Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Setting the Stage for Jesus, Part 4
Scripture: Luke 3:3
Code: 42-38

As we come to our time in the service when we look together to the Scripture, we only need to be reminded briefly that this is a critical part of our worship because this is when God speaks to us because, of course, He speaks through His Word. Open your Bible to Luke chapter 3, we have some Bibles there in the pews if you don't have one with you. We are in a study of the marvelous, marvelous book of Luke, a history of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world. And we have been studying the gospel of Luke for many, many months and we are only in the third chapter because so much of what Luke says has such immense implications, it takes time to work our way through it. We are in chapter 3 which is really the launch point for the actual ministry of Jesus.

It begins, as you know if you've been with us, with the prophet whom God raised up by the name of John to announce the arrival of Messiah and to prepare the people for His coming. We meet John at the beginning of chapter 3 as he begins his ministry. In fact, in verse 2 it says, "The word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness and he came into all the district around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Before he would introduce the Messiah to his people and his people to the Messiah, he needed to prepare them and that by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This was the message by which the people could be made ready for the arrival of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now as we have looked at this opening section, verses 1 through 6 of the third chapter, I had mentioned to you that it's a very important section. As was chapter 1 and chapter 2, this is a foundational part of Luke's gospel. It's very important for us to take our time and establish this foundation because much of what is going to happen in the future, much of the rest of the record that Luke gives us of the life and ministry of Jesus is built upon the foundational understandings that are given to us right here. In fact, what you have in verses 1 to 6 is the setting in which John began his ministry and six months later Jesus stepped in and began and fulfilled His ministry. This then sets the stage. You have here historical setting, geographical setting, theological setting and prophetical setting and this is setting the backdrop, as it were, setting the stage for the drama that will unfold when John steps on stage followed by Jesus.

Now we have already looked at the historical setting which was given to us in verses 1 and 2 and we were given the historical setting in a most wonderful way by seven names, five Gentile names in verse 1, two Jewish names in verse 2, namely Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests. And we spent a lot of time talking about the scene in the Gentile world under Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias.

We then talked about the Jewish historical setting under the tremendous dominating and manipulating influence of Annas and Caiaphas who wielded the corrupt priesthood of Israel. So we saw the historical setting, very important in shaping our understanding of the ministry of Jesus.

Then we saw the geographical setting for John's ministry, indicated in verse 3. "He came into all the district around the Jordan." It was a wilderness ministry. He was distant from the establishment. He was outside the cities of religious significance. He was outside the cities of social significance, outside the areas of political influence so that he really was his own man, or better, he was God's man. He was a man of God uninfluenced by the religion, the society, and the politics of his time. And ministry for John occurred out in that wilderness which demonstrated a certain disdain for all of the politics, all of the religion and all of the society that existed in Israel. God sent His preacher apart from all of that, in fact, to call the people involved in the political world and involved in the religious world of Israel to repentance. So we talked a little about the geography.

Now we've come to the third point in the setting and that is the theological setting. We know what the history was like. We know something of the geography. Now we're talking about the theology, what was going on theological in the world at that time and in Israel at that time so that we can understand the character of John's ministry and the character of Jesus' ministry and the emphasis both of them gave in their preaching. And we find the answer to that at the end of verse 3 where it says, "When John came after the word of the Lord came to him, he therefore came and preached...obviously what God wanted him to preach...and he was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Now that defines for us the theological situation in John's ministry. He came and he preached a baptism for repentance, or of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Three things obviously out of that phrase, forgiveness of sins, repentance and baptism, define for us the theological condition of the people at that time. Now last time we talked about the issue of the forgiveness of sins, and I won't say a lot about that. I'll maybe refer to it a couple of times as we go through things this morning. But the message that John brought to Israel was the message of the forgiveness of sins. It really wasn't the message, I don't think, that they initially thought they might hear because they prided themselves on being self-righteous. They prided themselves on being the sons of Abraham, the children of Abraham, the children of the covenant, the blessed of God, the people of God. They prided themselves on their own righteousness, their own ceremonies, their own religiosity, going to the temple, doing all of the things that needed to be done, associating with the synagogues and worship there. And they thought themselves to be a religious people.

