

WHAT ARE YOU DOING FOR CHRISTMAS?

Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

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Luke 3:7-18

“With many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.” Let’s see if we’ve got this straight: “. . . you brood of vipers . . . flee the wrath to come . . . every tree that does not bear fruit will be thrown into the fire.” If this is an example of John the Baptist preaching good news, then spare us the day when he has gotten up on the wrong side of the bed.

Still, the amazing thing is that the people who were listening that day did not dismiss these rantings and ravings as the words of a lunatic. Instead, they took John’s words seriously: “What shall we do?” asked the crowd. “What shall we do?” asked the tax collectors. “What shall we do?” asked the soldiers.

John the Baptist answers their question, and he answers it in a way that may surprise us. He does not say: “You’ve got to go into the temple and pray, and offer more sacrifices, and put on sackcloth and ashes.” He does not say: “Turn away from this terrible world and flee into the desert. Wait for the rapture. Don’t be left behind.” None of that.

Instead, John says to the crowd: “If you’ve got two coats, share one of them, and do the same with your food.” To the tax collectors he says, “Don’t collect more than the amount you’re supposed to take.” To the soldiers: “Don’t be a bully. Don’t use violence. Be content with your wages.”

Sometimes the gospel comes to us in a loud explosion, which completely upsets the old way of life: Take up your cross . . . sell what you have . . . don’t look back. Sometimes the gospel issues that sort of challenge.

But there is no explosion here, but rather a gentle tap on the shoulder: Share what you have, don't intimidate, be content with what you have, be fair. Simple and straightforward answers. They are not impossible to do. Nothing far-out or radical here.

Or is there? Suppose the people who heard John the Baptist really did what he said. Suppose the multitudes shared their second coat, or gave away half their food. Why, people might start taking advantage of such generous folks in all sorts of ways.

Suppose tax collectors really did collect only what they were owed. Tax collectors ordinarily made their money by collecting more than the law required. That's how they made their money, and that is also why other people looked upon them as traitors to their own people. If they collected only what they were owed, they wouldn't make any money, and the whole system of tax collection would fall apart.

Suppose soldiers did not use violence and intimidation to get their way. Suppose they stopped forcing citizens to carry their pack one mile, as they were allowed to do. People would stop being scared of the soldiers, stop being intimidated by them. The whole system of Roman authority would fall apart.

These words of John the Baptist, words that sound so ordinary and harmless, actually can change everything. Sharing is revolutionary. Kindness is radical. Fair-play is far-out.

The story is told of two friends who were talking together. One said: "Joe we've always been friends, right? If you had a million dollars, would you share it with me?" And Joe replied, "Sure I would; you're my friend." "And," asked the other, "if you had two barns full of hay, would you let my cows have one of them?" "You know I would," answered his friend. "And suppose you had two coats. Could I have one of them?" This time there was no answer. "What's the matter?" "Well, you see, I've got two coats."

You may have seen the commercial on TV for the Tennessee lottery. It shows a man coming to the house of an older couple. They open the door. "Well, look here! It's John." And John says: "You did so much for me while I was growing up, now I want to do something for you." They go out in the yard, and John has bought a huge motor home for them to travel around in. Presumably, John has struck it rich in the lottery, and now wants to do something nice with his winnings. The message is: Imagine all the good things you could do if you won the lottery.

But John the Baptist does not ask us to wait until we win the lottery. We are not being asked to do the impossible with what we do not have. We are asked to share, to be kind, to be generous, to be fair—right now, with what we have. It can change everything.

Suppose we lived that way today. Suppose the check-cashing service stopped charging high rates of interest, but rather showed concern for the poor who came into their establishment.

Suppose the politician elected to high office decided to put the common good above personal gain.

Suppose the landlord who charged exorbitant rents for inferior housing started giving decent housing at a decent price.

Suppose the boss who used intimidation and favoritism to keep employees in line tried instead the revolutionary concept of treating other people with dignity and respect.

“In this way John preached good news to the people.” It is good news, you know. The good news is that we are not called to extraordinary tasks, to quit our jobs and all become missionaries to some foreign land. Some may be called to that. But we can start right where we are to transform our ordinary lives, our work, our friendships, one single small choice at a time.

The good news is that we don’t have any longer to play by the world’s rules of intimidation and threats of violence. Instead, in our ordinary ways we extend kindness, we share; we are content with what we have.

The good news is that God is coming among us in Jesus Christ, and we are invited to participate in his coming. You already do it—giving to the angel tree, helping a neighbor, taking a friend to lunch because you know they need it, rearranging your schedule to help someone out. Not big, huge, gigantic things, but living out the good news of the Christian gospel in the ordinary affairs of life: giving, sharing, caring, being fair.¹

Richard Foster is an author of books on the Christian life. He tells of a time in his life when he was particularly busy with many demands. One day, in the middle of all this, a

¹ Thanks to my friend Todd Jenkins, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Fayetteville, TN.

friend called. His wife had taken the car, the friend said, and would Richard mind driving him around while he did a few errands? Foster writes:

Trapped, I consented, inwardly cursing my luck. As I ran out the door, I grabbed Bonhoffer's *Life Together*, thinking that I might have an opportunity to read some of it. Through each errand I inwardly fretted and fumed at the loss of precious time. Finally, at the supermarket, the final stop, I waved my friend on, saying I would wait in the car. I picked up my book, opened to the marker, and read these words: "One service that we perform for others in a Christian community is that of active helpfulness. This means, at first, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time in such petty, outward acts of helpfulness is usually taking his or her importance too seriously."²

The question we often hear asked at this time of year is: "What are you doing for Christmas?" It's not far from the question of those who asked John: "What shall we do?" What are you doing for Christmas? How shall you get ready for the coming of the Christ? How do you participate in his coming?

Here's how: Nothing radical. Just look at all the stuff you've got, and share it. Live within your means. Be fair. Don't intimidate.

It's not huge. You can do it. It can change everything.✠

² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*. (New York: HarperCollins 1978), p. 135. The Bonhoffer quote can be found in *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row 1954), p. 99.