


John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord. The religious leaders ignored him, but for others, including the most unlikely people, his preaching had an irresistible fascination. "And the multitudes asked him, 'What then shall we do?'"

*Jesus of Nazareth
the Messiah
Paul and Barnabas
Rich young ruler*

Whenever the Holy Spirit confronts men and women with the Gospel the question is raised within us, "What must I do?"  The preaching of the Good News of the coming of Jesus demands a response from those who hear it. Action is required. So when the people heard John the Baptist preach the good news they wanted to know what they should do to prepare for his advent. To each class of people John spelled out in simple terms the meaning of repentance which prepares us for the coming of Christ.

To tax collectors John said, "Collect no more than is appointed you." Roman authorities hired poor, unemployed Jews to collect taxes from their fellow countrymen. The system was very open to abuse and the tax collectors, sick of poverty gave into the temptation to enrich themselves through extortion.

Tax collectors appear several times in the Gospel of Luke. We all remember the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 18. "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man

that's certainly true here. There is nothing at all hard to understand about the teaching of John the Baptist or the teaching of Jesus concerning the use of possessions and money. If anything in the Bible is easy to understand certainly these words of John are easy to understand. If we cannot understand what John says here then all the education in the world will not help us understand anything else in the Bible.

How do we prepare for the coming of the Christ who came into the world naked, and homeless, and with the stigma of being illegitimate in the eyes of his neighbors? The answer is simple, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Do you have two coats? Do you have food? John tells us how to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

There was a third special group, the soldiers, that came out to hear the preaching of John the Baptist. Soldiers policed Judea and were often guilty of brutality. Soldiers treated Jesus with contempt and mocked him at his trial. Soldiers often used violence and false charges to blackmail the common people. They were poorly payed and always complaining about their wages.

To soldiers John said, "Bob no one by violence or by false accusations, and be content with your wages." "Be content with your wages." How management loves that verse even if they forget all the rest. And how labor so often ignores or is embarrassed by this verse. "Be content with your wages."

If the tax-payers are reluctant to obey John's command to share what they have equally with others then maybe they should be more tolerant of people who are not content with their wages. For all their differences, both the tax-payers and those not content with their wages have at least one thing in common. They are both in the wrong: They are both disobeying what all Christians believe to be the Word of God which is so plain and easy to understand.

John's command however remains valid even if the tax-payers do not share equally; even when workers are paid unjustly. "Be content with your wages." The Apostle Paul, confined to a cold, dank, prison wrote, "I have learned to be content with what I have. I know what it is to be in need, and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned the secret, so that anywhere, at anytime, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little."

How quickly the school situation here in Mifflin County could be settled if each party applied to himself or herself the verses which are directed to him. What must I do? To the tax-payers, to management, to all those who have food and clothes including teachers and school board members, John says, "Give what you have to the point of putting yourself on the same economic level as those around you. If you have two coats let him share with him who has none so that each will have one coat apiece and there will be economic equality."

To all those who are dissatisfied with your standard of living whether you are a teacher, a factory worker, a farmer, a businessman, a retired person, a doctor, a lawyer, or a housewife, John says, "Be content with your wages." Be content with what you have.

This is how we prepare for the coming of the Christ. We love to prepare for Christmas with religious ceremonies; ceremonies like the hanging of the greens, the lighting of the Advent candle, carol singing, Christmas parties, and the Christmas Eve worship service which is always so beautiful. And all this is good. But it is worthless apart from the preparation the Bible calls for; the preparation of repentance. Religious talk and ceremonies are

utterly worthless without religious doing and practice and obedience to the apostles and prophets.

It is vain to say with our lips that we repent and prepare for Christmas if we do not at the same time repent in our lives. It is more than vain. It will gradually sear our consciences and harden our hearts. To say we are sorry for our sins is mere hypocrisy unless we show that we are really sorry for them by giving them up.

Let each one of us who prepares for the coming of the Christ-child break off from his besetting sin. Tax-payers and board-members must not be content with crying out against the school teachers while ignoring what God's word requires of those who have not only coats and food but houses and land and accumulated wealth. To you John the Baptist says, "He who has, let him share equally with him who has not."

On the other hand school teachers should not cry out against the intransigence of the school board which is majority of merely representing the tax-payers without hearing and obeying the words of John, "Be content with your wages."

Let the rich be dissatisfied with his wealth until these who are poorer have as much as the rich. And let these who don't have much be as generous with the little

you have in order to shame your more affluent neighbors. Let each one of us find out our own besetting sins. Let the rich break off from the rich man's sins, and the poor from the sins of the poor. This is the first step in proving that we are earnest in our repentance and in our preparation for the coming of the one who is mightier than John the Baptist; the one who though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor."

And when this happens you will discover that what John says is not bad news. It is bad news only for those whose God is money; whether it be tax payers, board members, or teachers. But to those who obey it is good news which will begin to liberate both rich and poor from the idolatry of money and material possessions.

May God teach us all to repent. In the words of the English poet, John Donne,

"Here on this lowly ground,
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if Thou hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy
blood."

AMEN