

THE RADICAL MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

(Luke 3:1-20)

To this day, there are still some strict orders of Judaism, which forbid drinking the wine of foreign nations. The rationale for this taboo is fairly straightforward: wine is close to the earth being taken from the vines of the ground. As such, wine receives its flavors and character from the dirt, so when wine is produced by other nations it quite literally springs from the soils of paganism. We today might be tempted to write this practice off as extreme; to view it as going way too far. But before we dismiss this practice out-of-hand, we should remember that the Old Testament is full of such laws governing issues of separation. God Himself had directed the Jewish nation to be a people set apart from the rest of the world. He had chosen them as His covenant people, and then set about the task of untangling them from the polytheism of the surrounding nations. Dietary laws, temple laws, legal laws—all were given with an eye towards shaping them into a kingdom within a kingdom, a world unto themselves. Interesting how when you read the Old Testament you hear how God takes it very easy on the foreign Gentiles. He never punishes them directly for their polytheistic worship. In fact, He is very lenient towards them seeing how they act in ignorance. But towards His own people, He is quite different. He never once tolerates their practice of idolatry, and in fact punishes them severely when they adopt the lifestyles and practices of their pagan neighbors. After all, they were meant for the world, but not the other way around. The Jewish people were to be the faithful remnant; the few reminding the many of the true God of heaven and earth. As such, they were to model a life purity and holiness and set the example for others;

Oh, how the mighty people of God had fallen by the time of John the Baptist. By the time John shows up preaching in the wilderness, the people of God had all but been reduced to slavery. Just before our reading this morning, the Gospel of Luke sets the political scene for us. He records a number of names we are familiar with: Tiberius Caesar, Pontus Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas. Luke records these notorious names to make the point that politically, the Jews were ruled by foreigners, and religiously, the

high priests Annas and Caiaphas exploited the people of God and used their religious power to line their own pockets and increase their own authority. This list of names is a clear reference to the prophecy found in Genesis 49 that the scepter had departed from Judah. God's great nation had been peeled back one layer at a time until there was nothing left. The light of Israel had been snuffed out, and this by their own doing, their own betrayal, their own lack of trust in God's providential care.

They had abandoned God, but God had not abandoned them. And so, we hear this morning how the first converts to the Christian message came not from the Gentiles, but from the Jews. God begins with His own even when His own did not receive Him. Yes, Christ came preaching a message of forgiveness for all people—to Jews and Gentiles alike, but His message began in Jerusalem before traveling to the farthest ends of the earth. The first recorded words of John the Baptist are meant specifically for a Jewish audience, to those who claimed Abraham as their father. His words are for them, but his message is far from conciliatory. Because of their disobedience, God was removing their special status. While God could raise up a whole new nation of Abraham's children from the very stones scattered on the ground, He didn't want to do that. God was starting over, but He wanted His original covenant people to start over with Him. For though the ax was being laid to the root of the trees, there would come a new root from Jesse's stem, a new branch of righteousness forged not from lineage and land, but from the flesh and blood of Christ. God's covenant was now being extended, with offshoots spreading out in all directions. A new era was dawning, a new Kingdom was being ushered in with the birth of Christ our Lord.

We must hear in John the Baptist's message more than just a call for behavior modification, more than just a call to strict morality or right living. We must hear in His message a declaration of a new Kingdom come near in Christ. In Christ, God was closing one chapter only to begin a new one. He was creating a new nation wherein there would be no difference between Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Going forward, the very fruits sprouting from pagan soils would be blended together into one universal

vintage. No longer did it matter who your parents were, or who their parents were, now what mattered most was who you were in the new identity of Christ. This radical shift accounts for why our text concludes with the plot against John the Baptist; a plot that would finally lead to his imprisonment and beheading. For the people of God had grown fat and lazy, living on the scraps falling from their earthly master's table. They had forgotten their God-given right to something more. John reminded them of that something more, but fearing the loss of their status-quo existence they sought to put him to death.

John the Baptist's message is for us—for his God is our God. God gathers His people from all nations, He sets us apart to live in purity and holiness before Him. We are His new nation, His new people; a light upon the hill, and salt of the earth. This is now our privileged status and it is ours to lose. And yes, we can lose it. John's message, then, should serve as both a warning and a blessing to us for we are now God's new covenant people. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills