

THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

TEXT: LUKE 3:1-20

INTRODUCTION:

1. One of the most fascinating characters in the Bible is John the Baptist. He was a priest, a preacher, and a prophet. He was a priest by birth, because his father, Zacharias, was a priest.
2. Not only was John a priest, but he was also a great preacher. God called John to be a preacher before he was born. He was also a prophet who preached "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).
3. In fact, many people thought John was the prophet Elijah. Some thought he may have been the promised Messiah (3:15).
4. Our Lord said, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28).
5. Luke 3:7 says there was a "multitude that came forth to be baptized" by John. And John would not baptize just any one. They first had to repent of their sin (3:7, 8). That is important to note.
6. John the Baptist was determined that the people of his day would grasp and understand the urgency of his message. I think no other Scripture captures this urgency better than Luke 3:9 (cf. Matt. 3:10).
7. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said Luke 3:9, "sums up the very essence and pith of the Christian message and revelation."
8. John did not intend to come in and shake a few leaves off some trees. God did not call him to pull down a few branches. No – John said, "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees..." (Luke 3:9).
9. This was John the Baptist's main emphasis. This was the main thrust of his preaching. This point was stressed most strongly by John, but unfortunately it is not stressed by most preachers today. They are content to shake a few leaves, and many of them can't even do that.
10. I heard about one preacher who was so weak and wishy-washy that half his congregation slept through his message. One morning, he said, "Now what shall we do with this man called John the Baptist?" A member, who was having a difficult time staying awake, yelled out: "You can give him my seat. I've had enough!" And he walked out.
11. I do not think people ever fell asleep or walked out when John the Baptist preached.
12. Herod the tetrarch did not fall asleep when John the Baptist preached. Even though John reprovved him, Herod liked to hear John preach.
13. Matthew 14:4 says, "For John said unto him (Herod), It is not lawful for thee to have her."

14. Even though John reproved Herod the tetrarch, Mark 6:20 says Herod "heard him gladly." There is a great lesson here.
15. Luke 3:19 and 20 tells us that Herod the tetrarch had John put in prison. He eventually had John's head cut off. Why? Because John "reproved" Herod for his adulterous relationship with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, "and for all the evils which Herod had done" (3:19).
16. The axe was laid unto the root of the tree – lust and adultery, and Herodias (his brother Philip's wife) did not like that. And Herod did not like it. And for this reason John the Baptist was killed.
17. There are very few men like John around today, and that's why America is in such terrible shape. Today, we will look at the preaching of John the Baptist, and will look primarily at Luke 3:9.

I. THE AXE IS LAID AT THE ROOT OF THE TREES: THIS INVOLVES PREACHING REPENTANCE (LUKE 3:3, 8).

1. John's message was one of repentance. When the axe is sharp, and when the axe hits the right spot, there will be repentance.
2. When the axe is laid "unto the root of the trees," there must be repentance. What is repentance? It is self-judgment. It is a complete change of mind, change of heart, change of attitude, and change of direction.
3. A.C. Dixon said, "In repentance you think of the sin you hate; in faith you think of the Christ you love."
4. The sinner must see sin for what it really is – dirty, vile, wicked, ugly, and disgusting. And the sinner must see God for who He really is – holy, righteous, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and eternal.
5. Beloved, if you have truly repented, then you have faced your sins before God. The axe has been laid at the root of the trees.
6. But if you are making excuses for your sins, then you need to repent. Let us sharpen the axe and start chopping at the root of the trees.
7. Pride, jealousy, laziness, carnality, bitterness, bad attitude, bad temper, gossiping, lust, etc. What is the besetting sin that is keeping people from getting right with God? Let's keep chopping, till we get to the root of the problem.
8. Preachers can preach against rock music, but some people in the church will continue to listen to it. Why? We must chop at the root – and the root of the problem is rebelliousness and worldliness.

9. "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4).
10. We need to get to the root of the problem, whether it is worldliness, rebelliousness, pride, jealousy, covetousness, etc.
11. Quoting the prophet Isaiah (40:4), Luke 3:5 says, "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth."
12. W.H. Griffith Thomas says the valleys represent repentant souls. After they get saved they are "filled."
13. The mountains and hills represent the proud, impenitent Pharisees and Sadducees. They would be "brought low."
14. "The crooked shall be made straight" refers to the dishonest publicans who would repent and straighten out (3:12, 13).
15. "The rough ways" represent the rough soldiers. Though often rude and violent, they would be made "smooth" (3:14).
16. "And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then?" (3:10). John pointed the axe at them. They needed to repent (3:11-14). These are the "fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8).
17. Repentance comes when a sinner agrees with God that God is right and the sinner is wrong. God says man is a sinner. Impenitent men make excuses for their sin, deny they are sinners, and say: "I'm not so bad; nobody's perfect," etc.
18. But the repentant man says, "I give up, Lord. I'm sorry. You're right. I am a wicked sinner. I deserve to go to hell, etc."
19. Matthew 3:6 says that these repentant sinners were baptized by John in the Jordan River, "confessing their sins."

