

Message #13**Luke 3:1-14**

Dr. Erwin Lutzer told a story in a book he wrote about a Bible College graduate who became the pastor of a small country church. There was a very wealthy man in the church, but the board was not sure the man was saved. So, the board asked the young pastor if he would visit the man to find that out. The young pastor went to the man and asked him, "Are you a Christian, have you ever personally trusted Jesus Christ as Savior?" The man became angry. Here was a successful, self-made business man, and this pastor had the audacity to ask if he were a believer. The man went to the next board meeting and demanded the resignation of the pastor. Well the board, who asked the pastor to do this, turned against the pastor, and he was forced to resign. At the real heart of the matter was the true spiritual condition of the man. He had never been born again, and when that minister confronted him with his need for salvation, things exploded.

That is exactly what happened to John and Jesus when they started their ministry. They started telling people they needed to repent and they needed the forgiveness of sins, and that message did not go over very well in the religious and political world in which they lived.

We come now to another very important historical matter that was carefully researched by Dr. Luke. As we have mentioned, I am convinced that much of his research was done in Ephesus. That is where he would have talked with Mary and the Apostle John, and we also know that this was where he would have talked with those who could give him the historical scoop on John the Baptist. In Ephesus were about twelve disciples who at one time had been disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7).

The reason why Luke includes this is because this is critical historical data that sets the stage for the public appearance and ministry of Jesus Christ.

When John surfaced and when Jesus Christ surfaced, the world was dominated by godless political and religious leaders. The main Gentile power was Rome, and Luke wanted to carefully document everything about the political and religious leadership. That leadership will eventually turn against John and against Jesus Christ.

When John first surfaced, he did not surface preaching an ear-tickling message. What John first said when he surfaced was this:

ALL PEOPLE NEED THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS THAT WILL BE FOUND IN ONE PERSON, JESUS CHRIST, WHO WILL COME AFTER ME.

John came to the religious and political world and began by saying you are all sinners and you need to repent because you all need the forgiveness of sins. In fact, he called them a "brood of vipers" (v. 7). As you can imagine, in a sophisticated political and religious world, that message did not go over too well.

Had he surfaced preaching that the Messiah was coming to overthrow Rome and make Israel the dominate power of the world, they would have loved John. They would have welcomed him into their religious club. But that is not what he came preaching.

Just recently a Dallas Seminary Graduate, Robert Jeffries, prayed at the dedication of the U.S. Embassy in Israel. Old Mitt Romney said he should never pray, because he has said that Jews, Muslims, and Mormons will not go to heaven. Old Mormon Mitt doesn't like the truth and the fact is, it is the truth. There is one way to heaven, faith in Jesus Christ, and since those religions actually deny who Jesus Christ is, they will end up suffering eternal condemnation. That message doesn't go over too well today, and it didn't back in John's day either.

There are four historical observations we want to make about the ministry of John:

HISTORICAL OBSERVATION #1 – John came preaching to a specific political and religious world. **3:1-2**

This took place in real history with real people; seven of whom are named here. The people named here are not a bunch of political and religious leaders who loved the Word of God and go to prayer meetings.

Dr. Luke is very careful to set the political and religious climate to which John and Jesus came. It was not conducive to their good reception. It must be that Theophilus was very interested in this history. It is a history that did not favor John or Jesus. The leaders were not on their side. There are seven facts we learn from these two verses:

Fact #1 - Tiberius was Caesar (AD 14-37). He was the Roman Emperor who ruled the world. According to Edward Gibbon, Tiberius was a “dark, unrelenting” Caesar. He murdered people under the guise of justice and enjoyed it (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 2-3). He promoted the Roman military and encouraged them to indulge their pleasures (*Ibid.*, p. 57). He did seem to become somewhat favorable to Christians and was fascinated with their stories of miracles, specifically those of Jesus Christ (*Ibid.*, pp. 217-218).

Fact #2 - Tiberius was in his 15th year of reign. This would date this at **A.D. 29**.

Fact #3 - Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Palestine was divided into three state-like Regions - Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Pilate controlled Judea.

Fact #4 - Herod was tetrarch of Galilee. This was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great (**1:5**). The word “tetrarch” means that he was a ruler of a fourth part. He not only controlled Galilee, but was responsible for 1/4th part of the Roman Empire. Sometimes he was called a king.

Fact #5 - Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitus. These were two regions north and east of Galilee. He was Herod's brother.

Fact #6 - Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. This was land east of Ituraea and west of Damascus.

Fact #7 - Annas and Caiaphas were high priests of Israel. Actually, Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas, who had been appointed by Gratus (the governor of Judea before Pilate). Apparently, he allowed Annas to stay in the Temple and work with Caiaphas.

This group was not a group that loved God and His Word. This political and religious world was anything but godly. This was a corrupt religious and political swamp. And their little apple cart was about to be upset.

When John surfaced and started telling them that they needed to repent because they needed the forgiveness of sins, it did not go over well.

HISTORICAL OBSERVATION #2 – John came to a specific place, with a specific message, as a specific prophet. **3:3-6**

We learn from **verse 3** that John came preaching in “all the district around the Jordan” river. The Jordan river valley is about 150 miles long and sits right in the middle of this part of the world. So He came to the very geographical heart of the Jewish world.

According to **verse 3**, he preached a message of “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The word “repent” is a word that means to change your thinking or as G. Abbott-Smith, the Greek lexicographer, said, “to change one's mind” (*Greek Lexicon*, p. 287).