Quite on the other hand, John confronts them with the fact that they are just the opposite of what they think they are, they are people deeply, deeply, profoundly affected by sin so that they are headed for the judgment of God and greatly in need of the forgiveness of sins. They don't need to be just a little bit better, they need to recognize that they're actually horrible from top to bottom and what they need is forgiveness. And we talked about that.

So the message of God to humanity is always the same. The message of God to fallen man is forgiveness. That's the good news, God is willing to forgive all your sins, that is the gospel, that is the good news. All true preachers preach it, all true prophets say it, it's always been the same whether Old Testament or New Testament or in modern times or ancient times, the message has always been the same...the good news is God will forgive your sins.

You're in a very serious condition of sin, your sin runs so deep that it is systemic, it is endemic, it is passed from one generation to the other, it's so much of a part of the fabric of your nature, you can't do anything about it, you can't change it, you can't alter it, you can't overcome it and you can't cancel out the offenses you've made against God therefore you're headed for judgment and damnation in hell, but God is willing to forgive your sin. He is willing to literally wipe it all away and hold it not against you at all...which frees you from punishment, frees you from hell, frees you from eternal judgment and opens the gates of heaven to you. That's the good news. That's always been the message that all true preachers have preached. But the forgiveness of sins comes to those, according to verse 3, who repent. It is repentance for the forgiveness of sins. You cannot discuss the ministry of John, you can't discuss the ministry of any prophets, Old Testament prophets, New Testament preachers, apostles, you certainly can't discuss the ministry of Jesus without discussing the issue of repentance.

And so, this morning it is that issue that I want to direct your thinking. And again, I'm laboring this a bit because it is critical and foundational to everything that's going to flow in the subsequent teaching that comes from Luke in the ministry of Jesus. We need to understand this issue of repentance.

Now one of the key words associated with forgiveness, associated with Christianity, associated with the gospel is the word repentance. In all presentations...I'll say that again...in all presentations of the true gospel repentance must be discussed. Where there is no discussion of repentance, you do not have a full presentation of the gospel. Yes God will forgive your sins, but only if there is repentance. That is where John focused his ministry. He was preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Down in verse 8 there were people coming to him and he was warning them, he was saying to them, "Bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance." It was his message...repent, repent, repent the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, the Messiah is near. And, of course, even when Jesus came on the scene, for example, in Matthew 4:17 it says, "From that time," that is from the time that John was imprisoned and no longer preaching, and Jesus began, it says, "From that time Jesus began to

preach and say, 'Repent.'" In Luke 5 Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." In Luke 13:3 and 5, two verses there, He said, "I tell you, unless you repent you will likewise perish."

The ministry of Jesus was a preaching ministry and He was preaching repentance. The apostles preached repentance. In Acts 20 Paul preached repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now today in our modern world repentance is not a popular topic. It is, for some people, not theologically correct. It always amazes me that there are some people who from a theological viewpoint want to argue that repentance isn't necessary. I never really realized how widespread that strange view is until I began to write the book many years ago called The Gospel According to Jesus which created no small stir. In fact, it created the biggest stir I have ever created and I have created a few. It was the biggest stir ever created, anything I've ever said or wrote because I demanded that a biblical presentation of the gospel include repentance. And that was greatly assaulted and attacked by people who theologically disagreed. So for some it is theologically incorrect to preach repentance, for others it is politically incorrect to preach repentance because it makes people feel bad...and it's not politically correct to do that because it's not friendly to do that, it's not nice to do that and they might not come to Jesus if you're not nice to them.

So repentance has fallen on hard times. Those who theologically put it aside, those who sort of politically put it aside. Both finding it an incorrect emphasis have literally stripped the gospel of its essence. Repentance is critical in salvation. And when we talk about repentance, what we're talking about in terms of what the Scripture says about it is a repudiation of sin essentially. It is a repudiation of one's old life. It is a coming to a point where you reevaluate yourself, where you say, "I look at myself and I see sin and I don't like what I see, I resent the sin, I don't like the guilt, the shame, the fear, the anxiety that comes as a result of it. I live in fear of the consequence of sin which is eternal judgment in hell. I say to myself that I'm wretched. I look at my own life and I see my sin and I want to be delivered from it." That is a repentant attitude. It is looking at your life and instead of loving darkness and hating light, you have begun to hate darkness. You have begun to repudiate your old life. You desire to be delivered from the dominance of sin and its consequence. That is a penitent attitude.

