

Luke 3:15-38

Sermon: **The beginning**

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HE WANTS YOUR HEART

1. Before we move further, I want to pause briefly on John's sermon. Something profoundly important is happening here. If we've studied the history of Israel, then we know how much religiosity meant to them. In the Old Testament we see that Judaism was filled with ceremonial practices: offering sacrifices on the altar, purification rites, burning incense, prayers at set times, fasting, and many others.

1.1. And yet, what stands out in John's preaching is that he never emphasizes those practices. He doesn't say, *"Repent, and then be diligent in fulfilling your ceremonial duties."* Although those rituals were a central part of every Jew's life, John doesn't mention them at all as the decisive factor. Why? Because in God's eyes, that's not what counts. In God's eyes, only a repentant heart has value, and only such a heart qualifies for blessing.

1.2. This scene makes it abundantly clear—God has never been interested in human religiosity in and of itself.

1.3. At that time, as a people, the Jews were not striving to be faithful even in their religious observances, let alone to repent sincerely and return to their God. On the other hand, there was a group—the Pharisees—who chose to live in strict religiosity. They labeled anyone who didn't as "sinners."

1.4. And into that context comes John the Baptist. His message was simple and direct: *"If you want to be in right relationship with God, stop thinking only of yourselves. Start thinking of others. Stop revolving around your own interests and learn to live for God's truth, goodness, righteousness, mercy,*

and forgiveness. For this is what your God, Yahweh, does.” In other words, John was declaring to the people: “God doesn’t care about your religious practices. He wants your heart¹.”

ONE STRONGER THAN I IS COMING

2. (Luke 3:15–16) “Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were thinking carefully in their hearts about John, whether he himself perhaps was the Christ, John responded to them all, saying, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but He is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the straps of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”

2.1. “The people were in expectation.” Whom were the Jews waiting for? In the text we read that they wondered in their hearts, “*Could John be the Christ?*” Maybe their picture of the Messiah was distorted, but their collective thought was the same: “*Come, our King, deliver us from the hand of our enemies.*”

2.1.2. John the Baptist steps onto the stage and becomes widely known among the people. So it’s no surprise they were asking themselves: “*Maybe he is the Christ?*” John knew that thought was spreading among the crowds, and so he clearly declared: “*I baptize you with water!*” In our previous study we mentioned the meaning of John’s message—“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” His role was to prepare the people for the coming King. For the Messiah to establish His kingdom over Israel, they needed to become true Jews—Abraham’s descendants not just physically, but also in faith like their father Abraham.

2.2. But we must grasp something crucial: John had no authority to change anyone’s heart. His ministry was external—through baptism in water he urged a person to publicly confirm their inner decision to turn back to God. But could John know with certainty who had truly become a child of God? No. He had no such authority. His role was to prepare, but he could not transform the heart.

2.3. That’s why he says: “*One mightier than I is coming; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” Unlike John, Jesus Christ has the authority to “see” whom the Father has changed. He knows who has been called into God’s kingdom, for He carries the authority of God the Father Himself. When Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit, it means the Father has already forgiven that person and chosen them. Jesus has the authority to change the human heart, to enter the very depths of our being and give new life.

2.4. Here we see the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. He has a relationship with the Father that no other human being can have. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; all things were created for Him. This is what John wanted his people to grasp when he said: “*I am not worthy to untie the straps of His sandals.*” It was a statement of deep humility. Though he was highly known and respected, John knew his place in God’s plan. He didn’t exalt himself, but embraced his role—to yield to the One greater than him.

¹ Isaiah 1:11–17; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6–8

2.5. Now the One for whom all reality was created steps onto the scene. John understood this, and so his main mission was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

2.6. John then adds: *"The One who comes has authority to baptize with fire."* That means Jesus decides not only who will enter His kingdom, but also who will be set apart for destruction. "The eternal fire" is a symbol of complete and final judgment—the moment when a person is forever removed from reality. Jesus Himself said: *"The Father has given all judgment to the Son"*²

PEOPLE ARE NOT STUPID

3. (Luke 3:17) *"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

3.1. John uses an image that every Jew at that time would have clearly understood. When grain was threshed, the wheat was separated from the chaff—the wheat was stored in barns, while the chaff was burned. In this context, the wheat represents the children of God, while the chaff represents the children of the devil.

3.1.2. From John's words we can sense that he believed that day would come very soon, perhaps even in his own lifetime. That would be the day when the King of Israel would cleanse his people with the winnowing fork—separating the faithful from the unfaithful.

3.2. Almost all of John's sermon carries a negative tone: *"You must repent today, or you will be destroyed!"* He never says: *"Once you repent, then the King will establish his kingdom."* No—the urgency is felt in his words. He believed that the Jews no longer had time, that the moment of decision had come: either they would become true Jews, or they would be destroyed. *"Repent, for the King is already here, among us!"*

3.3. Of course, John's statement can also be applied universally, to every individual in every generation. Life is given to us only once. Today is a gift—and every new day as well. But it is precisely today that we must decide which path we will take: the path of righteousness or the path of destruction. After death—which can come at any moment—there is no second chance. If we have not repented while we lived, we become the chaff destined for eternal fire—final destruction, erased from reality forever.

