

As John the Baptist faithfully discharged his prophetic calling to prepare people to meet God, so must we, called as Christ’s ambassadors and followers, faithfully discharge our duties to repent and bear the fruit of repentance, urging others to do the same, in order to prepare ourselves and others to meet God.

Introduction – There’s a prophet in town! Who will go see him? (1) I go to church every Sunday and give money, occasionally I read my Bible and pray, and I try to be a good person. (2) I can’t seem to straighten out my life no matter what I do. (1&2) But why can’t I shake this nagging thought that God wants more from me? What more could he want? What else do I have to do?

I. The Prophetic Call

A. John’s call as prophet and herald (vv. 1-6)

1. *Date.* Luke dates John’s ministry in secular and sacred history during the reigns of contemporary rulers and high priests. The 15th year of Tiberius Caesar, when God called John as a prophet, was A.D. 25/26 or 28/29.
2. *Call.* Luke uses language that places John the Baptist in the long line of true biblical prophets. He was Isaiah’s prophecy coming true (Isa 40:3). He was proof that the old age of the law and promise was coming to a close, and the new age of fulfillment was dawning (Lk 16:16).
3. *Method.* When kings were about to travel, they would send messengers ahead to clear the roads, repair them, make them passable without trouble, and arrange to bring honor to the king (cf. Lk 19:36-38). John was calling the crowds to make their *hearts and lives* ready for the king.
4. *Purpose.* Notice the apocalyptic language from Isaiah 40:3-5 describing the prophetic ministry that the prophet heralding the Christ would fulfill. The imagery is of cosmic upheaval, cosmic judgment, and the salvation of God revealed to all flesh (Jew and Gentile; clean and unclean).

B. The minister’s call as ambassador (2 Cor 5:16-6:2)

Gospel ministers are the “prophets” of today. The word of the Lord does not come to us like God spoke to the biblical prophets, so we dare not presume to say, “Thus says the LORD...” But we are ambassadors of Christ, sent to his people (you!) to deliver and apply his message of reconciliation.

C. Every Christian’s call as minister (Eph 4:1-3, 11-13; 1 Pet 3:15)

Through teaching, discipleship, and mentoring in the church, God is equipping every believer for the works of ministry to build up the body of Christ. This includes the ambassadorial role of personal evangelist, giving to anyone who asks you for the reason why you hope in Jesus Christ.

II. The Urgent Message

A. Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (v. 3)

1. John’s baptism is not Christian baptism. It was historically prior to, and not as great as, Christian baptism. John the Baptist made this distinction clear when he noted the difference between his baptism and Jesus’ baptism (Lk 3:16). John’s baptism is an old covenant symbol building upon the sign of circumcision.

2. John's "baptism of repentance" was a cleansing ritual that signified the repentant person returning to God with the expectation of forgiveness. Jews were "baptizing" proselyte Gentiles as a prerequisite for entrance into the covenant community because they viewed Gentiles as spiritually "unclean." Some fringe Jewish groups required a ritual baptism as a prerequisite for entrance into the remnant community. But John's baptism was not of man but of God (Lk 20:1-8). He confronted them with their "unclean" lives, and declared that this placed them "outside" of God's grace, so they needed to take a "bath" to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

B. Good fruits, not religious heritage nor ritual, are the evidence of salvation (vv. 7-8)

Many Jews were outward law-keepers who came to identify with John and participate in the latest spiritual fad. They viewed John's baptism as a vaccination or a fire insurance policy protecting them from God's wrath. They believed their physical ancestry was a substitute for repentance. John wanted to clear away their self-righteousness, smug complacency, greed, cruelty, and slander (Lk 3:13-14). "The Christ is coming! You believe this but you don't understand how soon! God is at the door! He has picked up his axe and laid its head at the tree root. You are that tree! If you don't bear the fruit of repentance NOW he is about to chop you down and cast you into the fire."

C. Time is almost up (v. 9)

The judgment of God is not future anymore. The tree that does not bear good fruit will not *be* (future tense) cut down and burned. No, such a tree *is* (present tense) cut down and burned. Judgment is beginning now. In other words, repent because it's too late to wait!

III. The Prepared Life

A. Share what you have with those who need what you have (vv. 10-11)

John gives a general and practical example of the good fruit of repentance. Repentance necessarily leads to consistent action, helping those truly in needy (the hungry and naked). You don't have to be rich to share. If you have one more than is absolutely necessary, then you ought to share. On the other hand, a person might wear two tunics to keep warm (Mk 6:9). If John had this in mind, then he commanded the one with two to sacrifice comfort for the one who is cold.

B. Do your job well, fair, and with contentment (vv. 12-14)

1. Tax collectors had an earned reputation for dishonesty. They routinely collected excess money to pad their wallets. People despised and shunned them. But notice that John legitimizes their occupation. He commanded them to collect taxes honestly, and left them no room for compromise, delay, or half-way obedience.
2. Soldiers were prone to loot, and most people had little redress against a soldier using violence or false charges to rob them. They were often disgruntled, unscrupulous, cruel, and even inhumane. John commanded them to avoid these occupational hazards, instead acting uprightly and contentedly. He commands them to be honest and content with their pay.

Conclusion –John the Baptist was a prophet who prepared the way for the Great Prophet, Jesus Christ. His message prepares us to meet God. He was (and is) a herald preparing the way for the Lord's coming. When Jesus finally arrived, he came with a new message: the gospel of the kingdom. Compared to John's message, the gospel Jesus preached is exceedingly greater news with exceedingly greater demands. You and I still need the message of John the Baptist to prepare our hearts and lives for the coming of the king, to make us humble and willing servants ready to meet the Lord Jesus, God in the flesh.