



Demonstrating Confidence and Joy

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Luke 3:7-18

Trust and confidence are sometimes more identifiable by their absence than by their presence. It would seem, anyway, that we more easily notice when these are lacking than when they are present. Perhaps this is due to the nature of our expectations. We expect life to follow prescribed patterns and are somewhat shocked when life does not obey them. When trust is missing, we pay attention. When we see a lack of confidence or joy, we stand up and take notice. What should it look like, after all, when our lives give regular evidence of our faith and confidence in God?

Listening to John the Baptist in Luke 3, we would not take it for a message of comfort or confidence. We would not expect this to be a message about trusting God. Listening to his words strongly critiquing the crowds who came to hear him, we should expect something else. Even so, this seems to be the very message they took to heart.

John's tactics certainly seem rather odd from our current perspectives. His words to the crowds do not decry outsiders or the society around him in general. This was not the popular televangelist critique of a larger society heading off a moral cliff. They were not words crafted in a way to comfort his followers and make them feel better about themselves. His words of critique directly targeted those coming to him for baptism. His audience was composed of those people who were already determining their need for conversion. They wanted their lives turned around and focused upon God. They entered John's presence specifically to hear instructions from him about how their lives needed transformation.

John did not lambast the society at large. His harsh criticism was for these seeking to stake a claim on belonging to God, these who wanted to participate in ushering in the reign of Messiah. These were the very people stepping forward to heed and learn from John. It was these he cast as a brood of vipers, offspring of snakes, enemies of God and the people of God. It was their motives with which John was so concerned, not their response in requesting a baptism of conversion.

He questioned the reason they were stepping forward. He was not impressed by any show of religious observance, by rites or rituals. He was not impressed by words and vows of repentance. He was not impressed by declarations of beginning new lives through a baptismal ritual of conversion. Rather, he wanted to know why they came forward to declare their repentance. Were they simply looking for a means of escaping judgment? Coming to God out of fear of condemnation was not a response John was willing to entertain. When one's fear has abated, one's confidence and trust in God has grown no stronger. John was looking for so much more than responses out of fear. He sought responses flowing from trust and confidence instead.

John demanded trust in God that did not rely upon fear. He demanded confidence that allowed them to live in accordance with God's care for others. He demanded commitment to rely upon God that freed the individual to cast his future upon God while caring for those in need. If your repentance is true, he said, show it by the way you live. Begin letting God's character flow through you into the world all around you. Prove it!

They did not respond to John's words from the standpoint of a people disheartened. They did not respond with dismay upon hearing a word that condemned their way of living. The Hebrew prophets had consistently spoken in a similar manner. They challenged the people in such a way that the people

understood mercy and acceptance to be just around the corner. John's harsh words came to them from this perspective of understanding Yahweh as God who forever deals in mercy, forgiveness, and love. God was merciful, but God's requirements were demanding. God would forgive, but God would not lower standards for human action and interaction.

Hearing John's critiques and demands, they asked for direction. "What, then, shall we do? How shall we demonstrate our repentance and confidence in God?"

John's answer was simple. Start acting like God takes care of you!

Share your extra with those who don't have enough. Trust God to make what you have left sufficient. Don't be greedy or abuse others to increase your wealth. Trust God to meet all your needs. When one lives out of confidence in God's provision, one lives in joy and harmony with God's will. This is what true repentance looks like. It looks like submission to God and God's care. It looks like no longer trying to retain control over our lives, but living under God's direction.

John's message was simple. It was direct. It called for a wholly new way of living and gauging life, priorities, economics, faith, and submission to God.

It helps that John was quite an eccentric in his own right. He wore the simplest of clothing; he ate the simplest of diets. He called for letting go of so many things that simply don't matter. His words and message were compelling, because they flowed in harmony with the character of his life. John cast his life upon God's care and called others to follow him in the path he paved. His message had authority from his life. It also resonated with some of the demands of prophets from the nation's past. It went further, however, challenging the nation to cast their future and their present completely in the hands of God in a manner to free them from material concerns.

Many wondered at the eccentricity of John's message. It was very much a counter-cultural word that impacted religious life and its structures within Judaism. It resonated with the character of laws about Jubilee and the freeing of slaves and debts. It matched commandments in Deuteronomy that spoke of loving one's neighbor. It meshed with understanding that the Land of Promise ultimately belonged to Yahweh, not to the people. The message was out of sync, however, for these words and teachings had never been implemented in the life of the nation. John was calling them to actually do what they knew God required of them. That required a wholly new classification of trust in God's provision!

John considered a life lived out of confidence in God to be a life of repentance. That life would be poured out in respect for others in their needs. This would, however, be simply the beginning of something greater. It would be a first step in preparation for the coming of one who would usher in the presence of God's Spirit. As earth shattering as John's message was to so many, it would simply be a first step to lead the nation to a much greater reality, the joy and blessing of God's very presence through the promised outpouring of God's Spirit.

True repentance would find expression in a new level of confidence in God. Confidence in God would lead the nation through a wholly new application of God's will. This application of love for one another would then pave the way for the ultimate blessing, the ultimate reason for rejoicing in God. God would pour out upon them the promised Spirit, according to the words of Joel.

This is what caught the attention of the crowds who went out to hear John. Are we ready to embark with them on this transforming journey of trust that leads to real joy? This trust demands a radical transformation of our lives from repentance through dedicated action. This is the gospel call.

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