3.4. This is biblical truth: man was not created to cease to exist. We are created in the image of God—with the capacity to explore, learn, grow, and live life to the full. If this life were all we had, then those capacities would be wasted. This life is too short to fully express what God intends us to be. The potential within us is enormous, but sin holds us back, blinding us to all that is beautiful and glorious that we could become.

² John 5:22

3.5. The Bible promises that when we receive new bodies—bodies freed from sin—we will be completely free for that potential. Then we will become morally perfect, like our brother Jesus Christ. Goodness will dwell in us naturally and instinctively³. Can we imagine the freedom when selfishness, envy, malice, and pride no longer bind us? Even now, as God’s children, we can sometimes experience glimpses of that freedom—and even that is glorious. But one day we will live in that fullness, reflecting our Father as He deserves.

3.6. Therefore, although John’s sermon sounds harsh and negative, it comes from a heart that longs for the salvation of his people. It is the preaching of a heart that saves. It teaches us how seriously we must take his message.

3.7. As time goes on, this truth sinks deeper into me. It produces in me a heart that longs for the salvation of others. We cannot remain indifferent to John’s words. They must stir us to speak truth to those around us. Why? Because it is a tragedy to see a human life end as chaff. Our desire is that people be wheat, not ashes.

3.8. But as we speak, people see and feel what our motives are. If we do not sincerely care for them, they will know it. Let us not underestimate people—they are not stupid! Man is created in the image of God, and we must treat him that way. That is why we must persuade with reason, presenting arguments, evidence, and facts—but with hearts full of humility, grace, and goodness. We must not manipulate people, threaten them, mock them, or attack them. That is not God’s image—that is our sinful image. Our calling is to strive for nobility and righteousness, and through that image to speak the truth. And although we will never fully attain that perfection—because we are still sinful—that does not mean we should not strive with all our hearts to draw nearer to it.

IT COST HIM

4. (Luke 3:18) **“And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”**

4.1. Luke gives us only one of John’s sermons, probably to emphasize what he considered most important. He himself says: *“There were many other exhortations from John the Baptist.”*

4.3. Luke calls John’s message “the good news.” But when we connect it to John’s warning: “Repent or you will be destroyed!”—we ask, what is good about that? I believe that the “Good News” Luke writes about, which John proclaimed, was actually the coming of the Messiah.

4.4. Israel had been waiting for their Redeemer for thousands of years. From generation to generation that hope was passed down, and now He had finally come—the Messiah was physically present among His people. That was indeed good news for those who accepted Him. But for those who did not, it was news of judgment. Confronted with the truth Jesus brought, every individual was

³ 1 Corinthians 15:52–54; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 John 3:2; Romans 8:29–30; Galatians 5:22–23.

forced to decide: did they want to be a child of light or a child of darkness? With the coming of Jesus, the time of decision could no longer be postponed. The message was clear: *“Israel, you must decide to whom you belong!”*

4.5. What John believed would happen in his own day, we—Christians twenty centuries later—know still has not yet happened. The King’s judgment on His people has not yet been carried out. The Book of Revelation shows us that it will take place at Christ’s second coming, when He will judge the unfaithful and reign over Jerusalem with those who are His. Everything John proclaimed was true—he just did not know that its fulfillment would stretch across thousands of years after his death.

4.6. (Luke 3:19-20) *“But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.”*

4.7. Luke now mentions Herod and gives us a glimpse into the context in which John ministered. Herod the Great was a cruel, selfish, narcissistic king. He had many wives—the exact number is not known—and in his sick ambition, *“I am king and no one but me can be king!”* he killed his own children and wives who tried to persuade him to make their son the heir. Herod was a slave to darkness and to his obsession.

4.8. His family tree was large and complicated, full of half-brothers and half-sisters. History and the Gospels remember three: Herod Antipas, Herod Philip, and another Herod Philip. One of the Philips studied in Rome and married his niece Herodias. Later, his brother Herod Antipas, driven by lust, took her as his wife. Judaism considered both actions serious sins—marriage to a niece and marriage to a brother’s wife.

4.9. John the Baptist, as a prophet respected by the people, publicly denounced Herod Antipas for this lawlessness. And it cost him his freedom. Herod, a man already steeped in sin, threw God’s messenger into prison to silence him. In the end, he even had his head cut off.

4.9.1. And so, as John’s mission neared its end, we come to the One for whom John had been “a voice crying in the wilderness.” Luke now leads us to the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He writes that Jesus was baptized with the Holy Spirit, and then he records His genealogy. We know Jesus is the son of Joseph, the descendant of David, but Luke goes all the way back to Adam.

