

1. THE RADICAL {PERSONAL READING}

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The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way - a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist was seen as a radical, and still is.

Radicals are often not easy people to be around. They tend to upset the status quo, challenging the way things are, and living in a way that presents stark contrast to the accepted cultural momentum. Invariably radicals polarise the room, their very presence causing people to consider and possibly take sides on what is right or wrong. But as unsettling as they are, there are times when people long for a radical to stand up. They want to follow someone with a cause worth fighting for, or a set of values worth dying for. They want to know that the way things are isn’t the way things should always be.

That is how it was in John’s time. The Hebrew people of the land, the “Am-ha’aretz”, were tired, disillusioned, persecuted, and longing for hope. Rome was the latest in a series of powerful oppressors that had systematically and relentlessly worked at extinguishing Jewish independence and their dreams of a life under God. Adding to their sense of futility was the fact that some of their own potential leaders had in recent years tried to stand up and resist the Romans. They and their militant supporters had all been snuffed out violently and publicly.

But something within the Am-ha’aretz still believed it wouldn’t end this way. Some day the promised Messiah would come and set things right. Everything they were as Hebrews was built around this core belief, it was part of their DNA. So when John the Baptist stood up so uncompromisingly and said the Messiah was on His way, they lifted their eyes once more.

John had a message that brought change in the present, and hope for the future. His method of choice was a one-two combination of “preach-and-baptise”. He helped cut people off from their present sin, and prepare themselves for One who was greater than all. The call to repent wasn’t a new message, but the ritual of baptism in the dirty Jordan River certainly got their attention. The radical always has—and sometimes is—a message, and if it is to have an impact it must be a message that can be understood and accepted by the hearers.

But despite their joy at John coming on the scene, he probably wasn’t the guy you would invite home for a barbeque. He wasn’t good at small talk, often struggling to get off the topic of sin and judgment. And he tended to scare the children when he bit the heads off grasshoppers. John was just different, but in those days different wasn’t bad. It was accepted that prophet-types lived out their message physically as well as vocally. But everyone knew that the prophet was seldom your close friend.

These days, being a radical doesn’t mean you have to be weird. But like John it does mean you stick out—hopefully for all the right reasons. These days radicals stand out, not because they wear camel skins, but because they present a stark contrast between what currently is, and what they believe should be. If our Christian message is true, then like John, it will resonate with the heart of every person with the slightest inclination to examine their view of eternity.

RADICALIS

Preaching from a river bank probably won't work for you like it did for John. His method wasn't prescriptive. People around us have heard the noise of what they believe to be loveless and judgmental Christians before. They don't want the theory, they want to see the practice. Radical isn't what you say as much as what you are. You can't fake it, you can't just talk like a radical, you must be one. With every fibre of your being you must believe and live the truth. Nothing less than a radical will change the world around you, and it is quite likely you will not realise the fullness of your calling unless you live radically as well.

By their thoughts and actions, radicals unconsciously challenge the status quo. They seem to sit on a different foundation, and walk to a different beat. They sometimes look the same and act the same as the rest of us, but throughout a normal day there are moments where we see them react to a situation, or we pick up the way they think, and we note that there is something fundamentally different with the way they process things. They just seem to have roots that draw life from a different well.

John the Baptist used to cry out "Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees" (Mat.3:10). He wasn't attacking the surface issues of customs and lifestyle. He was challenging the hearts and motivations of those around him. He wasn't pointing at the fruit, but the root. "Radicalis" is the Latin word for the root of things. What I call a "Radicalis Christian" is one who is rooted, at the most fundamental level, in the simple truths of God's created order.

Take a simple truth like "Jesus is Lord". We know it is true, in theory at least. If pushed, we would tell our friends it's true, and we would put it at the top of our list of belief statements. But is that truth at the root of our life? Does every choice we make, every priority we invest in, every relationship we have reflect that truth? Do we allow that root of truth to tap into the Source of life, and then feed our souls until the fruit of our life proclaims for all to see that Jesus actually is Lord?

Or is it a truth we still grapple with? We know it should be true, but a thousand times a day we give ourselves permission to choose either His way or our own. We do it with our thoughts, our actions, our desires ... everything. But John wasn't like that, and neither was Jesus. They made it simple: God is either Lord or He isn't. They took aim directly at those who claimed to know God's mind and His words, but exhibited such little fruit to back it up.

