

Sometimes you get asked to do something that doesn't feel right – not something unpleasant to do, such as cleaning up a mess; not something you can't do, such as brain surgery; but something that doesn't feel right, something you don't want to do because it violates your sense of right and wrong. It can happen at work, at school or in your family. Someone may ask you to do something that feels dishonest.

Some people do it. They do it to keep their job or to keep the affection of the person who asked. Then they do it again, and again. Pretty soon it's easier not to look at the thing you're doing, not to reflect on it, just to do it. But every so often, you feel something else, and you realize that what you're doing, what you are now in the habit of doing, is just wrong.

These tax collectors who appear in the gospels – you know their reputation: These were people who were told to take more than they should and pocket the extra change. They show up in stories about Jesus; they also appear in today's gospel with John the Baptist. We think of biblical tax collectors as hardened criminals, but surprisingly they listened to Jesus and John the Baptist. Tax collectors were doing something that didn't feel right. It gnawed at them. Finally they had to do something about it; they couldn't live with it any more.

In today's gospel, three groups approach John the Baptist: the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers. They all ask him the same question, "What should we do?" "Teacher, what should we do?" "What is it that we should do?" Tax collectors called John "teacher"; they needed him to guide them in a better way of living.

We need guidance too, and once in a while we courageously ask a parent, a counselor, a teacher, or somebody else whose opinion we respect the same question so many people ask in today's gospel, "What should we do?" If we haven't asked it, we're afraid of the answer; we're afraid the answer will challenge us to make some changes.

The answers of John the Baptist do just that. He says: If you own two cloaks, give one to the poor. If you have extra food, share with the hungry. If you collect taxes, stop taking more than you should. Do not extort, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages. If something is bothering you and you want to know what to do, John says this: be content with what you have, don't try for more, and make do with less.

If John the Baptist thought two coats were one too many, how would he feel about the number of shoes I own? If he thought taxes were too high, how would he feel about the demands I make for my services? If he thought soldiers should be content with their wages, how would he feel about my desire to spend more than I have?

John the Baptist challenges people who do things that don't feel right. We do and we don't want to hear his words. We will be happier, though, if we are brave enough to ask, "What should we do?"