JESUS’ BAPTISM

5. (Luke 3:21) *“When all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized. And while he was praying, heaven was opened...”*

5.1. Let us first pause at Jesus' baptism. Why was Jesus baptized? We know that in one of the Gospels John the Baptist asked Jesus: *"Why should I baptize you? You should be baptizing me⁴!"* But Jesus replied: *"Let it be so now, for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness."* What did he mean by that? I believe the message is clear: *"As King, as the Messiah who came to his people, I must—and it is right, just, and good—stand in line with my people and receive baptism. In this way I personally commit myself to God, to love His Law with all my heart and to live it out."*

5.2. Luke then adds: "And while he was praying." This means that during this outward ceremony symbolizing consecration, Jesus inwardly prayed for God's blessing and grace. Prayer was a natural part of such an act—every Jew who took his faith seriously prayed during these moments.

5.3. And then, Luke writes, "heaven was opened." How exactly did heaven open? Was it simply a parting of clouds, or something far more miraculous? The text does not give details. What we know is that something happened which all those present could clearly notice.

5.4. **(Luke 3:22)** *"The Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"*

5.5. In our Christian tradition we often imagine a white dove gently landing on Jesus' shoulder. And perhaps it was so. But if we ask bird experts, they will tell us that when a dove chooses to land, it does not do so gently but quickly, forcefully, and with precision.

5.6. I think Luke wants to convey exactly that impression—the Holy Spirit did not come vaguely or slowly, but decisively, powerfully, and clearly, just as a dove swoops directly onto its target. Whether or not it was literally a dove is beside the point. What matters is that all those present saw the sign and understood that Jesus was someone unique.

5.7. Then came the voice from heaven: *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased!"* This was God the Father Himself testifying about Jesus. What does this mean for Jesus? It means that He is indeed the Messiah, the King of kings, the descendant of David to whom the Father entrusted all authority—to rule over His people.

5.8. Luke records this event briefly, but the apostle John gives it great importance. In his epistle he writes that the testimony about Jesus comes "by the water, the blood, and the Spirit." The "water" refers to this baptism, the "blood" to His crucifixion, and the "Spirit" to God's own witness⁵.

5.9. What does John want to emphasize? This: *"If you do not believe Jesus' words, if you do not believe His miracles, if you do not believe the works He performed—then at least believe this: God the Father Himself testified that Jesus is His Son. The Creator Himself revealed Himself visibly on several occasions and declared: 'This is my Son—listen to Him!' If that does not convince you, what will?"*

⁴ Matthew 3:13-15

⁵ 1 John 5:6-8

THE BEGINNING

6. (Luke 3:23) “Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli...”

6.1. Luke wants us to see that Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of His public ministry. Until then Jesus had lived quietly, humbly, and almost unnoticed. But now, at this very moment, God begins to reveal His glory and power through His Son. It is through Jesus that humanity will learn why we exist and what God’s plan is in this created reality. It all begins when Jesus is about thirty years old.

6.2. (Luke 3:23–38) Luke then gives us Jesus’ genealogy. Why? One reason is certainly to show His connection to King David. But Luke does not stop at David—he continues all the way back to Abraham and then to Adam. Why?

6.3. Some biblical scholars believe Luke traces the line back to Adam to emphasize that Jesus is the Savior of all humanity, not only of the Jews. That is a possible and reasonable explanation.

6.4. Or perhaps Luke simply had access to the genealogy and chose to record it. But one thing is certain—Luke had already stressed that God Himself testified: “*You are my Son, whom I love.*” And if someone is God’s Son and the Messiah, he must also be a descendant of David. That is why Luke includes the genealogy—to confirm to his readers that Jesus has the legal right to be King, Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man.

6.5. Matthew also records Jesus’ genealogy⁶. Yet, when we compare Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts, we see they hardly overlap—except in two places. Why? The early church fathers believed that Luke records Mary’s lineage, while Matthew records Joseph’s.

6.6. This takes us back to a legal provision in the Law of Moses, one that is difficult for us today to grasp. If a man died childless, his brother was obligated to marry the widow. The first son born of that union was not counted as the brother’s, but as the son of the deceased—thus continuing his family line⁷.

6.7. That was the way the lineage and inheritance rights were preserved. So the question here is not whether Mary herself came from David’s line (though she likely did), but whether Jesus had the legal right to David’s throne. And He did—through the genealogy of His legal father, Joseph.

6.8. My suggestion is this: Matthew gives the genealogy showing Jesus’ legal claim to the crown through Joseph, while Luke gives Joseph’s biological line—the one Mary also knew and likely passed on to Luke when she bore witness to him.

⁶ Mathew 1:1-17

⁷ Deuteronomy 25:5–6; Genesis 38:8; Ruth 4:5–6, 10