

# **To Seek and To Save the Lost**

## **The Preaching of John the Baptist**

*Luke 3:7-14*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# The Preaching of John the Baptist

## Scripture

We are studying the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke in a sermon series I am calling, “To Seek and To Save the Lost.”

The first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel deal with what is called “The Infancy Narrative.” That is, they deal with the prophecies and births of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah, and then what happened to Jesus following his birth.

Chapter 3 of Luke’s Gospel begins by focusing attention on John the Baptist. Unlike the other Gospel writers who scatter accounts of John’s ministry throughout their Gospel accounts, Luke basically gathers all the material about John’s ministry and presents it here in one place at the beginning of chapter 3. And except for one brief incident about John in Luke 7:18-23, he disappears from Luke’s Gospel after chapter 3. The reason is that Luke wanted to focus exclusively on the person and work of Jesus from Luke 3:21 onwards.

So here at the beginning of chapter 3 Luke described the life and ministry of John the Baptist. Last time we examined the ministry of John the Baptist. Today I would like to examine the preaching of John the Baptist.

Let’s read about the preaching of John the Baptist in Luke 3:7-14:

**<sup>7</sup> He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”**

**<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" <sup>11</sup> And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." <sup>12</sup> Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" <sup>13</sup> And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:7-14)**

## Introduction

"You know what you people are? You are all a bunch of hypocrites! You go to church on Sunday, but then you forget about God the rest of the week. You are living a double life. You say that you belong to God, but then you secretly go out and indulge in all kinds of sinful pleasures. You live in your nice big houses and drive around in your fancy cars, but you never do anything to help the poor. You snakes! Do you really think that God is going to save you just because you are baptized and belong to a Presbyterian church? Listen, unless you turn away from your sins, you are going straight to hell!"<sup>1</sup>

That was the kind of message that John the Baptist preached in all the region around the Jordan (3:3). His preaching was not designed to set people at ease. His preaching was not very "seeker sensitive." His preaching did not promote "cheap grace."

John was not trying to get people to like him. He was not interested in building a mega-church. He was not trying to win friends and influence people.

No. John saw himself as God's messenger. He saw himself as one who proclaimed God's truth with clarity and conviction.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 114.

He was trying to get people to repent. He wanted people to be reconciled to an absolutely holy God.

Admittedly, John the Baptist was a little peculiar. Matthew tells us in his Gospel that John lived in the wilderness, wore strange clothes, and ate locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4). Even in those days he was considered odd, which is why people talked about him all over Israel. But the main thing John did was to preach.

The Gospels present John as a man of action, preaching a powerful message of repentance. The sculptor, Auguste Rodin,

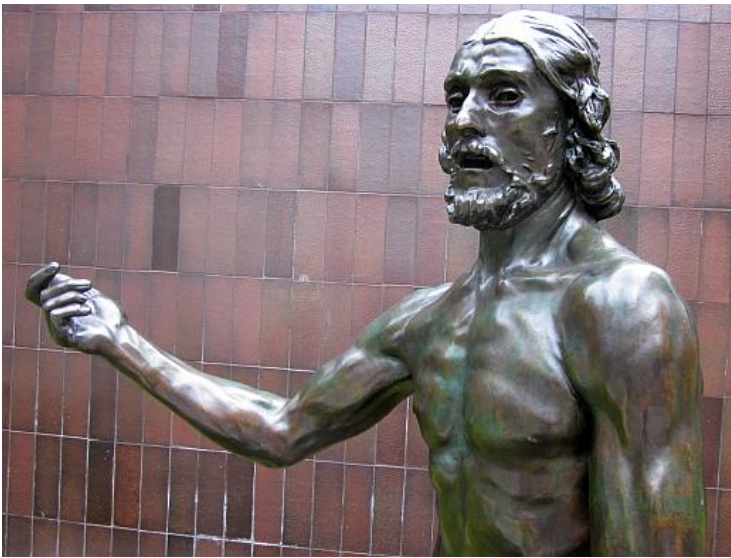


Figure 1: Auguste Rodin's *St. John the Baptist Preaching* was completed in 1878, and is housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Great Britain.

expressed this beautifully in his sculpture of John the Baptist, which is titled “John the Baptist Preaching” and is housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Great Britain. Rodin’s near-naked John has long unruly hair and a tiny animal skin around

his waist. He is in mid-stride, with a finger raised, his head turned to the side, and lips parted, as if in mid-sentence. The sculpture splendidly captures the essence of John’s preaching.

