

ENGAGE

- As you approach the text you may find these thoughts to be helpful?
 - We will be looking at the heart of repentance that leads to salvation.
 - We will also be looking the distinctions in baptisms.
 - Finally, the message will highlight the actions that we are called to in response to our repentance.

EXAMINE

1. (1-2a) *The time is described in reference to the contemporary political and religious leaders.*

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests,

a. **In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar:** Biblical chronology can be a complicated matter. From secular historical records we know with certainty the *general* time this was, but it is difficult to be certain *exactly* when this was. The best reckonings set it anywhere from A.D. 27 to 29.

b. **Tiberius Caesar... Pontius Pilate... Herod... Philip... Lysanias:** Luke listed the *political* leaders of the region Jesus lived and served in. Like any good historian, Luke gave a real, historical framework. This is not a fairy tale beginning with “once upon a time.”

i. Luke gave more than a chronological measure; he also told us something of the tenor of the times.

- **Tiberius** was an emperor known for his cruelty and severity.
- **Pontius Pilate** was also renowned for his brutal massacres of the Jewish people in Judea, and his insensitivity towards the Jews.
- The rulers from the family of Herod the Great (**Herod, Philip, and Lysanias**) were known for their corruption and cruelty.

ii. With all this, Luke reminds both his original readers and us today of the corruption and moral degradation of the Roman Empire, especially in the distant provinces like Judea.

iii. The historical reality of these rulers is beyond dispute. Archaeologists have discovered specific, undeniable evidence that these people lived and ruled in these places and at these times.

iv. When Herod the Great died, he divided his kingdom among his three sons **Herod, Philip, and Lysanias**. “The title tetrarch literally means *governor of a fourth part*...later the word widened its meaning and came to mean the governor of any part.” (Barclay)

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c. **Caiaphas... Annas:** Luke also listed the *religious* leaders of Judea in the period of Jesus' ministry. **Caiaphas** was actually the High Priest, but his father-in-law **Annas** (the patriarch of the family) was the real influence among the priestly class.

i. The mention of these two corrupt high priests reminds us that the Jewish leaders were more interested in power politics than in serving God.

ii. In November 1990, scholars discovered what they believe to be the family tomb of **Caiaphas**. On an ancient burial box (an *ossuary*) from the era is an inscription reading *Joseph, Son of Caiaphas*. Remains of a 60 year-old male were discovered in the box.

2. (2b-3) The ministry of John the Baptist.

The word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,

a. **The word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness:** John lived in the desert since his youth ([Luke 1:80](#)^L). But now, prompted by **the word of God**, John began to fulfill his ultimate calling: to be a forerunner of the Messiah.

i. Luke carefully set the work of John in historical context, because "To Luke the emergence of John the Baptist was one of the hinges on which history turned." (Barclay)

b. **Preaching baptism of repentance for the remission of sins:** The idea behind **remission** is not only forgiveness, but also liberty and deliverance (as in *to preach deliverance...to set at liberty* in [Luke 4:18](#)^L). **Repentance** could bring true liberty in the Messiah for those who received it.

i. John's message was a call to **repentance**. Some people think that repentance is mostly about *feelings*, especially feeling sorry for your sin. It is wonderful to feel sorry about your sin, but **repent** isn't a "feelings" word. It is an *action* word. John told his listeners to make a change of the mind, not merely to feel sorry for what they had done. Repentance speaks of a change of direction, not a sorrow in the heart.

c. **Baptism of repentance:** There was nothing strange in the ceremony of **baptism** (a ceremonial immersion) itself. The strange thing was that *Jews* submitted to baptism. This was a common ritual for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. For a Jew to submit to baptism was to say something like, "I'm as bad as a heathen Gentile." This was a true mark of humble repentance, a radical rededication to the Lord.

i. "Baptism by water, whether understood by the Qumran community as applicable to itself or as preached by Jewish missionaries to Gentile converts symbolized spiritual cleansing from sin, the result of forgiveness." (Pate)

ii. This is different than our *baptism into Christ* ([Romans 6:3-4](#)^L) where our immersion in water identifies us with Jesus' death and resurrection. This **baptism of repentance** John presented identified a person with their need to get right with God and be cleansed.