"Bear fruit in keeping with repentance!" John would shout at them (Mat.3:8). It was a call for them to stop talking about what they know and who they are, and start demonstrating a heart that humbly bows to the Lord of Life. Their religious culture and habits created for them a holy mask, making them look and feel better than they really were. A religious environment can do that. Those who enjoy the company and practice of people with a clear moral grid can find a place in the non-threatening world of "church" where most people look and think the same way. But if we looked deeper, we might see that we mostly like it because we are comfortable there. Of course this doesn't mean that Jesus is the Lord of our life! Like the Pharisees, our inner world might be in constant argument about exactly whose will should be done in our life.

You and I know that our struggle with the Lordship of Christ is a battle we will contend with for the rest of our lives. We daily, even hourly, need to remind ourselves of exactly who is Lord. We fail routinely, then repent again and pick up where we left off. But if we aren't careful, we can build a theology for life that accepts our struggle to the point where we actually condone something that God clearly does not. If we accept too comprehensively the inevitability of our struggle, then we will be forced to re-engineer our theology to say that it is actually God's plan for us to struggle with the Lordship of Christ.

But nowhere does scripture condone sin. It doesn't accept that we dress up our old nature as best we can, it just says to kill it (Romans 8:1-4). Neither does God's word condone things like doubt, even though we all know that it is something to be dealt with constantly. The scriptures just say "Stop it! Don't doubt, just believe" (Mat.21:21, Jas 1:6). The inevitable existence of a problem doesn't condone it. By accepting grey, we sometimes make it impossible to aim for and choose either black or white.

For the Radicalis Christian, there is no other standard but that which God declares. That becomes the standard, that is the only goal. If we start our thinking in a place that excuses half-hearted commitment, then we will never rise to the level of our calling. But at this point, some would say that such a radical stance just sets one up for a life of failure and subsequent guilt. By setting an absolute goal, any degree less than total success will demoralise us and destroy hope.

This might be the case if God's acceptance was based on performance. But it isn't, it is based on faith. Faith relies on God to do what we can't. The price paid for being less than perfect was laid on Jesus at the cross. When we fail, God's love for us does not.

RADICALIS DECLARATION

Today I am stepping across the line. I'm tired of waffling and I'm finished with wavering. I've made my choice; the verdict is in and my decision is irrevocable. I'm going God's way. There is no turning back. I will live the rest of my life serving God's purposes, with God's people, on God's planet, for God's glory. I will use my life to celebrate his presence, cultivate his character, participate in his family, demonstrate his love, and communicate his Word.

Since my past has been forgiven, and I have a purpose for living and a home waiting in heaven, I refuse to waste any more time or energy on shallow living, petty thinking, trivial talking, thoughtless doing, useless regretting, hurtful resenting, or faithless worrying. Instead I will magnify God, grow to maturity, serve in ministry, and fulfil my mission in the membership of his family.

Because this life is preparation for the next, I will value worship over wealth, "we" over "me", character over comfort, service over status, and people over possessions, position, and pleasure. I know what matters most and I will give it all I've got. I will do the best I can with what I have for Jesus Christ today. I won't be captivated by culture, manipulated by critics, motivated by praise, frustrated by problems, debilitated by temptation, or intimidated by the devil. I'll keep running my race with my eyes on the goal; not on the sidelines or on those running by me. When times get tough and I get tired, I won't back up, back off, back down, back out, or backslide. I'll just keep moving forward by God's grace. I'm spirit-led, purpose-driven, and mission-focused so I can't be bought. I will not be compromised, and I shall not quit until I finish the race.

I'm a trophy of God's amazing grace so I will be gracious to everyone, grateful for every day, and generous with everything that God entrusts to me. I am a radical in the original sense of the word: rooted in Christ, rooted in love, and rooted in his Word.

I hereby declare my supreme allegiance to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. I say this: However, whenever, wherever, and whatever you ask me to do, my answer is yes! I'm ready. Anytime. Anyway. Whatever it takes Lord; whatever it takes! I want to be used by you in such a way that on that final day I'll hear you say, "Well done, good and faithful one. Come on in and let the eternal party begin!"

Name: _____ Date: _____

