

Luke 3:10-14

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After John's fiery warnings, the crowds come to John asking what they should do in order to receive forgiveness and avoid the wrath to come. John tells them to put God's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself into practice by being generous with your possessions. When reviled tax collectors and hated soldiers come and ask John the same question as it applies to them, he gives them a similar answer.

There is no apparent parallel of this passage in the other Gospels.

After presenting the main message of John the Baptist, which was "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3); and after demonstrating John's fiery rebuke to the religious leaders among *the crowds* who came to *him* (Matthew 3:7-10; Luke 3: 7-9); Luke reports *the crowd's* response to the preacher in the wilderness,

And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" (v 10).

Specifically, the crowds were asking him what they should do in response to what he just told them:

"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. Indeed, the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

(Luke 3:8-9)

For a Jew, their entire identity and sense of security was wrapped up in the promise that they were children of Abraham. God's covenant promise to Abraham, that He would bless him and protect him and his descendants, extended to them. Some Jews, including many religious leaders took God's promise as a sort of overriding protection from their own responsibilities under their covenant with God.

Instead of following God by faith as their father Abraham did, and as they promised to do under the covenant they made with God, they distorted and manipulated His laws and promises to extort others and justify themselves in God's name. God's covenant clearly spelled out consequences for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). However, people often see what they want to see, and hear what they want to hear.

When John told them that they needed to repent (change their perspective to God's perspective and adjust their actions accordingly) and bear good fruit to avoid a painful judgment, *the crowds* were appropriately alarmed. They should not have been surprised, given that God's covenant with Israel clearly laid out their responsibility in order to receive the promised blessings. Jesus summarized their responsibility as loving their neighbor as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

It seems that John has shaken them from the thought that simply being a child of Abraham was enough to spare them fiery judgment. It should not have been necessary to explain this to them, given the fiery consequences spelled out in the “cursings” portion of their covenant/treaty with God (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). But it appears they now understand that their current course of action was insufficient and not bearing good fruit—so *What* were they to *do*? *What* would save them from this undesirable outcome?

Because they believed John was a prophet and even were wondering in their hearts as to whether he was the Messiah (Luke 3:15), they naturally asked him: *Then what shall we do?*”

The crowds were asking the right question.

Whenever they *were questioning him* like this, John *would answer and say to them*, “*The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise*” (v 11).

John’s *answer* was essentially the same as Jesus’s teaching that is commonly referred to as the “golden rule.” Jesus said:

“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”
(Matthew 7:12)

John’s *answer* aligned with the proverb:

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
When it is in your power to do it.
“Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come back,
And tomorrow I will give it,’
When you have it with you.”
(Proverbs 3:27-28)

By teaching people to share their second tunic or extra food in their possession with he who has none, John was pointing people to practical ways to fulfill the second greatest commandment:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.”
(Leviticus 19:18b)

In other words, instead of twisting God’s laws to manipulate and extort one another, they should obey them. This teaching comes directly from God’s covenant/treaty with Israel, in which He promised Israel that they would be blessed if they followed His laws. Much of the blessing would be the natural consequence of following His commands; a society/team/organization that treats one another lovingly will naturally be far superior to one that follows the pagan morality of mutual exploitation.

And they should start with considering their neighbor and his needs, looking for the opportunities God has given them to serve their neighbor.

Some have mistaken John's counsel, *the man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none* as a support for a political system of redistribution, such as communism. However, John's admonition only applies if the generosity is voluntary.

Communism is a system where government dictates how much the common folk can control. Through coercion, it takes from those whom it deems have more than their allotted amount and redistributes some of it to those it favors, then keeps the rest for itself.

Because redistribution is forced, communism does not *share* in the Biblical sense. Communism does teach the virtue of generosity or love, because it denies people the possessions by which they can be generous. Communism breeds envy towards those who have more than yourself. This is the opposite of love. Envy then petitions and empowers the government to take from others. This is the opposite of being generous with what you have, to *share with him who has none*.

Communism's policy of forced redistribution runs against the generosity and love which John the Baptist and the Bible teach,

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.”
(Ephesians 4:28)

We should treat others as we would like to be treated, but that is ours to choose. We should see our neighbor in his need and love *him* and share our *tunics* and our *food with him who has none*, but that is ours to choose. And we are *to do likewise* with everything else in our possession, including our time, our money, etc. because if we do not, we will face judgement from God.

