

“And [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

A pill that is a miracle cure won't sell unless you can diagnose the disease it cures. Telling a man, “I forgive you for wearing a hat.” Makes no sense unless that man understands that to some people, it is impolite for men to wear hats indoors. Likewise, the statement, “Jesus came to forgive you for your sins.” Makes less and less sense to a culture that has no sense of what the word sin even means.

You need to understand what sin is in order for the Gospel of Jesus Christ to even register in your brain. Onto the scene steps John the Baptist, and he came as the last great Old Testament prophet to point to the coming savior Jesus. Naturally, John then preached a message of Law to help people understand why they needed a savior. On this Second Sunday of Advent, we learn JOHN THE BAPTIST PREPARED THE WAY OF THE LORD BY PREACHING THE LAW.

First, I. John the Baptist preached the law to threaten. As John was preaching, he said, **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** One of the purposes of God's Law is to threaten consequences for bad actions. We teach that the law of God acts as a curb of ungodliness.

Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy, **“Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,”**

Our government today may pass laws that are immoral and wrong, but we can be thankful that many of them exist to threaten evildoers. When the law acts as a curb, it gives tickets to reckless drivers, it imprisons murderers, and it punishes thieves. When the law acts as a curb, it succeeds in preventing wicked people from doing evil if for not other reason, than not to get caught. The law is doing its job even if people stay close to the speed limit if for no other reason than the highway patrolman.

John the Baptist was unashamed to preach the Law in its full sternness. He told them that the bad trees would be thrown in the fires of hell. If a fire and brimstone sermon scared you straight, there's nothing wrong with that. God's word of Law threatens punishment, and it acts as a curb to open ungodly behavior.

Second, II. John the Baptist preached the law to diagnose. John the Baptist preached to the crowds, **“He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”**”

Nobody would undergo chemotherapy for fun. It is only after the doctor has recognized and diagnosed a cancer that we go to extraordinary lengths to stop it. We might even get the opinion of a second doctor before we started that difficult and sickening treatment.

John the Baptist gives the crowds a diagnosis. You may be Jewish. You may be able to trace your ancestry all the way back to Abraham, but that doesn't matter. God could make a stone into a son of Abraham. It's not about who gave birth to you that matters, but it's how you live right now that matters. Right now, John said, you're living like you're sons of Satan rather than sons of God. You're acting more like the offspring of vipers than the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God's Word of Law diagnoses the illness. In this way we call God's Law a mirror. A mirror shows you what you look like, and it doesn't care whether you're as beautiful as your wedding day, or as hideous as a mud wrestler.

God's Word of Law shows us our sin. It doesn't matter if your dad was the congregation president or if your ancestry can be traced back to the German Lutherans who settled in Missouri. All of us sin daily and are in need of forgiveness.

Oscar Wilde wrote a novel called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* wherein the main character, Dorian Gray, makes a deal with the devil to have a magical portrait painted of himself. This magical portrait would age and decay instead of him. Thus Dorian Gray could live a wild and loose lifestyle and he wouldn't experience any of the repercussions. This continued on for decades until curiosity got the best of him, and he glanced at the portrait that was stowed away in an attic. What saw him shocked him and eventually drove him crazy.

God is gracious enough to only give us glimpses of how sinful we really are because if we knew the depths right away, we would sink into depression. We find that we as grow closer and closer to God, He in His lovingkindness slowly reveals more and more of our sins and shortcomings so we can rely all the more greatly on His forgiveness and grace.

Third, III. John the Baptist preached the law to guide. On hearing this sermon **“...the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?”**” John tells the crowds to share their extra clothing. He tells the tax collectors to be honest in their dealings and not steal from others. He tells the soldiers not to extort money from people.

Not only does the law threaten punishment acting as a curb, not only does it diagnose our sinfulness acting as a mirror. The law acts as a guide which shows us how to live. The Psalmist writes, **“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”**

Ultimately, God’s Word of Law is practical. It shows us how to live. It shows us what God wants from us. It shows us how to love others. With all this talk of love in our culture, we as a society cannot truly love unless we know God’s Word of Law as found in the Bible and the Ten Commandments.

Finally, IV. John the Baptist preached the law to pave the way for Jesus. Curb, mirror, and guide: The law helps us make sense of what Jesus came to do. In this way it prepares the way of the Lord, it makes the valleys lifted up, and the mountains and hills low so that Jesus can enter into our hearts. It is then and only then that we can see the salvation of God, as Isaiah prophesies.

“As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John isn’t Jesus, but He prepared the way for Jesus. As we prepare for the birth of Christ on Christmas, let us prepare our hearts to receive our savior. Part of this is reflecting on the three uses of God’s Law: curb, mirror, and guide, and see that we cannot keep God’s holy and perfect demands.

On the other hand, Jesus was born on Christmas to live the perfect life that you couldn’t. He obeyed the law when we all too often failed. He glanced into the mirror of the law and it told Him that He is the fairest of them all. The Father said of Jesus, **“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”**

Jesus not only knew the law, He was able to keep the law perfectly. When we try to use the Law as a guide for our lives, all too often it points out how we fail. Jesus never failed to keep the law, such that we can follow Him as the perfect example.

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”” Jesus burned the chaff, but He burned all our imperfections away as He took on our sins and failures on the cross. He forgave you for your inability to keep the law.

As He rose again on Easter, He shows you that this lifelong struggle will end. You will die, and when He comes again He will raise you up, and then you too will have a righteousness that is not your own, but His. You will be able to perfectly keep the law. Until then, we trust in Him to care for us, and we live by the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to keep the law, even imperfectly.