

Here is a little news snippet the Boston Globe reported: To see how religion impacts economic behavior, Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary, a husband and wife research team at Harvard, analyzed data from 59 countries where a majority of the population follows one of the four major religions. One of their most intriguing discoveries: in developing countries a sharp rise in people's belief in hell, when accompanied by flat rates of church attendance correlates with economic growth. A belief in heaven has a similar, though less pronounced, correlation with economic growth."

I can see it now, the World Bank paying preachers to go to warn people the suffering God has planned for them if they do not shape up. Who says religion cannot be useful?

John the Baptist is exactly the one everyone needs. "The ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down."

Or as John the Baptist said later: "The one coming after me has his winnowing fork in his hand; he will gather the wheat into his granary but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." John was declaring judgement.

Now in contrast listen to another messenger of God, one who had seen the one who came after John. Once this man, named Saul or Paul had been all about judgement himself, arresting Christians so that they might be killed. But Jesus appeared to him, Jesus' own spirit came to live in Paul and this is what that Spirit led Paul to write: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

John and Paul both speak of the one who is coming. Both know that the Lord is near. But their expectation for what the coming of Jesus means could not be more different.

Which of these two has hold of your heart today? Fear of judgement – confidence in grace and love? God is able to work through both. Some of you are here because someone took on the role of John the Baptist in your life. Someone warned you that the way you were living was leading to the wrath of God, an unquenchable fire of judgement against you. You repented – your life turned – you are not the person you were then.

Others of you were weighed down under the burden of needing to please God. Day after day that burden shaped your words and deeds and though you were a responsible contributor there was no joy in your heart - only the burden of being responsible. Then you heard a new word, that Jesus loves you and will save you. You who were once weary and heavy burdened took off the yoke of your responsibility and received the yoke of faith in Jesus.

Yet I am guessing most of us are somewhere in between – not all that fearful nor all that joyful, just going along with God mostly on the edge of life, settling for good enough. Most of us most of the time are spending more energy on our entertainment than on our holiness. Most of us know more about the Cavs, or about who is starring in the latest movie or about Tiger and his scandals than we do about prayer and thanksgiving.

Whether it is John that you need to hear, or the Apostle Paul now is the time to take assessment. Are you building your life on a foundation of rock, the bedrock of Jesus love and forgiveness and salvation or on the sand of busyness and consuming and being entertained? A day is coming when knowing Jesus will be the most precious treasure that you can have. Many of those days are coming if we continue to live on this earth. And when our life on this earth is ended Jesus will still be the precious treasure when all else we have treasured will be dust.

When the people asked John what they should do he invited them to begin with simple things – sharing bread with the hungry, not stealing, not using violence against others. He invited them to begin in the places they lived.

That is where you can begin, a gift for hungry ones, or ten minutes set aside for praying for those your life touches who are in need, or some time each day to read about God in the scriptures. Not turning your life upside down but beginning with one thing. Some time in the future more can be added but for now begin. Begin with rejoicing in the Lord – giving thanks – see where that might lead. Maybe the peace of God will be in your heart and mind.

Now that might be even greater than the economy growing. Do you think? Amen.

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