If we love our neighbor as we love ourself, and trust God enough to be generous with our possessions, then we will “bear good fruit” (Luke 3:9) and avoid “the wrath to come” (Luke 3:7).

Before continuing, we should point out that John is not talking about how to receive “The Gift of Eternal Life.” *He* is not talking about that kind of salvation, the salvation of being justified in God's presence. The Jews had the opposite issue; they thought that due to being God's people, they were immune from consequences. John has dislodged them from that false confidence, and made it clear that their choices have consequences before God.

John is likely describing what it means to be a full-fledged participant in God's kingdom. What John is discussing in this passage is described elsewhere in scripture as inheriting the prize (Philippians 3:12-14; Hebrews 12:14-17; 2 Peter 1:4-9).

“[The Gift of Eternal Life](#)” is solely and scandalously based on God's grace—it is simply received (John 3:14-15). Receiving this gift has nothing to do with our works, including our

generosity. It is received only through a person's faith in Jesus Christ as God's Son (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Every child or believer eternally belongs in God's family. They cannot lose their status as God's child (John 10:28-29, Romans 8:31-39). Whosoever believes in Jesus is born into everlasting life as God's child (John 3:16) and they are eternally safe from all danger in the eternal Lake of Fire. Their eternal future with God is eternally secure because of the work of Christ. They are children of the kingdom. This is a great comfort. Believers do not have to worry about where they will spend eternity after they die, because they have received this grace on account of Jesus, through their faith in Him and His sacrifice (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But while faith alone in Christ alone guarantees that we are safe from eternal damnation in the Lake of Fire, it does not guarantee that we will enter and receive our inheritance in the kingdom of heaven. We might be excluded from honor (cast into outer darkness) and experience disappointment (weeping and gnashing of teeth). It takes obedient faith to win the reward of honor (Matthew 5:19-20, 7:13-14; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; Philippians 3:7-14; 2 Timothy 2:10-13; Hebrews 10:35-12:17; James 2:14-26; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 2 Peter 1:4-12; Revelation 2:26, 3:21, 21:7; Romans 2:7).

Jesus taught that eternal life is a Gift freely offered on the basis of simple faith in Him (John 3:16). And He also taught that entering the kingdom was a reward reserved only for believers who were faithful to do the will of His Father (Matthew 7:21; John 3:3).

To learn more about what the Bible says about this gift, see our article: "[What is Eternal Life? How to Gain the Gift of Eternal Life.](#)"

To learn more about what the Bible says about "Inheriting the Prize," see our article: "[Eternal Life: Receiving the Gift vs Inheriting the Prize.](#)"

At this point, the crowds have asked the question *what shall we do?* in response to John's warnings, and John has answered that they ought to live out the commandment to love their neighbors as they loved themselves. Now, Luke mentions two specific groups of people that also came to John asking about how they should live.

The first group was *some tax collectors* (v 12) and the second group was *some soldiers* (v 14).

Before we continue, we should consider what was meant by Luke's term—*some soldiers*. Specifically, what was the affiliation of these soldiers? There are three likely possibilities:

- The first possibility is that these *soldiers* were Roman *soldiers* or "Legionnaires." If so, they would have been under the authority of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate had his cohorts stationed in the Roman capital of Judea at Caesarea Maritima, located on the Mediterranean coast. These cohorts would travel with the governor as he moved throughout the province. Another cohort or two would also have been stationed in Jerusalem at the Fortress Antonia. These soldiers would have been Gentiles and Roman

citizens who were likely recruited from the Greek-speaking provinces in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Their officers would have been from Italy or Rome itself.

