

BAD NEWS

LUKE 3:7-20

Unless We Truly Grasp The Awfulness And Disgust Of The Bad News, We Can Never Truly Embrace The Good News Of Jesus.

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Bad News

Luke 3:7-20

Last time we examined God's calling on John the Baptist. God commissioned him to be the one to announce the coming of the long expected and anticipated Jewish Messiah. John was called to prepare people's hearts to welcome and worship their Messiah. It is almost like one of our ambassadors explaining to foreign dignitaries how they are to receive and address our president when he is preparing to visit their country. John is clearly a prophet in the full meaning of a prophet. He is foretelling the fact that Jesus will soon be arriving on the scene. And perhaps the most important part of a prophet's job was to point out to the people how far short they had fallen from God's expectation.

It seems to me that for some reason, a theme that has been common to my personal devotions and texts we come across in the Scripture keep hammering home how spiritually bankrupt we are. Well let me just speak for myself. It seems to me that as each day passes in my life, I appreciate more and more the Gospel. The more I do self-examination, the more I realize how far down in hell I deserve to be. And then I am drawn to the fact that as surely as Jesus reached out His hand to pull Peter up out of the sea, He reached out with His strong and loving hand, caught me, and rescued me from my rapid descent into hell. That is not simply good news, it's great news.

Sometimes we mistake being good or being religious for being saved. As we study through the Gospel of Luke, we are going to find out that the people Jesus singles out as the most likely to go to hell are the religious people. Since we are church people, we would do well to take a good hard look at ourselves as we study through this Gospel to see if we are truly Christian or just fooling ourselves. We are good at making Christianity what we want it to be. We are good at talking and acting religiously.

Let me give you an example. There were two men who went out fishing on a Wednesday evening. As time went on, one of the guys said, "You know, I feel kind of guilty being here fishing on prayer meeting night. Our pastor is trying so hard to get people to attend and as deacons, we probably ought to be there tonight." His friend said, "I couldn't be there at the prayer meeting tonight anyway, even if we hadn't come fishing. My wife is sick."

I think there are times when we feel guilty, but not guilty enough to change. The Bible is clear when it says:

"2What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Obedience is far better than sacrifice. Listening to him is much better than offering the fat of rams. 23Rebellion is as bad as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as bad as worshiping idols. ..." (1 Samuel 15:22-23 / NLT).

God wants obedience not religious talk or doing things we have defined as good.

I. BAD NEWS

Please take every opportunity that comes up during our study of the Gospel of Luke to see if you have placed your faith in the Jesus of the Bible or some made up idea of Jesus. Let's start out from the very beginning. The main idea of this morning's text is really the beginning of understanding the Gospel. **UNLESS WE TRULY GRASP THE AWFULNESS AND DISGUST OF THE BAD NEWS, WE CAN NEVER TRULY EMBRACE THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS.** In other words, unless we understand how evil, helpless, and hopeless we really are, we can never understand the love of God in the life and death of Jesus. Here we see John now starting his public ministry. People are coming out to the Jordan River to hear John preach. And in verses 7-9 John gives them bad news. The first thing that we must come to grips with is that **OUR NATURAL BENT IS TOWARDS EVIL.** John will leave no doubt in anyone's mind as to where we stand with God.

Children Of The Devil

In verse 7 we are in our natural state, referred to as children of the devil. Can we come to admit that without the finished work of Jesus applied to our lives by grace through faith, that we are children of the devil? I hate to keep hammering this home, but unless we come to admit this of ourselves, we can never be authentic Christians. There is nothing good in us except God the Holy Spirit. Jesus lives in our hearts through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Take God the Holy Spirit out of our lives and we are children of the devil. Many Christians have come to think that we are pretty good. But the fact is that minus Jesus, I am so evil that I deserve to spend eternity in the deepest level of hell, and so do you. Can you acknowledge that you are no good? Can you acknowledge that every part of your being is contaminated by evil? Can we acknowledge that we are not good nor could we ever be good? If you cannot acknowledge this, if it makes you angry that I am calling you evil and no good, you need to rethink what the Gospel is all about. John didn't mix words here. People came out of the cities and traveled to a remote place on the Jordan River. Instead of welcoming them John addressed them as children of snakes. In order to understand this, we must go back to the very beginning when Adam and Eve sinned, and God cursed the serpent who was the devil:

"14So the LORD God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, you will be punished. You are singled out from all the domestic and wild animals of the whole earth to be cursed. You will grovel in the dust as long as you live, crawling along on your belly. 15From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel'" (Genesis 3:14-15 / NLT).