But, however odd people thought John was, he was alive with passion for preaching the Word of God. People came from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan to hear him preach (Matthew 3:5). And many of them were baptized by him in response to his message.<sup>2</sup>

John was in fact the last of the Old Testament prophets,

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 114-115.

even though he appears only in the New Testament. Nevertheless, his appearance was foretold by the prophet Malachi (3:1) about 450 years before he began his ministry.

As I said, last time I examined the ministry of John. Today I would like to examine the preaching of John the Baptist.

## Lesson

An examination of the preaching of John the Baptist in Luke 3:7-14 will show us what constitutes faithful preaching.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Faithful Preaching Alerts about Divine Judgment (3:7, 9)
2. Faithful Preaching Calls for Repentance (3:8a)
3. Faithful Preaching Warns about False Hope (3:8b)
4. Faithful Preaching Demands Transformation (3:10-14)

### I. Faithful Preaching Alerts about Divine Judgment (3:7, 9)

First, faithful preaching alerts about divine judgment.

Luke wanted to give us a typical sampling of John the Baptist's preaching. So he told us that John **said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"** (3:7).

Students who are learning to preach are taught at seminaries today that it is important to begin a sermon by establishing a good report with the audience. That makes it easier for them later in the message to hear the hard words of the sermon.

John apparently missed the class on how to begin a sermon by establishing report with one's audience! He got

straight to the point. And why was that?

John got straight to the point because divine judgment was imminent. In fact, in verse 9 John said to the people, **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** John wanted people to understand that **the axe** was ready to begin its work.

People who are not in a right relationship with God are in terrible danger. Many people think like I did as a young person. When I was a teenager I had an intuitive sense that there probably was some kind of existence after this life. Later I learned that I was right because the writer of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, said that God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). That is why every people group in this world is religious. And even though individuals do not understand it, God has put into every single person a built-in sense of eternity.

My attitude as a young person was that I would wait until I was way into my retirement years before I got serious about spiritual matters. I suspected that there was a God and an eternity and a heaven and a hell, but I thought that I would settle my eternal destiny in the sunset years of my life.

Then, when I was nineteen years old I was sent off to war. I was terrified! I drowned my fear with alcohol on the way to report for duty. Suddenly, death and eternity were no longer distant realities but rather they were very present realities. And this was brought vividly home to me about two months later when some friends of mine were killed not by enemy fire but by friendly fire. I was never more sober than a few days later when I carried their bodies off the airplane in body bags.

I realized that I also could die at any time. And if I died, I would not be prepared to face God. If I died, I knew that I was headed for hell. I came to understand that I was under divine judgment because God’s wrath, “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteous-

ness of men” (Romans 1:18). I knew that I was ungodly and unrighteous. I did not really care for the things of God, even though I had attended worship services every week for years.

But, thank God, a few months later he heard my cries for mercy, and he granted me faith and repentance.

Every faithful preacher, like John, alerts his hearers about divine judgment. He does so because God’s wrath is real and no man knows the day of his death.

## II. Faithful Preaching Calls for Repentance (3:8a)

Second, faithful preaching calls for repentance.

John told his hearers, “**Bear fruits in keeping with repentance**” (3:8a).

So much preaching in our day is self-help preaching. Many preachers think that in order to reach our culture they need to give people tools that will help them in their daily lives. So, people get preaching about how to get along with each other, how to raise great children, how to love our spouses, how to become healthy, wealthy, and wise, and so on.

Some preaching is a little better in that they will urge people to believe, to have faith, and to trust in Jesus.

Sadly, however, there is not much preaching that calls for repentance. The Greek word for **repentance** (*metanoia*) is “to change one’s way.” Lexicographers Louw and Nida explain that “though in English a focal component of repent is the sorrow or contrition that a person experiences because of sin, the emphasis in [repentance] seems to be more specifically the total change, both in thought and behavior, with respect to how one should both think and act.”<sup>3</sup>

Many people confuse sorrow or contrition for repentance.

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<sup>3</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 509.

They are sorry for the wrong that they have done. They are contrite about what they have done and even how it may have affected others. But, repentance is much deeper than that. Repentance is fundamentally a change in thought and behavior. As one commentator said, “Real repentance manifests itself in concrete action,”<sup>4</sup> as we shall see shortly.

On October 8, 1871, a large capacity crowd filled Chicago’s Farwell Hall to hear D. L. Moody preach. He preached a powerful message about repentance. Then, toward the close of the message, people began hearing the noise of fire engines.

