

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Testimony of John the Baptist

Luke 3:15-17

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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 the prophecies and births of John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ, and then what happened to Jesus following his birth.

The third chapter of Luke's Gospel begins by focusing on John the Baptist. John had a remarkable ministry. His preaching was not designed to set people at ease. He saw himself as God's messenger who called people to repentance. And although he was viewed as a little odd, it would not be an overstatement to say that he was a huge sensation. Thousands of people came to hear him preach (Matthew 3:5).

As we continue our study of John the Baptist today, I would like to examine the testimony of John the Baptist.

Let's read about his testimony in Luke 3:15-17:

¹⁵As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:15-17)

Introduction

One of the greatest preachers of the last century was Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He once described a stunning personal experience of the Holy Spirit's empowering his preaching on an

unforgettable occasion: “Never, do I think, have I been so conscious of the Power of the Word and the Gale of the Spirit. It is exceedingly difficult to go on living after such an experience, especially difficult to go on preaching.”

Lloyd-Jones described what all true preachers know: it is one thing to preach the Word—it is quite another to preach in the power of the Holy Spirit. And those who heard and knew the Doctor do not doubt a word of his testimony.

His grandson, Christopher Catherwood, writes:

The one thing he prayed for, the one thing he relied on, the one thing he waited for and the one thing above all else and beyond most other preachers of his generation which thousands felt under his preaching was the unction, or anointing, of the Holy Spirit.¹

We don’t use the word “unction” much in our day, perhaps because so much preaching lacks unction.

But “unction” is a good word. It describes the work of the Holy Spirit who anoints the preacher in such a way so as to enable him to preach with penetrating power, clarity, and conviction. Listeners are riveted to the words of the preacher because in a very real sense his words are coming from the Holy Spirit.

This is what the listeners of John the Baptist experienced when they heard him preach. They were captivated by his preaching, perhaps to an even greater degree than any other preacher ever because John was filled with the Holy Spirit before birth, groomed by the Spirit for thirty years, and then launched into his ministry by the Spirit to prepare the way for Jesus. And in Jesus’ own words, there was no one greater than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28; Matthew 11:11).

This is the context for the incident I want to examine today. John’s powerful preaching was impacting thousands of

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 115.

people who were repenting of their sin and getting baptized. And so the people began to wonder if John was the Christ. That is, they began to wonder if John was the promised Messiah, the promised Deliverer.

The name “Christ” was the “official title given to Jesus in the New Testament. It signifies his office as anointed Savior and alludes to his spiritual qualifications for the task of saving his people. The word derives from the Greek *Christos*, which translates the Hebrew *Messiah* (John 1:41).”²

Today I would like to look at the testimony of John the Baptist.

Lesson

An examination of the testimony of John the Baptist in Luke 3:15-17 will show us that Jesus is the Christ.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. John Is Not the Christ (3:15)
2. Jesus Is the Christ (3:16-17)

I. John Is Not the Christ (3:15)

First, we learn that John is not the Christ.

Luke said that **the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ** (3:15).

John was an overnight sensation. Thousands of people came from Jerusalem and all Judea and the entire region about the Jordan to hear him preach. All around the countryside people were talking about John. They talked about his unusual lifestyle, his powerful preaching, and his cleansing baptism.

And then **the people** began wondering **whether John**

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 431.

might be the Christ.

Keep in mind that messianic expectations were fuzzy. The people in John's day were aware of the Old Testament prophecies that one day God would send the Messiah, the one who would deliver them from oppression. Of course the people wanted deliverance from the yoke of military and political oppression. But the Christ was going to come and deliver them from spiritual oppression. That is, the Christ was going to deliver them from sin and Satan, and grant them liberty to worship and serve the true and living God.

So, it is quite understandable that the people wondered **whether John might be the Christ**. After all, he was the best candidate in more than 450 years! Could it be that God was finally acting? Had God finally sent a deliverer for his people?

But John knew that he was not the Christ. When he heard the speculation **whether he might be the Christ**, he told them that he was not the Christ. One who was far mightier than he was coming, and that one would be the Christ.

Luke did not tell us whether John knew that his relative Jesus was the Christ. However, the apostle John records in his Gospel that when Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized by him, John immediately said of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). He then went on to explain to the people that Jesus was the one who was mightier than he, and that Jesus was the Christ.

Consider John's testimony. He was the most popular and powerful preacher in centuries! People by the thousands were flocking to hear him preach. They wanted him to deliver them. But John would have none of it.

