

MASTERED BY THE MESSIAH
Luke 3:15-20

(NASB) "Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.' ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. ¹⁹ But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, ²⁰ Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison."

INTRODUCTION

Please complete this statement: "The brightest and best evidence we have a saving relationship with **Jesus** is our Christlike [character, conduct, behavior, actions]? **Philippians 2:3-5, 13-15** (NCV) teaches, "When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves. ⁴ Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others. ⁵ In your lives you must think and act like Christ Jesus. ¹³ because God is working in you to help you want to do and be able to do what pleases Him. ¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing. ¹⁵ Then you will be innocent and without any wrong. You will be God's children without fault. But you are living with crooked and mean people all around you, among whom you shine like stars in the dark world."

In last week's message drawn from **Luke 3:1-9**, John the Baptist identified three character qualities that are shining hallmarks we have truly believed our need "to flee from the coming wrath" of God's judgment for defying our Creator's moral laws: generosity, honesty, and humility. Such character qualities satisfy God's demand that we "produce fruit consistent with repentance" after we turn from our sinful ways and embrace God's offer of forgiveness and salvation by yielding ourselves to **Jesus Christ** as Lord and Savior. The story of the Philadelphia Eagles winning their team's first Super Bowl one month ago today, by defeating the favored New England Patriots by the score of 41-33, demonstrates such generosity and humility. Core leaders of the Eagles, including Coach Doug Pederson, are dedicated Christians who are serious about sharing and growing in their faith in Christ. During this past NFL (National Football League) season, the Eagles featured a Bible study for couples on Monday nights, another for players on Thursdays, yet another for coaches on Friday mornings, chapel on Saturdays, and sometimes baptisms in the Team's pool!

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady had led them to five previous Super Bowl wins, including in 2015 & 2017. For the first 13 games of this past National Football League season, Carson Wentz quarterbacked the Eagles to an 11-2 record. In leading the Eagles to victory over the Los Angeles Rams on December 10, Wentz suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee and was lost for the season. Carson Wentz is a deeply committed follower of Christ who preaches in churches in the offseason and has a ministry named "Audience of One": meaning he lives to please Christ alone. After Wentz's injury, his job fell to his backup, Nick Foles, who starred as the quarterback of the University of Arizona Wildcats in 2010 & 2011, including a victory against #9 Iowa on national television. Foles' NFL career had been bittersweet with three teams and he'd thought seriously about retiring, but he humbly re-signed with the Eagles in March of 2016 merely as Wentz's backup. Under Foles' leadership, the Eagles went 5-1, counting their Super Bowl victory, in which Foles threw for 373 yards, three touchdowns, and caught a touchdown pass on a trick play, making him the first player in Super Bowl history to both throw and receive a touchdown pass. In the postgame celebration with an audience of up to 100 million viewers, Foles testified, "All glory to God, first and foremost." After answering a few questions, Foles added, "I wouldn't be here without God in my life, without Jesus in my life. . . . I don't have the strength to come out here and play this game like that."

Last year, Wentz, Foles, Zach Ertz (a tight end who caught what proved to be the winning touchdown), and backup tight end Trey Burton (who threw the touchdown pass to Foles) teamed up on a project to make spiritual champions by putting together a free Bible study with video content for the popular YouVersion Bible app. Zach Ertz testifies, "[Football] is the platform we have to draw people to the Word [of God], to Jesus, and it's not something we take for granted." Carson Wentz could have felt upstaged by Nick Foles. Wentz turned 25 on December 30, 2017, and was in just his 2nd season with the Eagles and the NFL. But instead of envying Foles' success, Wentz posted these words on his Twitter account the morning of the Super Bowl: "My bro is gonna shine bright tonight. So excited to see him & this team go out and compete tonight. Been through it all this year as a team, & yet, here we are!... God's writing an unbelievable story and He's getting all the glory." Wentz is able to "give more honor to" Nick Foles "than" himself, and can "shine like a star in the dark world," because he lives to please and magnify his "Audience of One," **Jesus Christ**, who has mastered him, rather than magnify himself. D. L. Moody (1837-99), an American evangelist and pastor, stated, "God has two thrones: one in the highest heavens; the other in the lowliest heart."

