

LUKE

“Jesus Is Better”

Luke 3:15-22

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“As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, ‘I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:15–22, ESV).

Heavenly Father, I thank you that you have revealed yourself in your Son Jesus. May your Spirit rest upon us today and reveal to us how Jesus is a better savior than we could have ever hoped for. AMEN.

I. Introduction

I remember the first time my wife and I traveled west on a road trip. As we drove on Interstate 40 out of the Great Plains into the expansive wilderness of the American Southwest, I watched her marvel at a landscape unlike anything she had never seen. She told me it looked like the place where Wyle E. Coyote would chase the Road Runner. She loved it. But what really overwhelmed her was the first time she saw the mountains of northern New Mexico. You see Kate was born in Ohio and had never seen the mountains outside of the rolling hills of West Virginia. So the first glimpse of these “real mountains” amazed her.

I told her, however, even though the mountains of New Mexico are a welcome and wonderful sight to a flatlander like me, they were nothing in comparison to what we were about to see once we crossed into Colorado. As gorgeous as the Sangre De Christos mountains around Sante Fe are, they are nothing compared to the snow capped majesty of a Pike’s Peak and the Colorado Rockies.

But this is the nature of how expectations works. Our expectations are framed by what we have experienced. And when we have a novel experience that overwhelms us, it is hard for us to imagine there might be something out there that would overwhelm us even more.

Here in Luke 3, the people of Judea have had a novel experience unlike anything they had ever seen before. John the Baptist was a prophet of the living God, speaking the very words of God in the wilderness. It had been four hundred years since God had spoken through a prophet. So when John

began to proclaim the word of God with authority, it was the most monumental spiritual event of people's lives.

Naturally they began to wonder (Lk. 3:15). Their hearts began to ask the question, "Could this prophet be the Christ? At long last, has God sent his anointed Messiah to deliver his people from oppression? Is the age of the Kingdom of God about to come through this man?"¹

But John responds to the crowds the same way that I responded to my wife, as we drove through northern New Mexico: "just wait; something better is coming!" However, not only does John refuse to be identified as the Messiah. He does everything he can to show that the true Messiah, the one who will follow him, is better than John in every conceivable way. He says, "There is one who is mightier than I who is coming, and I am not even worthy to untie his sandals" (Lk. 3:16). Now, to be asked to untie someone's sandals wasn't just a lowly act; it was a demeaning act. It was an act that was so lowly that only a non-Jewish slave could perform it for his Jewish master – it was beneath the dignity of a Jewish slave.²

John wants his audience to know – and he wants us to know – he is not the Messiah. In fact the whole point of John's great ministry is to point to the true Messiah. He wants us to know than in every conceivable way "*Jesus Is Better.*"

So for the rest of our time today, I want us to look deeply into this text to discover the ways in which Jesus is better: **1.) *Jesus is better than our best efforts*, 2.) *Jesus is better than our false messiahs*, and 3.) *Jesus is better than our greatest expectations.***

II. Text

1.) *Jesus is better than our best efforts.*

- The word "baptism" simply means immersion. Thus, to baptize is to soak, to saturate, to submerge.
- *John's ministry is built around baptism, and he says is a baptism of repentance.* John wants his hearers to live lives immersed in the reality of a holy God. He wants them to turn from sin and toward God.
- As we talked about at length last week, repentance is good; it is necessary.
- But repentance seems to focus on what man can do, and what man can do is limited.
- Thus, while repentance is a necessary part of salvation, it is insufficient by itself. We cannot white-knuckle our salvation. We cannot simply try as hard as we can, and expect to earn closeness with God.
- John knows our repentance must be empowered by something more than our best efforts and intentions.
- This is why, according to John, the baptism of the messiah is so much greater.
- The first thing that this messiah will baptize us in is the Holy Spirit.
- John says he can show us how to immerse our lives in a righteous way of life, but the when the messiah comes he will immerse us in the very Spirit of God.

¹ "[The people's expectation and wondering whether or not John is the Messiah] may suggest expectation of the eschatological denouement here." I. Howard Marshall, [*The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 145.

² Robert H. Stein, [*Luke*](#), vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 135.

