



BE PREPARED

John the Baptist: The Message and the Messenger

Matthew 3:1-17; Luke 3:1-22

Next week begins our 69th annual Central Bible Church missionary conference. It is a time to appreciate our missionaries—past, present, and future—who take the message of Christ around the world, often through different languages while penetrating cultural barriers with the illuminating message of Christ. The theme of our conference this year is “Carry the Light.”

That, of course, is the commission not just of our missionaries, but of all of us. We all have the privilege of carrying the Light of Christ so that people can see the beauty of the Gospel.

Now, as we think of our missionaries, as we think of ourselves, I’ve got a question for us: Which is more important—the character of the messenger or the content of the message? Which is more important, to really know the Lord, or to know how really to explain the Lord?

Which is more important? If you’re like me you’d probably answer, “Yes.” You can’t say which is more important, because they both are indispensable. The messenger and the message, the person and the proclamation; the character and the communication.

Both the message and the messenger combine to carry the light of Christ.

Today we are going to turn our attention in the Bible to one godly character who clearly communicated. A man who had both ingredients—John the Baptist. His effectiveness in carrying the light came not only from the greatness of his message, but also from the godliness of the messenger. For John the Baptist, for our missionaries, and for all of us, **both the message and the messenger combine to carry the light of Christ.** Listen as we read about the message and the man, John the Baptist.

The Message and the Man: John the Baptist

(Luke 3)

Narrator: In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea:

John: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

Narrator: John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them:

John: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is

already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Narrator: “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

John: “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

Narrator: Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

John: “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.”

Narrator: Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

John: “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

Narrator: The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.

John: “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

(John 1)

Narrator: The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him

John: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

(Matthew 3)

Narrator: Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him

John: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Narrator: Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The Message

One puzzling aspect of John’s ministry was that he had any audience at all. What was it that induced residents of Jerusalem to trek miles into the Judean desert to hear his message? His sermons seemed more scorching than the blistering sun. And, as far as we know, John never performed so much as one miracle.

Some who came out had unworthy motives. Some came out of curiosity; others from peer pressure; and religious leaders seemed to be coming for self-preservation, to check out their competition.

Although some came for unworthy motives, the majority came by virtue of the compelling force of John's message. It was summed up in one sentence, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" (Matthew 3:2)

What were the ingredients that made John the Baptist's message so powerful?

A. His message prepared for Messiah.

When Zacharias was told of John's birth by Gabriel, he prophesied his ministry would be one of preparation: "*And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord*" (Luke 1:17).

John continually stressed he was not the Messiah, but was the forerunner of the Messiah prophesied by Isaiah and Malachi. His responsibility was to prepare the people spiritually for Messiah's appearance. In a real sense, John the Baptist was the last Old Testament prophet. Just as the prophet Samuel anointed both Saul and David, preparing the way for their kingships, so John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as Israel's Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus was the Christ—literally, meaning 'anointed one.' Jesus was God's anointed one. The public act of his baptism might be considered his public anointing for ministry. Jesus was affirmed and the rite ratified by the Father's own voice, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

B. His message proclaimed repentance.

The word "repent" may bring up different images to different people. For some of us, when we say, "repent," we may think of a hairy, disheveled preacher holding a sign, "repent, the end is near."

But what does the Bible mean by the term, "repent"? What did John mean when he wielded the command to repent at the sinners in his audience? The biblical term (*metanaeo*) combines several nuances involving our mind, our emotions, and our will. The root meaning of the term conveys a change of the mind. It means we agree with God that what we once did, what we once even enjoyed, is wrong. Second, repentance confronts our emotions. When we realize the depth of our sin—that we have enjoyed behaviors and attitudes that were like shaking one's fist into the merciful, holy, loving face of God—our emotions are touched with sorrow and remorse. Finally, biblical repentance affects our will, producing a change in direction. It is not biblical repentance if it goes no further than the mind. It is not biblical repentance if it is only the emotions, like the repentance of Judas who "felt remorse" (Mt. 27:3) but did not bend his will toward God. Judas refused to come under the hand of God's grace and into a dependent relationship with God. Instead, he blubbered in self-pity and remorse, heading to suicide. Repentance, biblical repentance, effects our total person, mind, emotion, and will.

John was pointed about the requirement of repentance. Israelites depending upon their ancestral origins as the basis for entering the Kingdom were told, "...do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.' (Luke 3:8)

The all-important question for those who wished to enter the kingdom was not, "Who is your father," but "In whom is your faith?" Those who received the message of John saw their sinfulness and the need for spiritual cleansing to enter the kingdom that was at hand.

The outward sign of repentance was the rite of baptism. Baptism during O.T. times was not done to Jews, but rather to Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. A Gentile who was converted to Judaism had to be circumcised (if he was male), to offer a special sacrifice in the Temple (while it stood), and also to undergo a ceremonial baptism. There were differences between proselyte baptism and John's baptism. While proselyte baptism was self-administered, John baptized those who came to him. How humbling! How humbling for the Jew who was repenting. In effect, baptism showed just as a pagan must undergo baptism to enter into Judaism, so the sinful Jew must join the ranks of the pagan and enter into relationship with God in the same way as the Gentile. And it is something you cannot even do privately for yourself. The manifestation of repentance had to be administered by another.

Baptism was not the mean of attaining forgiveness of sins, but the manifestation of it. If the sign of repentance was baptism, the fruit of true repentance was to be a radical change of life for the individual. "Therefore, bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance," John said (Luke 3:8a).

