

You're probably familiar with some of these phrases:

Talk is cheap.

Do as I say, not as I do.

Actions speak louder than words.

And my favorite, "When all was said and done, more was said than done."

That takes us to the teachings we find in our gospel reading where we meet John the Baptist. John is a big one for teaching that you have to put your faith into action. He taught repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is turning completely away from old wrongful ways and taking up new right ways. Talking about getting better isn't actually getting better. Getting better is truly getting better.

We often consider John the Baptist to be a bit of a crazy wild-man living off by himself in the wilderness. It is impossible to know exactly what he was like, but such a depiction may very well be quite accurate. The thing is, many of his teachings were not wild or radical at all. Biblical

scholars often note that many of his teachings reflected common teachings of other religions and philosophies of the day. He's basically calling people to share with one another and to be nice to each other.

In our gospel we read, "And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must to likewise.'" In those days having two coats was quite a luxury. Today most of us have many coats, but in those days that wasn't the case. To have two coats was to be either wealthy or very lucky. Food was similar. There wasn't a lot of it. And the certainly didn't have Walmart, Wegmans, Tops, Wades Aldi and BJ's to choose from. Most years there was enough food to go around, but the entire population lived from crop to crop. One bad year and mass starvation was likely. To have extra food was a rarity. John's teaching is pretty basic - if you have and you see someone else who needs, share.

He also teaches some pretty basic ideas of fairness. Tax collectors asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" Notice John's response. He doesn't say, "Get out of your sinful tax

collecting practices and stop supporting the Romans." No. Instead he says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Most tax collectors were private entrepreneurs who submitted bids to the Romans to collect tolls, customs, and duties. They were expected to collect the revenue and have an appropriate markup to cover their own living expenses. It was much like any government contract today. And like many government contracts today, there was a lot of overcharging and fancy accounting. John says don't do it.

Soldiers asked John, "And we, what should we do?" These guys were probably not Roman soldiers but members of Herod's hired army. It was a questionable armed force - at best a heavily armed police force. At worst it was a brute squad. Anyway, John's advice is to just be nice and kind. He says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

If you take John the Baptist out of the picture and look just at his words here you find that he's teaching the same basic stuff you'd learn on Sesame Street. What does Sesame Street teach (or at least it did when I was a kid)? Share, co-

operation, take turns, help someone out in need. I suppose you wouldn't even have to take John the Baptist out of it. Just turn him into a muppet and you find he fits in right beside the likes of Cookie Monster.

No, there was nothing at all new or radical in much of John's teaching. He's calling people to be basically good people, upstanding citizens. He might as well have preached that you should live in a way so that people have nice things to say about you at your funeral.

Maybe I shouldn't minimize John's teachings so much. As Christians we should be glad that we live in a culture that teaches fairness and generosity. And we have every right to derive happiness when we live by these principles, for they are similar principles to what Jesus taught. There's certainly nothing wrong with being a good person and pushing yourself to be a better person.

The interesting thing with John's teachings, and what distinguishes him from just being a social philosopher, is what is at the root of his teachings.

The dominant moral force in our society today is secular humanism. It is taught in our public schools. It is the operating foundation for most of our news providers. It is the ideology that Sesame Street is built upon. All of these teach that that reason for being a good person is to build community and help the society as a whole. As Christians we certainly have no problems with those objectives. But where John the Baptist, and we as Christians, part company is where we put our trust.

Paul Kurtz, former professor at SUNY Buffalo and leading voice in the secular humanist movement, wrote in the *Humanist Manifesto 1 & 2*, "While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us. We must save ourselves." (Pg. 16)

Oh dear, oh dear, John the Baptist wouldn't like that. And neither do we. The thing is, much as I love you all and I want to applaud you for trying to be good people, I don't exactly entrust my soul to you. The problem is that try as we might, and good as we might want to be, we humans tend to make a mess

of just about everything we touch. And every time we try to save ourselves, we just make a bigger mess. Whenever I come across secular humanist teachings that suggest we can somehow save ourselves, or at least quit messing everything up, I want to introduce them to a little couple called Adam and Eve.

Social philosophers sometimes speak of secular humanism as the natural evolution of morals away from the ignorance of religion. Call it "progress" if you want; but there are 2337 pages in my Bible, and on page 9 -that early on in the story- it's already realized that the biggest and most stupid mistake we people can make is to think we can save ourselves.

John the Baptist does not preach that you should do good for the betterment of society, although the betterment of society is a nice side-effect. John the Baptist preaches that you should do good because it is the living trust that you have in God that is showing itself in actions. John doesn't teach that you should save yourself. John teaches, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

John is pointing to God as the source of salvation. John's image is scary. He says of the coming messiah, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." We discover in chapter 7 of Luke that Jesus isn't living up to John's expectations of him. Jesus isn't as much a firebrand and John thought, but John's truth remains and he was still right. Salvation comes from God and depends on God.

Enjoy being a good person. Enjoy building community around you and helping those less fortunate. You get the final word in our service when you say, "God's work, our hands." But don't be burdened by thinking your work has to save anyone. That is God's work. You just live the trust you have in God. Amen