

**True Repentance: God's Highway to the Heart, Part 1**

Scripture: Luke 3:7-8

Code: 42-41

Let's open our Bibles to the third chapter of Luke. The first six verses of the third chapter describe for us the setting of the ministry of John. You remember John, of course, is the forerunner to Messiah. He's going to announce the Messiah has come. He's going to prepare the people for Messiah's arrival. And we got all of the background, all of the setting in verses 1 to 6. We come to verse 7 and we actually hear John preach. This is now John, he's entering into his ministry.

Thirty years since his birth have passed. Messiah will appear on the scene about six months after John begins his ministry. This is the time for the real work of redemption to begin which involves, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ who becomes the theme of the gospels. And so we begin with John as he launches the ministry, long awaited in the history of Israel and even long awaited in this thirty years that has gone by since the one who was born to be the Messiah's forerunner can now begin his ministry.

And so, John speaks in verse 7. "He therefore began saying to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham for our father. For I say to you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And also, the ax is already laid at the root of the trees, every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' And the multitudes were questioning him saying, 'Then what shall we do?' And he would answer and say to them, 'Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none, and let him who has food do likewise.' And some tax gatherers also came to be baptized and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.' And some soldiers were questioning him saying, 'And what about us, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages.'

"Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he might be the Christ, John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water, but one is coming who is mightier than I and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire and His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn. But He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.' So, with many other exhortations also, he preached the gospel to the people."

Now here is a sample of John's preaching. This would be typical of John's preaching day after day after day. The encounter with the multitude, the encounter with the tax gatherers, the encounter with the soldiers is not intended to be a one-time encounter but is routine, it's what John went through regularly. We know that because of the verbs. The form of the verbs indicate to us this was a continuous pattern. So here we have a sample of John's kind of preaching. And as verse 8 indicates, this is how he preached the gospel. He did preach the gospel. And what is the gospel? It's the good news. What is the good news? God will forgive your sins. That's what John was preaching.

John is a model for us. He is a standard for how to preach. In some ways he's even a more easily understood standard than Jesus Himself because it's hard for us to emulate the preaching of Jesus since He is God in human flesh...but John is a man like us. We learn from John how to confront unbelievers with the message of the gospel...so he becomes the model, the standard for all who proclaim the good news of forgiveness to sinners. He is the example for us to follow, the pattern for us to trace, the leader for us to emulate. He called sinners to forgiveness. He told them good news, God will forgive your sins if you repent and receive Jesus Christ as Messiah and Savior...that's what he told them. He was a preacher of repentance and a preacher of faith in the Lord Messiah, Jesus Christ. And so he sets a standard for all of us and we can learn how to proclaim the gospel, how to communicate the gospel to unbelievers by looking at the pattern of John.

And one of the things that hit you immediately just in reading that is the lack of any kind of effort to win them over with smooth talk. In fact, he is harsh, very harsh, saying things like, "You brood of vipers." Or saying things like, "The ax is already laid at the root of the trees, every tree therefore that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." This is a very strong, apparently on the surface, strong approach. But this again is the reproach of a man of God set apart to proclaim the gospel. I don't think that John was without love or without affection for the people, but he was clear as to the message. And that is the issue, clarity, straight-forwardness in giving the message marks John.

Verse 18 tells us that there were many exhortations with which John preached the gospel to the people. He was preaching for months and months out in the wilderness. What you have then in verses 7 to 17 is just an example or a sample of what John preached all day, every day, week after week, month after month. And as I said, it gives us a pattern for our own preaching.

Now, if you remember that John was a preacher of repentance, that John said...as we learn in Matthew..."Repent, for the Kingdom is at hand," you will also then want to know that repentance is at the heart of his message, it is at the heart of any gospel message. You cannot truly preach the gospel of forgiveness, you cannot preach the gospel of grace unless you call sinners to repent. So repentance refines the substance of his message.

