

# C-Class Celebrities In The Kingdom Of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn back with me this morning to Luke chapter 3 and verses 1 through 20 in this 11th sermon on this topic of Luke's gospel.

There are certain characters in the Bible, famous characters even, of whom we speak too little. Mary, the mother of our Lord, is one of them, as is her husband Joseph, Jesus' adopted father. John the Baptist is most certainly another. We very rarely talk about John the Baptist. And yet, John the Baptist sparked a social and religious movement which sent an earthquake throughout the whole political establishment of Judea.

We don't talk much about John the Baptist because I guess he doesn't fit in with our stereotypical image of what a preacher should look like or what a preacher should say.

Because he's always talking about sin and righteousness and repentance. Maybe that's why we've relegated John the Baptist to being a C-class celebrity.

[ 1 : 17 ] However, if it was John the Baptist preaching this morning and not me, he'd be happy with his status as a nobody. You see, he never wanted to be a somebody.

He never wanted to draw attention to himself. His life's ambition from his birth was to draw attention to Jesus Christ, the true Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world.

You know what the real reason we don't talk much about John the Baptist is? We don't like his message. Because all of us want to be someone.

We all want to make our mark. We all want to be remembered. By contrast, John's greatest fulfillment came from making much of Jesus. He would say, who cares if no one remembers my name?

As long as they follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Who cares if no one remembers our names? As long as our families and our friends follow Jesus as Savior and Lord as a result of our witness to them.

[ 2 : 30 ] In the words of the apostle in Philippians 3.15, let those of us who are mature think this way. And if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that to you also.

Now, we've already been introduced to John the Baptist as a baby. But now in Luke 3, verses 1 through 20, we meet the man. And today as we analyze his ministry, we want to see two things about him.

First, the messenger of the kingdom. Second, the message of the kingdom. John the man. John the message.

And as we go through this study today, ask yourself the question soberly and seriously ask yourself the question. Is my highest fulfillment in life found in making much of me?

Or in making much of Jesus? First of all then, John the messenger of the kingdom. John the messenger of the kingdom.

[ 3 : 41 ] He may be a C-class celebrity, but he's one of the most significant figures in the Bible. He remains to this day one of the most successful messengers of the kingdom.

Even though he lived in the desert, his influence extended far beyond the borders of Judea. So much so that during the expansion of the early church in Acts 19, the apostle Paul discovered people in Ephesus, in Asia Minor, who had been baptized into John's baptism, but had never heard of Jesus.

Now there's two features of Luke's presentation of John the Baptist as messenger of the kingdom I want to draw your attention to this morning. Two among many.

The first is continuity. And the second is confrontation. Continuity, confrontation. Continuity, first of all. Luke chapter 3 begins somewhat similarly to Luke chapter 2.

With a list of important rulers. Nearly 30 years have passed between the two chapters, and Caesar Augustus has been replaced by Caesar Tiberius.

[ 4 : 50 ] There's a new governmental structure in Israel, with Pontius Pilate being governor and proconsul of Judea. Also in this introduction to Luke chapter 3 is reference to a jewel high priesthood, Anas and Caiaphas.

This is very unusual in the history of Israel, a jewel high priesthood. Usually it was just one man who was the high priest. Luke is meticulously detailing these things and setting them in context, historically.

And it's into this setting we read these words, The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

In the blitz of A-list celebs listed at the beginning of chapter 3, we have kings and we have emperors and we have governors. God's word comes to a man in the Judean wilderness.

Now the more you look at the wording, the precise wording of verse 2, the more you realize how similar the ministries of John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophet Elijah were.

[ 6 : 03 ] Both lived in the desert. Both lived in days of mighty rulers. The word of God came to them both. Even if you should just limit your range to the beginning of Elijah's ministry in 1 Kings 17 and 18, we read that very phrase, That formula, the word of the Lord came to, is used in the Old Testament of how God spoke to other prophets.

But here, Luke is drawing a direct line between John the Baptist and Elijah the prophet. Luke is presenting John the Baptist as Elijah reborn.

Again, this is perhaps not surprising. A couple of months ago, from chapter 1, verse 17, we learned that the angel Gabriel, when he announced the conception of John the Baptist, said to Zechariah, He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Everything about John the Baptist, including his message, as we'll see, is a replication of Elijah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Luke is intentionally pointing to continuity in message and messengers between the prophets of Old Testament religion and the preachers of the Christian religion.

