



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 28, 2008
Released on Wednesday, December 24, 2008

“Putting Commitment into Action”

Devotional Reading: Psalm 51:10–19.

Background Scripture: Luke 3:1–20.

Lesson Text: Luke 3:7–18.

Luke 3:7–18

7 Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

9 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

10 And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then?

11 He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.

12 Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do?

13 And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you.

14 And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.

15 And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not;

16 John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:

17 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.

18 And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to study John's basic message, the reactions of various people to it, and John's description of the coming Messiah.

Principle: to be aware that God positioned His messengers to prepare them for His Son's arrival.

Application: to help believers accept and promote their roles as messengers of Christ.

INTRODUCTION

There are many things to appreciate about Luke's careful account of Jesus' life and ministry (in the book of Luke) and of the beginning of the church (in the book of Acts). His attention to detail is impressive and does much to validate the Word of God due to the fact that what he said can be verified from secular history. Such careful recording probably stems from the fact that he was a physician (Col. 4:14). That profession has always required articulate diagnosis and treatment, and missing details can be disastrous.

Luke 3 begins with a list of significant political and religious leaders who were in office during the days of John the Baptist. An examination of the ones mentioned reveals that the world was not a friendly place for one who came to preach righteousness and clean living. If we were to take the time to look at the history of each of these leaders, we would discover much scheming, intrigue, backstabbing, and other corruption. John would have no easy task. Sadly, the problems were daunting.

CHALLENGING THE MASSES—Luke 3:7-14

1. How did John view the hypocritical ones in the crowd (Luke 3:7)?

As the official forerunner of the Messiah, as foretold to Zacharias (Luke 1:17), he had a special message for Israel. He prepared the way for the appearance of Jesus by calling upon the people to get right with God. The multitudes who came to John in the wilderness included many hypocritical people. Some came out of curiosity. Some wanted to add another work to their religiosity.

John knew of their deceptions, for it was clear that the way they were living did not match what they were saying. They claimed to know the God of Israel, but there was no attempt on their part to live according to what He had told Moses. John had no time for such duplicity. So he spoke his message clearly and boldly.

John did not see these hypocritical people as saints but as snakes: "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7). Vipers are poisonous snakes such as adders or pit vipers. John implied that not only were these pretenders hurting themselves but they were also affecting others with their poisonous beliefs. It would have been bad enough that they were on the road leading to the wrath of God, but to take others along with them deserved severe condemnation. He was not afraid to denounce them.

2. What is "the wrath to come?"

The *wrath* of God is not a popular or comfortable topic today. We want to focus on a loving God, not an angry God. Yet the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is loaded with references to the wrath of God (examples: Jeremiah 10:10; Romans 1:18). Two connections are often present in such texts.

First, the wrath of God is connected with God's righteous judgment (Romans 2:5). God's anger is His response to evil and sin (see Romans 13:4). Second, the wrath of God is often associated with the wilderness experience of the nation of Israel. Because of disobedience and lack of faith, the wrath of God came upon Israel, and they wandered in the wilderness 40 years before entering the promised land (Deuteronomy 9:7)

3. What did John say was the evidence of a genuinely righteous relationship with God (vs. 8,9)?

The real evidence of a right relationship with God would come from fruit in keeping with repentance. That is, if they were truly repentant of their sins, their lives would show it in righteous living. There were many, however, who lived in whatever ways they wanted without concern about righteousness and relied on the

fact that since they were descendants of Abraham, everything was fine between them and God. John reminded them that God did not need them. He could raise up children out of stones and do fine without them.

We can imagine John illustrating this by lifting a smooth stone from the Jordan River and reminding the audience that God can take rocks and make them into people for His glory. God formed Adam from dirt (Genesis 2:7) and showed Ezekiel that He could form people from dry, old bones (Ezekiel 37). *Fruits worthy of repentance* are more important than biological descent.

John then went one step further in his message by telling them that instead of being fine with God, they were already under His judgment. Since they were not bringing forth fruits evidencing repentance, they were like unproductive trees about to be chopped down. An ax was ready to chop any who did not bear good fruit. The message is the same for us today. Calling oneself a Christian means nothing to God if it is not accompanied by godly living. If salvation is not real, the end result will be a fiery finish.

4. What question did the people pose to John, and what does that reveal about their response to him and his message (vs. 10,11)?

The multitudes of people no doubt included both those who were sincerely interested in John's message and those who were there only to criticize. Nevertheless, many are convinced that he is telling the truth. They want to know more. Luke presents three groups who question John further, each asking *What shall we do?*

For Luke, *the people* is one specific group of these three. These are common folk, the peasant population. They have taken John's message to heart and desire further, specific instructions. From among these common people came a sincere question relative to what John was saying. If they were to bring forth fruits that evidenced repentance, what should they be doing?