3. (4-6) John's ministry as a fulfillment of prophecy.

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

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**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the LORD;
 Make His paths straight.
 Every valley shall be filled
 And every mountain and hill brought low;
 The crooked places shall be made straight
 And the rough ways smooth;
 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

- a. **As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:** Luke connected John the Baptist with the one prophesied by Isaiah ([Isaiah 40:3-5](#)). John himself was aware of this from his early days, because his father was aware of it from before John’s birth ([Luke 1:76-77](#)).
- b. **Prepare the way of the LORD:** John’s great message was that things *can* be set right. The Messiah is here to do things that are too big for man: filling valleys, leveling mountains, setting crooked roads straight and rough roads smooth.
- i. The Jews at that time thought that the problem was mainly “*them*” – that is, the Romans who politically oppressed them. John made them see that when you got right down to it, the problem was really with *me*, not *them*. *I* have to get right with God.
- c. **All flesh shall see the salvation of God:** The way of the Messiah must be made ready. He came to *all mankind*. (NIV)
- i. “Simply stated, the theme of John’s preaching was that the messianic age was at hand.” (Pate)

B. The message of John the Baptist.

1. (7-9) John’s message to the multitudes.

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

- a. **Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?** Addressing your audience as a *family of snakes* is not a customary way to begin a sermon. Asking them “*why are you here anyway?*” isn’t a smooth introduction. But John wasn’t interested in preaching a soft message or in tickling ears.
- i. Simply said, John was weird. Any man who preached like this, lived in the desert, wore funny clothes and lived on grasshoppers and wild honey was just plain *strange*. Jesus didn’t have a polished advance man with a thousand-dollar suit and a two-hundred-dollar haircut. God often uses weird people.
- b. **Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’:** John cautioned against trusting in Abraham’s merits as sufficient for salvation. It was widely taught that Abraham’s merits were plenty for any Jew’s salvation, and that it was *impossible* for any descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to go to hell.

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c. **Bear fruits worthy of repentance:** John was not unreasonable in demanding **good fruit**. True repentance will always have fruit – and the basic fruit of the Christian life is *love* ([Galatians 5:22](#) and [1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#)).

2. (10-14) John's message to specific individuals.

So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

a. **What shall we do then?** John's instructions were quite ordinary. He demanded that people share, that they be fair with each other, and that they not be mean and cruel; that they be happy with what they get. These are things we teach our smallest children.

i. Integrity in the *ordinary* things is still a mark of true repentance. We sometimes think God requires us to do great or impossible things to demonstrate repentance. Often, He instead looks for integrity in the ordinary things.

ii. *He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* ([Micah 6:8](#))

b. **Collect no more than what is appointed for you...Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages:** John did not see tax collecting or soldiering as inherently evil. He did not command these to quit their professions, but to conduct themselves honestly in them.

i. The Romans taxed by auctioning the rights to collect taxes to the highest bidder. Because the tax collector could only cover his costs and make a profit by getting as much as he could, these men were hated intensely.

ii. "These were the toll-takers, custom-gatherers for the Romans, and most of them greedy grippers. Publicans they were called, because they took up *publica*, the goods of the empire." (Trapp)

3. (15-18) John points forward to a greater One and a greater baptism.

Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.

a. **All reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not:** John made such an impact that people logically wondered if he was the Messiah. Instead of cultivating his own popularity, he gave it all to Jesus. John pointed to **One mightier than I**.