There's continuity there. John the Baptist is the great New Testament Elijah, to whom the word of the Lord comes, who fearlessly preaches a message of faith and repentance.

[ 7 : 57 ] Let me apply this. There's a very fine line to be drawn by Christian leaders between novelty and originality, between what's new and what's always been, between being faithful to the culture of the word of God and faithful to the culture of the world of the day.

And it's very hard to find this balance. Sometimes the church can be over-culturated, led not by the word of God, but by the prevailing culture of the day.

Other times, churches become irrelevant and unbiblical by failing to apply the word of God into their prevailing cultures. It's a very fine balance to strike, and no doubt, we all get it wrong.

I'm not convinced, and I think Donald Morrison has been very helpful to me here in the last few years, I'm not convinced that culture changed as much in Israel as significantly between 800 BC when Elijah lived and 25 AD when John the Baptist lived as it has in the last 20 years in Great Britain.

825 years, not much cultural change in Israel. 20 years in Great Britain. Huge cultural change. Maybe I'm wrong.

[ 9 : 21 ] The point is this. We live in continuity with all those who have gone before us, and at the very least, we must pay them the respect they are due by carefully studying them, the context in which they ministered, and the message they preached.

You'll be very tired of me talking about Andrew Boner, minister to Finiston in the late 19th century. The reason I study him is not because I'm an antiquarian, it's not because I like the Victorian steampunk look.

The reason I study him is because I want to imitate him. Not because I want to become a Victorian minister using Victorian words in 21st century Glasgow, because that would be unfaithful to him and to the Bible, but to learn lessons about how he ministered in his context so that I may minister more effectively in my context.

We live in continuity with those who've gone before us. We stand on the shoulders of giants, just as John the Baptist stood on the shoulders of Elijah. And that's a really fine line to strike.

The line between novelty and originality. I believe that line can only be struck in the faithful continuity of the message and messengers of the gospel.

[10:45] But the second element of John the Baptist as messenger is this, confrontation, confrontation. Because there's another reason that Luke inserts all these famous names into this chapter.

Another way in which John the Baptist stands in continuity with all the great Old Testament prophets. One might suppose that if God was like us, he would have sent his word to the world of his day through Caesar Tiberius or Pontius Pilate.

But he doesn't. He chooses to communicate through a strange man living in a desert. A man who, far from toadying up to the great of his day, will confront them with their need for personal faith and personal repentance.

John the Baptist's ministry will be one of confrontation. No shrinking violet, this man, the strong voice of God in his day. Think of the great patterns of prophetic confrontation in the Old Testament. Moses and Pharaoh, Samuel and Saul, Elijah and Ahab. Indeed, by verses 19 and 20 of Luke chapter 3, we're learning that John the Baptist so attracted the hatred and anger of Herod by his calling out of Herod's wicked relationships that he ended up in jail.

[12:16] Like his master Jesus, John's going to speak out against injustice, not just for the sake of it, but to show people their need of repentance and faith. In the early days of the church, some maybe six years on from the events recorded here, the Jewish religious authorities are going to kill Stephen, the deacon, and James, the apostle, because these two men confronted them with their hypocrisy.

The thing is that the message of the gospel is by its very nature confrontational. The message of the gospel calls out sin and hypocrisy and points unmistakably to our need of mercy and forgiveness.

When did the gospel stop being counter-cultural? When did its preachers become the instruments of woke societal indoctrination? I heard it said recently that the problem with preachers today is that no one wants to kill them.

No one wants to kill them. Please don't kill me. This brings us full circle. Maybe one of the reasons we don't like to speak out is because we're trying to carry favour with the Caesars and the pilots of this world rather than enjoy the daily experience of our Father's grace.

The reformers John Knox and Andrew Melville enjoyed tempestuous relationships with the Scottish crown precisely because they understood that confronting wickedness and hypocrisy in the high places was part and parcel of their call to gospel ministry.

[14:05] Don't go thinking that somehow John the Baptist and Jesus were different from each other that John was ferocious in his preaching whereas Jesus was kind of fluffy. They both suffered the same fate because their preaching was equally confrontational.

Perhaps it's a wake-up call for all of us to think less about our social respectability and more about our gospel responsibility. Perhaps our preaching isn't quite as sharp as it should be.

Perhaps we don't cut like John. Perhaps that's one reason we don't have the crowds coming to hear us that John had coming to hear him. So to many John may be a seeless celebrity but he certainly wasn't to Jesus and hopefully he's not to us either.