II. THE AXE IS LAID AT THE ROOT OF THE TREES: THIS INVOLVES PREACHING CHRIST.

1. When John was but a little baby, his father Zacharias said, "Thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" (Luke 1:76). It was John's task to prepare the nation for the Messiah, and then to present the Messiah to them.
2. You may recall in John 1:29 where John the Baptist says, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."
3. And in John 3:30, John says, "He must increase, but I must decrease."
4. John was not around very long, but while he was here he preached Christ, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

5. You will notice that John said "sin" (singular), not "sins" (John 1:29). Our Lord said the Holy Spirit would come and "reprove (convict) the world of sin" (John 16:8).
6. The greatest of all sins is the sin of unbelief (John 16:8). That is why we need to lay the axe at the root of the trees – the sin of unbelief.
7. "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18).
8. John 3:36 says, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."
9. To lay the axe at the root of the trees signifies the total condemnation of the natural man – he is condemned already because of his unbelief. The Bible says that Christ died for his sins but lost sinners do not really believe it.
10. To lay the axe at the root of the trees signifies the total condemnation of the flesh. The apostle Paul wrote, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing" (Rom.7:18).
11. To lay the axe at the root of the trees means to make the Gospel message clear: those without genuine faith in Jesus Christ are lost and need to get saved.
12. John's preaching ministry was prophesied by Isaiah (Luke 3:4-6; cf. Isa. 40:3-5). "All flesh shall see the salvation of God" (3:6) when the Lord returns.

III. THE AXE IS LAID AT THE ROOT OF THE TREES: THIS INVOLVES PREACHING THE JUDGMENT TO COME.

1. The axe has to hit the mark. Much preaching today does not hit the mark. One hundred years ago, W.H. Griffith Thomas said, "Now ministers must be milder or churches are empty" (*Outline Studies in Luke*). What would Griffith Thomas say today?
2. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, "Many true men of God would like to be comforting instead of plain-spoken, but all His real messengers have been fearless."
3. Isaiah 58:1 says, "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins."
4. But there are very few fearless preachers around today, and much preaching is very vague. A lost sinner can sit comfortably through most sermons and have no idea he was only a heartbeat from hell.

5. Many preachers speak in generalities. Certain Bible words are carefully avoided: hell, judgment, repentance, lost, sinner, damnation, etc.
6. John the Baptist said in Luke 3:9, "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." God will not tolerate fruitlessness.
7. In John's day, trees that did not produce good fruit were cut down and used for firewood. So the axe was laid to the root of these dead, useless trees (3:9).
8. John the Baptist said, "Every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."
9. The purpose of man is to glorify God. If man is not glorifying God, then what good is he? According to the Bible, he is good for nothing but to be cut down and cast into the fire (3:9, 17).
10. In addition to the picture of chopping down dead trees, John also talks about separating the wheat from the chaff (Luke 3:17). The wheat (saved) will be safe in the garner, "but the chaff (unsaved) he will burn with fire unquenchable" (3:17).
11. Notice the word "unquenchable" (3:17). This signifies the certainty and the completeness of judgment (cf. Mark 9:43-48).
12. The Bible has a lot to say about "the wrath to come" (Luke 3:7b). God hates sin. God judges sin. Unsaved friend, "Flee from the wrath to come" (3:7b).
13. The great evangelist George Whitefield kept a journal of his travels. During his first trip from England to Georgia, he noted that the ship's cook was a wicked sinner – a vulgar, profane drunkard. When this cook was reprovved for his wickedness, he boasted that he would continue being wicked until the last two years of his life, and then he would straighten out. Whitefield wrote in his journal that this drunken cook died within six hours after making his boastful statement. The axe was laid at the root of the tree, and this wicked sinner was cast into the fire.

CONCLUSION:

1. Luke 3:18 says, "And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people." How we wish we could have heard these "many other things" John preached!

2. As John exhorted, and as John preached, and as John laid his axe to the root of the trees, he was looking for one thing: souls that were genuinely saved.
3. And after they were genuinely saved, John baptized them in the Jordan River (Luke 3:3).
4. Perhaps there is some one here tonight that need to get saved. The axe has been laid to the root of the trees. Do not trifle with God's grace and mercy and longsuffering. Do not wait till it is too late and you are cast off into the fire (3:9).
5. And perhaps there are some that have been saved but need to be obedient to God's Word and get baptized. Baptism does not save, but if you truly are saved you need to get baptized (3:21).