

Session 3

A GIFT OF HUMILITY

Luke 3:7-18

Memory Verse

John answered them all, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

– LUKE 3:16, CSB



A Gift of Humility

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Jesus said that among those born of women there was no one greater than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). However, in response to the whispers surrounding him regarding if he was the Christ, John responded by saying, “One mightier than me is coming after me, whose sandals I am not even worthy to loose.” By no means was John perfect, but he lived a life of humility empowered by the Holy Spirit. Do we recognize that everything we have has been given to us by the Lord? Are we hoarding it and using it for our own glory and gain, or do we see what we have as a gift of God for His glory?

 What comes to mind when you hear the word humble?

 How can you tell if a person is humble? Why is humility something worth pursuing?

Proverbs 22:4 tells us, “Humility, the fear of the Lord, results in wealth, honor, and life.” Yet, many Christians believe that humility simply happens; that it is some sort of magic spell that will come over them if they muster up enough spiritual feelings.

But this isn't how it works. If it did, Paul wouldn't have given Christians the command to be humble and practical instruction about the practice of humility (i.e. Phil. 2). Christians must make an effort to develop humility. This happens primarily through ordinary means of grace in the context of the local church.

Jonathan Edwards put it this way, "We ought therefore greatly to humble ourselves, and be sure [to] let us see to it that humility prevails and flourishes amongst us with other religion . . . Let each one of us search and try our ways, and labor to become more as little children, to be low before God, and to walk humbly amongst men."¹

As Christians labor "to be low before God" it is helpful to look to examples of humility in Christian history and in the Scriptures themselves. In our text today, we find a man of exemplary humility, John the Baptist. We considered the baptizer's humility briefly last week. Let's dig deeper into this foundational aspect of his life.

Session Summary

Though many may think that John the Baptist's ministry was characterized by boldness or peculiarity, the heart of his work was humility. His humble estate as the doorman for the King of kings and Lord of lords was the foundation for both his fearless boldness and his unorthodox way of living. After all, who would disregard his own reputation, preach someone else's rules, and divert attention away from himself and to another except a man who has a very low view of himself and a very high view of the one he serves?

1. A Stern Warning (Luke 3:7-9)

John the Baptist had gathered a crowd. All sorts of people left the cities to go out into the wilderness to hear this strange-looking preacher. Some were even baptized by him. Clearly, some who heard him were moved to true repentance. Others seemed to have alternate motives.



How would you describe John the Baptist's tone in verses 7-9?

These verses describe a direct and harsh message. Last week, we discussed the baptizer's boldness. In Matthew's account of this scene, these words were directed specifically at the religious elite, the Sadducees and Pharisees. It is likely that Luke simply left that specification out. John's indictment here was consistent with the primary offense of the religious elite—self-righteousness.

This is a vivid example of the sort of fearless and bold preaching that is needed today. While there is no longer a need for a prophet to prepare the way of the Lord, the blood-bought people of God do need under-shepherds who believe the Word of God and preach it, fearing God alone and not man (Gal. 1:10).

? What warning did John the Baptist give to his listeners? What did this stern warning delivered by John the Baptist reveal about his motivation in preaching and serving the Lord?

The question “Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?” is powerful. John was not one for mincing words. He wasn't preaching a message of health and wealth. He wasn't promising anyone their best life now. He told them the hope they put in their being descendants of Abraham amounted to a pile of stones. He warned them that the axe was already laid at the root, and if they were honest with themselves, then they could probably already feel the heat of the fire into which they may be thrown.

It's worth noting here that John the Baptist didn't shy away from speaking the truth about what sinful humans need to be saved from. When he suggested they “flee from the wrath to come,” he wasn't referring to the wrath of the devil but the wrath of the one true and living God (Rom. 1:18). Even the devil trembles at the thought of God's wrath, and so should we. Christians haven't been saved from hell alone. They've been saved from the all-consuming wrath of a holy God.

It takes tremendous humility to bring a message of doom. John's words in verses 7-9 would have tickled no ears, only stepped on toes. Clearly, John the Baptist wasn't worried about increasing his popularity or building his brand. He didn't have time for that; he had a road to make straight. John the Baptist's stern warning betrayed a profound humility.

? Application: Are you ever tempted to hold back the truth of God’s Word because of how it may make you look? Where might this be an indication of pride and a lack of humility?

2. Clear Encouragement (Luke 3:10-14)

Luke reported that after John’s attack on self-righteousness, some people asked him “What then shall we do?” Again, those who asked for further clarification probably had differing motives. Some asked out of a genuine fear of the Lord and desire to be delivered from the coming wrath of God against sin. Others, however, may have asked in a scoffing manner.

? What was John the Baptist’s answer? What did he tell them to do? How might this apply in our context?

John completed his explanation of repentance. In verses 7-14, his message could be summed up in one word: Repent! Repentance is made up of two parts. First, a person turns from sin. In verses 7-9, the baptizer pointed out their sinfulness and their worthless self-righteousness. But when one turns away from something, they must also turn toward another thing. In verses 10-14, he explained what things they should turn to. He called them to leave behind evil deeds and to do what was right. The two specific examples that Luke included in his account had to do with the normal (though sinful) practices of tax collectors and soldiers. They were both in positions of authority and used that power to extort money.