John's response consisted of two examples of things they could do if they truly believed in God. Their belief would cause them to be concerned about other people who might be suffering. People who are right with God have a compassionate spirit willing to reach out to help others. Being generous with the necessities of life is evidence of the lack of self-centeredness that keeps one from being concerned about others. John mentioned clothing and food.

Do you know of someone in your church who is driving a car with bald tires and cannot afford new ones? Take him to the shop, and pay for some tires. Do you know a student without tuition money who is unable to return to school next semester?

When a person is endeavoring to live by the principles of God's Word, many opportunities for sharing will come. God knows that He can trust His children to be available to help one another. Perhaps we should also consider that doing this is a source of genuine joy. It feels good to reach out and help others.

5. What did John tell the publicans they needed to do to be right (vs. 12,13)?

The second of John's three groups are *publicans* (tax collectors). Tax collectors are described by John MacArthur as "disloyal Israelites hired by the Romans to tax other Jews for personal profit" (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, Word). They were a hated class because of this disloyalty and were sometimes viewed as symbols of the worst kind of people.

Yet even these national traitors could repent. There were some of them in the crowd listening to John who apparently came under conviction and wondered what to do.

It was common for tax collectors (publicans) to overcharge people. The Roman government told the tax collectors what it wanted to receive from the populace in their vicinity. They were free, however, to charge more than the government asked for—as much more as they wanted—and keep the difference as personal profit. So tax collectors were doubly hated because not only were they traitors to their own people, but they were cheats and thieves on top of that. The greatest barrier breaker- Jesus, was once criticized for eating with them (Matt. 9:10-11)!

They were told by John that evidence of repentance could be seen in honest dealings with the people. "Exact no more than that which is appointed you" (Luke 3:13). The people had no recourse but to pay whatever the tax collectors demanded. They did not dare risk the wrath of the Roman Empire, for then they would become objects of retaliation. Dishonest and greedy tax collectors could get away with requiring any payment they chose. It was clearly a form of betrayal, but their greed often overcame any sense of right and wrong.

It is easy to make an application for ourselves from this example. The business dealings of any believer should always be fair and honest. Proverbs 11:1 says, "A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is his delight."

6. What do we know about how the soldiers often acted, and what did John tell them to change (v. 14)?

The third group that comes to John is made up of *soldiers*, professional military men. John's instruction to the soldiers is that they not use extortion to increase their income. They were in positions of authority and could use their power for either good or bad.

John mentioned three areas of being a soldier that they should watch over carefully. They should not use intimidation against people. They should not falsely accuse people of things they had not done. Both of these actions were evidently used in extortion, forcing people to give them money to keep from being further pursued and mistreated. The third thing John said was that they should be content with their wages. John challenged them to be content with their pay instead of using extortion to pad their bank accounts.

Money often becomes a motivation for unethical and dishonest dealings with others. Paul wrote to Timothy and warned that "the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Tim. 6:10). Even believers can be led astray if their focus moves away from wholly pleasing God to getting more money. We must fully surrender our finances to God and absolutely refuse to consider being anything less than totally honest.

There is a difference between claiming to follow Christ and actually living the principles of God's Word. It ought to be the goal of every believer to learn and then completely obey the principles for living found in the Bible. Let us determine that we will be people of honesty and integrity.

CLEARING UP CONFUSION-Luke 3:15-18

7. What expectation did the people have about John (v. 15)?

Who was this John anyway? Many in the crowd could not decide. There was a sense of expectation in the air during those days. Some unusual things seemed to be happening, and people were evidently wondering what they meant. John was an unusual man with an unusual ministry, living and ministering in an unusual place. There had been rumors of an unusual birth followed by the unusual witness of a group of shepherds. Something was in the air, causing people to anticipate something else.

Could it be that this John was the long-awaited Messiah? He certainly was not the normal head of a home working hard at an occupation. Is this what the Messiah was to be like? After all, John spent his time preaching and baptizing and seemed to be a messenger from God. Luke wrote that everyone in the crowds busily speculated whether John might be the Christ. There must have been a lot of whispering and conjecture going on as people tried to decide what John was doing and whether certain major changes were about to take place.

One thing we can observe is that John had sparked the attention of the people and had awakened their sense of expectation that the Messiah either was here or would be soon. We can also note that John himself was apparently highly regarded among those who were not his critics. If they were thinking he could possibly be the Messiah, they obviously did not doubt his character or the high standards he imposed on himself.

8. How did he explain what he was doing compared to what the Messiah would do in His coming (vs. 16, 17)?

Once John knew the people were asking these questions about him, he quickly dispelled their thoughts that he was the Messiah. "Although John was the first genuine prophet in four hundred years, Jesus the Messiah would be infinitely greater than he.

John's job is to *baptize*. This certainly means the physical act of baptism, but that act must be seen as part of the broader issue of repentance. His task is to get the people to recognize their sin problem. John also explains how insignificant he was compared to the one more powerful who was coming (v. 16b). In most households, a lowly slave would untie the sandals of guests and then wash their feet.