True repentance never exists except in partnership with true faith. True repentance never exists except in partnership with true faith. And wherever there is true faith, true saving faith, there is true repentance. They go together. They're the two sides of the very same coin. You cannot have true faith in Jesus Christ apart from true repentance from sin. You cannot have true repentance from sin apart from true faith in Jesus Christ. Why? Because it is one work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts the sinner of sin and then moves the sinner toward Christ. Repentance then is a radical redefinition of one's person. It is a definitive mid-course correction. It is a point in which you

look at your life and instead of saying, "I cherish my sin, I want my sin, I cling to my sin, I will not abandon my sin, in fact it's not even sin, it's just who I am and that's the way it is and these are the things I like to do"...it is turning from those kinds of attitudes to saying, "I am bankrupt spiritually, I hate my sin, I resent what I am, I want to be delivered from its power and its penalty." That is an attitude of repentance. It is a definitive redefinition of who I am and a turning to God alone to remedy that.

Now that happens as, obviously at the point of salvation, as a once-for-all conversion. That's why in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 the Scripture says that the people in the Thessalonica church had turned to God from idols. That's what repentance is. We don't want to worship false gods anymore, we don't want to be bound to our sin anymore, we turn from that to God. That's repentance. And in the book of Acts the preaching, chapter 5 verse 31, Peter and the apostles and Peter says, "He is the one...speaking of Christ...whom God exalted to His right hand as a prince and a Savior to grant repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

You don't get the forgiveness of sins without the repentance. But God grants both. It is God who grants repentance and God who grants forgiveness. So when God saves someone, there is a work-producing repentance, and a work-producing faith which results in forgiveness.

In the eleventh chapter of Acts verse 18, I believe it is, it says, "And when they heard this they quieted down...these are people in Jerusalem hearing the report of Peter about the Gentiles who were saved...and glorified God saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance unto life.'" The repentance that leads to life and that's what's always required if there's going to be spiritual life there must be repentance...and it's God who grants it. Just read you Acts 5:31, Acts 11:18 both say it comes from God. It's not a human work, it's a divine work. In Paul's testimony to King Agrippa in Acts 26 verse 19 he says, "Consequently, King Agrippa, I didn't prove disobedient to the heavenly vision...talking about his conversion on the Damascus Road...and the subsequent call of God but I kept declaring both to those of Damascus first and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea and even to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God." That's what the apostles all preached...repent, turn to God. What does that mean? That means reevaluate your condition, see yourself as a sinner and turn to God, the only hope, the only one who can save you.

In 2 Timothy 2:25 Paul mentions again the same principle. He says God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth. Again it is God who grants the repentance but the repentance leads to the knowledge of the truth. It leads to turning to God. It leads to the forgiveness of sin.

Now I want to say this very clearly. Repentance is not a human work by which you earn salvation. Salvation isn't given to you because you earned it by repenting. Let me say it another way. Repentance is not a pre-salvation attempt to set your life right. When I wrote the book The Gospel According to Jesus, some people accused me of saying that...which, of course, I didn't say, that

somehow if you can pick yourself up by your own bootstraps and straighten out your own life, God will give you salvation. That is not what repentance is, that is not what any knowledgeable person would ever say of repentance. Repentance is not doing anything to change your life. Repentance is recognizing your true condition and part of your true condition is that you can't do anything to change your life. Okay? Very important.

A repentant person isn't saying, "I'm going to fix my life and then God will save me." A repentant person is saying, "I can't fix my life, and I have finally come to the recognition of how vile it is and that I can't fix it and I am turning to You who alone can do what I can't do." That's repentance. It involves the mind, recognizing my sin and its consequence, both in time and eternity. It involves my emotion, grieving over that condition, and then it involves my will acting to remedy that situation by turning to the only remedy, which is God through Christ.