Moody realized that the congregation was growing restless because they were distracted by what might be going on outside. So he decided to bring the service to a close. Before dismissing the large congregation, he told them to go home and think about what he had preached, and urged them to come back the next week to learn about getting right with God.

Sadly, that was the night of the Great Chicago Fire. A massive fire destroyed much of the city, including Farwell Hall, and more than 300 people died as a result of the fire.

As for those present among the capacity crowd who had come to hear Moody preach, they were unable to return the next week to learn about getting right with God.

D. L. Moody decided that from that point on he would never again preach without calling for a response to the gospel. The stakes are just too high because divine judgment is real.

Faithful preaching will call for a response to the gospel. Faithful preaching will call for a response of faith and repentance, which are really two aspects of the same response.

### **III. Faithful Preaching Warns about False Hope (3:8b)**

Third, faithful preaching warns about false hope.

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<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 304.



John continued his faithful preaching and said, **“And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham”** (3:8b).

John knew what the people were thinking. He had heard it so often. The Jews believed that God would save them because they were descendants of **Abraham**. After all, they reasoned, to them belonged the “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, . . . the promises, [and] . . . the patriarchs” (Romans 9:4-5). So, they were safe!

But John warned them not to put their hope in their heritage. God would not save them simply because they were born into a believing family. No. Saving faith is always personally exercised. No person would be saved because his or her ancestors were believers. Every person must believe and repent for himself or herself in order to receive the gift of eternal life.

My great fear as a pastor is that so many of you think that you are okay with God because you are brought up in a Christian home. Or you think that you are okay with God because you attend worship services regularly. Let me be as plain as John: if you think that God will save you because of your heritage, worship attendance, Christian service, or obedience to his law, your hope is as misplaced as John’s hearers.

God saves sinners by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And along with faith is repentance, a true change of thought and behavior.

Faithful preaching warns about false hope.

#### **IV. Faithful Preaching Demands Transformation (3:10-14)**

And finally, faithful preaching demands transformation.

A cartoon shows a skeptic shouting up to the heavens, “God! If you’re up there, tell us what we should do!”

Back comes a voice: “Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.”

The skeptic is shocked.

“Just testing!” he says.

“Me too!” replies the voice.<sup>5</sup>

I like this cartoon because it highlights that God does not merely listen to what we say, but he looks for what we do.

Far too many people make a profession of faith, and that is all that it is—a profession. There is no change of life.

However, faithful preaching demands transformation.

John explained in three very practical ways what happens to people who are transformed by the gospel.

*A. Transformed People Are Compassionate (3:10-11)*

First, transformed people are compassionate.

**The crowds asked John, “What then shall we do?”** (3:10). Having heard John’s preaching about divine judgment, the need for repentance, and the warning about false hope, they wanted to know how to respond.

**And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise”** (3:11). Transformed people share the blessings that God has given to them. They realize that God owns everything and that they are simply stewards of his possessions. So, it is easy for them to give “their” possessions away. And in this way, they demonstrate transformation through compassion.

*B. Transformed People Are Honest (3:12-13)*

Second, transformed people are honest.

**Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to**

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 35.

John, **“Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do”** (3:12-13).

The Roman authorities sold tax collection franchises to the Jews. They told them how much was to go to the Roman government, and the Jewish **tax collectors** charged people a whole lot more so that they could make an outrageous profit. The people hated the **tax collectors** because of this practice.

But the gospel transforms cheats and makes them honest.

*C. Transformed People Are Content (3:14)*

And third, transformed people are content.

**Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages”** (3:14).

Most likely these **soldiers** were not Roman soldiers but were more like local police who protected the tax collectors. They bullied people to give outrageous sums of money to the tax collectors. And they split the profits with the tax collectors.

But the gospel transforms bullies and liars and makes them content.

## **Conclusion**

John the Baptist was a faithful preacher.

Pray that God will raise up preachers who alert about divine judgment, call for repentance, warn about false hope, and demand transformation.

And pray that God will cause you to respond to such preaching by fleeing the wrath that is to come, repenting of your sin, not relying on false hope for salvation, and becoming transformed by the gospel. Amen.



## **Mission Statement**

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## **Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz**

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source\\_detail.asp?sourceid=FredFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FredFritz)

## **Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)**

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

O God, we do not see much preaching in our day like that of John the Baptist.

I pray that you will raise up preachers who alert about divine judgment, call for repentance, warn about false hope, and demand transformation.

And I pray that you will cause each one here today to respond to such preaching by fleeing the wrath that is to come, repenting of sin, not relying on false hope for salvation, and becoming transformed by the gospel.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!