

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 3:7-18

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This is the story of John's preaching. In reciting this story you are presenting John the Baptist. He is a person like Elijah, full of rage against the prophets of Baal and the defection of the people of Israel from the worship of Yahweh. Is he the embodiment of the wrath of God to come? I think there is some of that dynamic in his voice. But my hunch is that while his voice was strong and forceful, his message was good news for the oppressed people of the Roman Empire.

John the Baptist is a prophet of this new age, of this new period of history. There is good news because it means that the dominance of evil men and evil ways will come to an end. There will be justice. The best way for justice to happen is that those who are doing evil will change their minds and turn around and do something else.

First John talks to the crowds, just everyday people, and then tax collectors who came to be baptized. Tax collectors were the epitome of sinners, those who did evil in the land of Israel. They collected taxes for the Romans. They profited at an enormous rate while being the agents of Roman oppression.

Even more closely identified with the empire were the Roman soldiers. Some of the Romans came and asked John the Baptist, "What should we do?" Clearly Romans were coming out and listening to John's preaching. They too were moved by it and were trying to figure out what could they do to repent. John's exhortation to them is to cease extorting money, and to be satisfied with their wages. John is naming the things that would specifically signify repentance by those who were a primary source of evil and of wrongdoing in his day.

A major dimension of John's preaching is that everyone is involved in the ways of sin. The brood of vipers is *all* of us. The spirit of this story is not unlike the spirit of the wilderness camp meetings in 18th and 19th-century America. If you are involved in sin, you are liable to the judgment of God. The way to be saved from condemnation is to repent and to begin to act with righteousness and kindness rather than with selfishness and greed. The three examples that are given in response to John are specific examples that Luke uses to make his meaning clear.

The logic of the speech is that John has the authority and power prophesied by Isaiah. He is the agent of the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Is he the Messiah? Decisively not. He is the one who prepares the way for the Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth. John's ministry is a prelude to the life and work of Jesus.