- The people hearing this would have known that this meant something so much better than repentance, because they would have remembered the words of Ezekiel the Prophet: *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”* (Ezekiel 36:26–27, ESV).
- **Jesus is better because, Jesus doesn’t just make us better people – he makes us new people.**
- John can show us what a righteous life might look like. But Jesus lived a righteous life on our behalf. He faced the judgment of death. He conquered death. And now he gives the very power of resurrection to those who believe on him.
- That power of the Holy Spirit gives us new hearts, new desires, and new hopes so that we can pray along with Augustine: “Command what you will, and will what you command.”
- However, John says that the messiah will have another baptism – a baptism of fire.
- Sometimes I have heard it taught that the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the baptism of fire are the same thing. However, the context of this passage and everywhere else Luke uses the metaphor of fire shows that they are in fact two distinct realities.³
- Whereas the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a baptism into God, the baptism of fire is a baptism of judgment. This why this “baptism of fire” is followed by the illustration of Jesus standing with a winnowing fork, separating the wheat (those who bear fruit) from the chaff (those who don’t).⁴
- John is saying that he can preach with a sense of urgency about repentance, but that at the end of the day we will not be standing before him in judgment – rather we will stand before the messiah.
- This confronts our Americanized picture of Jesus. Jesus is not our buddy. He is not our homeboy. As the ancient Apostle Creed reminds us, he is the resurrected and ascended Lord of creation. He sits at the right hand of his Father in heaven, and he will one day return to judge the living and the dead.
- This is a sobering truth, which is why verse 18 might at first glance sound a little off: *“So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people”* (Luke 3:18, ESV).
- But even the judgment that Jesus will bring is indeed “good news.” **The coming judgment of Jesus means that one day the power of evil will not only be defeated, it will be destroyed.**
- **And even though in and of ourselves, we will stand guilty before our Judge, for those who are in Jesus, for those who have repented and believed in him, Jesus isn’t just our Judge – he is our Advocate.**

2.) Jesus is better than our false messiahs.

- Verses 19 and 20, tell us about how and why John the Baptist’s prophetic ministry came to an end.
- But in order to appreciate what is happening here, we need to understand a bit more of the historical context.

³ “...the reference to fire in Luke 3:9 involves divine judgment, and the immediate context of the following verse that refers to “burning fire” is clearly one of judgment. In fact, “fire” appears throughout Luke as a metaphor for divine judgment (cf. 9:54; 12:49; 17:29).” Stein, 135.

⁴ “For the imagery of winnowing and harvest in relation to judgment see Pr. 20:28, 26; Je. 15:7; Is. 41:15f.; Ps. 1:4; Rev. 14:14–20.” Marshall, 148.

- King Herod the “tetrarch” is a different King Herod than the one we saw at the beginning of Luke. When Jesus was born, the ruler was Herod the Great. These verses are referring to Herod the Great’s son, Herod Antipas who was now ruling part of Herod’s former kingdom.
- Now, both Herod the Great and Herod Antipas were pretend kings of Israel. They held power, but really they were glorified governors who needed to keep things in line for the Roman Empire. But they wanted more. What made them famous was that they rebuilt the Jewish temple. They wanted to be seen as the chosen heirs of the Old Testament King Solomon, the original temple-builder. They both wanted to be seen as messiahs.
- But Herod Antipas, like his father before him, was no messiah. He was a wicked man. In particular, he had recently divorced his first wife, and married a woman who was his brother’s wife. This was a scandal, but hardly anyone would be bold enough to speak up and call out Herod Antipas’s sin.⁵
- But John did. We know from the gospel of Mark that Herod Antipas was initially a fan of John’s who heard his preaching gladly (Mk. 6:20). That is, he heard him gladly until John publically rebuked Herod for his sin and called him to repentance. It was then as it is now a risky thing to call out a political leader. I imagine some folks in the Southern Baptist Convention would want to cut off John the Baptist’s funding for being overly critical and not representing his base. But John was faithful, even though this action ultimately led to John’s imprisonment and death.
- But here is the point: ***John not only pointed to the true messiah; he called out and exposed the false messiahs. John is saying, “Look people, I know that Herod might have caught your attention because is wealthy and powerful and has restored the temple. But he is no messiah. He is mockery of God’s ways. Don’t look to him for your salvation. Take your eyes off of him, and behold the lamb who takes away the sins of the world!”***
- What would you say those false messiahs are for us today? Who or what are the voices that promise us salvation that they could never achieve?
- This week, it’s rather easy to point out how much people of all political persuasions in our culture tend to look to politics for salvation.
- I can think of few other things that have tended to capture the thoughts and imaginations of people in such a way that they are willing to speak with urgency and passion, with which I yearn they would speak about Jesus.
- Now if politics really is your one hope in life and death, then by all means give your life and your allegiance to it. But if we say that something else is at the very center of the universe, we should live as such.
- But what are those things for you that tend to capture your heart, your imagination, and your passion? We often take good things and turn them to ultimate things. We look to them for our purpose and our salvation.
- Let us hear the voice of John awaken us to know that Jesus is better.