What John came preaching was that every Jew, no matter who it was, needed to admit he had a sin problem and admit that he did not have the righteousness necessary to get into the Kingdom. John demanded a physical and public demonstration of this admission.

This admission would be demonstrated by you being baptized in the Jordan river. That is what John preached. You need to change your mind about thinking that just because you are Jewish, you will get into the Kingdom. You are a sinner who needs forgiveness, and if you are changing your mind, you need to be baptized in the Jordan by me, as a way of admitting that.

Now included in this message of repentance, John brought out some very specific facts:

Fact #1 - John is the forerunner prophet predicted by Isaiah. **3:4a**

John was no fluke. He was the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

Fact #2 - John's job was to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. **3:4b**

His preparatory ministry was to get the people to admit they were sinners who needed their sins forgiven by the One who would come after Him. He would be the One who could take away their sins and give them their Kingdom.

Fact #3 - Jesus' ministry will geographically transform the Promised Land. **3:5**

Jesus Christ will be the One who will make geographical changes to the Promised Land. He literally will be the One who will eventually transform the Promised Land into becoming the most magnificent land in the world.

Fact #4 - Jesus will be the One who will cause people to see the salvation of God. **3:6**

Don't miss this point, all flesh will see the salvation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. Every eye will see Him and every person will face Him.

What John is saying is I am the forerunner of this One. It is my job to prepare the way for His arrival, and part of that job is to present the truth about Him.

HISTORICAL OBSERVATION #3 – John came preaching a warning of fire judgment. **3:7-9**

One of the first obstacles faced by John was getting the people to admit the truth about their own sinfulness. So his initial message was designed to do that and not tickle their ears. As the people were going out to be baptized, they needed to understand the reason for it. So here is what he preached:

Message #1 - You are a brood of vipers who needs to be warned you are heading to wrath. **3:7**

Notice this is what John was preaching to the crowds. When you study books on preaching, they will tell you that when you begin to address an audience, give some interesting opening introduction that pulls them into the message. John apparently didn't read those books, because he starts off by saying you are a bunch of deadly snakes. The implication is you believe poisonous teaching that will end up leading you to the wrath of God. These religious snakes have not told you to flee from God's wrath; they have told you that you are loved by God and have nothing to fear because you are Jewish.

Message #2 - You need to repent of your sin and not rely on your Jewish ancestry. **3:8**

These people really believed they were entitled to the Kingdom because they were physically related to Abraham. John says you need the forgiveness of God and God doesn't need you. He could turn stones into His people if He wanted.

Message #3 - If you do not repent you will end up burning in fire. **3:9**

John says the axe is ready to get at the root of the problem, which is sin. That axe will start chopping down all who refuse to believe in Jesus Christ, and they will be thrown into the fire. The “good fruit” refers to admitting one is a sinner and believing on Jesus Christ to give the righteousness necessary to get into the Kingdom. If one does not do that, one will be eternally condemned, eternally judged, and will eternally burn.

HISTORICAL OBSERVATION #4 - John tells them what they should do as they wait to meet the One who could forgive their sins. **3:10-14**

It is clear from **verse 10** that John’s message hit their hearts. As they waited for the One to come who could give them the righteousness to get into the Kingdom, they wanted to know what they should do.

John’s response is most interesting. He doesn’t demand that the people pursue an ascetic lifestyle like his. He does not challenge them to be more religious and get involved in more religious rituals. What he does do is challenge the people to do what they can to help others.

No matter what the individual circumstances, those who were serious about being right with God needed to make personal adjustments in life depending upon their own situation and sins and do what they could to help others. The religious and political world was absorbed with themselves.

So John gave four examples of things the people could do as they waited to meet the Messiah. This would show that they truly were serious about repenting. What is most interesting here is that he does not tell anyone they should give up their job or stop working and just wait for the Lord. What he challenged them to do was to become caring, honorable people of integrity:

Example #1 - If you have an extra tunic, share it with one who has none. **3:11a**

The word “tunic” (χιτων) is a word that refers to a garment worn next to the skin (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 481). This was an undershirt that was worn underneath a longer coat, and it protected one from the elements. Now, John says if you have a closet full of clothes and you know someone who doesn’t have any, share it.

Example #2 - If you have more than enough food, share it with others. **3:11b**

What applies to clothing, also applies to food.

Example #3 - If you have been cheating people, stop cheating people. **3:12-13**

Tax collectors were not popular people. People had to pay a lot of taxes. There were city taxes, state taxes, business taxes, Roman taxes. The tax collectors not only had to make sure they collected the taxes, but they were allowed to add an additional charge to make a living.

But what was happening is that these tax collectors were extorting money. John says if you are serious about repenting, stop cheating the people. Do honest business.

Example #4 - If you have been forcefully or falsely making money, stop and be content with your wages. **3:14**

The soldiers also sensed a need to respond. John said you need to stop threatening people and extorting money and making false allegations about people to get money. Apparently the soldiers would make up false accusations and say, if the people did not give them some kick back or pay off or ransom payment, they would do them harm.

Now the Jews viewed the tax collectors and Romans as the real bad sinners. John says you all have problems.

Now let's be very clear here. John's message is pre-Christ and pre-cross. What you must do to be saved is to realize and admit you are a sinner and believe in Jesus Christ to save you. The things in this text were things to be done before these people met Jesus Christ, the things we do are because we have already met Him.