

Luke 3:9-20
August 12, 2018

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

You will recall from last week that **John** challenged the people to bring forth **fruit** as an indication of their belief. John's address to the people was harsh: **You brood of vipers!** Apparently, some were coming with the belief that baptism alone could insure salvation. And for the Jewish listeners, John was clear that being a descendant of Abraham would not save anyone. In fact, he told them that God could create children out of stones! So we are going to pick up where we left off.

Transition: And as we go through this passage, let's be mindful that all of us CAN share the gospel effectively BY emphasizing the importance of repentance and offering EXAMPLES of what a changed life looks like. We will find some of those examples in today's reading. Let's begin.

BOOK (NIV 1984):

V.9:

- The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

V.10:

- "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

V.11:

- John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

V.12:

- Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

V.13:

- "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

V.14:

- Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

V.15:

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

V.16:

- John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

V.17:

- His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

V.18:

- And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

V.19:

- But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done,

V.20:

- Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q V.9: John chooses a certain imagery that “the ax is already at the root.” What does he want the crowd to understand? [Judgment is extremely close to anyone who did not evidence, i.e. produce good fruit” a genuine repentance. So unless there is repentance, it will be cut down.]

Transition: Luke unpacks the idea of producing good fruit by giving us EXAMPLES of the kind of fruit that is in keeping with true repentance. He shares some examples after the crowd asked, “What should we do then?”

Q V.11: What is the first example or illustration that John gives? [If you have two tunics, then share one with a man who has none. Same goes for those who have food.]

Q: What's the principle John is teaching? [Any proper faith must involve social concern for the poor and unfortunate. He told them not to be selfish but to share their blessings with others.]

Q V.12: Tax collectors approached John to be baptized. What did they ask? [“Teacher, what should we do?”]

Q V.13: How did John respond? [Don't collect any more than you are required.]

Q: What is John implying about tax collectors? [They have been dishonest in the past. They often worked for the Romans and usually extorted money from the people.]

Q V.14: Then soldiers approached John and asked the same question. How did John respond? [Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay]

Observation: Soldiers asked them to refrain from using their authority to get personal gain.

Transition: Luke now takes time to deal with John's announcement of the coming Messiah.

Q V.15: The crowds are coming out in throngs. Who do they think John is? [The Messiah]

Q V.16: How does John respond? [I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.]

Q: John makes an important distinction between himself and the Messiah. What did you see? [John will baptize with water, but the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.]

Observation on thongs of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie: John is saying that he was not worthy to perform this task that only non-Jewish slaves had to do for their Jewish masters.

Q: Why do think John mentions baptism by fire? [Luke sees a “mixed” audience, so he describes what happens to those who do not believe in Jesus. He’s introducing the Messianic age that brings the blessing of the Spirit to the repentant, but the fires of judgment to the unrepentant.]

Q: When do new Christians get baptized by the Holy Spirit? [As soon as you make your profession of faith in Him]

Q V.17: Luke gives us another word picture. What do you see? [The Lord will have a winnowing fork in his hand to separate the wheat from the chaff. And the chaff will burn up with unquenchable fire.]

Observation: The “unquenchable fire” portrays the eternal finality and irreversible nature of the final judgment.

Q V.18: How does Luke characterize John’s ministry? [He spoke with many words to exhort people and preach the good news to them.]

Q V.19-20: John had a word for Herod. What does he tell King Herod? [He rebukes him for his adulteress relationship with Herodias, his brother’s wife.]

Q: How well did King Herod take the rebuke? [Not well. He locked up John in prison.]

LOOK:

Any proper faith must involve a social concern for the poor and unfortunate. Let’s find a way to intentionally serve the poor and those who are in need.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 170–171). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

In Luke 3:7, John pictured the self-righteous sinners as snakes that slithered out of the grass because a fire was coming! Jesus compared the Pharisees to vipers (Matt. 23:33) because their self-righteousness and unbelief made them the children of the devil (John 8:44–45; Rev. 20:2). How tragic that the religious leaders refused to obey John's message and submit to his baptism (Luke 20:1–8). They not only failed to enter the kingdom themselves, but their bad example and false teaching kept other people from entering.

John the Baptist was also *a teacher* (Luke 3:12). He not only preached publicly, but he also had a personal ministry to the people, telling them how to practice their new faith (Luke 3:10–14). He told them not to be selfish but to share their blessings with others (see Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37).