"John saw himself as even lower than that slave in comparison to the coming Messiah. John was not even worthy of doing the most menial tasks for him, like untying his sandals" (Osborne, gen. ed., *Life Application Bible Commentary*, Tyndale).

All John did was baptize with water, but the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. This prediction of John, which is found as well in the other Gospels (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; John 1:33), is repeated by Christ in Acts 1:5 just before His ascension into heaven. Later this baptism in (or with) the Holy Spirit occurred on the Day of Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit took up permanent residence in the bodies of the believing disciples. The baptism with fire seems to refer to a future judgment as explained in verse 17, perhaps that which purifies believers, or ultimately. Judges those who refuse to believe.

Here the picture of a threshing floor and the separation of grain kernels from chaff is quite descriptive. The winnowing fan was used to blow chaff away, letting the grain fall back on the floor. The grain was then placed in storage bins, while the chaff was swept up and burned. Christ will separate believers from unbelievers, and the latter will be sent to a place of unquenchable fire (c.f. Psalm 1).

The people needed to prepare for something far more important than John's baptism.

9. What do John's words say to us (v. 18)?

Luke ends this section by reminding us that his presentation of John is brief and selective. There are *many other things* said by this powerful preacher to the crowds who come to hear him. Luke indicates that these are exhortations, meaning moral encouragements to the people to give up their many sinful ways and work out their repentance.

We wish we had more of the preaching of this mighty man of God. It is easy to accept Jesus' evaluation of John as "much more than a prophet" (Luke 7:26). He is a unique person in God's divine plan of salvation.

10. How can John the Baptist's directions to his original audience help someone today to reach the point of repentance?

Repentance is closely connected with the confessing of sin—after all, sin is what we repent of. Before someone will confess sin, he or she must acknowledge that sin exists. John pointed out both sinful and godly behavior. Placing the two alongside one another allows the hearer to realize the stark contrast between them.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

1. Knowing that God's wrath awaits sinners should motivate us to spread the gospel (Luke 3:7).
2. God is not impressed by our ancestry; He looks at the heart of each individual (vs. 8-9).
3. A repentant heart will be seen in the way we treat others (vs. 10-14).
4. The clear gospel message backed up by a godly life will have a tremendous impact (v. 15).
5. We must never claim for ourselves the honors that are due Christ alone (v. 16).
6. If people are to grasp eternal life, they must hear about eternal judgment (vs. 17-18).

CONCLUSION:

Actions That Count

"I promise! I'll never drink again!" These might be the words of a destructive alcoholic attempting to negotiate his way through yet another crisis caused by his drinking. The problem is that for many families this has a hollow ring, for they have heard it before. They might love the alcohol addict dearly, but his poor choices affect others too. They want more than words, no matter how sincere. They want change. They want the person who promises to quit drinking ... *to quit drinking!*

Repentance is a nonexistent topic in some churches. Part of this stems from a reaction to the preaching of the past, which was often overly moralistic. Preachers of a previous generation were expected to condemn everything from card playing to mixed swimming. However well-intentioned this might have been, the emphasis was upon behavior rather than repentance. Social pressure was applied to church members that required strict standards of *do's* and *don'ts*—and woe to the errant sinner who violated this code!

This system is based on fear, and fear is not a good motivator for the long term. Eventually we become numb to threats, and they lose their effectiveness. Behavioral change that is long lasting must come from a different source. True godly living comes from the heart. I do the right thing because I want to do the right thing, not because I am afraid of the consequences of violation.

John the Baptist understood this very well. He was called to prepare Israel for God's Messiah. He did not see this as getting them to clean up their lives for the sake of appearances. He saw this as effecting a change in heart. When he called Israel to repentance, he wasn't just saying, "Cut down on sinning." He demanded "fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8), the outward signs of a positive inward change.

Today, the Messiah still comes into the hearts of men and women. Jesus understands us in our weaknesses. His heart is broken by our self-destructive sinning. But he wants much more than "less sin." He wants a changed heart, a repentant heart. He desires more than a person saying, "I won't sin anymore." He

wants the heart that repents and affirms, "I don't want to sin anymore." Until we get to that point, we have not fully repented, for repentance involves the whole person, not just specific behaviors.

PRAYER:

God of all creation, judge of the living and the dead, we do not fear judgment because we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. May we never take our salvation for granted by disregarding how You expect us to live. Instead, may Your Holy Spirit continue to mold and shape us toward being ones who bear much fruit that is pleasing and acceptable to You. We pray this in the name of the One whom John the Baptist pointed to, Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

John's challenge to repent endures.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

In the next lesson we move to the Old Testament to study people of commitment. Shiphrah and Puah were Israelite midwives who defied Egyptian masters by allowing boys to live despite murderous instructions. Study Exodus 1:8-21

"Commitment of the Midwives."

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY:

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Have a blessed Christmas Day!

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