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b. **Whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose:** The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a teacher might require just about anything of his followers *except* to have them take off his sandals. That was considered too humiliating to demand. Yet John said that he was not even worthy to do *this* for Jesus.

i. John had many reasons to be proud, yet he was humble. He had a miraculous birth, a prophesied destiny, a man called to personally fulfill great prophetic promises, a powerful preacher, and a man with a great following.

ii. "What was the reason, think you, of John's always retaining his proper position? Was it not because he had a high idea of his Master, and a deep reverence for him? Ah, brethren, because of our little estimate of Christ, it is often unsafe for the Lord to trust us in any but the very lowest positions." (Spurgeon)

iii. John was both *strict* and *humble*. That is an all-too-rare combination.

c. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire:** John said that the Messiah was coming with a different baptism. The Holy Spirit's outpouring was promised as part of the New Covenant. We are promised an *immersion*, an *overflowing* of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This was often experienced as people were prayed for with hands laid on them ([Acts 6:6](#)^L, [8:17](#)^L, [9:17](#)^L, [13:3-4](#)^L, and [19:6](#)^L).

d. **His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor:** The Messiah would also bring a baptism of fire, fire that would both *purify* and *destroy* what is lacking, like fire burns up the worthless chaff. God's power is always a transforming power, a purifying power.

i. The Messiah will also be the one to divide the true from the false, to separate the wheat from the chaff; **the winnowing fan is in His hand**. Judas is set apart from Peter; one thief blasphemes, another believes.

4. (19-20) *The boldness of John's message is illustrated.*

But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.

a. **Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias:** The relationship between Herod and Herodias was both complicated and sinful. He was her uncle, and he seduced her from his half-brother. In marrying Herodias, Herod at once married a woman both his niece and his sister-in-law.

i. "In light of passages like [Leviticus 18:16](#)^L and [20:21](#)^L, which specifically forbid a man having sexual relations with his brother's wife, Herod's actions called for condemnation." (Pate)

b. **He shut John up in prison:** Because John made such a bold stand for the truth, Herod, who was steeped in immorality, punished him.

i. "Josephus says that the reason for the arrest was that Herod 'feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it in his power and inclination to raise a rebellion; for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise.'" (Barclay)

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Luke's presentation of John the Baptist combines material like that in Matthew 3:1-12 and Mark 1:2-8 with material unique to Luke (Lk 3:10-14). John is a preacher of the coming arrival of God's salvation, just as Isaiah 40:3-5 promised. The preparation for that salvation involves repentance, a heart open and turned to the living God. Forgiveness of sins paves the way for a life lived in honor of God with eyes looking for the One to come. There is a concrete ethical element in John's preaching in 3:10-14. That ethical note is also present in Jesus' teaching about how a disciple is to live with a unique kind of love (6:20-49). So John points both to Jesus and to the kind of heart that will recognize him and respond to him when he comes by honoring him with a life that is fruitful before God. John the Baptist's Ministry (3:1-6)

Like a painting placed inside a beautiful frame, John the Baptist's ministry (3:2b-3) is bracketed between the historical context (3:1-2a) and the context of Old Testament hope (3:4-6). Among the Gospel writers, only Luke takes the time to mention leaders in power at various political levels when John appeared. Luke is also unique in emphasizing the extent to which John's coming represents a renewed realization of the promise of Isaiah 40:3-5. For Isaiah, the initial fulfillment of seeing God's hand had been in the deliverance from exile during the period of Cyrus the Great, as later chapters of Isaiah note. Now the pattern of God's working to deliver his people is renewed in the word of *a voice of one calling in the desert*. God approaches, and creation is to level all geographical obstacles to prepare for his coming, as if rolling out a great red carpet. This leveling includes seeking contriteness of heart (Is 57:14-17).

In listing Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, Luke surveys the political and religious leadership from the most distant to the more directly involved authorities. The note about Tiberius's fifteenth year allows us to date the start of John's ministry. Assuming the calendar being used is a Roman one, John's ministry began somewhere during A.D. 28-29. The dating of this starting point is related to the dating of Jesus' ministry, which probably ended in A.D. 33 (though many date the end of his ministry in A.D. 30). Annas and Caiaphas are both called high priests, although only one high priest existed at a time. This description appears to be a case of a person of high office keeping his title even after leaving office, much like an ex-president or ex-governor today. Pilate and Herod reappear only briefly in 9:7-9 and 23:1-25, but both rulers are much discussed in ancient Jewish sources. Philip and Lysanias were the other regional tetrarchs of the period. They, like Herod, were descendants of Herod the Great, who ruled the entire area when Jesus was born.

