

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Boldness of John the Baptist

Luke 3:18-20

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Scripture

We are studying the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke in a sermon series I am calling, “To Seek and To Save the Lost.”

The first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel deal with the prophecies and births of John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ, and then what happened to Jesus following his birth.

The third chapter of Luke’s Gospel focuses on John the Baptist. John had a remarkable ministry. His preaching was not designed to set people at ease. He saw himself as God’s messenger who called people to repentance. And although he was viewed as a little odd, it would not be an overstatement to say that he was a huge sensation. Thousands of people came to hear John preach and he baptized many who responded to his call for repentance (Matthew 3:5).

Many people began wondering whether John might be the Christ (Luke 3:15). However, John knew that he was not the Christ. He was only the messenger who was to go before the Christ to prepare the people for the ministry of the Christ.

Last time we examined John’s testimony that Jesus was in fact the Christ. Next time we will examine John’s baptism of Jesus, which took place a few months after John started preaching and at the beginning of Jesus’ own ministry. John continued his ministry for another year or so before Herod the tetrarch imprisoned him. However, Luke placed John’s imprisonment in the text we are going to examine today. The reason is that Luke was writing thematically rather than chronologically. That is, he wanted to gather most of the material about John’s life and ministry in one place early in his Gospel so that he could then focus almost exclusively on Jesus and his ministry.

So today I would like to examine the boldness of John the Baptist. Let’s read about his boldness in Luke 3:18-20:

¹⁸So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. (Luke 3:18–20)

Introduction

Several years ago I attended a small gathering of pastors in Tampa to have lunch with Dr. Peter Lillback. He is Professor of Historical Theology and the President of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. At that time he was also Senior Pastor of Proclamation Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Dr. Lillback was in Tampa to promote the seminary, and that is how we came to have lunch with Dr. Lillback.

After he told us about the seminary, our questions drifted into wider aspects of the challenges facing Christians and pastors today. He said that our culture was becoming increasingly anti-Christian and intolerant of biblical absolutes. He was particularly referring to Christians proclaiming that homosexual activity was sinful and not biological. However, I will never forget his next comment, which really startled me. Dr. Lillback, who is a little older than I am, said that he fully expected to preach the gospel in prison before he died. He did not mean that he would be involved in a prison ministry. Instead, he meant that he would be imprisoned for preaching the gospel with uncompromising boldness. As I heard Dr. Lillback at lunch that day, I had to ask myself, "Am I willing to go to prison for preaching the gospel with uncompromising boldness?"

John the Baptist preached the gospel with uncompromising boldness. He simply would not compromise the gospel to accommodate his listeners. He knew that his goal was to please God and not those who listened to his preaching. Eventually, however, his boldness got him thrown into prison.

Today I would like to look at the boldness of John the Baptist.

Lesson

An examination of the boldness of John the Baptist in Luke 3:18-20 will show us several truths about bold Christians.

We will learn the following about bold Christians:

1. Bold Christians Share the Gospel (3:18)
2. Bold Christians Reprove Sin (3:19)
3. Bold Christians Face Persecution (3:20)

I. **Bold Christians Share the Gospel (3:18)**

First, we learn that bold Christians share the gospel.

Luke said that **with many other exhortations** John **preached good news to the people** (3:18).

Previously we noted that John was an overnight sensation. Thousands of people came from Jerusalem and all Judea and the entire region about the Jordan to hear him preach. All around the countryside people were talking about John. They talked about his unusual lifestyle, his powerful preaching, and his cleansing baptism.

And then the people began wondering whether John might be the Christ. The people knew that God had promised to send a deliverer who was called the "Christ." John was by far the most powerful preacher in more than 450 years! And so the people were naturally asking if he might be the Christ.

But John knew that he was not the Christ. He told the people that one far mightier than he was coming, and that one would be the Christ.

John understood that he was simply the Messenger who was to come before the Christ. His task was to prepare the people for the coming of the Christ.

And so John **preached good news to the people**. By the way, another word for “**good news**” is *gospel*.

It might strike some people as odd that John **preached good news to the people**. After all, what Luke recorded of John’s preaching is an uncompromising message pointing out the sin of the people and calling them to repent. That hardly sounds like **good news**, does it?

The fact is that **good news** is only good against the backdrop of bad news. The Bible teaches that every person is under the wrath of God because of sin. Every person rightly deserves the judgment and condemnation of God because of sin. Every person first needs to understand that he has sinned against God, and that God will send every unrepentant sinner to hell for all eternity. That is why John asked the people who had warned them to flee from the wrath to come (3:7).

