**What Is Great Preaching?**

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Luke 3:7-20; Ps. 72:1-15 1/6/19

**Summary: Four marks of biblical preaching**

Intro. What is your definition of great preaching? From time to time I hear comments about sermons or preachers that cause me to make mental notes about what people consider to be great preaching. For some, great preaching means hollering and yelling with lots of passion. For others, great preaching means teaching a Bible passage one verse at a time and simply exposing the truths found in it. There are people who like preaching to be encouraging and light hearted, then there are those who say you haven’t preached until you’ve stepped on their toes. Some like the encouraging “talks” of an Osteen. Others like the forcefulness of a Haggie. There are the intellectuals like R.C. Sproul, the entertainers like Ed Young Jr., the teachers like David Jeremiah, and the story-tellers like Swindoll.

But what is it really that makes for great preaching? So far I haven’t said anything about great preaching, because when most of you think about what makes preaching great you typically think of your favorite preachers in terms of personality and pulpit mannerisms. A dozen preachers can say the same thing, but it is not the content that draws us to them so much as the way they present what they say. But is that what makes for great preaching?

We would all agree that not all preaching is great preaching, nor does any preacher preach great sermons all the time. There are days when I have been known to put a person to sleep. I heard about a man that went to see his doctor for advice about being cured of snoring. The doctor asked, "Does your snoring disturb your wife?" The patient replied, "Does it disturb my wife? Why it disturbs the entire congregation!"

Today I want to talk to you about great preaching as we consider the preaching of John the Baptist, and I want to make it perfectly clear to you that great preaching is very simply this: IT IS BIBLICAL PREACHING.

All Biblical preaching is going to be great preaching, and all great preaching is going to be first and foremost Biblical preaching.

In this message I want to give you four identifying marks of Biblical preaching so you might learn to recognize it when you hear it, but first let me ask and then answer this question: does preaching really matter? I mean, of all the methods we might employ to reach the hearts and minds of people in this day and time, does preaching really matter? The answer to that question is YES, it does matter, and it matters for a very simple reason: GOD SAID to employ it.

In our text John the Baptist came forth preaching. Jesus preached. He ordained the twelve apostles to preach. He sent out the seventy preaching. Paul told young Timothy to preach the word, and said himself that of all the things God had called him to do, preaching the Word of God was first and foremost.

But in our day it seems that preaching is deemed of little importance, even among professing Christians. In his book, Biblical Preaching, Haddon Robinson points out two reasons worthy of noting. First he says that preachers themselves have lost respect.

Because preachers are no longer regarded as the intellectual or even the spiritual leaders in their communities, their image has changed. Ask people in the pews to describe a minister, and their description may not be flattering…the pastor comes across as a bland composite of the congregation’s congenial, ever helpful, ever ready to help boy scout; as the darling of the old ladies and as sufficiently reserved with the young ones; as the father image for the young people and a companion to lonely men; as the affable glad-hander at teas and civic club luncheons. If that description pictures reality at all, preachers may be liked, but they will certainly not be respected.

In addition to the loss of respect for the office of preacher is the fact that we live in a time of information overload.

Preaching takes place in an over-communicated society. Mass media bombard us with a hundred thousand messages a day. Television and radio feature pitchmen delivering a “word from the sponsor” with all the sincerity of an evangelist.

So what are the marks of Biblical preaching? Our text gives us four.

1. BIBLICAL PREACHING CALLS PEOPLE TO SALVATION.

As John preached the coming kingdom of heaven many of the Pharisees and scribes came to him to be baptized, but notice what he told them in verses 7-9: *7John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

John was not interested in gathering a following. He had been sent to prepare a people for the kingdom of God. These people thought they had a corner on God. They were the descendants of Abraham. They were Jews. They were keepers of the law – righteous in their own eyes – a cut above.

But John cut them to the quick. He called them a generation of vipers. That may not mean much to you or me, but the Jews knew exactly what he was calling them. Satan himself was the serpent. He was and is that old dragon and calling them a generation of vipers or a generation of snakes was John’s way of saying they were the children of the devil. They were lost! They claimed to know God and live for Him, but they were far from Him! They didn’t need to be baptized; they needed to be saved!

The greatest need you or any person has is a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ, and all Biblical preaching must proclaim that message! *“The preaching of the cross is foolishness to them that believe not, but to those of us who believe it is the power of God unto salvation*!” (1Corinthians 1:18)

You can come up with a thousand reasons to dismiss the preaching of God’s Word as foolish and unnecessary, but I want to tell you just one reason you’re wrong – and that’s because God has chosen the foolishness of preaching to proclaim to a lost and dying world that it needs a Savior. If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior then it is not more good deeds, not more morality, not more acts of kindness that will help you in eternity, but repenting of your sin and trusting the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ on your behalf.