There are a couple of interesting things we have to point out here. The devil is at constant war with God. The Bible is clear that we are born into sin. So from the very first breath we take, we are offspring of the devil. Secondly notice that this curse on Satan and his followers is coming to fruition in the arrival of Jesus. Satan will strike at Jesus' heel. He will instigate the crucifixion and death of Jesus. However, Jesus will crush the devil's head in the resurrection.

I think that if John were preaching in a modern day church, his board would tell him that he needed to be a little more winsome and a little more loving, gentle, and forgiving. Perhaps John

would be unable to pastor a modern day church because we don't want to hear the truth. John is uncompromising. He goes on to say, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? John is using what the Old Testament referred to as "Day of the Lord" theology. They all looked forward to the day in which the Jewish Messiah would come to earth, wipe out all of Israel's enemies, and establish Judaism as the world religion and Israel would rule the world. However, that's the only part they wanted to think about. In fact the Old Testament prophets made it clear that when the Day of the Lord came, God would judge His people first and many of them would not be happy with that judgment. Listen to what the prophet Amos said about it:

"18How terrible it will be for you who say, "If only the day of the LORD were here! For then the LORD would rescue us from all our enemies." But you have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will not bring light and prosperity, but darkness and disaster. 19In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear. After escaping the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and is bitten by a snake. 20Yes, the day of the LORD will be a dark and hopeless day, without a ray of joy or hope" (Amos 5:18-20 / NLT).

Did you catch that? It's like a horror movie. The Day of the Lord will be like a guy running breathlessly away from a lion, turning around every so often looking over his shoulder as he continues to run. One time after looking back and then turning his head around to look where he is running, a big brown bear stands up in front of him, dwarfs him, and lets out a menacing roar. He takes a quick right turn into his house, closes, locks the door, leans with his back against the door, let's out a sigh of relief and wipes the sweat of his forehead with his arm, thinking that he is finally safe. And then it happens, a snake falls down on him, bites him, and injects him with poisonous venom.

We all talk about the second coming of Jesus. We are so interested in studying the end times. But if God is consistent with the way He has worked in the past, He will first judge the church before He judges the nations and the unbelievers. I hope that we harshly judge ourselves on a daily basis so God will not have to.

The picture John paints of the people coming to listen to his sermons and to be baptized is that there is a brush fire in the desert and snakes are slithering out of their holes and trying to be avoid being burned by the fire.

Unlikely Repentance

We, like the people in verse 8, will have to demonstrate an unlikely repentance. At this time, it appears like John is first addressing the Jewish people. Remember, John is a Jew, Jesus is a Jew, and the Jews are God's chosen people. There was clearly a favored nation and people status the Jews enjoyed with God. However, because God gave them much, He expected much out of them. John said to them that just because they were Jewish and practiced Jewish religious customs didn't guarantee anything. John said that God could take rocks and make them children of Abraham. In other words, God can bring life to a dead rock. In one sense, that's an insult to us, but in another sense, it is filled with hope.

Here is the interesting thing about this section. John was preaching repentance to them and baptism. Baptism for the Jew was usually reserved for Gentiles converting to Judaism. It was a sign of their cleansing and their acceptance into the Jewish community. It symbolized they were cleansed of all their pagan sins and now acceptable to be included into the Jewish family of faith with all its privileges and status.

So think about this. Baptism was a ceremony that brought outsiders into the family of faith. The Jews should have already been in the family of faith. But John is treating them as if they were outsiders. In other words, they needed to acknowledge that they did not deserve anything except death and they too need to repent of their sins just like unbelievers.

We have so watered down sin and repentance in the modern day church. I know you are probably tired of hearing me say this but Jerry Bridges says in his books on holiness that we must preach the Gospel to ourselves every day. I must acknowledge to God every moment that if it were not for His applying the blood of Jesus to my life, then I would immediately find myself in the lowest depths of hell. I don't think many of us sitting here this morning believe that. Oh, we would say that we are not perfect, but we are certainly not deserving of spending an eternity in hell with such notables as Hitler and other mass murderers. But that's exactly where you belong and that's exactly right where I belong; one of us on Hitler's right and the other on Hitler's left. Just because we go to church and do religious stuff doesn't make us Christian.

