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

True Repentance: God's Highway to the Heart, Part 2
Scripture: Luke 3:8-14
Code: 42-42

We are in a rich and glorious study of Luke's gospel. And we're finding in Luke's gospel the foundations of the Christian faith as well as the bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament. We're in chapter 3 and I would invite you, if you would, to open your Bible to Luke chapter 3.

Jesus in Matthew chapter 11 and verse 11 said that of those that are born of women, that involves all in the human race, the greatest man who ever lived was named John...the greatest man who ever lived up until his time was John...greater than Abraham and Moses and David and Solomon and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel and Ezekiel and anybody and everybody else. There was much about John the Baptist to emulate. He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb which meant that his life functioned under divine direction and power. He was a man who lived a simple and frugal and almost self-denying life. He spent his entire ministry pointing toward Jesus Christ. All of those are admirable qualities. And if one were to pick a hero, somebody to pattern their life after, John the Baptist would be the best choice of those people who preceded Jesus Christ.

And I think not only in those personal areas, but in the fact that John is a notable model for the preacher. Today in our contemporary church environment there are all kinds of preaching models. I won't bore you with all the options, they're almost endless. Young men are going off to seminary and being trained into all kinds of different styles of preaching...models of preaching.

But I would like to offer to you and to the church in this generation John the Baptist as the model for preaching. I'm not talking about his wardrobe, I don't think God expects us to wear camel skin. I'm not talking about his diet, I don't think we need to eat locusts and wild honey. And I'm not talking about his location, I don't think we have to go out in the desert and expect everybody to come to us. But I am talking about his message because what marked John was that he was a preacher of repentance and he was a preacher of Jesus Christ.

Really, those were the two features in his ministry. He called on people to turn from their sin and embrace the Messiah. And that, of course, is the essence of all true gospel preaching. We live in a time today when there is a minimalistic presentation of Jesus Christ, at best, in many preaching environments. And there's an utter absence of the issue of repentance. In fact, just in the last couple of weeks a newsletter from a prominent ministry defended the fact that the gospel could be preached without any mention of repentance at all.

When I wrote the book a number of years ago, The Gospel According to Jesusand the sequel to that book called Faith Worksabout to be released in another few weeks called The Gospel According to the Apostles, I wrote those two books to confront the fact that there was a growing movement in the church to deny the role of repentance in salvation. Just an unthinkable thing to occur.

John was a preacher of repentance. Matthew tells us in his third chapter that John came and said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And Jesus came and said, "Repent." Luke records for us in the fifth chapter that Jesus said He didn't come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Repentance is the issue. In the thirteenth chapter of Luke and the third verse and the fifth verse, Jesus said if you don't repent you'll perish.

Repentance so often ignored today, so often overlooked and minimalized is at the very heart of any biblical gospel ministry. And John was a preacher of salvation. He was preaching that people could have the forgiveness of sin and New Covenant salvation, as we've already learned. And the essence of that preaching is two-fold...you preach repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's precisely what Acts 20 says the Apostles preached. That is gospel preaching.

We could certainly desire to call the preachers of our modern world back to that biblical preaching where they preach true repentance and a true understanding of the Lord Jesus Christ. Well John did. That's what marked his preaching. He becomes for us then a wonderful model for gospel preaching, New Covenant preaching, preaching to sinners telling them they can be forgiven if they repent and if they embrace the true Christ, the true Messiah.

That is God's promise not just for Israel. John was directed to preach to Israel but that is God's promise to all sinners of all times. Salvation, forgiveness of sin, eternal life is given to those who repent of sin and acknowledge Jesus Christ as the only Savior.

Now the prophet John's ministry was not unlike the ministry of prophets before him. All the prophets before him talked about sin and they talked about righteousness and they talked about forgiveness. And they saw God as a Savior and a forgiver and for those who didn't receive His salvation and forgiveness, God then is a judge and an executioner. John just stands at the pinnacle of that with the most concise and defined message and because he was living at the time the Messiah came he can point most directly of all the prophets to the Messiah.

When John began his preaching in the wilderness, about six months before Jesus appeared to begin his public ministry, when John began his preaching out in the wilderness of Judea, the hope for the Messiah was very high. The Jews were weary, to put it mildly, of Roman oppression and prior to that Greek oppression. Of course, way back the oppression of the Medo-Persians and even the captivity of the Babylonians. They were ready for their own king and they were ready for the fulfillment of

everything that had been promised to Abraham and David and they hadn't seen that fulfillment. They were ready for the Savior to come, the Redeemer, the One who would bring New Covenant salvation, New Covenant forgiveness and usher them in to the fulfillment of all Abrahamic and Davidic promise. They were looking for a monarch who would come and conquer nations, and they got a Lamb who came to conquer sin first. John was a model for this.