3.) Jesus is better than our greatest expectations.

- This baptism scene with John and Jesus together is the last time we see John alive in the book of Luke.

⁵ Ibid., 149.

- John's entire purpose it would seem is to point to Jesus, and show that Jesus is better. Now that Jesus has come and has been revealed as the messiah John foretold, John's ministry is fulfilled.⁶
- But it is worth noting that Jesus would have defied every expectation of who the messiah would be. The Jewish people were expecting a deliverer-prophet like Moses who would set God's people free from Rome. They were expecting a warrior-king like David who would defeat all their enemies. Instead, they got a carpenter from Nazareth.
- But when this carpenter was baptized, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended, and the voice of God said this is my beloved son (Lk. 3:21-22)!
- The people were expecting a prophet and a king, but instead they got the Son of God!

III. Conclusion

- Now before we conclude our time today, I want to attempt to answer two questions this passage has always provoked within me. Why was Jesus baptized? And what do we make of the Holy Spirit descending as a dove?
- As for the first question, we must acknowledge Jesus is baptized not because he needs to repent or cleanse himself from sin. The gospel of Matthew says, Jesus is baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15).
- *His baptism is a pre-figuring of his ministry – his life, death, and resurrection. **By his baptism Jesus displays how he unites himself with our humanity, so that he can unite our humanity with his righteousness.***
- The second question is a little trickier. Why did the Holy Spirit appear as a dove?
- Now as a general guideline, when you run into hard passages in the Bible the best way to make sense of them is to interpret them by the Bible.
- And interestingly enough there is really one other place we see one singular dove descend in Genesis 8 during the story of Noah, when the floodwaters subside and dry land reappears. In this story, the dove represents that the judgment of God has ended (Gen. 8:8-12). Now, this might not be enough to make a connection here; however, in 1 Peter 3, Peter directly connects baptism with the story of Noah's Ark (cf. 1 Pt. 3:20-21).
- So when we put all of these biblical connections together, here is what we get.
- ***The waters of baptism, like the floodwaters of Noah, represent God's wrath against sin. Though Jesus like Noah's ark is plunged into the waters of death and judgment, he will rise again to the light of resurrection and new creation. We, like the family of Noah who took refuge in the ark, endure the storm only if we are in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3-14). And, and as the dove announced to Noah that the flood waters were subsided and the judgment was finished, now because Christ took our condemnation, the dove of the Holy Spirit rests upon those who believe and the Father calls us children instead of enemies.***⁷
- This is why when we believe and are baptized, we know that God is pleased with us. Jesus is God's beloved child, and in him so are you!
- ***Jesus is better than our best efforts. He is better than our false messiahs. And he is better than our greatest expectations.*** AMEN.

⁶ "According to John 3:22-23; 4:1-2, the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist overlapped for a time. Luke, however, in presenting his orderly account told of John's imprisonment at this point in order to complete John's story, so that he now could concentrate on Jesus' story (cf. also Mark 1:14 but note 6:17-18)." Stein, 135.

⁷ Marshall, 153.

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1) According to this text, how is the baptism of Jesus different and better than the baptism of John (Lk. 3:15-17)?
- 2) John not only pointed toward the true messiah, he also exposed how a political leaders like Herod Antipas was not the messiah (Lk. 3:19-20). What are our false messiahs?
- 3) Many people were expecting the messiah to be a political or military leader. How does the baptism of Jesus show how Jesus is better than what people were expecting?