- The second possibility is that these *soldiers* were Herod Antipas's *soldiers*. Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of the district of Galilee in Judea, was allowed his own army of *soldiers* who protected him and served an auxiliary role to support the Roman legions. According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, Herod and his father, Herod the Great, recruited many of his troops from the Romanized cities of Caesarea Maritima and Sepphoris—located near Nazareth in Galilee. Herod's *soldiers* would have been stationed in Galilee and concentrated in his district capital of Tiberias on the western shore of Galilee. Herod's *soldiers* likely consisted of both ethnic Jews and Gentile mercenaries—but their cultural affiliation was pagan just as their allegiance was to Roman interests.
- A third possibility for these *soldiers* belonged to the Temple Guard. Rome allowed the Jews to maintain their own local military force to enforce the laws at the temple in Jerusalem. These *soldiers* would have been entirely Jewish, and during the ministry of John the Baptist would have been under the authority of Annas or Caiaphas, the high priest (Luke 3:2) and therefore affiliated with the Sadducees.

Luke does not specify which of these three types of *soldiers* came to John. However, it is reasonable to speculate that they were either Herod's *soldiers* or they were *soldiers* belonging to the temple guard, because John's ministry seems to be directed towards Israel. It would have been out of place, but not impossible, for Roman *soldiers* to seek out a Jewish radical in the wilderness. We must leave open the possibility of the *soldiers* belonging to any of these three affiliations, but the most likely affiliation is that they were Jewish *soldiers* of Herod or the Temple Guard.

Perhaps Luke, who wrote this under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, did not specify this intentionally because John's answer would have applied to any of these types of *soldiers*.

The other group, *Tax collectors*, were particularly despised by the Jews of John's day. Most Jews naturally assumed that there would be no place in God's kingdom for *tax collectors* who they viewed as having betrayed the descendants of Abraham through collecting taxes for Rome. A typical Jew possibly cast a suspicious eye toward the pro-Sadducee soldiers of the Temple guard; and he probably regarded Herodian soldiers with the same contempt he felt toward tax collectors—they were traitors to Judea. Most Jews strongly felt that the occupying Roman *soldiers* were enemies of the kingdom. In the common opinion of the Jews of John's day, both *tax collectors* and Herodian *soldiers* were hopelessly disqualified from dining at Abraham's banquet table in the coming kingdom. Depending on how one viewed the Sadducees and chief priests, *soldiers* of the Temple Guard may also have been dicey.

Perhaps these *tax collectors* and *soldiers* too felt they were disqualified and too far removed for God to accept their repentance and allow them to participate in His kingdom. But *they* had faith and asked John about this anyway.

John did not turn *them* away or tell *them* to quit their profession. He bid *them* to repent, by doing unto others what *they* would have others do *to them* within the contexts of their professions. In other words, *they* too could be a part of God's kingdom and be considered sons of Abraham if *they* had faith to live out God's command to love their neighbor as they loved themselves. Remarkably, their opportunity to enter the kingdom was the same as everyone else's—no more, no less.

And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" (v 12).

Again, *Tax collectors* were not well-liked by other Jews, since they were themselves Jews who worked for Rome by collecting taxes from their own people on Rome's behalf. The Jews viewed Rome as a hostile, occupying force. Their presence was a national disgrace and humiliation. Most Jews viewed any Jew who cooperated with Rome's imposition on God's people as treasonous to God and his fellow countrymen. *Tax collectors* were perceived as such traitors. And not only this, *tax collectors* were all the more hated because the way they made their money was to *collect more than what* was due to Rome, and keep the difference for themselves. Many would keep more than was just, thus defrauding their countrymen (Luke 19:8).

Thus, they were viewed not only as betraying agents of oppression, they were also regarded as thieves. For many Jews, what the *tax collectors* did was unforgivable.

Some tax collectors came to be baptized by John. This meant that *they* wished to publicly repent of their sin and avoid the wrath to come (Luke 3:7), and to participate in the Messiah's coming kingdom (Matthew 3:2). As they came, they asked John, *Teacher, what shall we do?*

The fact that *they* called John *Teacher* shows that these *tax collectors* had great respect for *him* and regarded *him* as an authority on the Messiah's kingdom.

John gave *them* a simple reply: *Collect no more than what you have been ordered to* (v 13). Rome allowed them to collect a commission for their own compensation, but that was often abused and exceeded.

In other words, *he* told *them* to keep doing their job, but do not take advantage of their position to steal from others by taking more than they ought. *They* were to respect other people and treat them as *they* themselves want to be treated. John's *answer* to these *tax collectors* applied the same principles (Leviticus 19:18b; Matthew 7:12) to their circumstances that *he* applied to others when they asked *him* a similar question.