John's ministry begins during this period. He ministers in the wilderness, brings *the word of God* and preaches *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. The concept of repentance is central to Luke. Not only is its concrete character elaborated in 3:10-14, but Jesus, in his Great Commission in 24:43-47, makes it clear that the roots of the concept come from the Old Testament. Though the Greek term for repentance means "a change of mind," the Semitic concept involves a "turning," an attitude that brings a change of direction (1 Kings 8:47; 13:33; Ps 78:34; Is 6:10; Ezek 3:19; Amos 4:6). Other texts in Luke emphasize this term (5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10). On this point Jesus and John echo one another. It is a contrite heart that comes to God for forgiveness, one who knows the need of a spiritual physician (5:31-32). A walk with God means submission to him and a change of direction.

John's baptism is a one-time rite in preparation of God's approaching salvation. Its roots may well go back to the Old Testament association of the Spirit's presence and washing (Ezek 36:25-

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27). Though John makes clear that Jesus is the one who brings the Spirit (Lk 3:15-17), John's baptism pictures a preparation for what God will do in Jesus.

Still, John's baptism differs from Christian baptism. John's baptism looks forward, while Christian baptism assumes Jesus' provision of the Spirit. John's baptism anticipates the Spirit's coming, while Christian baptism reflects the Spirit's arrival through Jesus. The washing aspect of John's baptism allows it to be associated with forgiveness of sins, as its connection to the Ezekiel 36 imagery suggests. Here are people of contrite heart, looking to God expectantly for what he will do in the days to come. Acts 19:1-10 reinforces the picture that John's baptism is anticipatory and not an end in itself: when some disciples appear in Ephesus who only knew John's baptism, they are led by Paul to experience what John's washing anticipated--the experience of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:15-17; Acts 10:37-38; 13:23-24). When an Israelite takes John's baptism, he or she is declaring openness to God and his ways. The nation is put on notice to await the rest of God's promise.

This message is why Luke cites Isaiah 40:3-5, with its promise of the coming of God's salvation. As already noted, this Isaiah text is a "pattern" prophecy, speaking to many periods of history at the same time. In Isaiah these verses introduce the entire second section of the book, which overviews God's saving program for Israel, starting with deliverance from exile and ending in the utopian existence described in Isaiah 65--66. Thus a range of events is in view.

Luke shows how the pattern begins yet again with John the Baptist in the wilderness. John is like Elijah, as Mark 1:2-3 and Luke 1:16-17 note (Mal 3:1). The passage itself compares preparing for the events of salvation to preparing a red-carpet reception for a king. The creation is called to level the path so God can enter. With his entry God makes salvation manifest for all to see. There is nowhere else to look for God's saving work except to Jesus. The appeal to the leveling of creation is best seen as including the removing of moral obstacles to God's arrival. John is the sentry who issues the moral call to clear the way for his coming. The other Gospels make it clear that John also announces that the kingdom of God has "come near," something Jesus also declares (Mt 3:2; Mk 1:14-15). This announcement indicates that some aspect of God's rule approaches that had not been present previously. For the promised kingdom to be "near" means that it is not yet present when John speaks. So John is not speaking of the kingdom of God in its broadest sense of God's rule from the beginning of the creation. Rather, he is discussing the promised, long-awaited rule of God in which the promised Messiah and God's Spirit become evident in a fresh and startling way. John is saying that finally God is fulfilling the long-awaited hope of Old Testament promise.

John's later remarks about the Spirit (3:15-17; Mt 3:11-12) make it clear that one of the signs of the kingdom's arrival will be the Messiah's distribution of the Spirit, an event Peter declares as initially fulfilled in Acts 2:30-36 and in which all believers today share. When the Spirit comes, Messiah is at work, kingdom blessings begin to be realized, and Old Testament promise is coming to pass (Rom 16:25-27; Heb 1:1-13). John the Baptist's Preaching (3:7-14)

Encountering a prophet can be a challenge, as when you hear a preacher who can read your heart. God calls prophets to declare his will to sinful humanity. Often God's prophets use direct, explicit, even shocking images. Often they offend.

