

Session 2

PREPARE THE WAY

Luke 3:1-6

Memory Verse

He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

– LUKE 3:3-4, CSB



Prepare the Way

THEOLOGICAL THEME: John the Baptist was the forerunner to Christ. John was sent from God on a mission to bear witness to the light that all might put their faith in Christ. John was not the light. Rather, he came to bear witness about the light.

 What is the purpose of a lighthouse? What might prohibit a lighthouse from fulfilling its purpose?

 In what way should followers of Christ act as “lighthouses” to those around them?

Modern technology has made maritime navigation much safer and easier. Sailors no longer have to depend on the stars to guide them. They don't have to use a line to sound water depth. Lighthouses aren't really necessary anymore either. There was a time, however, when all of these navigational tools were the only way sailors made it back to shore alive.

Lighthouses provided the indispensable service of helping ship captains know how close to shore they were. Lighthouses signaled both danger and safety. A lighthouse indicated to the sailor where not to go to avoid crashing into rocks or running aground. By virtue of their ability to illuminate danger, they showed the way to safety.

John the Baptist was a lighthouse. He called upon his listeners to repent of sin (warning of danger) and to receive the Kingdom (revelation of safety). The call of Christ to the lost world is both negative and positive. It is simultaneously a call to something and a call away from something. Christ said that people can't serve two masters. This was John the Baptist's message. This is also the message of Christians today. In order to truly give the good news of forgiveness in Christ, Christians must be clear about the bad news of each person's offensiveness to God.

Session Summary

Jesus explained to His disciples that repentance for the forgiveness of sins in His name would be proclaimed in all nations, and that they themselves would be the witnesses who would bear testimony about Jesus Christ (Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8). Jesus promised that He would never cast out those who came to Him (John 6:37). He never sends away humble sinners who come to Him for mercy, but He does send out redeemed souls to call other thirsty souls to find eternal refreshment in Him (John 20:21).

John the Baptist was the first person to bear witness of Christ. His example is an encouragement and guide for all Christians. Those who follow Christ don't look at New Testament narratives and seek to recreate them, for this practice doesn't recognize the fact that Christ's ministry on earth and the time of the apostles was unique and served to lay the foundation of the church. Now that the foundation has been laid, no new foundation is necessary. Instead, Christians carry out the clear directives of the New Testament with humble faith and obedience. John's example gives believers guidance in how to carry out the command to bear witness of Christ.

For example, Christians should not go about offering a baptism of repentance in nearby rivers or dress in camel hair and eat locusts, but there are important principles that we can discern in John's ministry that should be imitated. We will see that John was sacrificial, bold, and humble. Those same characteristics are present in all faithful ambassadors of Christ, from the first century until the 21st. During the season of Advent, as we anticipate the return of Christ, we should take the opportunities we are given to proclaim the truth of Christ as John did.

1. Sacrificial (Luke 3:1-2)

Luke introduced Jesus' earthly ministry by describing the peculiar ministry of the man whose miraculous birth was outshone only by Jesus'. John the baptizer was the unlikely offspring of old Zechariah and Elizabeth. His birth was also foretold by angels (Luke 1).

Luke wrote that "God's word came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness." This is significant because this means that he wasn't a sanctioned teacher or preacher. He didn't fit the mold of the regular religious leadership class. His message was simple, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

? According to Luke 1:2, where did John the Baptist conduct his ministry? What other light does Matthew 3:4-6 shed on John's ministry and living?

John conducted his ministry "in the wilderness," not in a synagogue or some urban venue in Jerusalem. John operated in a manner that was free from the trappings of materialism and popularity. According to Matthew, John wore some sort of garment made out of camel hair. He ate what he could find out in the wilderness—wild honey and locusts for the most part. John was strange. He wore strange clothing. He ate strange food. And he dedicated himself to a strange ministry.

? Why did John live as he did? What made John sacrifice so much to fulfill his mission? How are all followers of Jesus called to live like John the Baptist did to some degree?

John did desire to gain followers, but not for himself. He lived to turn people toward the Christ. In fact, he actively pushed his own followers toward Jesus (John 1:35-39). John's ministry and strangeness was no gimmick. Those things are all indicative of a life offered up for the purposes of Christ. Think about what made John strange. He

wore a camel-hair garment. He wasn't concerned with his outward appearance. He wasn't interested in seeking to make a good impression by wearing fine clothes. He was not preoccupied with satisfying his personal appetites. He ate what he could get out in the wilderness. His mission was all consuming. He would get dressed and eat around the mission, not vice versa.

John was focused on his mission and gave himself to it fully. He abandoned his life unto God and took up the mission with reckless abandon. John was a single-minded messenger.

The basis for John's sacrifice to live in the wilderness and preach the message is the same basis for Christians today when they hand a tract to someone on the street, meet a friend for coffee to share the gospel, or invite neighbors over to hear their testimony. It was the basis for Paul's focus as well.

Paul wrote to the Philippian church, "But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7-8). John, Paul, and faithful Christians today live sacrificial lives for the sake of the mission of Christ because of the immense value they place on Christ. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the buried treasure found by the man who went and sold all he had so he could purchase the field and obtain the treasure (Matt. 13:44).



Application: Where do you need to sacrifice for the sake of following Jesus?