What men apparently felt was unforgivable was, in fact, forgivable by God. We know that some *tax collectors* did repent and will be in the kingdom of God (Matthew 21:32). Jesus's disciple Matthew, referred to as "Levi" in Luke's Gospel (Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-29), and Zacchaeus of Jericho (Luke 19:1-10) are two such *tax collectors* that are mentioned by name; each became a disciple of Jesus.

Next, Luke reports that *some soldiers were questioning him, saying, “And what about us, what shall we do?”* (v 14a).

As discussed above, these *soldiers* were likely Jews of Herod Antipas’s army or Temple Guards. But there is also a possibility that they were Roman Legionnaires, in which case they would have been Gentile.

If these *soldiers* were Jewish Herodian troops or Sadducean Temple Guards, John’s acceptance of them would have been comparable to his acceptance of and offer to the *tax collectors*.

If these *soldiers* were Roman Legionnaires, they were despised Gentiles; which makes John’s acceptance and offer even more remarkable. Despite numerous prophecies saying otherwise (Genesis 12:3; Psalm 86:9; Isaiah 49:6; 52:15; 56:6-8; Daniel 7:14; Amos 9:11-12), the Jews generally regarded Gentiles as excluded and barred from the Messianic kingdom. What’s more, is that these *soldiers* were not only lowly Gentiles, they were members of an oppressive army and enemies of the Messiah and His kingdom.

If this was the case, it was most remarkable that John did not turn *them* away. *He* applied the same principles of love and justice *to them* (Leviticus 19:18b; Matthew 7:12) that *he* applied to everyone else.

And he said to them, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages” (v 14a).

They too, could be forgiven of their sins (Luke 3:2) and enter God’s kingdom (Matthew 3:2) and avoid the wrath to come (Luke 3:7) if they would repent (change their perspective to God’s and act accordingly).

Indeed, Jesus affirmed that Gentiles, including Roman *soldiers*, would be in His kingdom, while faithless descendants of Abraham missed out at the Messianic banquet when he commended the Roman Centurion’s faith (Matthew 8:8-13),

“I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
(Matthew 8:11-12)

Regardless of whether these soldiers were Roman Gentiles, Pagan-like traitors of Herod’s army, or pro-Sadducean troops of the Temple Guard, what John told them *to do* was to not take advantage of *anyone* by abusing their authority by *force or* fraud (or any other way); to not harm others for their own gain.

John added this in his instructions *to them: be content with your wages*. This added line about contentment *with their wages* may have been a directive to not abuse their position of authority to steal from others because they were discontent with their *wages*. Contentment is a Biblical

virtue (Philippians 4:11-13). Jesus had harsh words to say to those who abused their authority to exploit others (Matthew 23:4; 14).

The Biblical version of contentment runs contrary to authoritarian regimes such as communism's elevation of envy. When the Bible issues a command to "be content with your wages" it is for our edification and blessing; to avoid the natural, self-destructive consequences associated with greed. Human authorities cannot change the heart (Romans 9:30-32). Human authorities are appointed by God to prevent evil, not to redeem human hearts (Romans 13:3-5).

When authorities presume to impose moral choices, they use their authority improperly; authorities are to create boundaries within which humans make choices; they are not to replace human choice. Even though God knows best, He still gives humans agency to choose. But God reveals His moral laws of cause-effect through creation (Romans 1:18-21; Psalm 19) as well as through scripture, so humans have guidance to make productive choices, choices that bring life rather than death (Deuteronomy 30:19; Galatians 6:8). John's instructions disclose to his audience the moral consequences of their choices, including the judgement of God upon unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-28).

All in all, John the Baptist's teachings and directives tied back to God's Law and God's covenant/treaty with His people, and prepared the way for the coming Messiah. His commands also presaged many of the same things Jesus would later teach. This is consistent with Jesus's assertion that He came to fulfill the Law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17).

John's teachings sounded so much like the-yet-to-come-Messiah (Jesus) that many mistook *him* for being the Messiah (Luke 3:15-18). This is the subject of the next section of our commentary of Luke's Gospel.

Biblical Text

¹⁰ And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" ¹¹ And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." ¹² And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." ¹⁴ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."