John was speaking of Jesus in verse 17 when he said of Him, *“His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*

Let me say very quickly that all too often we can’t tell a lot of difference between those who are lost and those who are saved, but one day Jesus is going to separate the two and in that day it will be too late to choose. The kingdom of God is coming, but the time to prepare is today.

2. BIBLICAL PREACHING CALLS PEOPLE TO LIFE CHANGE.

In verses 10-14, John told the people in his audience,

*10 “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.*

*11 John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”*

*12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”*

*13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.*

*14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”*

*He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”*

If there is one thing I have noticed as a preacher of God’s Word, it is that everybody likes a preacher who’ll tell them how the Bible says to live, but very few like a preacher who expects them to live that way. Don’t ever forget that man’s standard of acceptable religion and God’s standards are quite different. God says to “*be holy as I am holy*.” He says that we’re to “*put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”* (Ephesians 4:24)

God speaks through the Bible. It is the major tool of communication by which He addresses individuals today. Biblical preaching, therefore, must not be equated with “the old, old story of Jesus and His love” as though it were retelling history about better times when God was alive and well. Nor is preaching merely a rehash of ideas about God – orthodox, but removed from life. Through the preaching of the Scriptures, God encounters men and women to bring them to salvation and to richness and ripeness of Christian character. Something fills us with awe when God confronts individuals through preaching and seizes them by the soul.

When John’s listeners were confronted by the Word of God, the Word of God became unique to each of them. Each was called upon to act on it in accordance with where he was in relation to God. The Bible is not just a bunch of theological “pie in the sky” dogma that is for the spiritual elites. It has a real message for real people living in a real world, and that message is to experience a change of life so we might be ready for an encounter with the King.

3. BIBLICAL PREACHING POINTS PEOPLE TO JESUS CHRIST.

As John preached, verse 15 says the people were in suspense and were reasoning in their hearts who John was. Was he the Christ or not? Perhaps he was the Messiah. But look what he told them in verse 16: *John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

This tells us that if the preacher calls attention to himself and his own competence, that he cannot effectively call attention to Jesus and his glorious sufficiency. You test those considered to be doing great preaching and see who is getting the glory – Jesus, or the preacher?

God himself is the necessary subject matter of our preaching. John made it clear in all he said and did that he was absolutely nothing but a tool, a servant, not important enough to even earn the title of a common slave untying his masters sandals. John wanted to make sure that those people heard about Christ; not him. They needed to know about the coming King, not the common messenger.

Sure preaching has to deal with marriage and parenting and money and gluttony and sex and all the other day in-day out matters of life, but the great theme of all Biblical preaching, even in the common place matters of life is the majesty and truth and holiness and righteousness and wisdom and faithfulness and sovereignty and grace of God! In the words of one preacher,

“It is not the job of the Christian preacher to give people moral or psychological pep talks about how to get along in the world; someone else can do that. But most of our people have no one in the world to tell them, week in and week out, about the supreme beauty and majesty of God.”

4. BIBLICAL PREACHING EXPOSES SIN IN EVERY RANK.

You will notice that it was Biblical preaching that landed John in prison and eventually got him beheaded. Verses 19-20 say, *19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.*

I don’t want to make a lot of comment here other than to say Biblical preaching doesn’t change for its audience. It is the same for people of every economic class, social standing, race, sex and age. God’s Word transcends all those things. It always has and always will. People and times change, but the Word of God will stand forever; and Biblical preaching will faithfully proclaim that message till Jesus comes.

Close: Listen to me for just a moment longer: If Biblical preaching exposes God’s Word, revealing His will, nothing could be of greater importance than understanding it. John’s audience understood how important it was to hear and respond that day, leaving us an example we ought to follow. While it has been my purpose today to relate to you what is Biblical preaching, I think it safe to say that throughout the ages there has been much more Biblical preaching than there has been a Biblical response to that preaching.

The point of me preaching about preaching is not simply to educate you, but to help you see that truly great preaching is a shared responsibility between you and me. I must do my part in presenting a Biblical message, but you must do your part by responding as God desires. When both parties do what God desires, the sermon has the greatest opportunity to bear fruit.

You may say to yourself on any given Sunday that the sermon was for someone in the room, but not for you; but you are mistaken. God did not lead you here to waste your hour on a message someone else needed. You too have a responsibility to take from the sermon God’s message to you in order that you might be saved, that your life might be changed, that you might be pointed to the glory of God, or that you might be confronted by your sin.

Which is it for you today? Have you really put your trust in Jesus Christ and in Him alone? What are you trusting for eternal life? Your religion? Your goodness? Your love for others? Today it is time to severe the root of all self-sufficiency and cast all your reliance on Christ.

**Let us pray:**  Holy Spirit of God, show us through the Word of God where we need to change so that our lives would better reflect the glory of God and Jesus to others in our world. In the name of Jesus. Amen.