When you're talking about repentance, you're not talking about somebody on their own in some pre-salvation human act, gritting their teeth, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps and saying, "I'm going to get my life right and then God will reward me by giving me salvation." Not at all. You're talking about a person who looking at his life comes to a true understanding of what condition he's really in...that he is deceitful and desperately wicked, that there's nothing good in him, that he is sinful to the core, and that recognition of one's lawlessness and the hatred of that sin stirs up emotions that produce grief which activates the will to turn to the one who alone can remedy the situation. That's repentance. The sinner is in such dire condition, the sinner is in such true understanding of his condition, such grief over that condition that he turns to plea to Christ, embracing Christ as the only one who can provide forgiveness. Believe me, that is not a human work. Left to himself man will never come to that conclusion. Let to himself man loves darkness rather than light, right? Because his deeds are evil. Left to himself there's nothing good in him and there's no pursuit of what is right. But when God begins to move on his heart, God produces a true understanding of his condition, that's John 16, the Spirit of God convicting the world of sin. That conviction starts and you begin to see the reality of your life.

How can you say you stand up in a pulpit and preach the gospel when you don't preach repentance? When you don't preach the wicked sinfulness of sin? The profound depth of human depravity with all of its consequences? That's where it all has to start.

Actually the Jews understood this. The Jews, as I pointed out last time, understood the forgiveness of sin. You'll notice in verse 3 there's not a lot of explanation, I'm giving you a lot of explanation because you, in many cases, we in this culture don't know what they already knew very well. They knew the Old Testament promise that God would forgive sin. They knew that. We pointed that out last time in detail.

They also knew that they...they were sinful. They...they...they had guilty consciences. They could feel the pain and the grief of their own sin. And here came John and he's preaching forgiveness of sin. They know God is a forgiving God, God is a pardoning God, the prophets said that. They remembered the penitent's Psalm 32, the penitent's Psalm 51 and other penitential pleas in the Psalms and they knew that God forgave sinners. They knew that and many of them, of course, knew they were sinners who needed that forgiveness.

Well they also knew about repentance. That was not something unfamiliar to them, they understood repentance. For example, I'm sure there are very few people who are Christians in the modern times who haven't heard 2 Chronicles 7:14 quoted some place. Let me tell you what it says to remind you. "My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven...will forgive their sins and will heal their land." There is a statement in 2 Chronicles 7:14 that when you come to a true recognition of your condition and you turn away from those wicked things toward God and seek forgiveness, God gives it. That's not anything new to them, they were very familiar with 2 Chronicles 7:14.

They were also familiar with the prophet Isaiah chapter 1 of Isaiah's prophecy, "Wash yourselves...verse 16...make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from my sight, cease to do evil." God's saying...You know, you've got to deal with your sin, you've got to take a look at what you really are. This is an indictment against them. Then he says in verse 18, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are as scarlet, they'll be as white as snow, though red like crimson they'll be like wool." God is saying you have to see your true condition, you are sin stained, you are red with sin, you are crimson with sin. It's like a stain on your life and it runs deep and you need to be washed and you need to be cleansed and you need to be made pure. That's a call again to the cleansing and forgiveness that comes when you're willing to take a look at the reality of your condition.

In Ezekiel the prophet, chapter 33, I'm just giving you some samples, there are a number of places where you can find this, but in Ezekiel 33, "When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he'll die in it." You show me somebody who is a superficially outwardly righteous person and commits iniquity, then that may be the reality of the truth of his heart. He may look right on the outside, but on the inside his heart is wicked, it will show up in committing iniquity and he'll die in it. But when a wicked man turns from his wickedness, practices justice and righteousness, he'll live by it. That's repentance. When you turn from the wickedness of your heart toward righteousness, that becomes the pattern of your life.

There are numerous other places where you can find those kinds of issues dealt with. Isaiah 55 which we talked about last time is another passage, maybe I'll just mention verses 6 and 7 to you there. "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He's near. Let the wicked forsake his way, the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord and He will have compassion

on him; and to our God for He will abundantly pardon or forgive." The same thing in Jonah chapter 3 and verse 10, that where the pagans repented God forgave their sin. The Jews knew that.