He did talk about the Kingdom, but he also talked about repentance. He did talk about the King, but he also talked about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world because before they could ever have the Kingdom and the fulfillment of Abrahamic and Davidic promise, they had to come through New Covenant salvation by way of repentance and faith in the Savior and the Redeemer, the Messiah. Luke wants us to understand John's message because it is a message for all the ages. And so he gives us a sample of John's preaching, starting in verse 7 and down to verse 17. That's the text we're looking at, Luke 3:7 to 17.

And as we go through this passage, we really do see the essence of gospel preaching. This, for me, is the model of how we are to preach. John is a great example. We are greatly indebted to Luke for giving us such a clear sample of John's great preaching, and in so doing providing for us the powerful and clear pattern for everybody who proclaims the good news of forgiveness.

Now as we go through this section, as I mentioned to you last week, we see the nature of true repentance. Because the main note that John sounded was the note of repentance, because he came calling people to repent, he was very clear as to what that involved. And that, as I told you last week, is absolutely critical today because there is such a tendency today to downplay repentance, to shrink repentance down to some minimal level, we face a tremendous amount of false repentance, a tremendous amount of shallow repentance, a tremendous amount of non-saving, superficial repentance.

Now there was nothing superficial about John's message. John preached what you would call hard truth, confrontive truth, even harsh truth because he understood the urgency of repentance and salvation. John was very confrontive. He was very direct. He paid no attention to his culture, in fact he lived his 30 years apart from the culture the whole time in the wilderness. He was not subject to the nuances of the political culture of the Romans, nor was he subject to the nuances of the religious culture of the Jews. He lived apart from all of that. He was culturally ignorant, I guess we could say, and more so, culturally indifferent. He was not interested in what the society thought or what they wanted to hear, he was only interested in the message that came from God to them. And so, John's message is very direct, very straightforward, very unembellished hard truth.

Even so...even so, most of the people apparently who came out and responded to John's preaching and repented and were baptized and there were a lot of them because the Bible says all Judea and Jerusalem were going out to him, most of the people that were coming to him and they involved the

multitudes in general. They involved the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious leaders. They involved the tax collectors, the outcasts of society. They involved the soldiers which would be Jewish soldiers most likely, those who were attached to Herod Antipas up at Perea and other Jewish soldiers who functioned as policemen in Jerusalem. All of these various elements of society all going out to be baptized to get ready for Messiah, making some kind of act of repentance, some kind of confession and yet when you get to the end of it all and Jesus has lived and died and gone back to heaven, there are only 120 disciples gathered in an upper room. We can only conclude then that if there were only 120 who were really devoted to Jesus Christ, that most of this was superficial. And amazingly that in the face of hard preaching, that in the face of very direct preaching.

Now if even direct preaching by this man, this great gifted preacher, the greatest of all prophets up to his time, if even that kind of preaching resulted in some large extent of superficiality, what in the world can we expect today with the kind of preaching most people hear? We need to go back and look at John. Matthew says John came preaching repentance, and he did. And Jesus came preaching repentance, and the apostles throughout the book of Acts were preaching repentance. And I need to remind you how serious it is to preach a message without a call to true repentance because apart from true repentance there is no salvation. It's not enough to say to someone...You need to accept Jesus as your personal Savior. I know what people mean when they say that and it's well intentioned, I don't question that. But such words, frankly, are really inadequate to instruct a sinner in the way of salvation. You need to accept Jesus as your personal Savior as if you were sitting in the seat of sovereignty and you were going to give Jesus the privilege of being accepted by you.

You hear people say, "Well, you need to make a decision for Christ," as if the salvation decision was yours and not His. See, those kinds of statements subtly change the focus of the gospel, and they change it subtly away from repentance. What the sinner needs to do is not accept Jesus Christ or make a decision for Christ, but to repent and cry out and ask Jesus Christ to accept him in spite of his sin. He asks Christ if He would make a decision to forgive him. It's not your decision for Christ, it's His decision for you that matters.

I was sitting in my office a few years ago. About five o'clock in the afternoon I received a phone call from the Riverside Hospital down here in North Hollywood. And the person in the hospital said, "Pastor MacArthur, there's a request from a dying patient for you to come down to the hospital." And I said sure, I'll come right away. And I jumped in the car and drove down there. I walked into a room and I looked in the bed and there was a young man, I found out his name was David Chastain(?). He was dying of AIDS. He was in the throes of death and it was not a pretty sight. There also were, I think, three other homosexuals in the room. One was a former lover. Another was a representative of the Gay and Lesbian task force that come to the side of people in that situation. And the other was some male nurse, as best I could assess. But they were all there in the room. I walked in and I knew immediately, of course, the context of all of this.