Now the question that I want to pose, as we look at this passage, is...what is the character of true repentance?...because it is given to us here in wonderfully clear terms. John, in fact, from verse 4 through 11, if we include verses 4 to 6, the prophecy of Isaiah that related to John, from verse 4 through 17, verse 4 through 17, we really do have a definition of true repentance, the kind of repentance that saves the sinner. But at the same time, because it is such a clear definition of true repentance, it is also an exposure of false repentance, or shallow repentance, or non-saving repentance. And this is of great interest to any preacher and any Christian because people have always been and still are prone to shallow repentance, they are prone to a false repentance. The message, the modern message of cheap grace, as it's often called, just believe in Jesus, that's all you need to do, the modern message that's often called "easy believism" in fact invites such shallowness and is at one 180 degrees from the message of John the Baptist. There was nothing about John's message that was easy. There was nothing about John's message that was warm and fuzzy. It was harsh, it was strong, it was confrontational, it was devastating because John understood how prone the sinner is to a shallow, superficial repentance that does not save.

This has been, as you well know, a grave concern of mine for many, many years. I'm convinced that churches are literally filled with people who have had a shallow non-saving repentance and they are categorized in Scripture as the many who say, "Lord, Lord...Matthew 7...to whom the Lord says, 'Depart from Me, I never knew you.'" They are the kind of soil that receives the Word initially and with maybe some emotion but because the soil is never plowed up, its hard soil, because its never plowed up its weedy soil, and either the rock or the weeds choke out the Word, the gospel and there never is any life and there never is any fruit. Shallow repenting is common. It was common in Israel. It was common in the Old Testament era. It was common in the New Testament era. It's common today and it's exacerbated by those who preach a cheap message, by those who strip the gospel of its confrontation, strip the gospel of its Law and of wrath and judgment and sin.

John knew that. And John knew familiarity among the Jewish people could make themselves think religious with just a superficial repentance. And so he endeavors to draw out the essence of a real repentance in his preaching.

Now people came out to see John. In fact, the scriptures tell us that all Jerusalem and all Judea came out. And there is a reason for that. I'm sure people knew about John. I'm sure the story had circulated through the 30-year period that an old priest by the name of Zacharias and Elizabeth were able to conceive a son miraculously and that Gabriel the angel told Zacharias it would happen and that the son would be the forerunner of the Messiah and that that son was alive and he was out in the wilderness and he was a prophet of God. I'm sure that circulated outside the family of Zacharias and Elizabeth and circulated around the related relatives, Mary and Joseph and their family, because they all knew the story. The story must have spread. The fact that Gabriel showed up, the fact that a miraculous birth had occurred, the fact that the Messiah's forerunner had been born must have been

to some extent around so that people knew about it. And once John began to preach and announce the coming of Messiah, the people came out, they were curious, they were ready for the Messiah. They wanted the Messiah. They were compelled by their curiosity. They were compelled by the fact that this could be it, this could be true. I mean, how else can you explain Gabriel showing up? And how else can you explain an old priestly couple having a miraculous child? Maybe this is it. So the people desired to come and find out if indeed he was the forerunner of Messiah and if indeed the Messiah had come.

They were ready. They wanted to participate in the long-awaited blessings promised to Abraham and David. They were really weary of the oppression of the Romans. They were weary of never having independent authority and sovereignty and rule. They were weary of the way things were. They were excited with Messianic hope. And, I think, if it's...if you really look into the heart of the people, they believed they belonged to God, they believed they were in the Kingdom. After all, they were the children of Abraham, after all they were the people to whom had been given the Covenants and the adoption, as Paul says in Romans 9, and they had received the Word of God and the prophets and everything else. They were the chosen people. And so, I'm convinced that when they came to John they were really asking John how do I stay in the Kingdom, not how do I get in. I think they believed they were in, they just wanted to be sure they could stay in the Kingdom. They wanted to be sure that they could get the best of whatever the Kingdom was going to bring by being on good terms with the Messiah. John announced to them that they didn't need to find out how to stay in the Kingdom, they needed to find out how to get in the Kingdom because they were on the outside and they were no better off than Gentiles and therefore they needed to acknowledge that and receive a baptism that really was a baptism for proselyte Gentiles who were becoming part of Judaism. He was saying to them...You aren't in, you're out and you need to get in by repentance and faith in the Messiah and demonstrate that you recognize you're outside by going through what amounts to a proselyte baptism, which would put you on the same ground as a Gentile.