So as John takes the center stage in the drama of redemption, his message isn't anything new, it's certainly not anything unfamiliar to the people. It's the old familiar message of forgiveness. God will forgive your sins if you repent. Repent means reassessing your condition, not seeing yourself as righteous, self-righteous, pleasing God, making it on your own merit, but seeing yourself as sinful, wicked to the very core and understanding the guilt and the consequence of that sin both to your own self in time as well as in eternity in punishment in hell, understanding now that you want to be delivered from that. You turn to God and cry out for forgiveness. That is the kind of repentance that John was preaching and that any true and faithful preacher preaches.

It is not just changing your mind about what you believe about Jesus, some have said. It is not just some simple remorse over the consequences of things that you did or the effects of them. Repentance is a radical change in how you view yourself that causes you to see the reality of your wretchedness and sinfulness. It's ugliness, it's effect on you in time and eternity. Then it produces a radical reassessment of who you are. It turns you completely a hundred and eighty degrees and sends you in the pursuit of something completely different than you've been pursuing. It creates disdain for the old life for what you are and have been. And you begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The best definition I know in the Bible of true repentance is in 2 Corinthians 7, I want you to look at it. Second Corinthians 7, if you have a MacArthur Study Bible you'll notice I've written some extensive notes on this section because it is so important. But in 2 Corinthians 7, just to kind of give you a passage that sums up the essence of repentance, the Corinthians had sins, obviously, Paul had confronted them in writing to them and even in going there. And he got word back that they had repented and he was glad about it. So in verse 9 he says, "I rejoice, I rejoice that you...not that you were made sorrowful," no, that's not the point, not that you felt bad, a lot of people feel bad about their sin, feel sorrowful about it, I don't rejoice that you were made sorrowful, "but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance," that your sorrow went where it should go, all the way to an honest assessment of your true condition. "You were made sorrowful according to God," actually in the Greek, "it was godly sorrow. You had godly sorrow."

What does that mean? That means you saw yourself the way God sees you. Your verdict on you was the same as God's verdict on you. And it wasn't just...Oops, I made a mistake. That's the way you hear the people talk today, isn't it? Oh, I made a mistake, I'm sorry for the mistake I made. I'm sorry for the miscalculation I made. Well, I've made a serious misjudgment, I'm sorry for the misjudgment.

Your sorry because you got caught and it wasn't a misjudgment. And that's not repentance. Repentance is seeing your sin just exactly the way God sees it. That's why Paul was rejoicing that they had seen their sin the way God saw it. Their sorrow was all the way to repentance, it went all the way to reassessing their true condition and being resentful of what they were as sinful. Verse 10 says, "The sorrow was according to God, or the sorrow that is godly, the sorrow that makes the assessment that God makes produces a repentance without regret." In other words, there's no hesitation and it leads to salvation while the sorrow of the world produces...what?...death. You know there are people who have sorrow and they go out and drink themselves to death, or they go out and take drugs until they're dead to try to dull the sorrow, or they go out and commit suicide. That's the sorrow that produces death, that's...there's no virtue in that. That's not to be confused with repentance. The sorrow of the world produces death, repentance produces life.

So he says, "I'm really rejoicing that your sorrow was the sorrow that leads to repentance, that is it leads to a true assessment of what you really are." It is a sorrow that leads to repentance that holds nothing back. There's no regret at all. You really honestly, openly, willingly assess yourself for what you are and that leads to salvation, godly sorrow, the sorrow produced by the Holy Spirit, the sorrow granted by God that leads to repentance, brings a person to salvation.

So repentance is at the very heart of salvation. It is repentance that launches the work of salvation. Now then he defines this repentance in verse 11 with a series of words or phrases. First of all, he says "Behold what earnestness, when I look at your repentance the first thing I see is earnestness," or as the New King James says, "Diligence." It means eagerness. This is an initial mark of true repentance. It's not reluctance. It's not hesitating. It's aggressive, it is eager, it is this hunger and thirst after righteousness. Where you have true repentance you don't have somebody quibbling and equivocating and hesitating and halting but rather there is this open kind of confession, this earnest, eager diligent acknowledgement of one's true wretched sinful condition and an aggressive pursuit of righteousness. It is the attitude that ends indifference to sin and complacency about sin.