Well, as soon as I walked in and announced who I was, the three left quickly and I was left standing at the bedside with David. And I said, "I'm John MacArthur."

He said, "Yes I know, thank you so much for coming." He said, "I needed you to come because I'm frightened." He said, "I'm dying and I'm going to be dead very soon and I'm going to go to hell forever. And I don't want to go to hell." And then he began to weep. And he said, "I just want to know if there's any hope for me."

I said, "Well, God is a Savior and He saves all who call upon him if you seek Him with all your heart. And if you repent honestly and genuinely, He'll not turn you away. But," I said, "it's up to you to ask Him." I didn't ask him to accept Christ, I told him to ask Jesus if He would accept him. I said, "Do you know the gospel?"

He said, "Yes, I know it very well. I was raised in it. My parents are Christians. I was raised in a Christian family. I attended Christian school. I went two years to a Bible college. And then I abandoned it all and for the last...I think he said about 20 years, maybe 15 or 20 years...I've been living at the basest level of a homosexual life style, the grossest and basest level." And he said, "I've had endless guilt. I know it's sin. I know it's wrong. I know it offended God. I know I deserve to go to hell, but I want God to forgive me. And I know about the death of Christ and I know about His resurrection." He went over that.

He said, "What do I do?"

I said, "Well, I think what you should do is ask Him to save you." It's like the thief, you know, what did he say? Lord...what? He didn't say, "Lord, I accept you." He said, "Lord...what?...remember me." It's like the publican beating on his chest saying, not Lord I accept you, I make a decision for you, but, "Lord...he says...be merciful to me, a sinner."

So I said...I reminded him of the publican who prayed that in Luke 18. I said, "Why don't you just ask God to be merciful to you?"

So, he grabbed a hold of my hand and held my hand and he began to cry out to the Lord. It was a long...long time. He confessed his sin. He said, "I know it's sin, I've always known it's sin. I know it violates Your law and I know I don't deserve Your forgiveness." And he was kind of weeping and praying and squeezing my hand with the strength that he had. And he just pled with God to save him and forgive him and apply the death of Christ to him. And then when he was done, I prayed the same thing and prayed. And, you know, Jesus said, "Him that comes to Me I'll never...what?...cast away." So there was a real calm after I suppose ten minutes or maybe more, maybe 15 minutes of this intense praying. And there was a real calm. There was just a peace that you could see in his heart.

And I assured him that if his repentance was real and his faith was true, God would save him and that God would be glorified in showing His mercy and never would withhold it from true repentance. And just a calm came over him

And just a little interesting thing...he looked at the calendar, there was a calendar on the wall opposite his bed and he just kept looking at it. I said, "What are you looking at?" He said, "I'm looking at the date because I want to remember the day of my new beginning." I remember that line. And he lived about a week and I ran a shuttle down there with some books and he read just intensely as much as he could in those last days. He said, one time, he said, "I...I just really feel like I want to get to know the Lord before I meet Him to make up for lost years." And he was a witness to those people in that environment until his death.

You see, that's what...that's what presenting the gospel is all about and it's not about you accepting Christ, it's about you asking Christ to accept you, right? That's the issue. It's at His discretion. We don't call sinners to repent enough today. We're not asking Him to take moral action. We have this superficial thing about accepting Jesus. There's...there's moral action here. There's a real moral issue. There's a grappling with a condition that is endemic, systemic, profound called sin. It isn't that Jesus is standing hat in hand waiting for sinners to render a verdict on Him. That isn't it. It's that He is ready to render a verdict on sinners. They are at the disposal of His sovereignty. But He promises for those who truly repent that He will provide forgiveness. So the gospel is a call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, and that is the essence of what John preached. And that is the essence of what all true preachers preach. And those who don't preach that don't preach truly. We preach repentance. That's what I said. In Luke 13:3 and 5 Jesus said, "If you don't repent, you'll perish." We preach repentance. That is our message.

At the very end of Luke's gospel in the great commission, Jesus says, "Repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations." That's what we do. We preach that God forgives sinners who repent and believe in the name of Jesus Christ. That's the gospel...that's the gospel.

Here we are again in our day today fighting...fighting for the preservation of the doctrine of repentance in the gospel. I'm glad that book is coming out again on The Gospel According to the Apostlescause it has a whole section demanding the preaching of repentance.

John was aware of shallow conversion. He was aware of that. He was aware that the Jewish people were very good at superficial religion and so the tone of his preaching was urgent and the tone of his preaching was even harsh as he spoke hard truth calling sinners to true penitence.