The people were so compelled by this that they did it. They came, they heard John and they got baptized which was a great admission on their part. To some degree they were saying...We're outside, okay we're outside, we've got to get inside and so we'll go through this even if it is an acknowledgement that humbles us, having to admit that we aren't in the Kingdom, we're on the outside, no better off than a Gentile proselyte wanting to become associated with Judaism.

As we learned, John starts preaching...All Jerusalem, all Judea come out, they're ready to get prepared for the Messiah. And if need be, they will be baptized with this baptism, though it is a humiliating affirmation. They begin to be baptized by John and they make some kind of confession of sin, some kind of confession of repentance. But as time goes on it becomes apparent that even with the strong preaching of John, even with the clear message of John, the repentance was, for the most part, shallow and false. We really don't have a difficult time in proving that because as the story of Jesus unfolds it becomes apparent that most people do not acknowledge Him as Messiah. In fact,

they finally come to the place where even though they have celebrated Him as Messiah on Palm Sunday, they cry for His blood on Friday at the crucifixion. And when you get to the book of Acts and the believers in Jerusalem are gathered in the Upper Room, there's only 120 of them and that's after the full ministry of John and Jesus is completed.

So, there was a lot of superficiality going on. And John was preaching a strong message and still there was superficial faith. How much more superficiality is there when a very weak message is preached? John understands the reality of shallow faith. John understands the reality of shallow repentance, false repentance. And this sample of his preaching demonstrates that concern and it demonstrates the message that needs to be preached. And all across this country in churches all across this land a shallow message is being preached, a shallow gospel, a shallow call to repentance that is giving people the tragic and damning illusion that they are saved when they are not.

So how can we recognize real repentance? How can we recognize it as best as possible? How can we see the real thing and separate it from false and shallow repentance?

Let's look at this passage. In it John gives us six elements of a true repentance, six elements of a true repentance. And again, this is a very notable portion of Scripture, not because it is a theological treatise on repentance, but because it is an example of the true preaching for repentance exhibited by this man of God. And John gives us six elements of a true, genuine, saving repentance. This section, by the way, is just loaded with theology...just loaded with it. John moves from hamartiology, which is the study of sin, through eschatology, to soteriology to Christology and to pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit...huge theological themes existed in his preaching. He was, of all things, a theological preacher.

He talks about sin. He talks about the end of the age and the coming wrath. He talks about salvation. He talks about within the framework of salvation, conversion, transformation, regeneration. He talks about Christ. He talks about the Holy Spirit. It is a sweeping treatment of theology. He was truly a theological preacher.

Let's look at the six elements then of true repentance. We'll try to get through four of them this morning.

Number one, and we'll talk about true repenters, okay? True repenters reflect on personal sin...true repenters reflect on personal sin. For this I have to take you back to verse 4. Now you remember that there's a quotation there from Isaiah chapter 40 verses 3 to 5. It's a quotation that describes John. John comes and he comes in fulfillment of prophecy. John, according to verse 4, is the voice of one crying. He is the voice. And what is he crying? Well, he's out there in the wilderness and he's crying, "Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." All right, he's the forerunner of the Messiah, he's saying get ready, do the necessary preparation, Messiah is coming.

What he's talking about here is heart preparation. Before there can be any national reception of the Messiah, there has to be individual reception of the Messiah. So he says in verse 5, taking the language of Isaiah 40, "Every ravine shall be filled up, every mountain and hill shall be brought low. The crooked shall become straight. The rough roads smooth. Then you'll see the salvation of God." If you want to experience the salvation of God individually and then collectively, as individual's believe, you must then make the path ready. And spiritually the pathway is through the wilderness of the heart. And I told you last time we talked about that, let's look at verse 5 and see how the imagery fits that. "Every ravine shall be filled up," that's analogous to the low things, the base things, the dark things of the heart. They have to be brought up, as it were to light. And then every mountain and hill is brought low...the high things of the heart, self-exaltation, self-will, self-fulfillment, all the pride has to be brought down. And then he talks about the crooked being made straight, the skolios, like scoliosis, curvature, anything perverted, twisted, deceitful, devious, lying, manipulating. All those matters straightened out. And then the rough road smooth, any kind of hindrance, any kind of obstacle, anything that clutters a clear and smooth path, anything that obstructs the Lord's entrance into the heart...could be self-love, apathy, indifference, lust, unbelief, etc., etc.