And then he says, "This godly kind of sorrow produced not only earnestness in you but what vindication, or perhaps better, what clearing." The idea would be...Look, I want to clear my name of the stigma that is a part of my life because of sin. I want to be cleared, I want to be vindicated, I want to be exonerated, I want to be forgiven. And there's no hesitation. I mean, there's an openness, like I told you a few weeks ago when you repent of your sins in the Russian church they had you a microphone and you repent. And you don't mind that, you're not trying to cover, not trying to hide, not trying to shade anything, or shelter anything, or keep anything back. There's this clearing, this openness, there's this desire to bring it all before God.

What indignation...he says. There's another word. Indignation means holy anger. You resent sin most in you, what fear, this is reverence toward God, a healthy fear of God's justice, God's punishment. What longing or as the New King James says, what desire, what strong desire, what

yearning. We could say in Matthew 5, what hunger you have, you desire this, you yearn for this, you hunger to have your sin dealt with and have your relationship to God restored. What zeal. Zeal is a word that combines love and hate. You love something so much you hate anything that negatively affects what you love. And this is a zeal for righteousness, a zeal for what is right. What avenging of wrong, a desire to see justice done, a desire to see sin exposed and sin covered and sin dealt with.

And then he closes it, "In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent." Really that's just a synonym for repentant, to be open, to be clear, to be pure. The Greek word actually means to be holy. You...you demonstrated your desire to be holy. That's it.

Well what is true repentance? It's a reassessment of yourself, seeing the sin of your life for what it is and desiring to be holy. That's repentance. That's John's message and believe me, folks, that is the message that every true preacher preaches and if they don't preach that message then they're not preaching the truth of the gospel. That's it.

So John came preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And that's what we preach. That's what's always been preached. That's what Jesus preached. And again I say, there's no suggestion here that repentance is some kind of a human work that's rewarded by God who gives forgiveness because you picked yourself up from your bootstraps. Repentance isn't anything you do to change your condition. Repentance is a new assessment of your condition and a recognition that you can't change it, and in that you reach out to God who alone can through the work of Jesus Christ.

Now there's another component here that I find absolutely fascinating and that is, back to verse 3, Luke 3, John also was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. By the way, a footnote may I add here? If you're truly saved, you repent at that time, but I also want you to know that that becomes a pattern in your life if you're a true Christian. If you're a true Christian then there's an ongoing attitude of repentance. If you think you're saved because you made some commitment in the past, but you do not have a penitent attitude in general, then you're probably not saved at all. In fact, the more...the longer you live as a Christian, the longer you've been a Christian the more you hate sin. Repentance, you could say, is the bench mark of a saved person. Saving faith and true repentance are always found together and it isn't that you repent once when you're saved and never again, it's a way of life.

But what was this baptism? This is very unique...it's a very, in fact this was the clout in John's ministry. This...this was the real wallop in his ministry. There were a number of ceremonial washings, ablutions they were called, known among the people of Israel. But no baptism of Jews, this is new and this is why, by the way, that John got a nickname. He was actually called John cause that's what God wanted him called. That's what the angel told Zacharias to call him, that's what they named him. But he became known as John the...what?...the Baptist. That became his nickname because he did something no prophet had ever done, he baptized people...he baptized them. In fact,

in Matthew chapter 3 verse 6 it tells us people out of Judea and Jerusalem were all going down to the Jordan River and John was dunking them in the river. So he became John the Baptizer...John the Baptist.

Well what was this baptism about? Now we know what Christian baptism is about, it's about symbolizing the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, that's clearly identified for us in the New Testament epistles, particularly Paul in Romans 6, and elsewhere. But Jesus hadn't died and hadn't risen again. Christian baptism hadn't been instituted yet. There was no such baptism of Jewish people in Israel. So John was doing something that was completely unique and brand new.

