

"PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD"

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In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

Matthew 3:1-3, 7-9 KJV

Beautiful as they are, these are just words unless and until they are given active life through the Holy Spirit. They have no doubt been intoned millions of times over the past 20 centuries in wide varieties of Christian beliefs and edifices. Yet, their full meaning seems somehow to escape us as the well-known words mask the underlying message that preparing the way of the Lord means more than creeds and beliefs; it also means to "Bring forth fruits [deeds] meet [fit] for repentance."

The Pharisees and Sadducees were enemies of John the Baptist and Jesus from the very beginning. Their pompous, arrogant, supercilious behavior provoked John's ire on this occasion as he labeled them a "generation of vipers" and challenged them to drop their arrogant pretensions of special privilege as Abraham's descendants and begin to bring forth fruit or behavior fit for Christ's kingdom.

What behavior was John speaking of? Since he represented and spoke for Christ we might suspect that his definition of what bringing forth fruits fit for Christ's kingdom meant would be the same as those behaviors later taught by Jesus himself. And where better to look for Christ's meaning than in his own words describing his mission on this earth.

In the fourth chapter of Luke Jesus sets forth his mission and ministry. He said he was anointed to preach the gospel to the poor, bring healing to the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. Later in the same chapter he said: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent."

So "preparing the way of the Lord" must mean preaching the kingdom of God, including not just personal salvation and a deeper spiritual walk, but its values of justice for the poor, brokenhearted, captive, blind, oppressed vulnerable people of this world.

The church exists not only to perpetuate itself or its traditions, however grand they may be, but to carry the word of God to people ignorant of God's will, comatose in their response to human suffering, stultified in their traditions, and dead in their sins. In his well-known Great Commission Jesus sends his disciples into the world to preach the gospel and make disciples of all men. That's usually where we stop; but he adds that the disciples should also teach men to observe all that he had commanded. That advice is more viable now than ever before because never before have humans faced absolute annihilation at the hands of man or nature.

It's time to stop playing church and pretending that we're pleasing God even though he clearly says in several scriptures that all our professed goodness is as filthy rags in his sight, and that our sacrificial offerings and worship are offensive to him unless accompanied by obedience to his word in the form of righteousness, justice, truth, and mercy. When will we drop our religious games in favor of simple obedience to God's word and will?