John then would come and he would be the voice, he would be saying...You need to do a real search of your heart. You need to reflect on your personal sin. You need to see the depth and the dark and the low and the gross and base elements of your life. You need to see the height and the high things and the proud things of your heart and the perverse and crooked thing and every other hindrance in your life for what it is...obstacles that prevent the King from coming into your heart. True repentance requires a complete and full admission of one's sinfulness...depth and height and length and breadth. That's essential to real repentance. Sin must be recognized and reflected upon in one's own life.

Secondly, and now we'll get to our text in verse 7, true repenters do reflect on personal sin, but they also recognize divine wrath...they also recognize divine wrath. Verse 7 is very interesting. "He therefore began saying to the multitudes," because he wanted them to prepare their hearts, because he wanted them to deal with their sin, because he wanted them to do an honest inventory, as I just pointed out, "Therefore he tells them who were going out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'"

Now why does he do that? He wants them to do an honest heart-searching of their sin. He wants them to reflect on their personal iniquity. He wants them to see their sin at its depth, its heights, its length and breadth. He wants them to do that honesty and so naturally he warns them about divine wrath.

What he's saying to them is...You better deal with your sin because it has such immense and eternal consequences. True repentance comes out of the fear of divine wrath. This motivates it. People coming to John and seeking the baptism that he gave, having to confess the fact that they weren't in

the Kingdom but outside, no better than a Gentile, and needed to come inside by repentance, they were willing to repent because they wanted to flee the wrath to come. You can be sure that John was a preacher of wrath, a preacher of judgment. Down in verse 9 he says, "The ax has already been laid at the root of the tree." When you're going to chop the tree down the first thing you do is take the ax over there and set it down while you get ready to pick it up and cut the tree. He says the ax is already there and God is about to swing it.

Now the Jews were very aware of this. They were very much aware that the Old Testament closed with the book of Malachi, actually the last of the Old Testament prophets before John. And then Malachi closes off the story prophetically, Malachi 3, the next to the last chapter in your Old Testament, "Behold, I'm going to send My messenger, that's the Messiah, and he'll...that's John the Baptist, I should say...and he will clear the way before Me...that's the Messiah." So the Lord is going to come, He's going to send His messenger, John, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple and the messenger of the Covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming...says the Lord of host. Okay, the Messiah is coming and before Him is coming His messenger. And then verse 2, "But who can endure the day of His coming and who can stand when He appears for He is like a refiner's fire and He is like fullers, or the washer person, laundry person's soap...he's like a smelter, verse 3, and a purifier of silver." This is judgment. Verse 5, "I will draw near to you for judgment." And then in verse 1 of chapter 4, the last chapter in the Old Testament, "The day is coming, burning like a furnace, all the arrogant, every evil doer will be chaff. The day is coming, we'll set them ablaze, says the Lord of host, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." There the ax will be laid at the root as stated by John the Baptist. Down further, the next to the last verse in the Old Testament talks about the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.

The Jewish people knew this. They knew that when Messiah came it would not only be for the fulfillment of Abrahamic promise and Davidic promise, but that it would also be for judgment. That is clearly outlined for them and I can't begin to take you through all of the passages that do that, but just a few sample passages. For example, Isaiah chapter 2 verse 10, "Enter the rock and hide from the dust from the terror of the Lord, from the splendor of His majesty, for the Lord of host...verse 12...will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty, against everyone who is lifted up that he may be abased." And then down in verse 19, "And men will go into caves or the rocks and the holes of the ground before the terror of the Lord, before the splendor of His majesty when He arises to make the earth tremble," and that, by the way, is a similar scene to what you see later on in the book of Revelation when people cry for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the face of the Lord. Verse 21 repeats the very same thing, the terror of the Lord is coming, the splendor of His majesty and the consequent trembling of the earth as He comes in furious judgment.