First I want to say this. It didn't produce forgiveness, okay? The Jordan water doesn't produce anything. I've been there many times. People come home from Israel with little bottles of the Jordan water to do all kinds of things with, it doesn't do anything. There wasn't anything...there wasn't anything in the ceremony, there wasn't anything in the rite. It didn't do anything. Baptism didn't do anything. Mark this, but it did say something very significant. It didn't do anything, it said something. It didn't produce forgiveness, ex opera operato(???) as the theologians like to say it automatically. Baptism did not, does not do anything, but it does say something.

In the Christian realm it says that I am identifying with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection and I know live a new life. It's...it's what we say in baptism, it's not what baptism does to us because it doesn't do anything.

But then what was it saying for them? I'll tell you what it was saying. In Matthew 3:6 it says they were baptized while they were confessing their sins. Now this is a little different. When we are baptized today, when somebody is baptized today what do they confess? They confess Jesus as Lord. Okay, that's different. When people were baptized in John's ministry, they confessed their sins. Our baptism, Christian baptism is a baptism that pictures new life in Christ. This baptism has something to do with sin and I'll tell you what it had to do with it. There was one emersion, there was one ceremonial baptism that was carried out in Israel and the only one, it is the only one time baptism the Jews performed and it was only performed on Gentiles...on Gentiles. And whenever a Gentile wanted to come in to Israel and identify with the religion of Israel and identify with the people of Israel, they were required to go through this ceremonial baptism as a way of demonstrating their uncleanness, confessing their uncleanness, confessing their separation from the covenant and the covenant people, confessing their separation from the true and living God. And so that...a Gentile proselyte coming in to Judaism and wanting to be included in the full, it had to go through this Gentile proselyte baptism in which he confessed himself to be unclean, outside the covenant, apart from the true God and His people in need of cleansing. That was the standard, and every Jew knew...every Jew knew that baptism because they knew that that's what happened when Gentiles came in to the covenant, in to the people of Israel.

So what was happening was this, John...that's why I said this was the wallop in his ministry...was saying if you want to be forgiven you have to repent and you have to repent to the point where you recognize that you are no different than a Gentile. You think that was a big crow for them to swallow? You better believe it was. How...how far are you willing to go in your recognition of your sinfulness? Are you willing to say you are disconnected from the true and living God of Israel? Are you willing to say you are outside the covenant of Abraham? Are you willing to say circumcised or not you are outside the covenant that God promised to David? Are you willing to say you are outside all of the promises of God that were given to the New Covenant? Are you willing to confess your sin to such a degree that you acknowledge you have no relationship to the true and living God and are no better than a pagan?

That's the level of repentance John was calling for. That's why he baptized them. They were literally going through Gentile proselyte baptism. They were saying my national descent has not brought me into the covenant with God or prepared me for the Messiah. They were saying my racial descent hasn't prepared me for the Messiah. They were saying my circumcision hasn't prepared me for the Messiah. They were saying my tribal identity hasn't prepared me for the Messiah. They were saying I have nothing to do with God, I have nothing to do with the covenants of God, I have nothing to do with the salvation of God, I have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God, I am an outcast, I am a Gentile and I acknowledge it.

I'd say that's a pretty serious call for repentance, wouldn't you? That's what he was asking for them to do. So I say the baptism didn't produce anything, but, boy, did it say something. Here were these people literally saying we're no better than Gentiles. And you know how they felt about Gentiles? We've talked about that. They didn't want to go into their house. They didn't want to eat their food. They didn't want to touch their utensils. They saw them as despised. You remember the prayers that the rabbis used to pray when they got up in the morning every day? "I thank You, God, that You didn't make me a woman or a Gentile." And now they were going to have to go out there and confess they were no better than Gentiles. Literally they were stripped bare. That's the bankruptcy that the gospel brings to the religious person. These are not...these are not people who are apart from the Scriptures, these are people who are Jewish people who have been basically nurtured and raised on the Old Testament. These are quote/unquote "the people who have had the truth," and they have to confess before God that they are completely outside the covenant, completely disconnected from the true and living God. They had to be baptized as if they were Gentiles.