Now with that as a background, let's look at the text now and we're going to see that there are six elements in John's preaching...six elements that define for us true repentance. This is important

cause people will say, "Well I believe in repentance," and then redefine it in some way that it's not consistent with true repentance.

So what is repentance? Well John gives us six characteristics of a true repenter so we can see it in the demonstration that is given here as Luke records the preaching of John. And by the way, from verse 7 to 17, actually including verse 18, you have a sample of John's preaching. But now remember, he preached for months and he preached every day all day as the crowds kept coming and kept coming and kept coming. And the verbs in this passage, a number of the verbs are imperfect which is continuous action and present tense which also is continuous action so that this is kind of the cycle of John's preaching and the cycle of his interaction with the cycle of people who kept coming day after day. So this is really a sampler of the consistent kind of preaching John did day after day and gives us a great model for preaching for true repentance and salvation.

Now a true repenter is to be known by six characteristics. Number one, I already covered the first four, we're just going to review...number one, true repenters reflect on personal sin...they reflect on personal sin. Remember, we looked back at verse 5 at that wonderful passage from Isaiah 40, part of which says, "Every ravine shall be filled up, every mountain and hill shall be brought low, the crooked shall become straight, the rough road smooth." And we said if you're going to make a highway to the heart, a highway on which God can come into the heart, you have to do some preparation, heart preparation. And the ravine is the low and the base and the hidden of the secret shameful things of the heart that have to be brought up to the light. And we talk about the mountains and the hills being the lofty things, the things of pride and self-righteousness and they have to be brought low. And then we talked about the skolios, the crooked, the bent things that need to be straightened out, the things of deception and dishonesty. And then the rough roads have to be made smooth. All the other bumps, all the...all the other iniquities that litter our lives, they all have to be dealt with, they have to be examined. There's a real honest internal introspective reflection on personal sin. That's true of a true repenter. They do an inventory on their sin and they are overwhelmed by it and they want forgiveness.

Secondly, true repenters reflect on personal sin, secondly, reviewing, true repenters recognize divine wrath...they recognize divine wrath. It's absolutely critical to preach the doctrine of hell. It's critical to preach the doctrine of eternal judgment as John did because why else would someone want their sins forgiven if there was no hell? If there was no judgment? And so, John, end of verse 7, preached about the wrath to come...he preached about the wrath to come. That is an expression well known to the Jews, it refers to God's final wrath, God's final vengeance, the judgment that Messiah would bring on the ungodly.

And it's in light of the wrath to come, it's in light of eternal hell, eternal judgment, eternal punishment that forgiveness becomes urgent. And that's what calls for the harsh words, or the hard truth, the straightforward truth to shake people out of shallow attitudes and shallow repentance.

In fact, to show you how hard John was on his audience, he says in verse 7, "When the multitudes were coming," the multitudes, and, of course, Matthew tells us in front there were the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and Jesus says right to the Pharisees and Sadducees, as well as the multitude around them, "You brood of vipers." In other words, you're coming but there isn't any change in your nature, you're still the sons of Satan, you're still of your father, the devil, the original serpent. You're still sons of snakes. You haven't had any change in your wicked nature..."Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Remember I told you what he means by that is you're like snakes scrambling in front of a brush fire, scrambling toward the water. Here you come scrambling down the back hills of Jerusalem, back side of Judea, you're scrambling as if you were snakes trying to escape from the wrath and you're scrambling down there to get in the water of this baptism thinking that by that you can escape the wrath to come...who told you that? There's no change in your nature, you're just crazed like snakes scrambling toward water chased by a brush fire. You recognize the fire of judgment but you haven't recognized that you are snakes. And so he unveils that fact to them.

Yes, they did recognize the wrath to come, that's necessary. Yes, there had to be an honest reflection on personal sin. Some of them were apparently doing that or they wouldn't have submitted to John's baptism because John's baptism was the baptism that was usually reserved for Gentiles who were proselyting into Israel, becoming Jews by...by a baptismal ceremony, that is they were proselytes to Judaism. And what Jew would want to admit that he was no better than a Gentile? So some of them were doing some reflection on personal sin, saying...Okay, I'm not in the covenant, okay I'm not in the family of God, okay I'm no better than a Gentile, I'll go ahead with that baptism...and yes, I see the wrath to come. So they had come this far.

There's a third characteristic that John points out to them. True repenters reject religious ritual. "Who warned you to flee?" Remember, I told you what he's saying there is...Did you think that by this rite of baptism you would escape the wrath to come? You're like snakes who think if they can get to the water they'll escape the fire...but there's still no change in your nature. It doesn't do you any good to come down here and go through the water, that is not enough. You have to reject religious ritual. Baptism doesn't save. We went into that last time. You cannot avoid God's wrath by any religious ceremony, including baptism.