One of the characteristics of faithful Christian preachers is that they refuse to allow people to exalt them. Faithful Christian preachers, like John, exalt Jesus. That is the hallmark of faithful preaching: to exalt the person and work of Jesus.

In his commentary on Luke's Gospel, pastor Kent Hughes

said that he once heard E. V. Hill, the pastor of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, tell of the ministry of an elderly woman in his church whom they all called 1800 because no one knew how old she was. 1800 was hard on unsuspecting preachers because she would sit in the front row, and as soon as the preacher began she would say, "Get him up!" (referring to Christ). After a few minutes, if she did not think there was enough of Christ in the sermon, she would again shout, "Get him up!" If a preacher did not "Get him up!" he was in for a long, hard day!³

John the Baptist would not allow people to exalt him. Instead, he pointed people to Jesus. John's ministry was to "get him up!" And indeed, that is the purpose of every faithful preacher. It is to exalt Jesus and "get him up!"

II. Jesus Is the Christ (3:16-17)

Second, we learn that Jesus is the Christ.

The people wanted to talk about how great John was, but John responded by telling them about one who was far greater. And this one who was far greater than John was the Christ!

John's argument for the greatness of Jesus is by way of comparison. He said to the people, "You think that I am great. But wait until you see Jesus. Then you will understand what true greatness really is. Then you will know that Jesus is the Christ, the only one who can deliver and redeem you."

So, let us examine why John said that Jesus is the Christ.

A. *Because He Is Greater in His Person (3:16a)*

First, Jesus is the Christ because he is greater in his person.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 116.

Up until that time John was the greatest of all men, he was the last of the Old Testament prophets, he was greatest of all the Old Testament prophets, he was having the greatest preaching ministry ever, and he was having enormous crowds thronging to listen to his preaching. And yet John said that he was not even worthy to perform the humblest act for Christ.

This is how John put it to the people: **“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie”** (3:16a).

In those days it was customary for students to follow their teachers. In fact, that is what a “disciple” is: one who follows his teacher. Those disciples generally did not pay tuition, but they did show their gratitude and commitment to their teacher by performing menial acts of service. A great teacher hardly had to do anything. His students did everything for him—everything, that is, except for one specific act of service. An ancient rabbinical saying put it this way: “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher, except for one thing—untie the strap of his sandals.”⁴

John said that he was not even worthy to do that! He was unworthy to untie the strap of the sandals of the immeasurably worthy Christ. By comparison, John was saying that he was not just the lowest of the low, he was even lower. The people wondered whether John might be the Christ, but John told them that he did not even deserve to be Jesus’ slave.

John said this to show the greatness of Jesus. Jesus is so worthy of honor and worship that even the greatest man on earth was unworthy to be his slave!

So, isn’t it amazing that God has called us to be the servants of Jesus? We are not worthy for his service, except by God’s grace.

But consider something even more amazing. Jesus, this

⁴ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), 109, referencing Strack-Billerbeck, IV. (1:121).

most worthy Christ, has become *our* servant!

You may recall that on the night before his arrest, Jesus had a Passover meal with his disciples (John 13:1-20). As Jesus and his disciples entered the room for the meal no one was willing to wash anyone else's feet, let alone Jesus' feet. Perhaps the disciples were thinking of the rabbinical saying that they should not untie the strap of their teacher's sandals in order to wash his feet. But what happened? Jesus took the basin of water and towel, and he started to untie the straps of the sandals of his disciples in order to wash their feet—just like a servant! You may also remember that Peter told Jesus not to touch him. But Jesus insisted.

It was a stunning reversal. Jesus is so worthy that he would have done his disciples an honor by asking them to wash his feet. Instead, he washed *their* feet. The reason he did this was to prepare his disciples for his supreme act of service to them. The next day he went to Golgotha and died a horrible death on the cross in order to pay the penalty for their sins.

Jesus is the Christ because he is supremely great and worthy, we are extremely unworthy, and God is marvelously gracious in saving us and allowing us to serve and worship him.

B. Because He Is Greater in His Baptism (3:16b-c)

Second, Jesus is the Christ because he is greater in his baptism.

John put it this way: "I baptize you with water. . . . **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire**" (3:16b-c).