And I think the amazing thing, and it must say something about the power of John as a preacher because it says Jerusalem was going out to him, Matthew 3:5, all Judea, all the district around the Jordan and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan as they confessed their sins. Somehow he got them to the place where they were willing to make that kind of confession. We don't know how...how long-lasting that was. It appears as the story goes on that many of these baptisms by

John were superficial, right? They were superficial.

Up to that point, you know, they maybe recognized their sin, they recognized they needed cleansing, but when it came time to put their trust in Jesus Christ, they couldn't do it. They wouldn't do it. He didn't turn out to be the kind of Messiah they hoped for, you know, the one who would knock off the Romans and create a permanent welfare state.

But his impact on the Jewish people, John's, was profound. He got them all the way to the place where they would acknowledge they were no better than Gentiles, outside the covenant of God. Can you see? This is a powerful thing, folks, because now what you've got is essentially the whole nation Israel confessing their spiritual bankruptcy, right? Confessing their spiritual bankruptcy. And that's where they needed to be to get ready for the one who could come alone and solve that problem, right? So John's ministry was critically preparatory. As you've got a whole nation of people now confessing their bankruptcy, desperately in need of a Savior and the Savior is on the scene and He comes and they don't want Him.

Was it true repentance? I'll say this again. There is no such thing as true repentance apart from true faith in Christ, right? True faith in Christ always includes true repentance, but true repentance always includes true faith in Christ. For some of them, I'm sure, it was true repentance and there was also faith in Christ when the gospel unfolded around Christ. For others it was a momentary repentance and without true faith in Christ never produced forgiveness and salvation.

They thought they were secure and John strips them bare. Look at verse 8 again, just quickly. Don't start saying to yourselves...he says...we have Abraham for our father, don't go back and say...oh, yes, we are the people of God, we're in the covenant, we have Abraham for our father. I'm telling you, if God wanted to He could make children of Abraham out of rocks. You're not so special. There's no security in your Abrahamic ancestry. John chapter 8, boy, one of the...one of the dialogues that Jesus had with the Jews that really precipitated their hatred of Him. He said, "I know you're Abraham's offspring," John 8:37, "but you seek to kill Me." He later says, "If you were Abraham's children then do the deeds of Abraham, but as it is you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. This Abraham didn't do." Abraham didn't reject God's Word. Abraham didn't kill God's messenger, don't tell Me you're the children of Abraham, you're not acting like Abraham. "You...He says in verse 41...are doing the deeds of your father," and in verse 44 He says, "your father...who?...the devil." Wow, you're not the children of Abraham, you're the children of the devil, He says.

That was about the last straw. But that's essentially what he's saying here. You have no relationship to God...John the Baptist is saying...you're like a Gentile, you're like a pagan, you're like an idolater, you have no connection to the covenants. You see, there's no true forgiveness for anybody without repentance and there's no true repentance without confessing openly one's true sinful condition and

spiritual bankruptcy. John was asking the people to say you have to confess the wretched wickedness of your heart and the fact that no matter what religion you're involved in, even if it's Judaism, you are separated from the true and living God, outside the covenant, outside His Kingdom. That's repentance.

When a person comes to the point where they will acknowledge their true sinful condition and alienation from God and see themselves for who they really are under the prompting convicting work of the Spirit of God, they then can turn to God who alone provides the solution through faith in Jesus Christ. That's gospel preaching and that's what John did.

Well, John also is placed here in a prophetic setting. We'll see that next time.

Father, we again thank You this morning for Your Word, the entrance of which gives light and our horizons keep expanding the truth, opening up new vistas of clarity for us, as the drama of redemption unfolds. Thank You...thank You for the greatness of Your truth and may it penetrate every heart. I pray that there will be sinners convicted upon hearing the message today that they would reassess their true condition and see their deep sinfulness and the shame of it, the guilt of it and the judgment that awaits them and they would see themselves for what they are. No matter how religious they may be, in actuality there no better than pagans, no better than idolaters, no better than Gentiles, completely outside the covenant with no relationship to You whatsoever. And in their spiritual bankruptcy may that open confession come, prompted by the Holy Spirit and then may there come a turning to You, the living God, who will forgive sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross and that alone. We pray that Your salvation will come to hearts even today, in Christ's name. Amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).