Amos chapter 5, very strong prophecy along the same line. Let me read you Zephaniah 1:14, "Near is the great day of the Lord, near coming very quickly, listen, the day of the Lord, a day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble, distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and thick darkness." He goes on to describe it down to verse 18 on..."The day of the Lord's wrath all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy. He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth."

Now those are just a few of many, many passages in the Old Testament, particularly in the prophets, that speak of judgment when Messiah comes, when God comes. All the prophets preached judgment. John preached judgment. Any true preacher preaches judgment. And when you give a witness for Christ to another individual, you have to talk about the wrath to come. The wrath to come is speaking of final, eternal judgment. Jesus made that a theme of His preaching. He preached more on hell than He did on heaven. He preached more on hell than anybody ever preached on hell. Why? Because He didn't like sinners, because He wanted to damn sinners? No, because He wanted to warn sinners. And one of the things that you must preach when you preach for a true repentance is the seriousness, the eternality and the suffering of eternal hell.

John preached the wrath to come. Obviously the indication here in Luke chapter 3 is that these people were coming to him to flee the wrath to come which meant that he was pointing out to them those passages in the Old Testament that indicate when Messiah comes wrath will come with Him. And it is essential in true repentance to understand the wrath to come, to recognize that reality. There is a hell and it is forever and it is a forever alienation from God and a forever conscious punishment, conscious torment. That's what makes forgiveness urgent. That's what makes forgiveness good news. And that is a strong motivation and any faithful preacher preaches the wrath to come.

You hear people say, "Well, this world is all the hell you'll ever know." No, it's not...not it's not. The Bible is very clear on eternal punishment in very graphic terms. We'll...we'll see some of that as we go through the gospel of Luke, particularly when Jesus speaks of it.

So, John uses very graphic terms and he speaks very harsh words because he is so profoundly concerned about the wrath to come. And the Jews understood it. Why else would these Jews come flocking out there? They knew when Messiah came that there would be blessing but they also knew there would be fiery judgment, that was very clear from Malachi. There would be a terrible day of burning. There would be terrible wrath. They knew that. They wanted to make sure they got the blessings and not the wrath.

But notice how straightforward John is. He says to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" You sons of poisonous snakes...boy, that is not a seeker-friendly approach. What is he saying here? This is not how to win friends and influence people. This is not how to schmooze people into the Kingdom here. What in the world is he saying?



First of all, I think he's calling them children of Satan. Jesus did that in John 8:44, He said to the Jewish leaders, "You're of your father, the devil," didn't He? He says, "You're of your father, the devil." Jesus said to the Pharisees, Jewish leaders, Matthew 12:34, Matthew 23 I think it's verse 33, both places, "You brood of vipers," same phrase exactly. Jesus said it twice to the Jewish leaders...you sons of snakes. I think he's really identifying them with their father. The devil appeared in the Garden in Genesis 3 in what form? A serpent. And according to the scriptures he is a serpent, as clearly indicated in Revelation chapter 12. So he is...he's really telling them...you belong to Satan, you snakes. What he's saying to them is...You are running from the fire but not interested in any change of your nature. You're still snakes, you're just scrambling in front of the fire. Shallow repenters are offsprings of that snake, Satan.

By the way, Matthew 3:7 when Matthew writes about the preaching of John, says when John said this...at least on the occasion of Matthew writing...he said it to Pharisees and Sadducees. Luke says he said it to everybody. So particularly to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were the most vicious, poisonous and deadly...deadliest of all the snakes, of all the children of Satan because they wore the name of God, as it were, on the outside but were satanic on the inside, thus their hypocrisy was more devastating. He says you're the worst of it, the rest of you also belong to the same nature, same satanic nature. Beyond just the Pharisees and the Sadducees, all those people had the very nature of Satan, they were the children of Satan. And he's pointing out their superficiality, he says, your repentance is superficial because your true nature is vicious, your true nature is of the serpent, your true nature is poisonous, your true nature is hostile, your true nature is deadly...particularly those Pharisees and Sadducees...paraded themselves as if they represented God and they were just biting the people and filling them with poison.