So true repentance is a matter of recognizing your personal sin, recognizing divine wrath, rejecting ritual as a means of salvation, any ritual. And then fourthly, John also says you have to renounce family ancestry. You cannot trust in your ancestry. In verse 8, in the middle of the verse, they would say...and he knew it so he says..."Don't start saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father.'" Don't say...we're going to get out of this wrath, we're going to escape because after all, Abraham is our father and God gave the covenant to Abraham back in Genesis 12 and 15 and 18 and reiterated it to Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and we are in that line and we are born out of the loins of Abraham, we are the people of the covenant. And because we're Abraham's children we're going to be God's

people and we're going to receive all the Abrahamic promises of blessing and the land and prosperity and all of that.

He says you can't count on that, you can't count on your family, you can't count on your ancestry. You can't count on your heritage. And in a very sarcastic way he says...God can make children of Abraham out of these rocks, that's nothing special. And that's a statement to demean their Abrahamic ancestry. It isn't that it didn't mean anything, but they really inherited from Abraham was sin. It's really what he passed on to them. They did inherit covenant promise which means opportunity for spiritual blessing, it doesn't mean spiritual blessing, it means opportunity for spiritual blessing if they believed and obeyed God. So they did inherit from Abraham privileges but those privileges were never going to be theirs, apart from faith and obedience. In fact, because of their privileges their rejection was far more serious and their punishment far greater. So basically John says to them your Abrahamic ancestry doesn't mean anything, God can make sons of Abraham out of rocks. It's not a Jew, Paul said in Romans 2:28, who is one outwardly, it's a Jew who is one inwardly.

So a true repenter, and this is anybody, these people and anybody, a true repenter reflects on personal sin. There's a real honest assessment and inventory of sin. Also recognizes divine wrath. You have an eschatology and a theology that indicates God is judge and there is the end of the age when God is going to bring that judgment and there's going to be a real hell and a real eternal punishment. At the same time true repenters reject ritual as a means of salvation and they reject ancestry as a protection from judgment.

There's a fifth component and that's the one I want to have you look at in the few minutes we have left. True repenters reveal spiritual transformation. True repenters reveal spiritual transformation. In other words, look at verse 8 and we'll get back to the text here, we've just been reviewing up to now, let's pick it up in verse 8. "Therefore," okay, you want to escape from the wrath to come, you scrambling snakes headed for the water, "Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance."

In other words, John says if the repentance is real it will show up in your conduct...it will show up in your behavior. It will show up in your attitudes. It will show up in your actions. Let's see the fruit...let's see the fruit.

When the Apostle Paul was giving his testimony to Agrippa, the king, in the twenty-sixth chapter of Acts, he said to Agrippa, "Consequently, King Agrippa...verse 19...I didn't prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, I kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, also at Jerusalem, throughout the region of Judea, even to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God performing deeds appropriate to repentance."

Is your repentance real? Then let's see it manifest in your life. If this repentance is real, listen to this, it is the work of God. If it's real repentance, it's the kind of repentance that Paul wrote to Timothy

about that God is granting, that God is working and it means it's consistent with regeneration. Repentance doesn't occur in a vacuum, it occurs in the environment of regeneration so that the Spirit of God is regenerating and the repentance then is reflective of that new life and it shows up in new attitudes and new conduct.

And this is not...this is not unfamiliar to the Jewish people. They knew that whenever there was a call to repentance, there was a call to a new approach to life. In...for example, Isaiah 1, where this statement of depravity, your whole head is sick, the whole heart is faint, from the sole of the foot to the head there's nothing sound in it. You're depraved from top to bottom, Isaiah says in verses 5 and 6. Then in verse 16 he says, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Reprove the ruthless. Defend the orphans and plead for the widow."

In other words, you want to repent? Then let's see the work of God in that repentance in your life. Though your sins are scarlet, they'll be white as snow; though they were red like crimson, they'll be like wool. If God is changing you and God is cleansing you, then we're going to see it in the way you treat orphans, the way you treat widows and the way you treat God's Law.

The familiar call to repentance in 2 Chronicles chapter 7 verse 14, "My people who are called by My name humble themselves and they pray and they seek My face and they turn from their wicked ways. Then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin." It's when there's a turning. It's when there's a rejection of sin and there's a pursuit of righteousness that there is evidence of the real working of God.

One other passage along this line, just quickly. Ezekiel 33:19, "When the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness, he will live."

When God is doing the work, when God the Father is drawing and when God is doing the work of conversion, transformation, new birth, regeneration, the repentance is going to show up in changed life. So true repenters reveal spiritual transformation.