Repentance means in Greek to change our mind and in Hebrew to turn around. The fruit of repentance is not doing religious stuff or talking religious stuff. The fruit of repentance is that we acknowledge that God's way is right and that we are wrong and the fruit that this repentance produces should be that we exhibit more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. The fruit of repentance should produce a desire to make restitution and a coming to the realization that some of the damage we have done in the past is irreversible. There is no one who as ever lived that if God were to weight the good works against the sins would ever come out on top.

Deader And Dumber Than A Rock (9)

If we think that our good works outnumber our sins, then as verse 9 continues on, we are deader and dumber than a rock. John and Jesus both use this illustration. Trees that produce good fruit will be spared but trees that don't produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Keep in mind that John is addressing so called church people. We should hear John preaching this to us. If we are not producing the fruit of repentance in our lives, then we may not be saved.

Here are some tips and indicators that can help us check ourselves out. Ask yourself this question. If Jesus had never come to earth and God judged me based on my good works versus my sins, would I go to heaven? In other words, do I think that my good works outweigh my sins on the scale of justice? If we answer those questions "yes" meaning that I would be fine if God weighed my good works against my sins, then you can be sure that you are not a Christian.

Next, since we are so evil, I'm assuming that we all have sin in our lives. Can I name two specific sins that I am at war with? I'm not talking about religious garbage talk like I don't read the Bible enough or I don't pray enough, I'm talking about sin that disgusts God. Can I name

two specific sins I at war with? And by at war I mean using all your resources to conquer them. If the answer is no, then perhaps you are not a Christian.

The third question we may want to ask ourselves is this. Has my life been changing? In other words, can I see real Christian growth in my life, and can others see me changing? The Bible is clear on this point. If I am not growing and maturing as a Christian, then I'm probably not a Christian because the Bible says that God the Holy Spirit is constantly putting the desire in us to change and the ability to change. So if I examine my life and find that I have not changed a bit of theology, and if I have not changed my attitudes, thoughts, or behaviors for years, then I am probably not a Christian.

And finally, if God is not manifesting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in my life, then I am probably not a Christian. If we want to be authentic Christians we have to affirm the bad news first. **OUR NATURAL BENT IS TOWARDS EVIL.**

II. REALLY BAD NEWS

If that sounds bad so far, hold on to your hats, because in verses 10-15 John gives us really bad news. **WHEN TRYING TO BE GOOD, IT QUICKLY BECOMES EVIDENT HOW EVIL WE REALLY ARE.** In other words, when we truly examine our lives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we come to realize how far short we fall from God's expectations. And to make it even worse, we find that when we go to war with the sin in our lives, sin fights back. It really is a war to do the will of God.

What Can We Do? (10)

In verse 10, like us, the people ask John, "What can we do?" It's almost as if when we hear how bad we really are, we just want to give up. That's what Satan would like us to do. But keep in mind, John is preparing us to receive Jesus. He is preparing the people to meet and receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

This is a great question. It is the question that leads to salvation and an authentic relationship with Jesus. In other words, what should we do? How should we change? How can we change our thinking and how can we change our behavior? This is what the bad news is intended to do. Luke puts this question on several different people's lips throughout his Gospel and his book of Acts.

Baptism is a symbol of death for the Christian. In fact, it is a public statement that we have died to ourselves and to our old way of life. Our lives are transformed as we learn to think biblically. In other words, the Bible is the document we look to for truth. As we change our minds, we draw on the power of the Holy Spirit to help us change.

Change Our Whole Lives Around (11-14)

In verses 11-14, John makes it clear that we have to change our whole lives around. In these verses he addresses people in general, tax collectors, and soldiers. Here is what I want us to follow. Each group finds them in a position of power. John doesn't tell them to leave their jobs and join him in the desert. John gives them seemingly impossible commands and sends them back to their everyday lives.

Let's start with people in general in verse 11. John tells them to share with others less fortunate. However, follow this reasoning. Let's say that I have saved my money and I have bought myself six shirts. Then let's say that I run into someone who has none. So I give him one. Later I meet another one who has no shirt, and I give him one. No doubt, there will be enough people who need a shirt that I give them all away except the one I'm wearing.

