

Matt Henry
Luke 3:1-14
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“Working the Crowd”

Grace and peace...

On the front of the classic movie, “The Christmas Story” DVD, it reads, “Peace, comfort, joy...maybe next year.” That may be how you are feeling already as you go about your Christmas preparations. There’s always a lot to get done and crowds to fight. The crowds tend to work us over. But this message is about how one person worked the crowd. That person is John the Baptist. His job is to prepare people—and for this reason—Advent is his season. In a sense, John the Baptist, has been working the crowds and preparing the crowds of every generation since. He’s a catalyst for change. So what needs to change in your life? If we truly consider the question, then we’ll also ask, just as they did before us, “What shall we do?” John’s answer is practical, specific and down-to-earth. Only Luke provides it. Here is exactly what you do—and if you do it, people will see the change in you. The change comes from having a relationship with God. The relationship with God causes us to become the generous, honest and content people God wants us to be. And then we may just have that peace, comfort and joy whether or not we are prepared for a holiday, we will be prepared for our Lord. We will be prepared for the Lord because the Lord prepares us!

John's basic message that he proclaimed was "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That just sounds way too churchy. I have to define those terms.

Baptism--Now I know we hear the word baptism and we think Holy Baptism, but this is not the Holy Baptism as we have. John's baptism is incomplete. It is preparatory for something greater. John's baptism is a recognition of deficiency, not a promise of salvation. It's a public demonstration of the need for a savior. It's a public admission of sin. This is a baptism that is just for sinners, so it's going to be altogether shocking when Jesus is baptized by John. He stands in the place of sinners and identifies with them in this kind of unclean baptism—the righteous for the unrighteous.

Repentance is another concept we need to define. I know you've heard repentance as being defined as turning from sin and unto God. It is that, but it's more. When John calls for repentance, he is calling for people to leave behind unbelief. Repentance is not just a call to stop sinning, but a call to start believing. Be converted. So the baptism of repentance is a public call for faith in Christ and that faith alone brings the forgiveness of sins. Only God can do that in us.

John is the voice, as Isaiah put it, of the one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways.” What’s that mean? This isn’t a geography lesson. This is describing people. The proud and arrogant are like those lofty mountains that will be brought low. The humble and lowly will be exalted. The crooked will give up their crooked ways and become straight. Jesus’ coming turns the world upside down and puts everyone on the same level no matter who they are. So the concept is this: Jesus is coming, get ready, prepare the way because Jesus is bringing real change with Him. It’s true that all four gospels mention Isaiah 40 in conjunction with John the Baptist, Luke takes it a step further. Only Luke includes v. 6, “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” That means Gentiles are in on it too, and since Luke is the only Gentile author in the Bible, that’s a significant point he is making. Prepare the way then is directed at everyone, everywhere, for everytime—including you and me.

How much change can be made? As much as needs to happen. Sometimes we are surprised by how much change can happen in one person. I read an article about Rene Martinez who is 44 years old. He’s not your average church-going person, but here’s his story from the news this week.

<https://www.foxnews.com/us/notorious-gang-leader-in-miami-now-preaches-jesus-im-a-radical-soldier-for-god>

(Fox News article) Rene Martinez spent the majority of his life in and out of jail, breaking into homes, stealing guns, dealing drugs, and getting into fights. But today, the former gang leader in Miami is now a follower of Jesus. "I lived a very crazy life, I did some horrible things in my life that I know it's only by the grace of God and His mercy that I'm alive and free," Level told Fox News. "I was gang affiliated from the 80's to 2012, I've seen a lot of people die in front of me and I've been through a lot."

As a young teenager, Level joined a gang, and on Halloween night 1989 he started what became a notorious gang known as the Latin Syndicate that grew to 300 members. At 14, he was in a coma and almost died. Two years later he was in jail for attempted murder. When he had his daughter, he wanted to be a good father but didn't know

how, so he started fighting to provide for his family. He turned to bare-knuckle fighting and became a professional Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter, which is how he earned the name "Level," and he defeated three-time world champion in Nicaragua.

He's faced death numerous times, and he said in 2013, when he was recording gangster music in his garage, he heard Jesus speak to him, saying: "I spared you for such a time as this. Either you come to me now or I'm going to take my hedge of protection off of you." I saw my whole life flash before my eyes – when a gun was jammed in my face, when a bullet whistled by my ear – I almost died five or six times – and all my friends that died. God set me free for a reason. I repented right there."

But it wasn't until he was baptized that everything changed in an instant. "When I went in the water, this was April 10, 2016, that day shifted my life," Level said. "I ain't never been the same. Something incredible in my life happened that I can't explain. It was Jesus, only Jesus can do it."

"I was on the road to Damascus and Jesus showed up – Saul to Paul – that was me. God sent me back to the places I came from." Level had the opportunity to lead one of his friends, Corey, out of gang life and to the Lord. "I gave him the Word and he got baptized and I started discipling him. He's on fire for God right now. He grew up in the projects, but now he's in Washington State praising God in the mountains."

He has a street ministry called "One Accord". There's a documentary on his life now out called "The Level Warrior".

Well, talk about preparing the way of the Lord! The rough places becoming level ways. And actually discipling someone—this Level guy gets it! Someone you would have thought was too far gone is not beyond the scope and reach of our God. God doesn't have any difficulty with a situation like this. I know this is a rather extreme example. I mean, the closest thing we have to gangs around here are the Grunts and the Quilters! It's like Westside Story around here. But since God brings the change, He can go Isaiah 40 and level out anyone! But the people that He has the harshest words for, and John had the harshest words for, were people on the inside. Those who were resistant and not repentant.

In Luke 3, when John saw the crowds coming, he says something that is rather blunt. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?" That's one way to work the crowd! Jesus also called the Pharisees "brood of vipers" (Mt 12:34). [Do you happen to recall the huge tsunami that wiped out Indonesia a few years ago? One of the odd things that people reported before the earthquake was seeing snakes heading straight away from the beaches and onto higher ground. How did they know? Can't tell you, but somehow they (and

probably other animals) are equipped with some kind of sense that helps them survive.] They knew to flee ahead of time. And I think that's the sense of what John is getting at when he calls the people "brood of vipers." And along with it, comes a sense of "Don't just be doing this for show. But really repent, bear the fruit of repentance. Don't even play the Abraham card or the race card because you are no better off than anyone else. The axe is at the root of the trees. And it's either repent, or there will come a time when God removes his hedge of protection. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. We're all on the same level. We all need a Savior."

The crowds get the point. They ask, "What shall we do? As in, what shall we do differently? What should we do that we are not currently doing?" The crowds were to change their ways by becoming more generous. The tax collectors were to change their ways by being honest. The soldiers were told to change their ways by not abusing their authority, but being content with their wages. For those three groups to practice generosity, honesty, contentment, that's as much a shock as it is watching a former gang member lead ministry. But it's the kind of thing that only Jesus can do.

So what about you? What will you do? What needs to change? The answer is going to be expressed in a way of living it out and it's also going to be relational. It may be finally getting serious about discipleship itself.

It's part of preparing the way of the Lord. Meeting Jesus, encountering Jesus always means making changes. Some of them are big, some of them are small. But they are changes that need to be made. And He will accomplish that change. God set us free for a reason so that our lives on the outside would be a reflection of the change He brings on the inside.

In Jesus' name, Amen.