Now with that you could also compare Ezekiel 36 where the work of God is going on in New Covenant fashion, where the New Covenant is at work in the life of a person. It says in verse 25, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, you'll be clean, I'll cleanse you from all your filthiness, from all your idols. I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit within you, move the heart of stone from your flesh, give you a heart of flesh. I'll put My Spirit within you...listen to this...and cause you to walk in My statutes and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."

That's right. When God is doing the work, there's a spiritual transformation...there's a spiritual transformation. And now go down to verse 9 and here's another warning. "Also, the ax, by the way,

is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So John says, and I just want to remind you that God is ready to do the judgment. He's already walked out to the orchard, He's already surveyed the trees and He's laid the ax down against one of the trees, He's ready to do the judgment. And if He looks at your tree and there aren't any elements of fruit on the tree, then the ax is going to be laid at the root of the tree and the tree then, having been chopped down, is going to be thrown into the fire and the fire is eternal judgment. The same eternal judgment, the same fire that Malachi warned them about in the last book of the Old Testament when he said He's like a refiner's fire, He's going to come in fiery judgment, the Messiah is. So they knew that with the Messiah's coming was blessing but also was fiery, fiery judgment because the prophets had made it abundantly clear that that was so.

And so, John just reminds them...Look, either you repent a real true repentance manifested in fruit...and fruit, by the way, I won't take time to develop this, is attitudes and actions that are righteous...attitudes and actions that are righteous, that manifest the love of God and obedience to His Word. And he's simply saying...If I don't see that, then I don't see the fruit of true repentance. It's not enough for you to scramble down here and get through the water and think that your Abrahamic ancestry and your ritual and your remorse about your sin is enough, there has to be indication of a hatred of sin and a love of righteousness that shows up in a changed behavior, which indicates regeneration. And if it's not there, if the fruits not there, the ax is going to be struck at the root of the tree. This is not collective Israel because it says "every tree that doesn't bear good fruit," it's talking about individuals here, any sinner and every sinner is in view. And if there's not the right fruit, that sinner is going to be destroyed, if there's not the evidence of spiritual transformation, regeneration.

And, of course, if enough individuals reject, then you have a national situation. And that's what happened. There were many individuals whose repentance was shallow and the ax was laid at the root of the tree, believe me, in those individuals lives. In 70 A.D. the Romans came in there and murdered, literally massacred a million, one-hundred thousand Jews and the ax fell in judgment and those people were cast into eternal hell. There were so many of them that it constituted a nation literally going into temporary exile, as it were, out of existence temporarily. And, of course, we're living in a day when we're watching God bringing them back...bringing them back, reconstituting them a nation in 1948 and getting them ready for the great salvation yet to come in the millennial Kingdom that will fulfill His promises to David. And at that time they will believe, they will look on Him whom they've pierced, they will mourn for Him and then a fountain of cleansing will be opened and they will be spiritually transformed and they will become the witness nation that God always wanted them to be and their witness all through the Tribulation and their witness all through the Kingdom so that on the robe of every Jew will be hanging ten Gentiles saying..."Take me to see the King of Kings." But at the time that John was preaching, they rejected. The time of Jesus preaching, they rejected. So many individuals rejected that it constituted a national rejection. But every tree that doesn't bear good fruit will be cut down.

And by the way, the Messiah will not only judge Israel this way, but He'll judge all men this way. Zephaniah 1, "The great day of the Lord is near, very near, coming very quickly, it's a day of wrath, a day of trouble, distress, destruction desolation, darkness, gloom, clouds, thick darkness." And at the end it says, "He will make a complete end on the day of the Lord's wrath, all the earth will be devoured. He will make a complete end, a terrifying one of all the inhabitants of the earth." It isn't just Jewish people that will feel the wrath of God, anyone who rejects the Messiah will be subject to that final terrifying judgment. He says in chapter 3 of Zephaniah verse 8, "He will pour out His indignation and burning anger on the whole earth."

So, John preaches a very strong message of judgment on individuals. That's the message. But if enough individuals reject, it becomes a national issue, as in the case of Israel. And if enough individuals reject, it becomes a world issue, as in the case of today as the world is largely made up of sinners who refuse to repent.

The evidence of repentance then is righteous deeds. That's why Romans 2:5 to 8 says God is going to judge finally on our deeds because the deeds aren't the way we earn our salvation, they're the demonstration that we have been saved by grace. You have been saved unto good works, Ephesians 2:10 says.