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John the Baptist is no exception to this pattern. To listen to John is to be called to account. God wishes us to stop and reflect on where we are with God and to take fresh action, if necessary. For Luke, John the Baptist plays a twofold role. He prepares people for the Messiah, and he informs them concerning God's standard of righteousness (1:17). In this representative sample of his preaching, Luke shows how John accomplished the second concern. What does righteousness of the heart look like? What is the product of repentance? John's warning is direct. People need to be prepared to be open to God, to see and experience his grace.

A lesson on the differing responses to God's teaching appears in Herod's response to the criticism John gives in verses 19-20 and the crowd's response in verses 10-14. Where the people ask what they must do to honor God, Herod seeks to remove the prophet from the scene. We always face a choice when God's will is revealed. We may seek to accomplish God's desire, or we may reject it out of hand and try to remove the message (or messenger) from sight.

John's message is simple: (1) judgment is near (vv. 7-9), and (2) repentance means treating others well (vv. 10-14).

John is not at all soft-spoken as he addresses the crowd. His warnings are sharp, even severe. Those who come out to hear him are compared to snakes that slither out of their holes and *flee* across the desert as a fire approaches. God's enemies are often called snakes (Is 14:29; 59:5; Jer 46:22). Who wants to be near a snake? John calls the people snakes to warn them that their heart is not right and that his words must be heeded. No casual response will do; eternal realities are at stake. The snakes need transformation, since the fire of God's wrath draws near.

The reference to *coming wrath* alludes to the Day of the Lord (Is 13:9; 30:23; Zeph 2:2-3; Mal 3:2; 4:1, 5). John scares people into considering the fearful fate that may await them if they do not know and respond to God. The New Testament makes it clear that a person's position in relationship to Jesus is the key determinant of one's fate on Judgment Day (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:9-10). Since John preaches before Jesus comes, he makes the point in terms of a person's self-perception. What might indicate that I am sensitive to God? John's answer is simple: a life that shows the *fruit* of caring about God by caring about others. Submit to God and serve others.

John asks for genuine *fruit*. In Greek the word for fruit is clearly plural, so John is asking for multiple produce. *Repent* is a slippery word in theological circles today. For some it merely means to feel remorse about something done, or maybe even just to attend confession with no real hope to stop the sin. But in biblical terms, to repent means to alter one's direction and perspective on something, to change sides or points of view. (For more on the centrality of repentance for Luke, see discussions on 3:1-6 and the introduction to Luke.) First Thessalonians 1:9-10 illustrates this meaning. The Thessalonians changed their allegiance from idols to serve the living God.

Jesus' call does not differ from that of John or of Paul to the Thessalonians (Lk 6:43-45; 13:6-9). In fact, for Luke *repent* is a key term that typifies what should be the response to the gospel's message (24:47). God wants us to come to him in repentance, but he calls us to him so he may grace us with a changed heart and a changed life. God honors a changed heart.

As John prepares the crowd to meet Jesus, he asks them to consider their identity. John is clear: religious heritage is not good enough. A good heritage can be an advantage, but it is no

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guarantee of blessing. The Jews of John's day thought that mere ancestral ties to Abraham would be good enough to guarantee them blessing (2 Esd 6:56-58). Some today think similarly, that one can be born a Christian or that attendance at church makes one a saved child of God. John warns that such thoughts of inherited salvation should not even cross their minds. Inherited salvation is no salvation at all. To come to Jesus we must come on his terms, not through a pedigree or by association with a certain organization. Though a good environment and roots can be of benefit, they do not yield salvation. Blessing is not a matter of physical heirship but of God's creative power. That God *can raise up children* out of *stones* pictures the reality that God's power is what produces new life. To get new life, we must come to him.

So John preaches that the one who pleases God seeks to serve others. Such a new outlook on life was imperative because *the ax is already at the root of the trees*. The poised ax makes it clear that any unfruitful tree will be removed and burned. The many allusions to fire in verses 7-9 show how warning dominates the section. The flame of judgment will consume. It is better not to get burned. John urges his audience to flee the threat of judgment just as they would run from a fire.