John then says that I should do the same with food. People will continue to lose their shirts and will be in constant need of food; some legitimate and some because of laziness, some because of addictions, and some because of stupidity. To do this literally would be burdensome and ultimately impossible, even though that is the command. I don't want to soften this because that's the command and I want us to feel the impossibility of it all. However, let me say that we must apply this in spirit. For example, those of us who have material resources have an advantage over those who don't. In other words, we have a measure of freedom and status others don't. The idea is that we give up our power. When we give to someone, we must never give the impression that we are better or more powerful in any way. It is giving with an attitude of becoming one with the person we are sharing with. Do you hear that? When we help someone less fortunate than ourselves we are not giving them anything. To give them something first of all means that we own it. That is a lie from the start. Everything we have belongs to God. Then God has commanded us to share with others. So if our money and possessions belong to God, then we are merely sharing God's blessings with others. Unless we have come to realize how evil and undeserving of God's blessings we really are, we will always give off the impression that we are higher in status and power than the person who is receiving. The goal of sharing is to break down all ethnic, racial, cultural, educational, and financial barriers. There are no distinctions in the church. We all become children by grace through faith in Jesus. Now to be sure, the Bible tells us to be wise when we give because some people will try to take things and become a drain on the church. But for us this morning, let's just understand the giving up of power.

Next, John told the tax collectors not to collect any more than they were required to. You think our tax system is messed up, the Roman system was worse. It was like a pyramid scheme. There were appointed tax collectors over each region. They would take bids from subcontractors who would collect the taxes. These subcontractors would have to pay the official in charge of that region. Then the subcontractor would take bids from other subcontractors to have the right to collect taxes in certain regions so they would receive a portion also. It went like this down several layers. Several Jewish subcontractors won bids to collect taxes from the Jewish community. Tax collectors were hated and feared. It sounds like the IRS doesn't it? At any rate, John told them to collect what they were required to collect and no more. Since they made their money on what they added on to the tax, how much would be fair? After all, John didn't tell them to quit their jobs, just to be fair and honorable. Can you see how impossible it would be? How would I determine what I could make legitimately when there was no law stating how much I could collect? All the levels of bureaucracy above me were simply interested in getting

their share and Rome was only interested in getting her share. Whatever the answer, if I were a tax collector, I would have to give up my unrestrained power in order to serve others and recognize that I am no better than anyone else even though I may have more money or more power.

And lastly, perhaps the most powerful in John's crowd were the soldiers. Roman soldiers were famous for their cruelty and their ability to extort money from people. After all, they worked for Caesar, they had weapons, and people's safety depended on their protection. John told them to give up all this status and protect people. They were to stop shaking people down.

Can you hear John say to us in our response to what fruits of repentance look like in our lives, "Quit being angry, quit lusting, love your husband, love your wife, serve your husband, serve you wife, get rid of your pride, acknowledge your sinfulness, be sexually pure, don't cheat on your income tax, be honest in everything you say and do."

Hope (15)

The thoughts and fears that arise in our hearts should point to the rightness of John's words, but at the same time how impossible it seems for us to accomplish all of it. That would be the perfect response and verse 15 describes the straw of hope we can hang on to. The people realized the rightness of all that John said. We know that if we examined ourselves and were honest with ourselves, we can see that we are liars, thieves, and murderers. But the people were also excited that the promised Messiah could appear in their lifetime. And surely if they were repentant, Messiah would indeed save them from their enemies and themselves. And so John's message was so right on, they thought John may be the Messiah. This message should also bring us hope. John preached the coming Messiah and we know Jesus is the Messiah. As we examine ourselves and prepare ourselves to receive Jesus we realize that even our best efforts at being holy are pathetic. It is clear to all who have tried. **WHEN TRYING TO BE GOOD, IT QUICKLY BECOMES EVIDENT HOW EVIL WE REALLY ARE.**

