

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 8, November, 1999

“Prepare the Way for the Lord”

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Mark 1:1-5 (NIV) - *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah [40:3-5] the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way -- a voice of one calling in the desert,” ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*

Matthew 11:10-11 (NIV) - *This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”*

It doesn't matter if we are the least or the greatest, there is something each of us must do to get ready for the Lord. There is some preparing that we need to make in our personal lives. God has told his people all through the scriptures to be ready for his coming. What a blessing it is for those who will be ready on the day the Lord comes.

As we open the Bible to the Old Testament we find in the Book of Exodus just one example of God talking to his people about getting ready. God told Moses what to say to the Israelites to help them get ready to come into the presence of a holy God.

Exodus 19:10-11 (NIV) - *And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.*

Through his servant Moses, the Lord taught the Israelites the importance of consecration (setting themselves apart), out of reverence to God. Moses asked them to wash their clothes as a symbol of purification and holiness. In obedience, the Israelites washed their clothes so they would be ready to come into God's presence.

On the morning of the third day, Moses led the people out of the camp so they could stand at the bottom of Mount Sinai. As Moses spoke, God answered Moses from behind a cloud of smoke. The cloud of smoke was present, because the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai in fire. The whole mountain trembled violently because the smoke billowed up from it like the smoke from a furnace. Sin had gotten so bad that God talked to the Israelites from a distance, for their own protection. The cloud served to protect them from being burned up by the intensity of God's fiery radiance.

As we can imagine the Israelites grew tired of talking to God through a cloud of smoke. No matter how many times they washed their clothes to get ready, they still were not holy enough to stand in the presence of God without needing the protection of the cloud.

God longed to have his people close to him. He didn't like having to hide his presence behind the cloud of smoke anymore than the people did. He loved His people so much he didn't want their sin to come between them. There had to be a way prepared for God's people to get rid of their sins, so that they could come back into his righteous presence.

The plan for the redemption of man had already been put in place. Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God, was coming to take away the sin of the world. (**John 1:29**)

Mark 1:4 (NIV) - *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

When the Jews approached John, asking who he was, he answered humbly by saying he was nothing but a voice calling people to prepare the way (road) for the king. What did getting the road ready for the king have to do with John's message of repentance? At the time of Jesus, the conditions of the roads were not good. They were nothing more than mere tracks or ruts. Anytime the news got out that a king was about to visit a province, it was then that the roads were smoothed and straightened out. The way of the king must not be hindered.

John was sent with the announcement that a king was coming - but this king was different. He didn't come wearing a gold crown on his head and gold rings on his fingers. His kingdom was not even of this world. The Messiah, God's anointed king was coming! The road to be prepared for this king was not a physical road. It was a spiritual road - the road of the heart. There were things in the lives of God's people that needed to be smoothed and straightened out in preparation for His coming.

Some of the Jews who came to question John, felt that because they were the "children of Abraham," they didn't need to be baptized. They thought they were entitled to special protection from the penalty of sin, as long as they observed the outward ordinances of the law. John quickly rescued them from their wayward attitude. He told them that no matter what their heritage was, to find acceptance with God they must bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.

The same thing is true for us today. To find acceptance with God there is something each person must do for themselves. It doesn't matter how "spiritual" someone else is - your pastor, your wife or husband, your girlfriend or boyfriend. They can't get the sin out of your heart. You are the only one who can get the sin out, through repentance, to come back into the presence of God.

John wasn't calling the Israelites to get baptized in the Jordan River to obey another ritual. If that was all there was to it, then it would have served the same purpose as when Moses asked the Israelites to wash their clothes. God doesn't want us to just look clean on the outside, while rebelling against him on the inside. See Matthew 23:25-28.

John the Baptist was the messenger sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord, by calling people to go beyond the outward observances of the law. The time had come for them to stop going through the motions and pretense of being righteous. John was crying out to them to repent of their sins and bring forth good fruit. If they didn't produce fruit worthy of repentance, then their baptism would be fruitless. John's message was clear and he spoke it with conviction; if their heart was not broken because of their sin, then their fruit was not worthy to lay at the feet of Jesus.

Luke 3:9 (NIV) - *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*



Questions for personal or group study:

1. Although the mission of Jesus went beyond that of John the Baptist, the theme of repentance continued as a primary requirement for salvation. In fact, Jesus began his preaching and teaching in the very words of John. What were these words? (see Matthew, chapter 4)
2. What attitude did John take toward those who regarded themselves as favored of God? (see Luke, chapter 3)
3. What changes would you make in your own life to bring forth fruit worthy of repentance? (for examples, see Luke 3:10-14)