

**Sermon Notes for December 13, 2009**  
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**Advent III**

**I. John the Baptist the Ethicist**

**A. Ever read *The Ethicist* column in the New York Times Magazine?**

1. Questions submitted by readers:

a. Can I bribe a lawnmower repair man to move my machine up during the spring rush?

b. My kid surprised me with a massive science project due the next day. I stayed up all night and essentially did it for him. How much of my kid's homework can I ethically do?

c. We just moved to a new town. I am not married to the woman people here think is my wife. Do I have to explain our non-marriage?

2. Ethicist offers a question and answer service that assists the questioners and educates the other readers.

**B. So too John the Baptist plays ethicist in our lesson today.**

1. Similar passages in all the Gospels, but only Luke remembers John's ethical advice.

2. Begins with a warning of God's coming power:

a. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

b. Do not comfort yourself by proclaiming your chosen-ness.

c. He even calls them a "brood of vipers."

d. Something, someone great is coming. Get ready!

3. Attention getting, to say the least. John's eschatological predictions prompts ethical questions.

a. Whole crowd, a poor and hopeless group: What then should we do?

b. Tells them to share: If you have two coats, share one.

Let no one go hungry in your midst.

c. Tax Collectors also ask what they should do.

d. Tells them: Collect no more than you are due.

e. And Roman soldiers also want to know how to live ethically.

f. He says, though you are an occupying force with great power, do not abuse civilians; don't take things from those under you.

## **II. John's Ethical Teaching both worthy and not worthy of Jesus.**

- A. Share and prevent suffering around you.
  - 1. Good basic advice.
  - 2. The sort of thing we are trying to teach our two year-old.
- B. If you are given a public trust, do not abuse it.
  - 1. Don't embezzle from your employer.
  - 2. Don't demand bribes or kick-backs.
  - 3. Again, advice that should be taken for granted.
- C. Worthy of Jesus in this sense:
  - 1. He too invites his followers to merciful living.
  - 2. To be satisfied with what we have.
  - 3. To feed the hungry and share our resources.

## **III. John's Ethical Teaching is unworthy of Jesus.**

- A. Ultimately, Jesus' call is more radical.
- B. John's work was lesser; to stamp out greed, self-indulgence, the use of violence for extortion, the betrayal of the public's trust.
- B. John says: If you have two coats, give one to a cold person.  
Jesus says: If someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt as well.
- C. John says: If you have a little food, share it.  
Jesus multiplied loaves and fish; not simply dividing the meager but making God's abundance known.
- D. John says: If you have a little food, share it.  
Jesus says. Give to everyone who begs from you

## **IV. We have mostly claimed John's Ethics for Ourselves**

- A. We can do what John invites, particularly in December.
- B. We are tolerably honest and express concern for those in need.
- C. John's advice good for the time of waiting.
- D. John's work was good: to assemble the motley crowd that would receive Jesus. Tax collectors, soldiers, prostitutes, and other poor sinners.
- E. He gave them a hope for the interim, ethics for the interim.

## **V. But John Says "Do not be satisfied with me or my**

## ethics"

- A. The Kingdom of God is coming!
- B. One who is coming is more powerful than me.
- C. He will show you a still more excellent way.
- D. John's interim ethics are surrounded by his exhortation to prepare for the real thing.
- E. For the one who brings the ultimate good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.
- F. The fruit worthy of repentance are the first fruits of the Kingdom of God.

## **VI. In a Still-Broken World, John's Teaching is Better than Nothing.**

- A. I still implore you and myself to mercy and honesty.
- B. We still await the final manifestation of the Kingdom; interim ethics may sustain us.

## **VII. But the real good news is still coming.**

- A. When the One more powerful than John comes, ethics as a category will melt away.
- B. We won't wonder, as the crowds did, "What should I do?" about consumerism, poverty or war or abortion or execution.
- C. No, worship will fully replace ethical reflection, as all are gathered around the throne of the Lamb.

## **VIII. It is GOOD NEWS that John's teaching is not all there is.**

- A. The ethics of the Kingdom of God are higher and better.

But finally, Jesus is not an ethicist, not a moral teacher.  
He is of a different, higher order than John.

He is the Savior of world, by whose incarnation, death, and resurrection  
we are saved.

We who follow him must live merciful and generous lives, but his ethics  
will not prevail until he does.

And then we will all see the glory of God.