And by the way, this was a pattern for John, he therefore began saying to the multitudes "who were going." The imperfect tense and the present tense verbs mean this is something that went on a lot, this is not one-time dialogue, sometimes it was the Pharisees and Sadducees, sometimes it was the crowd, and sometimes it was both...this is a recurring pattern in John's preaching. This is a constant pattern. He is saying to them...it doesn't do you any good to scramble around like snakes in front of a brush fire if you don't change your nature. Who told you you could escape the wrath by just coming down here and getting baptized?

They have fires because the land is very dry and brush fires like they are in California, are very dangerous and deadly, and what happened obviously in a brush fire is the snakes who live in that area when the fire come begin to scramble to stay ahead of the fire and that's what John sees. Here comes all the Pharisees and the scribes scrambling down the mountain side and backside of Jerusalem into the Judean wilderness, scrambling, as it were, ahead of the fires of Messiah, scrambling to escape the wrath of God by whatever they need to do to escape the wrath of God. But never interested in any change of their wretched nature. So he warns them. There's more to repentance than scrambling to avoid the fires of divine wrath. That you must do, that you must

understand but there's more to it than that.

And that takes us to the third point. True repenters reflect on personal sin, they recognize divine wrath, but also they reject religious ritual. They...the Jews were so used to a ritual approach to religion, they were so used to believing that you could somehow make yourself right with God by your formal prayers, by your alms-giving, by whatever religious ceremony you went through on the Sabbath, or whatever sacrifice you offered. They were believers in the fact that you could actually make yourself right with God through these various rituals. As I'll point out tonight, one of the interesting things about Judaism is it rejects total depravity. Jewish commentators think the sin of Adam affected only Adam and that's why they believe we can make ourselves righteous because no fallenness really passes to us from Adam. And so they believe that they could be good before God and that by religious ritual achieve God's pleasure and favor. So they came down to go through another ritual. So John is saying to them...Huh, who told you to come down here and try to escape the wrath of God by being baptized? Do you think that's enough? Verse 8 he says, "You better bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. Isn't going to do you any good just to be baptized. That's not what God is looking for. Do you think you can scramble like scrambling snakes in front of a fire and all you want to do is head for the water? And you get down here and you slither into the Jordan River and it's all well and good?"

Now there's no right, there's no ceremony, there's no ritual, there's no baptism that can save anybody. There's no salvation in baptism then and there's none in it now. In fact, when Jesus preached His great sermon, we call it the Sermon on the Mount, and I told the students at the Master's College in chapel the other day, I don't know why they call it the Sermon on the Mount, that doesn't tell us anything. I like to call it, "The sermon on salvation." What is the Sermon on the Mount? It doesn't tell you the subject. I mean, how would you like it if I put out a tape that said, "The sermon from the pulpit." That doesn't tell you anything. What's it about? It's a sermon on salvation, Matthew 5 to 7. In that sermon which is a great, great sermon on salvation, Jesus destroyed all their hope in ritual. He attacked their prayers and said it's nothing but vain repetition. He attacked their alms giving and said it's nothing but parading your self-righteous pride. He attacked their sacrifices. He attacked their Sabbath observances. He attacked their oaths. He attacked their vows. He attacked their misinterpretation of the Law of God. He attacked everything they were ceremonially and ritualistically hanging on to. And in a sense He said to them, "All of that stuff is what Paul said in Philippians 3, it's manure apart from repentance."