So the crowd is getting the seriousness of the message, right? And apparently they've worked their way through the list, that they have done some reflecting on their own sin...so much that they're willing to submit themselves to a baptism that confesses their no better than Gentiles, and that was very hard for proud Jews to swallow. And they went so far as to recognize divine wrath and to scramble to escape it because it was all over the prophets of the Old Testament. They also had to reject the ritual as a saving ritual and they had to reject their ancestry from Abraham as any kind of protection from judgment. In fact, it only exacerbated the judgment if they rejected their Messiah because they had received more revelation, they were more accountable to be more greatly punished.

And here they're told they have to have a life that demonstrates this true repentance. That creates some questions, go to verse 10, this is just a brief dialogue. "And the multitudes were questioning him saying, 'Then what shall we do?'" So the crowd said...You want the fruits of repentance, we don't want the ax to fall, we don't want to be thrown into hell, so what do we do? What does God want to see?

"And he would answer and say," the form of those words there in the original indicates that this was a constant thing with him. It's not that he once answered and said...it's he would answer anytime this came up and it came up all the time because he preached like this all the time. And he would answer and say to them..."Let the man who has two tunics," tunic, the word there refers to an undergarment

and you only wore one of those so if you had two you had a spare one. It was the undergarment you wore over your skin and then you wore your outer garment on top of that. "So if somebody has two of those then share with the person who doesn't have any and whoever has food, do the same."

Now this doesn't see...well this is a pretty menial kind of thing, it's pretty trivial. Is this the kind of fruit of righteousness? Sure because the first great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. But the second great commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Now that's straightforward. The Jews knew that very well. They knew Leviticus 19:18 because Leviticus 19:18 says you shall love your neighbor as yourself, that was reiterated all through the Old Testament. You can see it in many, many places. They knew they were to love their neighbors. They knew they were to sacrifice for their neighbors. They would show their love for God by how they loved their neighbors. They would show a transformed heart by...by being unselfish and generous with their neighbors. And that follows all the way through the whole New Testament where we're told we fulfill the whole law of God when we love God and love our neighbors. So he's saying just what Jesus said when He said to His disciples in John 13, "All men will know that you're My disciples if you have...what?...love for one another." How do you show that love? You wash each other's feet. You share a garment with each other. You provide food for each other. In fact, in 1 John 3 he says if you see your brother has need and you don't meet it, how does the love of God dwell in you? And if the love of God doesn't dwell in you, then we might assume that you're not God's children.

So, this is more profound than it appears, perhaps, on the surface because there was a general selfishness, there always is, in unregenerate minds. There would be the evidence of regeneration in selflessness and in the consuming love of one another where you look not on your own things but on the things of others, as Paul said in Philippians 2. So if you have two chiton, two of those linen undergarments and somebody has none, then you give him yours. And if you have more food than you need, then you give that other person what food you have. They understood that. They understood the environment of loving your neighbor as yourself. Clearly they understood it. Isaiah 58:7 and 8; Ezekiel 18:7 to 9; Micah 6:8; and elsewhere called them to this kind of demonstration of sacrificial love.

I mean, even James writes that pure religion and undefiled is to take care of widows and orphans, right? That for some people doesn't seem like a very lofty view of religion but that's it at the heart. Such works are the expression of a true heart repentance and a real conversion and a real work of regeneration. They are not the means of salvation, as the rabbis wrongly teach, but they are the effect of that salvation.

And then another group came and Luke uses them to illustrate the point in verse 12, some tax gatherers. Now you need to know a little about them. They were the most hated people in the country because they were Jews who were collecting taxes for Romans. Usually wealthy Romans

would buy a tax franchise for a certain area of Palestine. They would hire traitor Jews, really, who would then go collect taxes from their countrymen and they were exorbitant, there was tremendous abuse, there was extortion. All the worst possible things as well as representing a Gentile idolatrous government and taking for them money from God's people Israel, that was the traitor of all traitors. That's why the worst that could be said about somebody was you would treat him like a tax collector, a total outcast.

So here come the tax collectors. Now they want to know what to do. They've got a lot on their plate, they must have felt some guilt so they said, "What do we do? What...this is pretty open, you know," they were vilified by the people. They were scorned by the people. They were hated by the people. They were the abusers of the people. The publicans, the chief collectors, as I said, were Romans but under them were these Jews who got rich at the expense of their countrymen and made a life of robbing people. Virtually they were considered virtually unclean and regarded as alienated from God. They were associated with drunkards and prostitutes. They went around collecting poll taxes, land taxes, sales taxes, anything they could come up with. John must have made them feel guilty and if they wanted to repent and get ready for Messiah, what were these Jews going to do?