The baptism of Jesus is greater than John's baptism because baptism with water is *external*, while baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is *internal*. As commentator Kent Hughes notes, "One can be water-baptized without being baptized with the Holy Spirit, and vice versa. Water-baptism can only wash the outside of a person. Baptism with the Spirit and fire cleans-

es the inside.”⁵

I want you to note the language of this verse. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit *and* fire. There are not two baptisms but rather there is one baptism with two complementary aspects. Let’s look briefly at each aspect.

1. Jesus Will Baptize with the Holy Spirit (3:16b)

First, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John said, “**He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit**” (3:16b).

What did John mean when he said that Jesus would **baptize** people **with the Holy Spirit**? The apostle Paul explained it to the Christian believers in 1 Corinthians 12:13: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (*NIV*). Baptism with the Holy Spirit is a reference to the new birth, to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit giving us new spiritual life. He incorporates us into the body of Christ, making us children of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Have you experienced this baptism?

Every Christian does, because it is the Holy Spirit who makes a person a Christian. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to every person for whom he has died and paid sin’s penalty, and the Holy Spirit then regenerates that person, gives him faith and repentance, and begins to indwell him in order to sanctify him.

John’s baptism was external, with water. Jesus’ baptism was internal, with the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ baptism is greater.

2. Jesus Will Baptize with Fire (3:16c)

And second, Jesus will baptize with fire.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 117.

John said, “**He will baptize you with. . . fire**” (3:16c).

Remember that this is not a second baptism, but is instead a second aspect of the one baptism by Jesus. **Fire** represents the ongoing work of cleansing in the Christian’s life.

For example, Isaiah 4:4 speaks of the cleansing of Jerusalem with washing and fire.

Malachi 3:1a describes the coming of John the Baptist by saying, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” And then verse 2 speaks of the cleansing work that Jesus will do when he comes: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.” In those days the refiner’s fire was intense in order to separate the dross from the pure metal.

And that is what Jesus does by the indwelling Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. He baptizes with fire so that he can purify and cleanse us in order to skim off the dross of disobedience and sin, and make us more and more like himself.

John’s baptism was external. He baptized those who claimed to be repentant. But Jesus’ baptism is greater because he really does change those who have been born again. He does an internal work of ongoing change and purification and cleansing so that Christians look more and more like Jesus.

Again, I ask you: have you experienced this baptism?

C. Because He Is Greater in His Judgment (3:17)

And third, Jesus is the Christ because he is greater in his judgment.

When people came to John for baptism, he did not know who was sincere when they said they were repentant and wanted to be baptized by him. 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?” (3:7).

When a brush fire swept through the wilderness the vipers would sense the heat and come of their holes and flee from the approaching fire. John knew that the people sensed approaching doom, but he lacked the ability to see their hearts.

But Jesus lacks no such discernment. He knows the heart of every individual. John said of Jesus in verse 17, **“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**

John said that Jesus is the harvester who will toss the grain and chaff into the air with his winnowing fork. The lighter chaff will be blown off to the side by the wind, but the grain, which is heavier, will fall back on to the ground. The grain, which represents true believers, will be gathered together safely into his barn. But the chaff, which represents all non-Christians, will be sent to eternal, unending punishment in hell.

John could only warn people of the coming judgment. But Jesus is greater because he is able to administer the judgment of God to every unregenerate person.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the testimony of John, we should commit ourselves to Jesus as the Christ.

John was not the Christ. He pointed people to Jesus who is the Christ. Jesus is the supremely great one who alone is worthy. He sends the Holy Spirit to regenerate and to sanctify those for whom he died. And he also is the one who will administer the judgment of God by sending unrepentant sinners to hell for all eternity.

Is Jesus your Christ today? Is he your Savior? If not, you are in terrible danger. Turn to Jesus today and ask him to save you from the judgment that is to come. 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

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PRAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for the testimony of John the Baptist.

According to Jesus himself, there was no one greater than John the Baptist. He had such an amazing ministry that people wondered if he might be the Christ. But he was not the Christ.

And like all faithful preachers he pointed people to the true Christ—Jesus.

Oh God, we learned today that Jesus is supremely great and worthy, and we are extremely unworthy, and yet you are marvelously gracious in sending Jesus to be the Savior of sinners.

Jesus is supremely great because he baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. He sends the Holy Spirit to give the new birth, and he purifies and cleanses his followers to make them more and more like himself.

And finally, we learned that Jesus is supremely great because he will administer the judgment of God to every unregenerate person.

O God, will you save every person who cries out to you for mercy today?

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!