III. REALLY, REALLY BAD NEWS

We have seen bad news. We are all born with a natural bent towards sin and we have all willingly sinned against God and offended Him. We are all guilty. The really bad news is that no matter how hard we try to be good, it seems as if we find ourselves failing and falling short of God's expectations. But there is really, really bad news described in verses 16-20. Here it is. **THE MORE SUCCESSFUL WE ARE IN LIFE, THE HARDER IT WILL BE TO FOLLOW CHRIST.** It really is a hard notion to admit we are no better than anyone else. It is traumatic to humble ourselves. In fact Jesus said that it's harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

The Ministry Of John (16)

John described his ministry in verse 16. John stated very clearly that his ministry was simply to bring people to the realization in their lives that they were totally lost and sold into sin. John

brought people face to face that their good works could not save them. John brought people to the place where they realized that only the grace of God could save them. They needed a Savior. They needed a Redeemer. They needed Jesus.

The Bad News Is Actually Good News (17-18)

Until we come that realization we cannot understand that the bad news is actually good news as described in verses 17-18. John understands his own message. In verse 18 he says that he is not even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. Here is that great preacher who lived his whole life for God in the wilderness, and he realizes that when it comes to righteousness, he is a piece of garbage. John is not preaching at the people telling them that they are pieces of garbage and he isn't. John includes himself as a child of snakes. John preached and exhorted people to repent and to prepare themselves for Jesus' ministry. Realizing our need for Jesus is actually a good thing because Jesus will gather us up into His arms and rescue us, save us, and redeem us. On the other hand, Jesus will come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. There is one baptism with two outcomes. Jesus came and presented Himself to people. If they received Him, they received the Holy Spirit. If they rejected Him, they received the fires of hell. Look, the Bible is very clear on this point. No one gets to heaven by doing good works. Every human being is expected to do good works. We can only get to heaven by confessing our moral bankruptcy to God and asking Jesus to save us. And believers are not kept in good standing with God by doing good works. When believers do good works, the glory and credit is to go to God alone. Proud people hate this message.

The Good News Is Actually Bad News (19-20)

So in verses 19-20 we can see how good news is actually bad news. John did not pull any punches when he preached and made sure he was not under any obligation to public figures or authorities. John publicly rebuked Herod the tetrarch. Herod the Great married many women and had many children with many different wives. When this Herod Antipas seduced and married Herodias, she was all at the same time his niece, his sister-in-law, and his wife. This was disgusting even for our society.

John merely stated the truth. Herod was an abomination to the Jewish faith and an abomination to God. Telling the truth will get us noticed by the power with which it carries in and of itself. However, the rich and powerful do not want to be confronted by the godliness and by the truth. Even though John was a simple preacher in the wilderness, the truth he spoke threatened both Herod and Herodias. So they had him arrested and thrown into prison. The historian Josephus said that John's preaching and his very existence presented a political threat to Herod. Proud people, arrogant people, and self-absorbed people do not want to hear the message of the Gospel. Only the humble, the meek, and the repentant receive the Gospel message with joy. This is clearly the truth. **THE MORE SUCCESSFUL WE ARE IN LIFE, THE HARDER IT WILL BE TO FOLLOW CHRIST.**

I'm sure that all of you may be getting tired of hearing me preach this part of the Gospel but unless we really understand it and accept it, we can never be truly saved. **UNLESS WE TRULY**

GRASP THE AWFULNESS AND DISGUST OF THE BAD NEWS, WE CAN NEVER TRULY EMBRACE THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS.

IV. SUMMARY

I'm ashamed to say that most of us pastors have forgotten our calling to preach the Gospel in all its glory. That means we speak forth the truth and quit trying to win people by making the Gospel palatable. The Gospel is truth and truth always intimidates the proud. In his commentary on Luke, Barclay says:

“It is always dangerous to speak the truth; and yet although anyone who sides with the truth may be imprisoned or even executed, in the final count that person is the victor. Once the Earl of Morton, who was regent of Scotland, threatened Andrew Melville, the reformer. ‘There will never,’ he said menacingly, ‘be quietness in this country till half a dozen of you be hanged or banished.’ Melville answered him, ‘Tush! Sir, threaten not your courtiers in that fashion. It is the same to me whether I rot in the air or in the ground ... God be glorified, it will not lie in your power to hang nor exile his truth.’”

Our society is becoming more and more anti-Christian and true Christians will suffer in the near future. The challenge to each one of us is that we learn the truth, live the truth, and preach the truth. Then we will confidently trust in God to let the chips fall where they may.