Only when people understand that they are under the wrath and condemnation of a holy God are they ready to hear the remedy for their condition. That is when the gospel becomes **good news!** God has sent a remedy in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So, John constantly shared the gospel with people. He told them about their sin, God’s wrath, their condemnation, and Jesus Christ, who is the remedy for receiving God’s forgiveness. And he did so with uncompromising boldness.

Now, I want to point out something fascinating about the boldness that God gives to Christians like John. The word “bold” is used only four times in the Old Testament. The word “bold” or “boldness” is never used in any of the Gospels. However, after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, “bold” or “boldness” is used twenty-four times in the rest of the New Testament to describe Christians. And in the majority of those instances it is a description of Christians sharing the gospel.

For example, Peter and John were arrested for preaching

the gospel. When they appeared before the Sanhedrin, we read in Acts 4:13, “Now when [the Sanhedrin] saw *the boldness of Peter and John*, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.”

After Peter and John had been released from prison they went back to report to the other Christians what had happened to them. The entire church prayed and included the following petition in their prayer in Acts 4:29, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats [of the authorities not to preach] *and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.*”

After the church finished praying, Luke gave an astonishing account of what happened next. He said in Acts 4:31, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*”

That is the characteristic description throughout the rest of the New Testament of what Christians do when they are filled with the Holy Spirit: *they speak the word of God with boldness.*

Does that statement describe you? Do you speak the word of God with boldness? Do you share the gospel with people?

The problem is not with God. Oh, I know we say things like, “Sharing the gospel is not my spiritual gift.” And then we comfort ourselves that sharing the gospel is what others do.

Is it any wonder then that today’s Church is so anemic? Let us pray, like the first-century church, that God will grant to his servants to continue to speak his word with all boldness.

II. Bold Christians Reprove Sin (3:19)

Second, we learn that bold Christians reprove sin.

John’s bold preaching was not only directed to large groups of listeners, but also to specific individuals.

Even **Herod Antipas, the tetrarch** of Galilee and Perea where John was preaching, did not escape being **reproved by him**. **Herod Antipas** was a son of Herod the Great, and his long reign (4 BC to 39 AD) encompassed the entire ministry of Jesus Christ. With the exception of the birth narratives, Antipas is the **Herod** who appears in the gospel accounts.

Herod Antipas was not a Jew. His father, Herod the Great, the ruler when Jesus was born and who ordered the slaughter of all baby boys under the age of two-years-old in Bethlehem, was an Idumean (Edomite) and his mother, Malthace, was a Samaritan.

That **Herod Antipas** was descended from the despised Edomites and Samaritans did not endear him to his Jewish subjects. Neither did his actions as ruler, in particular building Tiberias, his capital city, on the site of a Jewish cemetery. Because they considered the site to be defiled, Antipas had a hard time persuading any Jews to settle there.

Though some may have hesitated to rebuke a ruler of Herod's status, John was not deterred. The Greek verb that is translated as **reproved** is a present passive participle, indicating continuous action. John continually challenged the moral character of **Herod the tetrarch** because of **all the evil things that Herod had done**.

Of all of Herod's sins, one glaring sin stood out publicly: his illicit marriage to **Herodias, his brother's wife**. Their sordid story was nothing less than a first-century soap opera.

Marital problems were nothing new to the Herods. Antipas's father, Herod the Great, for example, had had ten wives. Antipas had married the daughter of Aretas, the king of Nabatea, a region located just south of Perea. While on a journey to Rome, Antipas visited his half brother Philip (not the Philip the tetrarch mentioned in 3:1). While staying with him, Antipas became infatuated with Philip's wife **Herodias** (who was also Antipas's niece, the daughter of another of his half brothers).

The ambitious **Herodias** was eager to be the wife of a tetrarch (her husband, Philip, was a private citizen) and agreed to marry Antipas on the condition that he divorce Aretas's daughter. Aretas was outraged over this insult, and his smoldering resentment later led to war between him and Antipas.¹

Herod Antipas's marriage to **Herodias** was wrong on several counts. First, they divorced their spouses to marry each other. Second, their relationship was also incestuous, since she was his niece. Finally, Herod's marriage to her was a flagrant violation of the Mosaic Law, which explicitly prohibited a man from marrying his brother's wife (Leviticus 20:21). The only exception was to produce offspring if his brother died (which is known as levirate marriage). But Philip already had offspring. Moreover, he was still alive.²

John boldly called Herod's wrongdoing sin. He knew that God's moral law needed to be proclaimed so that people could see how they had sinned against God.

And Christians need that kind of boldness today as well. God's moral law still stands. We need to call wrongdoing sin. We must not turn a blind eye or sugarcoat wrongdoing.