Even the tax collectors came to John for counsel. These men were despised by their fellow Jews because they worked for the Romans and usually extorted money from the people. Luke emphasized the fact that Jesus was the friend of tax collectors (Luke 5:27ff; 15:1–2; 19:1–10). John did not tell them to quit their jobs but to do their work honestly.

Likewise, the soldiers were not condemned for their vocation. Rather, John told them to refrain from using their authority to get personal gain. These were probably Jewish soldiers attached to the temple or to the court of one of the Jewish rulers. It was not likely that Roman soldiers would ask a Jewish prophet for counsel.

John was faithful in his ministry to prepare the hearts of the people and then to present their Messiah to them. He clearly stated that Jesus was “the Lord” (Luke 3:4) and the Son of God (John 1:34). Because John rebuked Herod Antipas for his adulterous marriage to Herodias, he was imprisoned by the king and finally beheaded. However, he had faithfully finished his God-given assignment and prepared the people to meet the Messiah, the Son of God.

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 202-205)

3:7–9. **John** challenged the people to bring forth **fruit** as an indication of their belief. John's address to the people was harsh: **You brood of vipers!** Apparently, some were coming with the belief that baptism alone could insure salvation. John was alerting them to the stark realities of life. One must face the fact that **wrath** was **coming**. John was clear that being a member of the nation of Israel would not save anyone (v. 8; cf. John 8:33–39; Rom. 2:28–29). An **ax** is ready to **cut down** trees that do not bear **good fruit**, so they can be burned. Likewise, judgment was extremely close to anyone who did not evidence (“produce good fruit”) a genuine **repentance** (Luke 3:8).

3:10–14. The crowd, tax collectors, and soldiers all asked, “**What should we do** (vv. 10, 12, 14) to give evidence of genuine repentance?” (Cf. similar questions in 10:25; 18:18.) In response John told the people to be (a) generous (3:11), (b) honest (v. 13), and (c) content (v. 14).

A person showed his repentance by being generous with the necessities of life—clothing and food. A tunic (*chitōn*) was a shirtlike garment. Often people wore two if they had them.

Tax collectors, notorious for their dishonesty in collecting more than required and pocketing it for themselves (cf. 5:27–32), exemplified the need for honesty. And **soldiers**, known and hated

for always trying to get more **money** (by extorting it and blaming others for it), were examples of the need to be **content** and gentle.

3. THE ROLE OF JOHN (3:15–17).

3:15–17. Luke had previously explained what John's function was to be (1:17, 76). But the crowds who thronged out to hear John began to wonder **if John might possibly be the Christ**. John distinguished between his own baptism and the Messiah's baptism: John's baptism was **with water**, but the Messiah would baptize **with the Holy Spirit and with fire**. The Apostle John presented Jesus not only as the Spirit-baptized One but also as the baptizing One (John 20:22). Ultimately the fulfillment of the baptizing work of the Spirit was seen on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). The baptizing "with fire" may refer to the purifying aspect of the baptism of the Spirit (Acts 2:3), or it may refer to the purifying work of judgment that the Messiah will accomplish (Mal. 3:2–3). The latter seems more probable in view of the work of judgment described in Luke 3:17 (cf. v. 9).

4. THE PREACHING AND IMPRISONMENT OF JOHN (3:18–20).

3:18–20. Scholars debate the dates of John the Baptist's imprisonment and death. It is likely that John began his ministry about A.D. 29 (cf. v. 1), that he was imprisoned the following year, and that he was beheaded not later than A.D. 32. His entire ministry lasted no more than three years—about one year out of prison and two years in prison. (For details on John's imprisonment and death by beheading see Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29; Luke 9:7–9, 19–20.)

Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, pp. 113–118). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

3:9 The ax is already at the root. The imagery here is clearly one of judgment (cf. Isa 10:33–34; Ezek 31:12; Dan 4:14), but this refers not to the final judgment but rather to the judgment occurring due to the arrival of God's kingdom. Already now the messianic banquet has begun (Luke 14:15–24), and the judgment is taking place. The invited guests are being excluded, and the outcasts are now invited in their place. Indeed, the last are becoming first, and the first are becoming last (13:30). The barren fig tree is now experiencing its final hour (13:6–9). Unless there is repentance, it will be cut down (13:9). Compare Rom 11:17f. for a Pauline parallel.

3:10 In this and the following verses we find practical examples of the kind of fruit that is in keeping with true repentance. A living eschatological hope does not ignore social concerns but provides the ground for such concerns as well as its motivation. John did not require his hearers to follow his particular "desert life-style" or still less the monastic life-style of the Qumran community. Rather the life of one awaiting the kingdom of God is to be lived out in the world.