Selfishness should be replaced with sharing. The one who has two tunics should share with him who has none. The one who has food should share with the one without. Skimming unfair profits should be replaced by righteous dealings. Extortion must be replaced with contentment. Soldiers are to be content with their wages, rather than using their police powers to supplement one's salary. Be content to live on what you are paid without dishonesty.

C. His message pointed toward a salvation not fully revealed.

You wouldn't want to use John's message as the text of a Gospel tract today. Why? Because during the days Jesus was living physically among men, people were saved sequentially. Let me explain.

Today, when we share the gospel of Jesus, we should begin with the fact that men are sinners, justly under the condemnation of God, headed for judgment. We should then immediately move from man's problem to God's remedy. We should inform people God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take our punishment and to provide us with His righteousness in place of our sinfulness. All one need to is acknowledge his need, trust in Christ's gift by grace.

Now, this did not happen so quickly in the days of our Lord's earthly life. John came with a message of sin and judgment. He could not, though, tell men that Jesus Christ died for their sins, for that was yet future. He simply preached that God's solution for sinners was going to appear, and after Jesus' baptism, had appeared. Upon our Lord's death on the cross, men who had

acknowledged their need of forgiveness of sins then needed to place their faith in what Christ had done.

The full disclosure of the message of salvation in the time of John the Baptist took several years. This helps us understand why John's message was so negative. It was preliminary and preparatory. As today, the good news of the gospel begins with the bad news of man's sin. But John the Baptist was not aware of just how God was going to provide for the eternal forgiveness of those who were repenting under his message.

The Messenger

So, which is most important? The message or the messenger? Yes. In John the Baptist's case, his message was right on, and powerful. But part of the reason his message was so powerful was that it was delivered by a man who of character, a man who was godly.

Let's look at what we know of the man, John the Baptist.

A. His clothing and diet.

One of the main things your children in LKP and KW would say about John the Baptist is about his clothing and diet. It was distinctive. A camel's hair garment and leather belt were not the attire of the fashionable young men of Jerusalem. Neither were grasshoppers and honey served in the finest restaurants. Today, we might think this kind of clothing and food were an expression of cultural rebellion, a kind-of flower child of the 60's. I don't believe this is entirely the case. There were probably three reasons for his unusual dress and diet.

1. Associated him with Elijah. Zacharias had been told his son John would go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17) and Elijah was described as "a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins" (2 Kings 1:8). His clothes were to associate him with Elijah and Elijah's ministry.

2. Separated him from the world. His dress made him stick out like a nun in a tavern. His separation toward God and away from the world was prophesied at his birth, "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit..."(Luke 1:15). John was to be a Nazarite (Numbers 6:2ff; Judges 13:4-5), remaining separate, set apart from normal defilements for godly service. John's dress did not reflect the religious system of his day. John—and Jesus too—came not to patch up the existing religious mess of Judaism, symbolized by the flowing robes of the Pharisees and Sadducees, but to constitute a spiritual relationship with God.

3. Supported his message. What would you think of a televangelist who arrives on a Lear jet, limos to the stadium, consults his Rolex watch, and then preaches about the need to respond to poverty in Rwanda? Yeah, me too. John had preached true repentance should result in compassion for the needs of others. If you had two tunics, see if you could find someone who had none to whom you could give your extra. It would have been glaringly inconsistent had John arrived at his speaking engagement with the ornate robes of the Pharisee's plumage. The diet and dress of John backed up his words with his actions.

B. His character

Jesus gave John the greatest stamp of approval possible: “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women (how many is that?) there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” (Matthew 11:11). What made him so great?

1. Strong convictions and great courage. He did not coddle his audiences. When King Herod married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, John called it sin. He is a great example for us all that having strong convictions of right and wrong—though not fashionable in our politically correct society—is pleasing to God. And he had the courage not just to hold the convictions privately, but to jab the consciences of those who sinned.

2. Deep humility. The nature of John’s task kept him in the spotlight. Not only did he have the opportunity to enhance his prestige, but the crowds were inviting him to do so. There is no greater insight into the character than when the leaders wanted him to speak of himself, but he could only speak of Messiah. John openly encouraged his disciples, including Andrew, to leave him to follow Jesus (John 1:35ff). When others tried to stir up jealousy due to the popularity of Jesus, John indicated he was privileged to draw attention to Christ and not himself: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30).

What a message. What a messenger. The message of John the Baptist prepared for Messiah, proclaimed repentance, and pointed toward salvation. The messenger, by clothes and diet, associated himself with Elijah, separated himself from the world, and supported his message of simplicity in sharing. And his character with strong convictions, great courage, and deep humility backed up his preaching. His walk amplified his talk.

God created and called a unique messenger in John the Baptist. So what about us? Well, God also created and called you as a unique messenger to carry the light of Christ. Out of all the people in the world, only you have your DNA, only you have the specific set of abilities, aptitudes, and experiences to fill your role in this world. You are the only next-door-neighbor to the south for your neighbor on the north. You have people cross your paths—once or regularly—who need to see the beauty of our Lord in the relationship we enjoy.

God’s path for you is different than it was for John. You don’t have to wear camel hide and eat grasshoppers—thank goodness. But like John, we have the privilege and opportunity to carry the light in the clarity of the message and the character of the messenger. **Both the message and the messenger combine to carry the light of Christ.**