Judgment and accountability to God are not politically correct concepts in today's society. Nonetheless, they are present throughout Scripture. God as Creator has the right to hold our feet to the fire. We cannot be saved unless we are saved *from* something. God is neither a baby sitter nor a spectator; he is our Savior. Once the ax is wielded and the flames are kindled, it is too late. John is saying, "Watch out. Don't get burned!" Unless we come to him, we are at risk.

John obviously scored with some in his audience. Three different groups ask, "*What should we do then?*" John does not simply say, "Be baptized." Rather, he points them to their jobs and personal relationships. True repentance is a matter of the heart and results in change in everyday behavior. That is why the word *do* is repeated several times in verses 10-14. Each group wants to know the appropriate response to John's call; each reply points to how others are treated. The answer is in the spirit of the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments, which deal with how one relates to God and how one relates to others as a result. John makes it clear that he is not interested in their being baptized merely to participate in a sacred rite, but that the act represents and should point to a new way of responding to God.

The people should be ready to share their clothes, if they have more than they need: if someone is without clothes, clothe him. (The *tunics* were actually undershirts that were worn beneath the first-century tunic [Bauer 1979:882, visx1m].) The same response goes for food. Luke reports John's ethical and social concern, the call to give willingly to others and meet their needs (negatively, 12:13-21; positively, 14:12-14). Luke possesses a sensitive, compassionate theology of the poor.

The tax man is simply to collect the appropriate taxed amount, not extort additional monies. In the first century, tax collection was loaded with middlemen, who each added their own surcharge, so the potential for abuse was great (Donahue 1971:39-61). The soldier is not to take advantage of his authority; he is not to oppress the citizens with threats or violence.

The teaching of this text is not an ethical given. Little did I realize this passage's revolutionary power until I traveled in Latin America and realized the history of abuse of military authority and that of guerrillas who challenge the government. Guns and intimidation have played a large

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part in their history as well as in the present activities of many nations. Of course, twentieth-century history has shown that such abuse is not limited to Latin America. Power corrupts, because sinful human beings use it to take advantage of those who are powerless. But service in the name of the state is not a license to abuse authority. So soldiers should exercise restraint in dealing with the citizenry and should be content with their wages.

In ancient times a soldier was paid only enough to maintain a basic standard of living (Caragounis 1974:35-57). Contentment with salary was key, because discontent might lead to the temptation to extort additional funds from others. Service to an institution does not mean one has the right to rob the till or take advantage of others' powerlessness.

John's answers are stated directly and concretely. The penitent is committed to fairness to neighbors, sensitivity and responsiveness to others' needs, and willingness to accept a "no-frills" standard of living (Barclay 1975:34). If Paul had food and clothing, he was content (1 Tim 6:8). John does not tell the hated tax collector to seek a new job, but to perform his job faithfully and compassionately. How we treat others is a litmus test for how we are responding to God. As Jesus says later, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

John asks, "Where do we stand as the day of God's evaluation draws near?" Since John comes before the period of the cross, he cannot tell the people to place their trust in the work accomplished there. Rather, he calls them to live as children of God.

If such a life was pleasing to God before Jesus' coming, surely it pleases the Lord to see it in his children today. Heritage and words by themselves count for nothing. They may point us in the right direction, but they do not lead automatically to blessing. What pleases God is responding to him and showing concrete kindness to others. Such kindness involves compassion and concern for those in need, an ethical value that has corporate and individual dimensions. Authority should mean not the wielding of power but faithful service. Such is to be the life of God's saint still, as James 1:26-27 makes clear. A Promise of the One to Come and Other Warnings (3:15-20)

John the Baptist's ministry is a two-sided coin: a plea for repentance in preparation for the Lord's coming on one side, and looking to Christ on the other. Like a good pathfinder, John points to Christ. But Christ is no mystery for John; he is the bearer of the Spirit. John serves humanity and the Messiah by showing humanity what the anointed one of God will do. This section explains why John is a pointer, not the center of God's plan. The theme is clearest in verses 15-17 (v. 18 simply notes that much more could be said about John, while vv. 19-20 reveal Herod's reaction to and rejection of John). By mentioning John's arrest here, Luke places all the events of the Baptist's ministry in one passage. This arrangement enables Luke to concentrate on Jesus from this point on. The picture of John as the servant who points the way to Jesus illuminates what servants of God are like: they magnify the God they serve (Jn 3:25-30).

