

## Make a U-turn- John the Baptist

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### Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist sure puts you in the Christmas spirit, doesn't he?

John represents the school of the prophets. He is dressed like Elijah. They both wore Camel's hair garments with a leather belt around the waist (2 Kings 1:8 and Matt 3:4). Elijah was the prophet's prophet. He was supposed to come before the messiah would arrive (Mal 4:5). John also had the words of the prophets on his lips (Mal 3:1; Is 40:3-5). The stereotypical cry of the prophet is "repent", which means to turn. You repent when you head down the wrong road and when you realize it you make a U-turn. It involves both turning away from what is wrong and turning towards God and His ways. The prophets usually arose to call people back to the Law and Covenant. The people would stop following God's direction in their life. They would become attracted to the cultures around them. They would start participating in the worship of other gods, and forget the moral and religious direction God set out for them. So the prophets were those who stood up to call the people back when they had wandered too far off the path. The prophet stood up to tell them they are racing towards a dead end. Prophets primarily spoke God's words to His people. They weren't primarily about predicting the future. They were there to call people back to God and warn about natural consequences for being reckless- like travelling too fast and careless on a narrow mountain road with no guardrails. John the Baptist represents the prophets and in a way represents the Old Testament, both in calling people to repent, and in pointing to the coming Messiah. John stands in the gap between the Old Testament and the New.

John has a hard message for the crowds. That means he has a hard message for us. It's like going to the doctor and he tells you that you are overweight, or that your blood pressure is way too high, or you drink too much, or you need to stop smoking, or stop eating salty foods. It's not always a comfortable message to hear, but it is ultimately for our good. If we are willing to hear it we can make a change that might save our lives.

Have you ever watched a movie where some disaster is happening and someone is panicking? Then someone grabs them by the collar and slaps them to get their attention? John is that person that grabs us by the collar, slaps us across the face. John's slap is "you brood of vipers!" If you are coming to John to be baptized then you are admitting you are a part of the problem. The world is in a mess and unless you are willing to admit that you are a part of that mess you have no business seeking baptism from John. His baptism is for repentance. That means we see ourselves running from God and then we stop and turn back. Yes, it is shocking and offensive, but if we are in need of repentance, then vipers we are. If we are not a "brood of vipers" then we don't need to repent and why are we out in the wilderness seeking out John the Baptist? Are we just voyeurs? If we are going to take John seriously, then we have to take our sin

seriously and not sugar coat it by saying things like “well, I’m only human”, or “everyone does it”. John wants us to look at our lives intensely and seriously.

He wants us to come out from behind the images we hold up to pretend we are okay with God. The Jewish people in John’s day would sometimes hide behind the fact that Abraham was their ancestor. John says your family lineage doesn’t count for squat. God only has children- he doesn’t have any grandchildren. We can’t speak about the faithfulness of our parent, or say “my grandfather helped build this church” and think that gives us some special favor with God. God has no grandchildren. Likewise, we can’t say I’ve attended church all my life as if church attendance is automatically an “in” with God. Neither can I say, “I’m a priest” and hope God goes easy on me. On the contrary we are told we will be judged more strictly. God cares about the state of our hearts, not our role in the community, not who our parents are, or how long we’ve been Christians.

John uses the image of a tree. He says that when we say that we are God’s children it’s like a tree declaring itself to be an apple tree. But, John says you know a tree by its fruit. What good is an apple tree that never produces apples? John says it’s firewood. John wants us to “bear fruits worthy of repentance”. He doesn’t want us to just say “we repent”. Neither does he want us to thoughtlessly say, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.” John says that God wants to see that repentance has really hit us. He wants to know it is a reality and not just words. Have we shed tears over our sin? Have we felt pain because of the hurt we have caused someone? Not embarrassment, or the pain of getting caught, but pain because of the wrong we have done? Have we shed tears because of the offense we have caused God? Those tears are fruit of repentance. But, tears can be short-lived. Emotions like that can be fickle.

The people ask John what kind of fruit he is talking about. What does he say? Interestingly, this prophet doesn’t give a bunch of religious suggestions. We might think that a religious guy like John might suggest that we pray more, or read our Bible more. Our problem is not often that we aren’t religious enough, it’s usually that our hearts have become hard. What does he think we need to do to show that repentance has taken root in our hearts? Another prophet, Isaiah, quotes God as saying this, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught” (Is 29:13). “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ... Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. ... Your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ... Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause” (1:11-17). For Isaiah, they would meet in the Temple and sing psalms about God being just and holy, but then they would leave worship and act cruelly and oppressively. Their primarily problem wasn’t that they

weren't religious enough. It was that their hearts weren't right.

Likewise for us as Christians, the Eucharist is celebrated extremely faithfully throughout the world. Jesus' command "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19) is quite obediently followed on Sundays across the planet. The Eucharist is celebrated in churches, in jails, in hospitals, on mountaintops, even in countries where it is illegal to do so. Our problem is not in performing the ritual, rather, the problem is usually the state of our hearts when coming to the bread and wine. The Corinthians were obedient in gathering for the Eucharist, but their hearts weren't right. Paul says in his 1st letter to the Corinthians, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:27-29). So the way we live our lives can effectively nullify what we do when we worship.

Like Isaiah and Paul, John is drawing our attention to our hearts. He wants us to act in a way that shows our hearts have been changed. In general, we are to do good and refrain from doing evil. The crowds ask John what they should do to show that repentance has really taken root in their hearts. To the crowd he says "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (3:11). Tax collectors come to him asking what they should do. Tax collectors were among the most hated. They were Jewish people who worked for Rome and they would ask for more money than was required and pocket the extra. Many became rich doing this. They were notoriously corrupt not only for their greed but also for their cooperation with the oppressive Roman Empire that occupied the land. John the Baptist tells them to "Collect no more than the amount prescribed" (3:13). He tells them to deal honestly regardless of what was commonly practiced among tax collectors. Soldiers also came to him, and it seems like they sometimes abused their power, so when they ask what they should do John tells them to "not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and [to] be satisfied with [their] wages" (3:14). This is very real and practical day to day advice. If we are going to live lives preparing for the coming of God, then we need to live examined lives. We need to know our weaknesses and take the time to fix our gaze on Christ and imitate him.

John wants to see fruit of repentance. He wants to see that we have the humility to recognize that there are parts of our lives that need changing- that need turning. If we believe that God is for us and not against us- if we believe that God loves us- then we will not fear repentance. He desires our repentance the way a doctor desires their patient to take their medication. Repentance is ultimately about hope because it implies that a better future is possible. It implies that our future selves can be more like Jesus.