If ever it was true of a man that he succeeded in putting Jesus first it was true of John the Baptist. Perhaps that's the best tribute we can give him as a messenger of the kingdom. But then secondly and a bit more briefly the message of the kingdom the message of the kingdom if it's true that there are certain characters in the Bible of which we speak little it's equally true that there are certain topics in the Bible of which we speak little the preaching of John the Baptist is challenging at best fairly embarrassing at worst.

And as I said earlier we don't like it because it makes us feel small. Makes us feel small. In these verses he's baptizing and preaching but it's his preaching that Luke wants us to focus our attention upon.

[15:47] I'd thought of including this as a separate point his method of proclaiming the kingdom the foolishness of preaching no conversion at the point of a sword for John the Baptist no conversion by false promises of health and wealth for John the Baptist but the plain proclamation of our sinfulness as human beings before God and our need of repentance faith and forgiveness through Christ Jesus.

John was a Baptist I mean that's what he did not that's what his ecclesiological convictions were but first and foremost he was a preacher of righteousness and Luke summarizes that preaching in verse 18 of chapter 3 so with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people the message of John the Baptist was good news it was a message of faith and repentance leading to forgiveness and salvation through Christ now very briefly there are three features of John's preaching I want to draw your attention toward first of all he preached for repentance secondly he preached against assumption and third he preached the Christ as in the first point of this sermon not just John the messenger but John the message challenges us all about our priorities in life first of all he preaches for repentance he preaches for repentance in verse 3 we're introduced to John's mission with the words and he went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and there follows a series of episodes where we have solid applications of repentance and practice the crowds the tax collectors and the soldiers each asking John what then shall we do how shall we then repent and how then shall we live

John's preaching repentance not just the motions we go through of confessing our sins but of sincere amendment of life as the book of prayer calls it and this kind of repentance it consists of a complete turnaround of thought word and deed it consists in the admission we've been headed in the wrong direction all the time an independence upon God's promised help we're now going to walk in God's ways now I don't think any of us find repentance a particularly difficult concept to understand but it's the most difficult thing in the world to do you know we hate to admit that we've been wrong I know I do hate to admit I've been wrong Alcoholics Anonymous is a very well known organisation it's 12 step programme to recovery is famous even among non-alcoholics because it forms the basis for the freedom from any addiction and trust me we're all addicted to something every single one of us step one is the most famous of all the steps reads like this

I admit that I'm powerless over alcohol that my life has become unmanageable I admit that I'm powerless over alcohol that my life has become unmanageable John the Baptist preaching made the crowds listening to him realise they were powerless over their sin and their lives had become unmanageable step one might be only one step out of twelve but it's the most important one the admission I have a problem with sin I need help repentance isn't one of these words that we like in today's evangelicalism we don't like to talk about our need of personal repentance but perhaps even more controversially we don't like to talk of our need for corporate repentance is there a sin among us of which we need to repent corporately I'm taking as my basis for saying this the wonderful book on church revitalisation from embers to a flame by Harry Reader is there sin among us of which we need to repent corporately you know when we consider the weakness of our churches both numerically and missionally without exception our first response is to make new plans and to engage in new strategies what we never do is to ask are there sins embedded within the culture of my congregation which render us ineligible for God's blessing is there a pride in our achievements is there arrogance toward other

Christians looking down at them because they don't worship the same way we do is there a divisive spirit among us I want things my way no one else's is there worldliness is there power games is there ungodliness tolerated evangelicals simply don't talk in terms of corporate repentance but without it let me suggest that churches including our own will never become numerically and spiritually healthy church revitalisation must consist first in church repentance followed by that question the crowds asked John what then shall we do so preaching for repentance secondly preaching against assumption preaching against assumption one of the themes that we're going to find as we go through Luke Acts is the equality of Jew and Gentile in the early Christian church in the early Christian church Gentiles were being made to feel like second class citizens by their [ 21 : 58 ] Jewish Christian brothers and sisters or you're not of the true blood you don't have the right heritage you don't speak the right language from the beginning of his ministry John's at point at pains to point out that being able to trace your genetic line from Abraham does not remove your need for personal faith and repentance in Jesus Christ and so in verse 7 John criticizes the crowds who've come to him relying upon their descent from Abraham as the basis of their salvation he tells them it is not your genetics that will save you from the coming judgment of God it's your faith in Jesus Christ and then he says don't begin to say to yourselves well we have Abraham as our father I tell you God is able to raise up from these stones children for Abraham John's preaching against assumption the assumption that because we share a faithful ancestor that because we have a certain culture a certain background a certain language that we've been circumcised or baptised in our case as infants we are automatically in it's not our family that saves us it's our faith that saves

us it's not our race that saves us it's our repentance that saves us it's not our linguistic background that saves us it's the language of love