He says in verse 13, he said to them, "Collect no more than what you've been ordered to." Now the law had been written and apparently the law was a reasonable law developed by the Roman senate and then put upon the people, but it never was adhered to. These tax collectors extorted...the story of Zaccheus will come into play in chapter 19 when we get there, in another millennium. But until that time you can read it for yourself. He just says to them...don't take anymore than the law requires. That's a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree move for the tax collectors. Just take what you're supposed to take, that's all, don't take anymore.

So, love is one manifestation of a transformed life. Another one is honesty...honesty or justice. That's a beautiful picture, fairness and justice, a characteristic of God. Then there's a third group here, soldiers. And in my Bible...in my study Bible I put the note that they were probably Roman soldiers, I think I was wrong. As I've studied it again, it's debatable in some ways, but I really kind of...I'm going to change that in the next edition. I'm going to change it to the fact that I think they were Jewish soldiers who were really assigned to Herod Antipas and stationed in Perea, that's the best way to historically track them back. There's really no compelling reason why Romans would show up here to get ready for the Messiah, and maybe some of the soldiers that functioned in Jerusalem in a sort of a police faction. But these soldiers, most likely Jewish soldiers, came and were questioning the same way. And this would have been probably a repeated scenario...what about us? What do we do? What are the fruit of...what's the fruit of repentance for us? What are you looking for? What is God looking for?

He says to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages." Those are the three major pit falls for people in authority, people who carry the

sword, people who carry weapons, police, soldiers. Those are the three most obvious ways that they can pervert their authority.

The first one, "Do not take money from anyone by force." The Greek verb literally means "to shake down." Don't shake down people. How do you shake down somebody? By intimidation, by threat, you shake them down by force. And soldiers did that. They robbed people. That was the pattern for them. They would rob people. They had authority. They had power. They had weapons and they would shake down people and take whatever they wanted.

I remember being thrown in a jail in Mississippi during some racial problems when I was preaching in black high schools. And I remember a sheriff coming in and throwing me in jail. They literally arrested us for preaching the gospel in a black high school. Took us into one of those "Heat of the Night" places and the guy looks at me and he says...he said, "There's a fine for this."

And I said, "Really."

And he said, "Yes, how much money do you have?"

And I remember saying, "I have $17."

And he said, "That's the fine." And I gave him my $17. That's a shakedown

Now the second thing he says to the soldiers is, "Don't accuse anyone falsely." Have you been reading the Los Angeles papers lately? You've got a whole long laundry list of people who literally have been imprisoned on false accusations. People in positions of police have tremendous authority and tremendous ability to twist and pervert evidence in order to convict people who are innocent and perhaps in some cases to blackmail those people for money, if they want to be set free. Fining people on false charges, extorting them by fraud.

And the third thing he says, "Be content with your wages." It's the discontent over your wages that turns policemen to criminals. If they were content with their wages, they wouldn't be running some kind of scam in the police department and stealing drugs, or selling drugs or using their power and position to corrupt, right?

So these are the issues that they deal with with people in positions of authority like soldiers and police. Oh, he's simply saying...Hey, honesty, integrity, justice, fairness, love, let it be that that's manifest out of your life. This is contrary to how unforgiven, untransformed, unregenerate people act.

Really it all shows love. It all shows justice, honesty, contentment. Those are righteous virtues that evidence a changed life. And so, John is saying...Look, are you a true repenter? Have you reflected on your personal sin? Recognized the wrath to come? Rejected ritual? Renounced ancestry as a

protection from divine judgment? And is there a revelation of transformation into your attitudes and your actions are so different?

I think about Zaccheus, remember, when he was converted. Immediately he returned to everybody four-fold what he had stolen. Remember that? That's an illustration of that.

Now up to this point we have a clear compelling understanding of true repentance. This is the real deal. The genuine repenter does a real honest inventory of the reality of his personal transgression. He understands that no religious ritual and no heritage can bring about escape or protection from divine judgment. That he must have a heart transformation that results in a righteous life that manifests love and justice and honesty and those virtues that are characteristic of God Himself. And all that is good.

There's one other thing missing. And the one thing missing is the sixth and final element in a true gospel preacher's arsenal is this...he must receive the true Messiah...he must receive the true Messiah. All the rest is insufficient without the true Messiah so that you repent but you also put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because Acts 4:12 says, "There is not salvation in any other name." Right? That's John's theme in verses 15 to 17, and that's my theme next week. Let's pray.

Our Father, we are so awed by the power and the consistency of real gospel preaching and the true call for repentance. We're so grateful that You have given us this picture, this model of John, the greatest of men up to his time, the one who pointed to Jesus Christ most clearly, most explicitly, most faithfully. May we do the same. May we live our lives to point sinners to Christ, to call them to repentance and faith in the true Savior. Use us to that end, we pray. Amen.

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