This morning's message, Mastered by the Messiah, will explore two questions: Who Do We Say Is Our Master? and How Do We Show Who Is Our Master?

I. WHO DO WE SAY IS OUR MASTER?

Vs. 15: "Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ." We could translate the first words of this verse as, "Now while the people were on tiptoe of expectation." John had suddenly burst upon Israel's stage in the classic garb and lifestyle of a prophet, as **Mark 1:6** describes: "John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." John's rigorous self-denial, stern call to repentance, and insistence that even Jews, Abraham's children, needed spiritual cleansing symbolized by baptism, made him a likely candidate to be God's Messiah, Israel's long-awaited reformer and deliverer! This was John's big chance to bask in such glory as is rarely given to any human being. During his long, lonely years of spiritual preparation, when "he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (**Luke 1:80**), do you think John ever daydreamed like another unknown young man, "Someday when I get to be rich and famous, I wonder if I'll be the same sweet, lovable, humble person I am now?" We value genuine humility, as does God, because it is rare. True story: A woman worked at being humble for 3 weeks. Afterwards, she was talking to her friend from church while they were out shopping. "I finally did it! I finally reached the humble nature God wants me to be at!" Her friend said, "Gee, I bet you're proud of yourself," while she looked over her shoulder to see the many gifts this woman was buying herself to celebrate her achievement. "You bet I am!" this woman exclaimed.

Vs. 16: "John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water.'" To minimize his importance, John's point was, "I baptize you with water *only*." "But One is coming who is mightier than I." The Greek text states, "But *the* One is Coming. . . ." Luke introduced us to this "mightier One" in his first two chapters. "And I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals." John, at this point in his life, is an awe-inspiring, thunder-voiced, & Spirit-filled prophet of Almighty God. But he testifies the Messiah is so much greater than him that John announces his unworthiness "to untie the thong of His sandals." This task was thought to be so contemptible that only non-Jewish slaves were called upon to perform it for their Jewish masters. Rabbis expected disciples to perform many common & lowly duties for them, but exempted them from stooping to such base service as removing a rabbi's sandals; this was a slave's job. John claimed no importance for himself. He directed all praise and submission to the Messiah, **Jesus the Christ**, he lived to proclaim & serve. "Not fit" translates Greek words meaning "incompetent," "unqualified," or "inadequate." John professed he lacked the merit or ability to render even such menial service to his Master, the Christ.

John 3:25-30 (NLT) gives us clearer insight into John the Baptist's heart: "A debate broke out between John's disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial cleansing.²⁶ So John's disciples came to him and said,

'Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to Him instead of coming to us.'²⁷ John replied, . . .²⁸ 'You yourselves know how plainly I told you, "I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for Him."²⁹ It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at His success.³⁰ He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.'" John lived in such awe of the Messiah that his joy came from how many celebrated **Jesus** as their Master, not from how many held John in awe! This is much easier said than done. Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), an American composer, music lecturer, and pianist, conducted New York's Philharmonic Orchestra for decades. He was among the first conductors born and educated in the US to receive worldwide acclaim. According to music critic Donal Henahan, Bernstein was "one of the most prodigiously talented and successful musicians in American history." Someone once asked Leonard Bernstein, "What's the most difficult instrument to play?" He answered immediately, "Second violin."

