

Chapter 11

Relationship with Society: Living Justly

Opening Question: “Many people don’t like the words ‘sin’ and ‘repent’, yet John the Baptist uses them. Luke 3:18 says that these words come alongside the Good News—how might you understand these words so that they become good news?”

DEBRIEF

Have group members repeat the memory verse and share how they did in prayerfully paying attention to their use of social media as they arrive. Open with prayer for the Spirit to illuminate the group during the study.

HEAR THE WORD

Old Testament context:

- Isaiah 40 pictures the Messiah coming in a kind of second exodus with Elijah preceding the coming of the Messiah.
- The Holy Spirit often fell on people in the Old Testament, but didn’t continually live inside people.

Immediate context:

- In Luke 1: 67-79, John’s father, Zechariah, prophesied that John would be called “Prophet of the Most High” and go before the Lord “to prepare the way for him”(NIV).
- Luke names the Roman rulers whom Jewish people ruled under and in cooperation with, and religious leaders, the former and current high priests. Given Luke’s information, this was probably around 25-26 AD. There was great expectation that the Messiah would come at that time.
- In the past, water baptism had only been required for Gentiles desiring to fully convert to Judaism. John required baptism for Jews as well, to show their sincerity about repentance.
- At harvest time in Palestine, wheat would be separated from the useless matter collected when growing it and burned—a picture of life without God. This is a kind of baptism through fire.

Luke 3:1-20 (NIV)

¹It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene. ² Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. ³ Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁴ Isaiah had spoken of John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!

Clear the road for him!

⁵The valleys will be filled,

and the mountains and hills made level.

The curves will be straightened,

and the rough places made smooth.

⁶ And then all people will see

the salvation sent from God.”

⁷ When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, “You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? ⁸ Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ⁹ Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ The crowds asked, “What should we do?”

¹¹ John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.”

¹² Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³ He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.”

¹⁴ “What should we do?” asked some soldiers.

John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.”

¹⁵ Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.” ¹⁸ John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

OBSERVE (What does the passage say?)

1. Let people read the text quietly to themselves, circling any words or ideas they don’t understand. Explain that in verses 16-17, John is talking about Jesus.

What questions do you have about words or ideas in the text?

Have different students read it aloud, taking the parts of the narrator, John, the crowds, tax collectors and soldiers.

2. Where and when does this occur?
3. Look for repeated and contrasting words and ideas, including those in the quote from Isaiah and the rest of the passage. To what or whom do the words seem to point?

INTERPRET (What does the passage mean?)

4. Have group members choose one of the characters—the religious leaders, common people, tax collectors, soldiers, and John—and imagine how they might feel. Here are questions for each group to answer:
 - a. We know from the Matthew version of the story that it is the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious teachers, whom John calls a brood or bunch of snakes. They are depending on their descent from Abraham’s children for salvation. John says that even stones could be sons of Abraham, but that doesn’t save them.

Why would John speak to them so harshly? How might you feel if you are a religious teacher who is sincerely repenting?

- b. If you had two shirts, you were considered rich enough to give one away. How would you, a common person, have felt when John commanded this?
- c. Tax collectors took more than was due them and kept it for themselves..If you had been one of these tax collectors, how might you have felt, listening to John?
- d. Soldiers took more money than was needed from the people, sometimes threatening violence. If you had been one of the soldiers, how might you have felt as you heard John's words?
- e. Verse 15: Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. In verse 16 John said that he was unworthy to untie the sandals of the one coming after him, one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Untying sandals was considered work that slaves did. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit fell on people but did not live inside them. When Jesus gave the Spirit, the Spirit would live inside disciples. What does John think and feel about Jesus? How did John's message about Jesus and the Holy Spirit prepare the way for Jesus's message of Good News?

APPLY (What does the passage mean to me and my community?)

- 5. The common people who had two shirts were told to give one away. How might that teaching apply to us today? Where do you see differences in income on your campus or in the city where you live now? Or in your home country? What is being done or could be done to change the situation, both short term and long term?

Memory Verse: Luke 3:16

John answered their questions by saying, "I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Write it in English and your heart language here:

RESPOND

Practice: Think through your answers to Question 6 and spend some time listening to the Lord as a group.

After your listening prayer time, decide what next steps your group wants to pursue and get volunteers to research possibilities. Close in prayer for this Respond step, the needs of group members, and for all situations where injustice prevails.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This chapter was written by Katie Rawson of InterVarsity-USA. She became involved with international students as an international grad student doing research in Paris, where she was part of the GBU, the French student movement associated with the IFES. Katie has served among international students in the USA for over forty years, and she has a passion to see students living in and glorifying Jesus wherever God sends them. Joan Krebs, ISM Volunteer with training in Bible and Theology, and Diane Tyndall, a Grad and Faculty campus minister with training in discipleship and theology commented on this study.

Facilitator's Notes

Objectives of the Study

- To help students grasp that John's message about repentance points us to Jesus' good news of salvation and gift of the Holy Spirit
- To help students grasp God's desire that for his disciples to live just lives with concern for equity and honesty
- To help students grasp God's desire for just societies where those with power do not misuse it for their own gain and consider what responsibility they might have to change these situations

Notes on the Questions

Opening Question: Sin includes both heart attitudes and actions that separate us from God and others. Repentance is turning from self to God, which opens us to receive the good news of Jesus.

Question 2: It occurs on both sides of the Jordan River at a time where there was expectation of the promised Messiah (v. 15), with hope that he would free them from unfair and sometimes cruel Roman rule.

Question 3: Repeated: God, Lord, salvation from God, repent, turn from sins, warning; contrast: baptize with water/ baptize with Holy Spirit.

Question 4: Remind students to assume that the questioners were sincere. Give people some time to think about their answers. Think about your own so that you can be the first to answer and help others open up, if needed.

Question 5: John makes it clear that his role is to prepare people to see their need for Jesus. His message about repentance and the two kinds of baptism is good news because the Holy Spirit will bring salvation and the ability to obey.

Question 6: Again, think through some answers to this question so that, if needed, your answers can spark ideas in others in the group. Here are some possibilities:

Your group or individuals from your group could volunteer in a food pantry on campus or in the city or help with harvesting a community garden where food goes to those who have no good grocery stores nearby. Or you could give extra clothing to a thrift shop that employs low income workers. More permanent solutions include supporting university employees such as cafeteria workers and maintenance people who are seeking incomes that allow them to live nearby instead of traveling a long way to work.

Climate change often disproportionately impacts the poor, so efforts to care for the environment are options as well.

Notes on the Respond Section

Make sure you take time (5 minutes is fine) to listen to the Lord together and take time to make sure everyone who has something to share does so.