Jesus Christ and the cross that saves us it is of no consequence at all if you're a Jew or a Gentile if there's no faith no repentance and what John later calls bearing fruits and keeping repentance listen John's preaching against assumption I assume that I'm a Christian because I live in a Christian country because I've got Christian parents because I worship in a Christian church because I was baptized by a Christian minister but please tell me this isn't a problem we have here of assumption that there's any among us who think this way please tell me then as we apply this into the life of the church we begin to see things from a slightly different perspective what's important among us listen carefully what's important among us isn't our ethnicity our background our titles our achievements our bloodlines our ancestry our heritage our dulichus as the gales say it's our faith repentance and fruit bearing if there is one place in the entire world where we should be all equal with each other in status and dignity right here in this church if you're titled or not you're privileged or not we approach

God in humility and meekness confessing our sins and admitting our need of his help preaching against assumption and then lastly preaching the Christ preaching the Christ okay I admit it I don't like Edinburgh I am Edinburgh phobic in every single way but the one thing I do like about Edinburgh albeit very grudgingly is looking up from Prince's Street on a dark night toward Edinburgh Castle my countryman from the north Neil Gunn the Highland author he called that view from Prince's Street Gardens up to the Edinburgh Castle he called that the beating heart of Scotland maybe it wasn't his day I don't think it is now the floodlights they illuminate the castle ramparts you can see

Edinburgh Castle from Fife from miles away the thing is nobody ever draws attention to the floodlights but you know without the floodlights you'd never see the castle think of John the Baptist as the floodlights at the base of Castle Hill in Edinburgh his mission in life was not to draw attention to himself but to illuminate Jesus his mission in life was to prepare the way for Jesus as we see from verses 15 to 17 there were certain among the crowd who thought that perhaps John was the Christ and they wanted to make much of him but John's response was characteristic of the man he said he who is mightier than I is coming the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie embodying the spirit of all the great Old Testament prophets

John the Baptist bows before Jesus Christ as Lord and he joins his floodlights with all the other floodlights and points them all toward Jesus and says to the crowd do not make much of me make much of Jesus I have a book on my Kindle written by the most famous author in the world his name is Anonymous it is entitled embracing obscurity becoming nothing in the light of God's everything embracing obscurity becoming nothing in the light of God's everything it was written obviously by a high profile American preacher but we don't know his identity even his wife didn't know that he was writing this book so even she couldn't come up I can't figure out who it is you can guess the theme of the book and I quote from it it's about making God not ourselves look good it's about making God not ourselves look good tell me is this your primary motive in life that whether you're made to look like an absolute fool as long as

[ 28 : 20 ] Christ is made to look good through you you know John the Baptist could have written that book embracing obscurity because his ministry was entirely about Jesus and nothing about himself at all why are we all so precious about our reputations and respectability why for if our master Jesus Christ gave up all these things for us how can we respond in any other way than by joining our little floodlights to those of John the Baptist and those of every other faithful servant of God to make Christ look good our lives will point to the cross on which our savior died to make atonement for our sins and give us eternal life our lives will point to the empty tomb from which Jesus rose on the third day to defeat death forevermore our lives will point to the spirit of Jesus working powerful within us to give hope love and peace and joy forgiveness and kindness what then shall we say to all these things what kind of a Christian messenger are you what message are you giving out do you stand in faithful continuity with the followers of

Christ all over the world and all over time and space are you willing to confront kings and governors with the claims of Christ as king and what kind of Christian message are you preaching by both word and work show me the evidence that your life as was John the Baptist's is making little of yourself and much of Jesus let us pray Lord we thank you and praise you that Jesus is the center of the praises of the church not ourselves no mere mortal not a preacher not a minister not a

movement not a church not an ethnicity not a background but Jesus Jesus Christ and him crucified  
and Lord if there's anything about us which is offensive to you or which detracts from the message  
we want to preach which is don't look to me look to  
Jesus then forgive us and help us to pursue amendment of life we pray we ask all these things in  
Jesus name Amen