2. Bold (Luke 3:3)

John the Baptist sacrificed a great deal for the sake of Christ. He dressed strangely. His food was meager. He was imprisoned. Finally, he was beheaded. But John was no weakling who was trampled on by those in power, forced to suffer. He suffered because of his boldness.



What evidence do we have of John's boldness from these verses?

Luke reported that John “went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Don't rush past this. When was the last time you went into the streets of your neighborhood, nearest grocery store parking lot, or city park and loudly proclaimed the message of the gospel? It takes an unwavering confidence and holy boldness to proclaim an open-air message to perfect strangers.

According to other gospel accounts, John's reputation spread and the crowds grew. It wasn't long before the religious elite ventured out to assess the situation. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the two preeminent sects of the day, were in for a surprise. When John saw them he said: “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” The Pharisees and Sadducees were well-respected and led the nation of Israel's devotion to and understanding of God. They certainly weren't accustomed to being called names and called out by a wild man with no credentials to speak of.

John told the truth clearly, even when it posed a great risk to himself. This is boldness illustrated in vivid detail. This same boldness was shared by the apostles as well. Early in their ministry, Peter and John were detained by Jewish leadership (Acts 4). They boldly testified to the council before they were finally released, but not without a stern warning. When they returned to the believers, Luke reports that they lifted their voice in prayer and, among other things, prayed these words, “And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that your servants may speak your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29).



Where is there a need for Christian boldness today?

The West was largely Christian for many years. While this Christianity may have been predominantly cultural, it still meant that Christians, Christian churches, and Christian values enjoyed a prominent place in society. However, this has shifted dramatically over the past several decades. Christians are increasingly looked upon with disdain and labeled as bigoted, narrow-minded, and intolerant. The boldness of John the Baptist and the apostles is necessary now more than ever for Christians living in the West. We would do well to add the prayer, “Lord, consider their threats, and grant that your servants may speak your word with all boldness” to their daily devotion to the Lord. Christians must be bold to make the most of opportunities this Christmas season to testify of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The boldness of John the Baptist, the apostles, and Christians throughout history has been based on robust confidence in the power and faithfulness of God. Christian boldness is not based on confidence in one’s self; that would be foolhardiness. Rather, Christian boldness is based on God’s power, that’s why it is possible to be both bold and humble.

? Application: Where do you have a need for boldness for Christ’s sake? How might you seek this boldness from Him rather than seeking to stir it up yourself?

3. Humble (Luke 3:4-6)

John the Baptist’s sacrifice revealed how much he valued Christ. His boldness revealed his confidence in God. His humility revealed his clarity about himself.

? What did John the Baptist reveal about his mission in verses 11-12? What made John the Baptist humble?

John’s mission and ministry were all about getting people to look at Christ. He made an astounding statement in verse 11 when he said, “I am not worthy to remove his sandals,” referring to Christ. What he meant was that he was not even worthy to be

Jesus' servant, His slave. As the moon produces no light of its own but only reflects the light of the sun, so John was not the light, but he came to bear testimony of the light, Christ.

John the Baptist was a humble man because he was keenly aware of two key truths. First, he knew that he was a mortal man, a dependent creature in need of forgiveness. John the Baptist, though he lived sacrificially and boldly for Christ, knew that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. He knew that there were none who were righteous, not even him (Rom. 3:10,23). Second, he knew the glory of Christ. In Matthew 3:11, he said, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I . . . He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out."



How would you define humility? Why is it important for Christians to be humble?

To be humble is to be aware of one's desperate dependence on another and then lean into it. Christians who are humble look only to Christ for their provision in body and soul. They are like Paul who said, "I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Christians who are humble recognize their weakness and need, causing them to trust in the Lord with all their hearts. When they cling to Christ in faith, then they are strong and are able to be bold for the gospel and sacrifice for the gospel. Humble, bold, and sacrificial witnesses of Christ are pleasing to the Father and are used to draw the lost to Himself.



Application: Where do you need to grow in humility? How does further reflection on the gospel help us to do this?

Conclusion

The Christmas season is an excellent time for Christians to humble themselves before the Father and to witness of Jesus Christ with boldness, no matter what the sacrifice. John the Baptist provided a helpful and challenging example to believers today who desire to give testimony of Christ during the holiday season.

? Would you say you regularly sacrifice for the sake of Christ? What do you need to sacrifice this Advent season that others might hear the truth about Jesus?

? How might you seek boldness to pursue gospel conversations with those around you during the Christmas season? What makes this difficult for you?

? How might true humility give us further opportunities to point others to Jesus?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Christ is the Messiah, the Promised One, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). John the Baptist bore witness because he knew the truth.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Jesus told His disciples just before He ascended that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and they would testify to the world about Him. Their mission was the same as John's mission. After 2000 years, the mission of Christians hasn't changed.



FOR NEXT WEEK

A Gift of Humility

Main Passages

- Luke 3:7-18

Session Outline

1. Stern Warning (Luke 3:7-9)
2. Clear Encouragement (Luke 3:10-14)
3. Hearty Deflection (Luke 3:15-18)

Memorize

He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah

- Isaiah 3:3-4, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Matthew 3:1-12
- Tuesday - 1 Peter 3:15
- Wednesday - Romans 1:16
- Thursday - Psalm 96:3
- Friday - Romans 6:23
- Saturday - 2 Corinthians 5:20