The power in John's message leads some to speculate that perhaps John is the Christ. The question is logical, since John has spoken of the coming Day of the Lord, God's wrath and the approach of God's deliverance. Many Jews at the time expected that God would crush his enemies decisively during the time of Messiah (*Psalms of Solomon* 17--18). So maybe John is this figure. Luke states the popular expectation with the Greek particle *mepote* ("perhaps");

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NIV *if*), indicating that the answer to the question is negative. If this grammatical hint is not enough, John's reply settles the matter.

But then a question remains: if not John, then who is the Christ? John's answer expresses Jesus' superiority at three points. First, Jesus has a higher position than John. John will detail exactly what this means in the following two points. When he calls Jesus *one more powerful*, he is thinking more of personal authority than of physical power. So great is the One to come that a prophet of God is not worthy to untie his sandals. This illustration carries great power. Among the many tasks that a first-century slave performed for his master, one of the most demanding and least liked was removing sandals from the master's feet (Schneider 1977:88; Mekilta Exodus 21:2). John reverses the image to highlight the gulf between human beings, even great persons, and the One to come. It is not that untying sandals is too demeaning for the prophet; it is that he is not worthy to be that close to the Messiah. This is like a CEO saying he is not worthy to take out Jesus' garbage.

John's humility gives a proper perspective on the relationship of humanity to Jesus. Human beings are not Jesus' advisers or equals; they are greatly honored to know him and serve him. John does not draw attention to himself; instead he points to the superior greatness of the one to come. To direct others to Jesus is the call of God's servant.

The second area of Jesus' superiority is the blessing he brings. John has a baptism of water, but as verse 16 shows, this is a mere preparatory baptism. Jesus baptizes with the Spirit, bringing blessing, discernment, enablement and divine presence. To say that Jesus' baptism is *with the Holy Spirit and fire* raises an interesting point, since only one baptism is in view. We know only one baptism is described because (contrary to the NIV) the terms *Holy Spirit* and *fire* are tied together by one preposition, *en* ("with"). John is prophesying of all the Spirit will do as Jesus forms his people. Thus this is not addressing the rite of water baptism, but pictures the Spirit's coming to gather a people to himself. It refers to the promise of the Spirit's coming to those who trust in Jesus, while excluding those who do not respond to him (1 Cor 12:12-13). *Fire* is a key image for purging and judgment (Is 1:25; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2-3; Dunn 1970a:12-13). A key Old Testament passage mentioning Spirit and fire together is Isaiah 4:4-5, where people are purged so some may dwell in God's presence. *The Holy Spirit and fire*, then, represent two integral aspects of Jesus' ministry. He comes to gather and to divide (12:49-53; 17:29-30). The offer of the Spirit must be received. Those who respond are purged and taken in, while those who reject are tossed away like chaff, as verse 17 suggests. Jesus is far superior to John because in the end it is Jesus alone who matters for any person.

The third and final point of superiority marks the ultimate difference. Jesus is superior because he is the Judge who makes distinctions between people. The wheat retained for storage and chaff that is blown away, gathered and burned evoke a picture of harvest time and are symbols with Old Testament roots (Job 20:26; Prov 20:26; Is 34:8-10; 41:15-16; 64:6; Jer 15:7). The key image is that of sifting, the separation Jesus makes between people. There is no room for universalism in this imagery: *the winnowing fork is in his hand*. Note the juxtaposition of judgment and fire--an echo of verses 7-9. The difference between John and Jesus is ultimately the difference between a prophet and the Judge. Jesus is stronger because he has all authority.