? What would’ve been strange about John’s counsel to the tax collectors and soldiers in this passage? What is counter cultural about true repentance in our culture?

Remember, Israel was not a free and autonomous nation during the time of John the Baptist and Jesus' earthly ministry. The Roman general Pompey had captured the city of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. This meant that Israel was under Roman occupation. Of course, no nation desired to be stripped of their autonomy, but for Israel, this was especially difficult because they believed that the land on which they lived had been given to them by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were a special nation set apart and ruled by God alone. A Roman occupation didn't fit into the Jewish worldview. To make matters worse, some Jews had capitulated and gone into the service of the empire by becoming tax collectors. They collected taxes from their own people on behalf of the Roman government. The soldiers who were present at John the Baptist's sermon were probably not Romans, but auxiliary troops from Syria working for the Roman government.

So, when a camel hair wearing prophet showed up in the Israelite wilderness some may have suspected the beginnings of grassroots political revolution. It was certainly expected that the Messiah would throw off the Roman yoke of oppression. However, John told the tax collectors to keep collecting taxes but without taking extra. He told the soldiers to keep enforcing Roman law, but without abusing their power. This may have come as a surprise to many who heard his message. Some were likely disappointed.

The key to understanding John's message is recognizing that he wasn't speaking on his own authority. John the Baptist hadn't invented his message by his own wisdom and calculations. He was a man under authority and was preaching the message that God had put in his mouth. This brings us back to John's humility. It takes great humility to continually bring another's message, especially when it isn't what the audience desires. The man who is humble before his God wouldn't dare take matters into his own hands and adjust, tweak, or change the message in order to please the crowd. The humble Christian desires to please God and God alone.

? **Application:** How do you display that God's Word is enough to meet your own spiritual needs and the needs of those to whom you minister? Do you humbly accept the provision that God has given you for your soul? Or do you seek to supplement with other things? What needs to change?

3. Hearty Deflection (Luke 3:15-18)

John was unlike anyone that people had seen. He spoke with authority, and he didn't seem to care about currying favor with the religious elite. Furthermore, there were some fantastic rumors going around about his conception and birth. Despite his harsh message and his resistance to political revolution he had gained a large following. This shouldn't surprise us, however, because those who were sincerely drawn to John were evidence of God's plan to glorify and exalt the Son, the Christ, Jesus.



What were those who were following John asking themselves? What was his response?



How might he have been tempted to respond differently?

It was only natural for people to wonder whether John the Baptist might be the Christ. They were hoping for his arrival and the baptizer seemed like a decent candidate. But John knew that his ministry was meant to be eclipsed by the God-man.

In these verses, we also see the second theme of John's preaching, namely faith in the good news of the One to come. John's ministry may be summed up with two words: repentance and faith. Jesus immediately picked up on these themes when John was arrested and carried them forward as His ministry progressed (Mark 1:15).

Here we see John's humility on full display. He said, "He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." It is reported elsewhere that he made the statement, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). In order to make things even more clear, John contrasted his ministry with Jesus'. He said, "I baptize you with water . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit

and fire.” The people were excited and encouraged by John the Baptist. There was energy around his campaign. But he had news for them—they hadn’t seen anything yet! Luke concluded his summary of John’s ministry by saying, “So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.”

What was this good news? Quite simply it was that the Christ was about to appear. This is humility personified. The good news that John the Baptist brought to the crowd that had gathered to hear him was that he was going to fade into the background and someone else who exceeded him in every way would take center stage. Christians ought to strive to be characterized by this sort of humility today. They should, as Paul said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

 **Application: Who takes the center stage of your life? Is your life all about you or about Christ? How would those closest to you answer that question?**

Conclusion

John the Baptist’s ministry was important because God purposed for him to prepare the way for the Lord by preaching repentance and faith. But his ministry served a greater purpose and a great person—the person and work of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist is a tremendous example of humility for Christians today. His life serves as an example of what a humble life looks like in the context of real life. During the season of Advent, followers of Christ would do well to pursue the same degree of humility. This is a prime opportunity to point others away from ourselves and the things of this world and to the only One worthy of all glory and honor.

? What do you think are some of the impediments that keep Christians from walking in humility? What keeps you from this?

? How is humility tied to the core truths of being a follower of Jesus?

? Where is God calling you to be humble currently? How does it take humility to share the gospel with others without changing the message to please your audience?

CHRIST CONNECTION: John the Baptist pointed to Christ. His ministry was empty and meaningless if the One who would baptize with the Spirit did not come after him.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: John the Baptist not only walked in obedience by preaching against sin, for adherence to the Law of God, and about the coming Messiah, but he also did so with a humble heart seeking glory for God, not for himself. This is a worthy model for all followers of Jesus.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Memorize

John answered them all, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

- Luke 3:16, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Matthew 11:2-11
- Tuesday - Isaiah 7:14
- Wednesday - Genesis 12:1-3
- Thursday - 2 Samuel 7:12-13
- Friday - Isaiah 53:12
- Saturday - Psalm 16:10

References

¹Edwards, Jonathan. *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.