What should we do? Such a question does not suggest that the individual is seeking to achieve a relationship with God based upon his or her works but is an appropriate and sincere response to the divine message. Luke understood what followed as applicable to his Christian readers since it came from an authoritative spokesman, John the Baptist.

3:11 The man with two tunics. The tunic was the inner garment worn under a cloak. Compare Luke 6:29. What we find in this verse has clear OT roots (Job 31:16–20; Isa 58:7; Ezek 18:7) and is a theological emphasis found throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. Any proper faith must

involve a social concern for the poor and unfortunate, and of all the Evangelists, Luke particularly sought to stress this point (Luke 6:30; 12:33; 14:12–14; 16:9; 18:22).

3:12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. This is understood better as “toll collectors” who were located at commercial centers, such as Capernaum and Jericho, to collect tolls, customs, and tariffs. Such people had bid and won the right to collect such tolls for the Romans. The fact that their profit was determined by how much they collected and that their bid had been paid for in advance led to great abuse. They were hated and despised by their fellow Jews. Dishonesty among tax collectors was the rule (*Sanh* 25b), and their witness was not accepted in a court of law. Thus, they were often associated with sinners and prostitutes.

Teacher. Like Jesus, John the Baptist was recognized as a teacher and an authoritative spokesman for God.

3:13 Tax collectors were not required to resign but to become honest. John’s statement confirms the view that most tax collectors tended to be dishonest (cf. 19:8).

3:14 These soldiers probably were not Romans but Jews whom Herod Antipas employed (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1 [18.113]) perhaps to assist tax collectors in their duties. Soldiers were also not required to resign but to avoid the sins of their profession, i.e., violent intimidation (“extort”), robbing by false accusation, and dissatisfaction with “wages” (or perhaps “rations”).

3:15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering ... if John might be the Christ. Did Luke add the following account because of the existence of followers of John the Baptist in his day who were rivals to the Christian church? John’s Gospel suggests that in some circles John the Baptist was the object of great veneration (cf. John 1:20). Whatever the reason, in the present context the following verses serve mainly to point to the one who is greater than John—the Messiah.

3:16 In this and the next verse Matthew and Luke possess several agreements against Mark, including (1) the order of the two clauses about baptism and the Coming One (“I baptize” then “the more powerful one”), (2) the addition of “and with fire,” and (3) the addition of the saying concerning the winnowing fork. This probably indicates that the material common to Matthew and Luke also contained an introductory account concerning John the Baptist which at these points Matthew and Luke preferred over their Markan source.

With water. This is in an emphatic position to show the contrast between John’s baptism with water only and Jesus’ baptism, which also involved the Holy Spirit. This contrast is seen clearly in Acts 19:1–7.

But one more powerful than I will come. Most translations tend to ignore the article associated with the one more powerful. It would be better to read, “But *the* one more powerful than I will come.” This indicates that the reader already knows about this more powerful one, who was introduced in the first two chapters.

This same expression is also used in Luke 11:22, where Jesus is described as “stronger,” i.e., more powerful, than Satan. The expression “will come” appears first in this sentence and is thus emphatic— “He is coming, the one more powerful than I.”

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Like Matthew’s, Luke’s description of the baptism of the Messiah involves the Spirit and fire. (X-Ref however, Acts 1:5; 11:16, which omit the reference to “fire.”) The main question about this statement involves whether the reference to “fire” is to be understood positively or negatively, i.e., does it refer to a blessing (the flaming, purifying work of the Spirit) the Messiah brings for the believer or to a fiery judgment that will fall upon the unbeliever. In favor of the former is the parallelism between the “you” who received John’s baptism and the “you” who receive the Messiah’s baptism. This suggests that the

same group receives both the Spirit and fire. This would then mean that the baptism of the Spirit Jesus promised (Acts 1:5) was fulfilled at Pentecost when the Spirit came with tongues of fire (2:3). Yet if Luke wanted his readers to see the reference to “fire” in Luke 3:16 as being fulfilled in Acts 2:3, one would have expected him to include “and with fire” in 1:5, but he did not. On the other hand, the reference to fire in Luke 3:9 involves divine judgment, and the immediate context of the following verse that refers to “burning fire” is clearly one of judgment. In fact, “fire” appears throughout Luke as a metaphor for divine judgment (cf. 9:54; 12:49; 17:29). In the other two instances in which Luke mentioned the baptism of the Spirit (Acts 1:5; 11:16), there is no mention of a baptism of “fire.” Perhaps this is because the audience addressed in these two instances consists of believers and thus “fire” does not fit their situation. In Luke 3:16, however, the audience is mixed, and “fire” describes well what happens to those who do not believe in Jesus. For Luke the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is thus best understood as involving two separate groups. For the “wheat” there is the blessing of the Spirit, whereas for the “chaff” there is the judgment of burning. The messianic age therefore is seen as twofold in nature. It brings the blessing of the Spirit to the repentant but the fires of judgment to the unrepentant.