The churches are full of people going through the motions. People who were baptized as babies, people who were baptized as young people, people baptized as adults, people who go to the church and go through whatever ordinances their churches call for them to go through, whether it's confirmation or whether they go and the priest tells them to say so many Hail Marys and they go through their beads and they go through whatever patterns of penancing they go through, etc., etc., etc., light so many candles, or whatever, pray so many prayers, in the end it has absolutely nothing to

do with anything. You cannot flee the wrath to come by scrambling and diving in the water. Verse 8 says you have to bring forth fruit that demonstrate repentance.

And here...there was Paul, you know, Philippians 3, said, "Ah, you know, I...I'm from Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, the Hebrew of the Hebrews...that means he was kosher, traditional, kept the law, zealous for the law, blameless before the law, ceremonially down to the gnat's eyebrow, just like any good Pharisee." And he said, "I took a look at it when I saw Christ and it was all dung."

John is not telling them they don't need to escape. He's telling them they need to escape. But not like scrambling snakes just headed for the water, that won't do it. A snake in the water is just a snake in the water. What they needed was a change of nature. It's impossible for any sinner to escape judgment by any or all external rituals. True repentance then honestly reflects on personal sin...the depth and height and length and breadth of it. Honestly recognizes divine wrath and totally rejects all religious ritual as a means of forgiveness. Now baptism is an outward sign of something in the heart, but John knew well it could be an outward sign of nothing in the heart as it was in many cases in his ministry...sad to say.

And then number four, repenters not only reflect on personal sin, recognize divine wrath and reject religious ritual, but they renounce ancestry...they renounce ancestry, family ancestry. Look at verse 8 again. "Do not...he says...do not, I warn you, do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father.'" Now what was this? We don't have anything to fear from the wrath to come, we are the children of Abraham. And after all, salvation is genetic, it just gets passed down, we're Jewish, we have Abraham for our father. They were basing their eternal hope on their genes. They were Abraham's offspring. They were the people of the promised blessing. They were the people to whom God had made great unilateral, irrevocable, unconditional, eternal promises both to Abraham and to David. They were the people who were promised the land and blessing and a kingdom. They had been promised redemption, according to Galatians 3, that was in the Abrahamic Covenant. They were also promised a Redeemer in the Abrahamic Covenant with the seed who was not many seeds but THE seed, Messiah. They were counting on that descent.

In John chapter 8 they enter into a discussion with Jesus, the Jewish leaders again, and those who are religious leaders, the theologians, and they say to Jesus, "We are Abraham's offspring." And Jesus says to them, "I know you're Abraham's offspring...verse 37...yet you seek to kill Me because My word has no place in you." In verse 39, "If you're Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham." You are the children of Abraham, but look, Abraham didn't kill God. He didn't try to kill God. That's what you're trying to do. You're doing the deeds of your father, he says, and your father is the devil.

Not all Israel is Israel. And he is not a Jew that is one outwardly but one inwardly, Romans 2. That's no defense against God's judgment. That is no defense against God's judgment. The pro...they knew that, they knew the prophets. Ezekiel 18, they knew what Ezekiel 18 says that everybody is

going to be basically judged on his own life. Verse 21, "If the wicked man turns from his sins which he has committed and observes My statutes, practices justice, righteousness, he shall surely live and shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God? Rather than that he should turn from his ways and live." God says...Look, it's up to you. Ezekiel says you have to choose to live or die. He will live if he obeys.

Same thing down in verse 30, "Repent, turn away from your transgressions so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away your transgressions which you've committed," and so forth. Why do you want to die?...he says. "Why do you want to die, O house of Israel?" Being in the house of Israel doesn't protect you from eternal death. Repentance, faith in God does.

Later on in Luke's gospel, chapter 13. Jesus makes an interesting statement. Luke 13:16, just a brief statement, "And this woman," this is more of this dialogue Jesus has with the people who don't understand, he's teaching here in this synagogue on a Sabbath, trying to help them to understand individual faith. Verse 16, He says, "This woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is." Yeah, she's a daughter of Abraham, "But Satan has bound her for 18 long years." Wow, she is a daughter of Abraham and Satan bound her. Later in verse 28, "There's going to be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God and yourselves being cast out." You may be Jewish, and He's very clear about this, but you may be shut out of the Kingdom. That doesn't protect you. The fact that you may have been raised in a Christian family doesn't make you a Christian. The fact that you may have been baptized as an infant doesn't secure your salvation. By the way, you remember the rich man that died and went to hell? He says, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me," he was Jewish. What's he doing there? Boy, Jesus made it pretty clear. Heritage doesn't save you.