III. Bold Christians Face Persecution (3:20)

And third, we learn that bold Christians face persecution.

Although John called Herod to repent out of concern for his soul, John's uncompromising rebuke of the couple's illicit marriage was explosive politically. As noted above, Aretas was already infuriated that Herod had divorced his daughter to marry Herodias. Now the widely popular John the Baptist was denouncing his sin. Moving to silence the bold preacher, **Herod**

¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 230-31.

² John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 231.

added to his already lengthy list of sins the most public one of **them all: he locked up John in prison** (3:20).

Luke ends the story of John there, but Matthew and Mark record the grim final episode of his life. Wanting to execute John, but afraid of the people's reaction (Matthew 14:5), Herod kept him in prison.

But mere imprisonment was not enough for the vindictive Herodias, who "had a grudge against [John] and wanted to put him to death" (Mark 6:19). Eventually, she found a way to manipulate her husband and get what she wanted.

At a gala celebration of Herod's birthday Herodias's daughter from her marriage to Philip (Josephus gives her name as Salome) performed a lewd and immoral dance before Herod and his guests. Seduced by her performance, wanting to play the magnanimous ruler before his guests, and probably more than a little drunk, Herod "promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask" (Matthew 14:7). Prompted by her vengeful mother, the girl replied, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter" (14:8). Grieved over the outcome of his foolish promise but too proud to break it, Herod reluctantly ordered John's decapitation (14:10).

In the end, killing John did not accomplish anything for Herod and Herodias. They eventually lost everything and went into exile. And Herod was haunted by guilt over what he had done to John. So when reports of Jesus' ministry reached him, Herod exclaimed, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him" (14:2). And Herod would add to his guilt by playing a role in the trial of Jesus (Luke 23:7-12).³

Throughout church history bold Christians have faced persecution and paid the price for sharing the gospel and reproving sin.

³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 231-32.

In this regard, bold Christians are only following the example of Jesus himself, who was executed by his enemies.

Jesus' own apostles faced persecution for sharing the gospel and reproofing sin. According to traditions (of varying reliability) handed down from the first-century church, all of the apostles except for John, who was exiled to Patmos, were killed for sharing the gospel and reproofing sin.

Peter was crucified (upside down, at his request, because he felt unworthy to be crucified as his Lord had been).

His brother Andrew reportedly was also crucified, but he was tied instead of nailed to the cross to prolong his suffering.

James the brother of John is the only apostle whose death is recorded in Scripture. He was executed by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2).

Philip was said to have been stoned to death in Asia Minor, but not before multitudes came to faith in Christ through his preaching.

The traditions vary concerning how Philip's close companion Nathanael (also known as Bartholomew) died. Some say he was bound and thrown into the sea, while others that he was crucified.

Matthew may have been burned at the stake.

Thomas likely reached India, where some traditions say he was killed with a spear.

According to the apocryphal *Martyrdom of James*, James the son of Alphaeus was stoned to death by the Jews for preaching the gospel.

Simon the Zealot, according to some traditions, preached the gospel in Egypt, North Africa, and Persia, where he was martyred by being sawn in two. Other traditions place his ministry in Britain, where the Romans eventually crucified him.

Thaddeus (also known as Judas the son of James) reportedly took the gospel message to what is now modern Turkey, where he was clubbed to death.

Paul was likely beheaded at Rome during Nero's persecution of the church.⁴

Even today, bold Christians face persecution for sharing the gospel and reproving sin. All around the world hundreds of thousands of Christians are persecuted for sharing the gospel and reproving sin.

The news recently reported that Pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen, has been sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran for helping underground churches share the gospel and reprove sin. We certainly should pray for him and his family.

Persecution for us today may not involve going to prison. It may mean losing friends or job opportunities or promotion.

Nevertheless, I still ask myself, "Am I willing to go to prison for preaching the gospel with uncompromising boldness?" Am I willing to face persecution for sharing the gospel and reproving sin? I pray that God would make me so bold.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the boldness of John the Baptist as set forth in Luke 3:18-20, we should ask God for more bold Christians.

One great need of our day is for a mighty army of bold Christians. We need men and women, boys and girls, who are so filled with the Holy Spirit that they will boldly share the gospel, reprove sin, and face persecution for the glory of God and the good of those to whom they are speaking.

Will you join me in praying that God will raise us up to be bold Christians who share the gospel, who reprove sin, and who are willing even to face persecution? Amen.

⁴ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 225-26.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for the uncompromising boldness of John the Baptist.

His boldness shows us that bold Christians share the gospel, reprove sin, and face persecution. Oh God, will you raise a mighty army of bold Christians? Will you make us bold for the sake of your glory and the good of those to whom we speak?

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!