According to Cairo Damascus Document 2:12 the Messiah, who is anointed by the Spirit (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1), would be the bringer of the Holy Spirit. This promise, however, is not fulfilled until Pentecost (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5, 8; 2:1ff.). This “baptism of the Spirit” is best understood as referring to a water baptism (as in John’s case) but associated with messianic benefits that John’s mission lacked (the gift of the Spirit). In other words as the response to John’s preaching brought repentance, faith, and forgiveness and was marked by baptism, so the response to Jesus’ preaching would bring repentance, faith, and forgiveness but also the blessing of the messianic age (the coming of the Spirit) and was likewise marked by baptism. Thus the “baptism of the Spirit” involves a baptism in water by immersion that is the result of repentance and faith on the believer’s part and renewal on the Holy Spirit’s part. That the baptism of the Spirit is the experience of every true believer is evident from the parallelism with John’s baptism; for all, not just part, of John’s followers experienced his baptism (cf. also 1 Cor 12:13).

The thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. The Messiah is so much greater than John that the great prophet was not worthy to perform a task that only non-Jewish slaves had to do for their Jewish masters, for Jewish slaves were exempt from this demeaning act.

3:17 The imagery of this verse is that of a winnowing fork, a forklike shovel used to throw the grain and chaff (husk and straw) into the air so that the wind would blow the lighter chaff away from the heavier grain as they fell to the earth. Since burnable materials were in short supply, the chaff would be gathered to burn in the oven for cooking (cf. Matt 6:30). For Luke this winnowing already was realized in Jesus’ ministry rather than in the distant future. Already for Luke and his readers there was a fulfillment of this in Israel’s exclusion from God’s kingdom, Jerusalem’s destruction in A.D. 70, and the gathering of the outcasts into the kingdom. See comments on 3:9.

With unquenchable fire. This portrays the eternal finality and irreversible nature of the final judgment. It fits well the description of Gehenna as a metaphor for the place of eternal judgment, for there Jerusalem’s garbage was burned, and its fires never went out. (*Gehenna* is Hebrew for *the Valley of Hinom*, which was the valley marking Jerusalem’s southern boundary.)

3:18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. Luke concluded this section by a summary statement in which John is portrayed as preaching the “good news,” i.e., the gospel. The message of repentance is “good news,” for it means that forgiveness is possible. Persons can still pass from death to life and become part of God’s kingdom if they repent. The tragedy and consequences of sin are not irreversible, and this

is “good news.” Thus, Luke saw John the Baptist in preaching the “good news” as part of the kingdom age and not simply the last prophet of the old age. By his preaching John was preparing the Lord’s way (3:4).

3:19 But when John rebuked Herod. Whereas Josephus’s *Antiquities* 18.5.2 (18.116–19) deals with the political reason Herod imprisoned John, Luke and the other Gospel accounts provide the religious reason.

Herod the tetrarch. See comments on 3:1. Herod is described accurately here as a “tetrarch” whereas Mark 6:14 describes him more popularly as a “king.”

Because of Herodias, his brother’s wife. Luke did not go into as much detail as the other Synoptics (Mark 6:17–19; Matt 14:3–4) in describing John’s rebuke, but it clearly involved marrying a woman who had been married to his brother, which involved the issue of marrying a divorced woman (John was scandalized by what OT law regarded as an incestuous relationship). We are not told who this brother was (though see Mark 6:17 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1 [18.109–10]).

3:20 Herod added this to them all. The epitome of Herod Antipas’s evil career for Luke, and that for which he is known in history, was the arrest and death of John the Baptist (Luke 9:7–9). Luke could think of no greater evil than to reject and persecute God’s messenger. John, however, was not the only one who would be persecuted for rebuking sin (cf. 4:28; 20:19; Acts 7:54).

He locked John up in prison. According to Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.5.2 [18.119]), John was imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. According to John 3:22–23; 4:1–2, the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist overlapped for a time. Luke, however, in presenting his orderly account told of John’s imprisonment at this point in order to complete John’s story, so that he now could concentrate on Jesus’ story (cf. also Mark 1:14 but note 6:17–18).