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Luke's point is crucial. Jesus is not simply a great teacher, a moral example or a friend to those in need. He is these things, but he is also much more. Jesus' significance is evident in our accountability to him. In his hands God has placed ultimate authority. This picture of Jesus as ultimate Judge is central to Luke and to the preaching of Acts (Acts 4:10-12; 10:42; 17:31; Rom 10:9-13). If we wish to hear the voice and will of God, we must hear Jesus and those who carry his gospel message. This authority is why John pointed so exclusively to Jesus and why he counted it an honor to serve him. We do well to emulate John's respect for Jesus and total commitment to his uniqueness. In fact, doing so is a matter of life and death.

Luke next notes that John *preached the good news to them*. His preaching included a variety of other exhortations. Calling John's message *good news* might seem odd to us, given his direct, challenging, even harsh tone. His words seem more caustic warnings than good news. Our problem is our failure to appreciate what John is offering. Reality, especially spiritual reality, often seems a bitter pill to swallow at first. Healing can involve pain, especially when we are asked to look honestly at ourselves. Yet healing is good news, and John is calling people to genuine healing of the soul.

Herod's reaction to John's preaching stands in negative contrast to the openness of the crowds in 3:10-14. Like many Old Testament prophets, John holds the political leader accountable for his moral insensitivity and failure. Herod's marriage to Herodias is objectionable on two grounds. First, both have left previous marriages to marry each other. Second, Herodias had previously been married to a near blood relative of Herod; thus her union with Herod is forbidden under Jewish law (Lev 18:16; 20:21). Since Herodias had been married to Herod's half-brother, Herod Philip, in effect she is Herod's wife, sister-in-law and niece all in one (Barclay 1975:36)! John also points to other sins of Herod, but the use of the general term *porneron* ("immoral things"; NIV *evil things*) does not allow us to speculate on what these things are specifically.

Herod's response to the exposure of his sin is instructive. He does not face the sin and take responsibility for it; he strikes back, taking advantage of his authority to do so. Such a response is all too familiar. Herod will use all the authority at his disposal to silence the voice of conviction, for eventually he will execute John. Sin confronted but unchecked often becomes sin multiplied and magnified. Defensiveness in the face of sin is inevitably self-destructive. Unfortunately, the damage often extends beyond the one who is sinning.

Also instructive is an evaluation of John's ministry against the modern standard of success. By that standard John's scripturally honest but confrontational style could be seen as the cause of his downfall and failure. A modern PR consultant might have advised him, "Don't say anything that's too upsetting to your hearers, even if it's true. Work especially hard to avoid offending those with influence, because you might lose them." But the call to Jesus is not a call to maintain the status quo; it is an invitation to personal renovation. Our spiritual well-being may require that we recognize and deal with sin. Renovation implies change, and problems need to be exposed if they are to be corrected. Confrontation occurs because of a commitment to the hope of renovation; proper moral correction means moving closer to God.

John may be in prison, but his ministry has been carried out faithfully and is a success, for he has pointed people to God's will and to God's agent. He has treated the hated tax collectors and

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Herod the same way, calling them all to walk with God. These two practices still make for an effective life compass today: (1) to honestly appraise one's spiritual condition and (2) to focus on Jesus and the gift of his grace.

QUESTIONS

1. What information is given regarding when the events in chap. 3 began – 3:1,2? What do we know about these people?
2. Why would Luke name all these people? Some people say Bible writers never intended their records to be viewed as historic fact. How would you respond?
3. How is John's baptism described – 3:3?
4. What passage is quoted in 3:4-6? Explain its significance.
5. List other passages about fruits of repentance – 3:7,8. Explain the meaning
6. Why did people emphasize having Abraham as their father (study the context)? What was John's response?
7. Explain the illustration regarding the ax at the root of the trees – 3:9.
8. List 3 specific examples of fruits of repentance – 3:10-14.
9. What did people wonder about John (3:15), and what was his answer?
10. List several differences between John's baptism and Holy Spirit baptism – 3:16-18. Compare these to the baptism of the Great Commission.
11. List 2 references to fire in this context (besides baptism in fire). To what do these other two references refer? Explain baptism in fire.
12. Who imprisoned John? Why – 3:19,20? (Think: What can we learn about rebuking sin?)

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