Zaccheus was a Jew, chapter 19 of Luke. He needed salvation. Jesus went to his house, he was saved.

So, John says then in very sarcastic words, again at the end of verse 8, "Don't you begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father, for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.'" That's no big deal. God can make children of Abraham out of the rocks. You think you're special? God can make as many children of Abraham as He wants out of the dirt.

That is a very demeaning statement. You understand the tone of John, don't you, is very harsh. You snakes...you nobodies that God can make out of a bunch of dirt. In fact, if you go back to Isaiah 51 verses 1 and 2, God says, "Remember the rock from which you were hewn," almost as if to say, you know, you were...God just sort of cut you out of a rock to begin with and God can make more of you if

He chooses out of the rocks lying around here on the ground. That's nothing special.

You have to come to the place if you want to truly repent where you don't base your relationship to God on anything ancestral. It doesn't matter what your father believes, your mother believes...their salvation doesn't pass to you. I don't think there are people who understand that. There's a whole world of Greek orthodox people, a whole world of Russian orthodox people who believe that salvation is generationally passed down. There are people in the Reform Movement, people in the sacerdotal, sacramental church, Roman Catholicism, who believe somehow that rites which they engaged in as infants passed salvation down from the parents to them. Actually at infant baptism the parents' faith is counted for the salvation of the infant.

Abraham's true children, according to the Scripture, are those who follow the faith of Abraham. It's not genetic. You're Abraham's child if you follow the faith of Abraham. I wish we had time to look at Romans 2, Romans 4, Romans 9, Galatians 3 to see that. What you did get from Abraham, by the way, is sin nature and judgment.

So, what is true repentance? Boy, it demands a straight shot. True repentance calls for honest reflection on personal sin. It calls for a recognition of divine wrath. It calls for a rejection of any religious ritual as a means of salvation and the renouncing of any ancestral hope. And even all of that won't save you cause there's two more. True repenters also, number five and we'll just mention these, do them next week, must be spiritually transformed. There must be the revelation of a spiritual transformation. And the sixth one, they must, this is, of course, the heart of it all, receive the true Messiah. We'll see all of that in the rest of the text.

There's no more important thing than giving a clear message of the gospel and that means a clear understanding of repentance. John is a wonderful model. You say, "Yeah, but he was so harsh." Yeah, but the issue is so serious...so serious. You can do it with love, you should do it with tenderness, there should be a tear in the voice and a tear in the eye, but at the same time you cannot hold back. People have to come to grips with personal sin, the depth and height and length and breadth of it. They have to recognize the reality of divine wrath to motivate them to seek forgiveness and escape. But they must reject any external religious ritual and renounce any ancestral kind of genetic hope or any kind of ceremonial hope passed down from their parents. We'll see the last two next time. Let's pray.

Father, we do know that in the end true repentance must include regeneration, Your work of transformation based upon true faith in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, it's so..so empowering for us to have the understanding You give us in Your Word cause then when we go into our own hearts to assess our own situation, we have the knowledge we need to know that our own salvation is real, as well as then to take it to others and be confident that what we're telling them is truth. Thank You for empowering us with Your Word, with the truth. Our hearts really grieve for so

many people in the churches whose repentance is a shallow superficial repentance, who may not even be scrambling to escape wrath since they perhaps never even hear about it, who may not be at all dealing with an honest review of the length and breadth and height and depth of their sinfulness, who perhaps don't even understand what it is to reject completely any ritual or any ancestry, only to embrace the Savior. Our Father, how we pray that the true gospel, the true news of forgiveness, the true message that motivates it would be preached far and wide across this world to Your glory and that we might be part of doing that, we pray in the Savior's name. Amen.

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