II. HOW DO WE SHOW WHO IS OUR MASTER?

John demonstrated how much the Messiah had mastered his heart by not swerving from proclaiming the "bad news" of how much we all need a Savior, which all must believe before they can receive the "good news" of God's offer to forgive and reconcile with us through **Jesus the Christ**. **Vs. 17:** "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Farmers first spread sheaves of grain (barley or wheat) on a hard-packed surface. Oxen then dragged a sled with a stone-studded bottom over the grain to separate kernels from the stalks. Farmers then tossed the grain into the air using a "winnowing fork," a wooden forklike shovel. Afternoon breezes from the Mediterranean Sea would carry away the "chaff" (whatever remained of the kernels' hard coat, dust, dirt, or bits of straw) and the heavier kernels would fall back to the ground to be collected and ground into flour. John announced **Jesus** will "winnow" all people; carefully inspecting and separating those who only think they've attached themselves to God's family but have no more of God's life in them than chaff is truly alive. The Greek word for "unquenchable" is also used in **Matthew** and **Mark's** account of John's words. This underscores the finality of God's judgment in an inextinguishable, merciless fire, for those who die having spurned His gracious offer of merciful forgiveness through the sacrifice of **Jesus** the Christ (Messiah) in their behalf!

Vs. 18: "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Luke makes clear he's giving only a sample of John's preaching. John's warnings of God's irreversible judgment is "good news" because God's offer of forgiveness is still available to us! The tragedy and consequences of sin are not yet irreversible. The NLT of **vs. 18** is: "In many different ways John preached the Good News to the people and urged them to change their ways."

Vss. 19-20: "But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done,²⁰ Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison." Herod the Great's family tree is a ghastly mess! Herod had 10 wives and over a dozen children. "Herodias" was his great-niece; daughter of his second-born son. Herodias married Philip, a son of Herod the Great who was also her half-uncle (her father's half brother). Philip lived as a private citizen; the only surviving son of Herod the Great not inheriting any of his Kingdom. He's not to be confused with "his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis" north and east of Galilee, mentioned in **Luke 3:1**. Herod Antipas, "tetrarch of Galilee" (**Luke 3:1**), grew infatuated with Herodias while visiting Philip in Rome. He persuaded Herodias, at the time both his sister-in-law and niece, to leave Philip and marry him. Antipas ditched his own wife, an Arabian princess. They married in A. D. 26, just prior to John's ministry, and in defiance of God's law declared in **Leviticus 20:21** (NCV): "It is unclean for a man to marry his brother's wife. That man has shamed his brother." John could have avoided politics, as preachers are often urged to do today, but John confronted Herod Antipas and Herodias with their need to submit to the Messiah as their Savior and Master, despite their royal wealth and power. John's devotion to

his Master cost him his life. He believed a Messiah worth living for is also a Master worth dying for. Augustine (A. D. 354-430), the foremost teacher of Biblical Christianity, next to the Apostles, in the first 1,000 years of the Church, stated, "Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all."

As is often true, Luke's record of the events surrounding **Jesus'** life is not chronological. John probably began in ministry in the middle of A. D. 26, six months before **Jesus** did. Herod did not arrest and imprison John until near the close of A. D. 27. This means that for nearly a full year, their ministries overlapped. Luke's primary concern here is not chronological but logical. He brings his account of John's ministry to a close that he might give fuller emphasis to the ministry of **Jesus** that is just beginning.

CONCLUSION

A missionary to South America once wrote a reflective piece about his life in the jungles. He and his family knew the discomforts of such things as snakes and bugs. He told how he and his family were cleaning the house one day when they decided to take a break and have some tea. While sitting at the table, a very large, winged beetle darted through the open window and right between them all. The wife was startled and screamed. Surprised more by the scream than by the beetle, their young daughter cried out, "For heaven's sake, Mom!" The wife resolutely replied, "That's the *only* reason I'm here!" When we seek to follow God's leading, we may not always find ourselves in the most desirable situations. At those times, it may be helpful to remember why we're there. This life really isn't about us. It's "for heaven's sake."

A minister developed a sermon around two common expressions: "What in the world are you doing?" and the sometimes flippant exclamation, "For heaven's sake!" This minister suggests Christians should ask themselves five questions by emphasizing a different part of the question that results by combining these expressions: (1) *What* in the world are you doing for heaven's sake? (2) What *in the world* are you doing for heaven's sake? (3) What in the world are *you* doing for heaven's sake? (4) What in the world are you *doing* for heaven's sake? (5) What in the world are you doing *for heaven's sake*? The answers we are able to give to these questions will help us assess the extent to which we have been Mastered by the Messiah.