin is the constant call on the life of every Christian, and the reason why 'confession' is usually a part of every Christian service of worship. The fruit mentioned by John is a simple fruit, a matter of the heart being responsive to the just, moral and spiritual call of God. We are not yet at a point in Scripture where we can talk about the fruit of the Spirit, but we must recognise that without a heart that shows this fruit of repentance, people are not in the right place to receive the Messiah or His Spirit.

What lay behind John's advice to the crowds (3:10,11)?

It is remarkable that here, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, John should preach a simple and challenging Gospel designed to make people look at themselves and their own relationship with God, and they respond by saying '*what then shall we do*' (3:10)? If we turn to the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, which is the second half of Luke's great work about Jesus and the life of the church, the first thing that happens after the coming of the Holy Spirit is that Peter preaches a powerful sermon directing people to consider what God was doing in their midst. Immediately after this, the response of the crowd is exactly the same as we find here in this passage; '*what shall we do ...*' (Acts 2:37)! Moreover, in response to this question, Peter tells the crowd that they must be baptised, and the baptised community begins to share all things in common (Acts 2:43f.)!

John's advice, when asked by the crowd about how they should respond to the message of God was that they should share their belongings with each other. Of course, John's message was hard to resist. Other Gospels record that John wore only a 'hair shirt' himself (Mark 1:6f.), so no one could accuse him of being a hypocrite! The tunic John referred to was a simple cloth or linen garment worn between an inner 'vest' and any outer cloak, and the number of shirts worn was dependent, as we might expect, upon the weather! The sharing of food was also a radical step, for in many communities, families struggled to provide for themselves, so this instruction asked people to think beyond their own needs to those of others.

What lay behind John's advice to the tax collectors (3:12,13)?

Tax collectors were hated people. Romans responsible for taxing the people of Israel hired 'tax-collectors'; they were, in effect, Jewish collaborators with the Romans, and were loathed as such. They obtained their positions by bidding to the Roman authorities for how much they could raise from the population, and this corrupt practice encouraged vicious people to act in appalling ways. Because there was no way of knowing the true rate of tax, the collectors got away with whatever they charged and were able to pocket money for themselves.

John's advice to the tax collectors was not to stop their jobs; that would have created dysfunction in the Israelite state, and the Roman legions would soon have marched on the area to restore order. Instead, John appealed to the tax collectors to act justly, and return overpaid tax to those from whom it was extorted. We are all familiar with the story of the call of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who when faced with the call of Christ, agreed to give back all he had taken from others (unsurprisingly, found in Luke's Gospel, 19:2). John had preached years before that this was his duty, and he may well have known this.

What lay behind John's advice to the soldiers (3:14)?

Who were the soldiers who came to ask John his advice? It is hard to imagine Roman soldiers casually becoming involved with John; they were men under discipline, who lived in their garrisons, constantly at the ready for service. It is highly likely that these soldiers were conscripts working for Herod Antipas (in Galilee) or possibly the Temple authorities (from Jerusalem, the same group under the authority of the Temple Sanhedrin and the Chief Priests, who were employed to arrest Jesus – see Luke 22:47f.). Their job was to maintain the peace, rather like the police today; and if these soldiers were effective in their work, then they would keep the full weight of Roman martial law at bay, something that in truth, neither the Jews nor the Romans really wanted.

These 'Jewish' soldiers fared little better in Jewish society than tax collectors, and they also suffered the indignity of varied rates of pay due to the unstable nature of Jewish governance at the time. When they asked John about what they should do, he went straight to the heart of their own moral dilemmas. No, they should not cease their jobs, but accept their role in society and do so fairly. Perhaps if they did not rob people and cheat through false accusation, then, instead of being loathed, the Jewish people would appreciate them, along with the work they did. The message is simple.

Application

So although John's message was tough at the beginning, we can see clearly that his message to those who came and asked him was profoundly practical and plainly put, even if it was hard. The fact was that people continued to come to John. They were impressed by a message which asked them to

- Expect God to work and reveal His Messiah.
- Live with an honest attitude and a repentant heart, recognising sin and its consequences.
- Act with neighbourly love and compassion, looking out for the needs of others.
- Reform the two great sores in the life of Jewish people; tax collectors and soldiers.

Now, John was famous for baptising people, but this particular passage of Luke does not emphasise baptism, it stresses what God requires from people to justify their baptism. Because of this, the passage reveals some elementary moral and spiritual teaching, and all of it is compatible with the teaching of Jesus, and later, of Paul and the other New Testament writers.

In a simple way, John appeals to people before they have met the Messiah. He says that ritual is of little importance unless it is a sign of a changed heart, and there is no changed heart without repentance, because repentance means desire for change. When people are ready and willing to hear about change then they will listen to the Gospel. John also shows us the importance of a message that asks people to think beyond their own needs to those of others; this is a social message but it is fundamentally appealing to the vast majority of people. It is true to this day (perhaps debatably) that people who live at a subsistence level in countries like Africa and India have a better understanding of the principles of common sharing than most in more developed nations, where the gap between rich and poor can be oppressively scandalous.

The Bible does not always ask or require of people that they should continue in their jobs and not complain, as John suggests in verses 12 to 14. However, there is no doubt that it is wise advice to people to hold on to the stability of their work within good moral reasoning, rather than act in a revolutionary manner! Other Scriptures indicate the nature of God's call that takes a person away from normal work to a special work of God, but most people must accept the work they have, and seek to act in a spiritually moral and just way within it. Here, John's advice is not radical, but helpful.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Can we learn how to be better Christians from this passage of Scripture, or should we discard its advice and wait for the 'full Gospel' found in Jesus?
2. Do the words '*flee from the wrath to come*' (3:7) have any resonance with people today? Should they have any resonance with people today?
3. If John was dispensing advice today, what might he say to bankers or politicians today (or any other group of people you may suggest)?

Topics covered by this text

- *The moral justice of God's work in the world*
- *The 'fruit consistent with repentance'*
- *Communal living and social justice*
- *Social order and morality*

Personal comments by author

I reckon that this passage has a considerable amount to teach us about the proclamation of the Gospel. On the one hand, John was fearsomely just but he also seems to be understanding and sensitive to the needs of individuals, and groups. Today, if we are to proclaim the Gospel, we need great boldness and also great sensitivity, and we gain a glimpse of this from John.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Try and write out this passage of Scripture, but imagining that John was preaching today and in your part of the world! As you do this, think carefully about how John's message applies to our world today.*
- *Which categories of people, profession or vocation, needs a special word from God today? Talk about this with a friend and try to think of ways in which such a message can be delivered.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have called people for centuries, and You understand people better than we think. You understand the financial and stock markets today, and you know the political parties and pressure groups. Work through Your people to overcome the problems that beset our world and allow injustice to prevail. We ask this through Your name: AMEN
