

“Packaged with Love!”—Mark 1:1-4

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Packaged with Love!”, is Mark 1:1-4 → *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’” John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

A young man was getting ready to graduate from college. For many months he had admired a beautiful sports car in a dealer’s showroom, and knowing his father could well afford it, he told him it was all he wanted. As graduation day approached, the young man awaited signs that his father had purchased the car.

On the morning of his graduation his father called him into his private study. His father told him how proud he was to have such a fine son and told him how much he loved him. He handed his son a beautifully wrapped gift box. Curious, but somewhat disappointed, the young man opened the box and found a leather-bound Bible with his name embossed in gold. Angrily, he raised his voice to his father and said, “With all your money you give me a Bible?!” and stormed out of the house, leaving the Bible on the desk.

Many years passed and the young man became very successful in business. He had a beautiful home and wonderful family. Realizing that his father was very old he thought perhaps he should go to visit him. He had not seen him since that graduation day. Before he could make arrangements he received news telling him his father had passed away and willed all of his possessions to his son. He needed to come home immediately and take care of things.

When he arrived at his father’s house sudden sadness and regret filled his heart. He began to search through his father’s important papers and saw the still new Bible just as he had left it years ago. With tears he opened the Bible and began to turn the pages. His father had carefully underlined Luke 11:13 → *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!*

As he read those words, a car key dropped from the back of the Bible. It had a tag with the dealer’s name, the same dealer who had the sports car he had desired. On the tag was the date of his graduation with the words “PAID IN FULL.” He had missed the blessing because he could not get past the package in which it came.

How many times do we miss God’s blessings because they are not “packaged” as we expect? Packaging is very important to us. In fact, many marketing experts would say that packaging is everything to selling a product. “Packaging” is also very important to our heavenly Father as He gives us the gifts of His grace, love, forgiveness of sins and eternal life!

God’s gifts come to us in the “package” of His Word—the Scriptures. Verse 1 of our text tells us that Mark began his account of God’s “gift-giving” in *the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*, “packaged” in the ministry of John the Baptizer. Our English word “gospel” comes from an Old English word “godspel” which means “good news.” The good news is that God took on human flesh in the Person of Jesus—incarnational “packaging” if you will—and lived in perfect obedience to His Law **for you**, taking the punishment you deserve because of your sin upon Himself as your perfect sacrifice.

Even John’s ministry was based upon the “package” of God’s Word, the Old Testament Scriptures. Our text tells us that His appearance was based upon the prophecies from Malachi (3:1) and Isaiah (40:3),

which promised a messenger from the LORD who would prepare the way for the Lord's coming to save people from the power of sin, death and the devil.

John's preaching *in the wilderness* may have been an action which spoke about peoples' sinful condition before God, picturing people wandering in the desert of their sin, spiritually dried up without the Word of God. Verse 4 of our text says that he appeared *proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. He called people to look not only at their sinful actions but deeper into their hearts, from which flow our sinful actions, so that they would confess their sins to God and be baptized. John's baptism looked forward to the baptism instituted by Jesus—*the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit* (cf. Titus 3:5) which washes away your sins (cf. Acts 22:16) in light of Christ fulfilling God's plan of salvation for you. God's blessings come through the "packaging" of water and the Word in humble submission and faith in Christ.

"Packaging" also proved to be a stumbling block to receiving the LORD's blessing in John's day as well. From the "religious" perspective John the Baptizer was working outside of the established religious order of Judaism. Definitely a "no-no." Even his lifestyle and dress were different than the religious leaders of his day. According to Mark 1:6 John's "vestments" were not what one would expect from a preacher—*clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist*. His lifestyle may have been an action which protested peoples' sinful self-indulging, hedonistic natures—living in the desert and eating *locusts and wild honey*?

Yet, even this "packaging" pointed to Christ based upon the Old Testament prophecies concerning John as the one to prepare the way for the Savior's redemptive work in our lives! In Matthew 11:7-10 Jesus stressed the importance of John's ministry in connection with the Gospel when He said to the crowds: *What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You."*

What were they expecting? Elijah? Absolutely! This prophecy which Jesus quoted speaks about Elijah coming before the salvation of the LORD is to be revealed. The One Whom this "Elijah" reveals is the promised, long-awaited Messiah and Redeemer. This is why Jesus also said in Matthew 11:13-14 → *All the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come*. Their understanding of John and his ministry must be accepted on the basis of the Old Testament Scriptures.

The blessings of God in the Person & Work of Jesus can only be experienced by a faith based upon the promises in the "package" in which it came—God's promises in the written Old Testament Scriptures. This is true of His blessings for us today as well. God's blessings of forgiveness of sins, new life by His Holy Spirit and salvation come to you "packaged" in His means of grace.

Turn to page 210 in your hymnal. Immediately before receiving the forgiveness of your sins through the "package" of the Lord's Supper, we sing the proclamation of John the Baptizer about Jesus in John 1:29 → *Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!* In the words of the "Agnus Dei" (Latin words for "lamb of God") we recognize that Christ conveys or gives us the forgiveness of sins as our faith clings to the promise of His Word connected with this sacrament! We recognize that just as John prepared the people to meet Jesus in His public ministry we are prepared to receive the eternal blessings of God here and now! The *voice* is still calling to you in the desert of your sin today to repent, believe in Jesus Christ for salvation and to live a new life under the Holy Spirit's power and promises!

As the Holy Spirit fills your heart with new life through the promises of God's Word today you can live each day with a "new life" attitude, not wallowing in a "desert" filled with spiritual turmoil, guilt and hopelessness. Rather, the Holy Spirit gives you a new heart in baptism which listens to God's voice of the Gospel wherein you experience His eternal gifts! With such a new life perspective, "packaging" is

very important to you because your heavenly Father has packaged His gifts for you in the love of Jesus Christ! Blessed Incarnation! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen