JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHES REPENTANCE

Luke 3:1-14, Key Verse: 3:3

“He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

We started studying Luke’s gospel in our Christmas message series last month. We learned about the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and then, through Carlos’ message, thought about the birth of Jesus. We skipped a couple passages, but we got the basic background, so now in 2021 we start with the actual ministries of John the Baptist and then Jesus. May God bless our study to see Jesus through Luke’s eyes, and then Christ may live more fully in our hearts.

We’ll pick up our Luke’s study by spending just this one message to think exclusively about the ministry of John the Baptist. Most of us know that the purpose of John the Baptist’s ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus, and that he did so by preaching a message of repentance. In this passage, we can see John’s spirit and the contents of his preaching. From these we can learn a lot about the true meaning of repentance. Repenting is one of the best things we can do at new year’s. With God’s help, may we find the grace of personal repentance that will open the way for Jesus to come in newly in 2021.

1. The word of God came to John (1-6)

In our first Luke’s gospel message before Christmas, we saw how the author gave the historical context and timeframe of the events he describes. We learned that John the Baptist and Jesus were born in the time of Herod king of Judea, when Caesar Augustus was emperor of the Roman Empire, and specifically at the time of the census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke does the same thing to orient us at the start of this chapter. Look at verses 1 and 2a. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas…” It’s now a generation later than the events of chapters 1 and 2. The Roman Emperor is now Tiberias Caesar, the successor of Augustus. He reigned from AD 14 to 37, which would make the fifteenth year around AD 29. As it says further down in this chapter, both Jesus and John started their ministries when they were around 30 years old.

The land of Israel was governed by a new Herod, Herod the Great’s son Herod Antipas, and his brother Philip. The Roman governor of the territory was the infamous Pontius Pilate, and the Jewish high priests were Annas and Caiaphas, who like Pilate, would play a part in persecuting and condemning Jesus. It looks like the leadership situation was not any better than it was in the previous generation.

Some people say that God’s work has to start over in every generation, and in some sense that’s true, because in each generation new sinners are born, and so each generation needs new people to receive God’s calling and be equipped for his work. We saw how greatly God worked in Zechariah and Elizabeth’s life, but their time on earth was over. The good news is that, though generations come and go, God is faithful to renew his work. And so, after giving the historical context, Luke at the end of verse two makes a small additional note—did you notice it? He says that in those times that he described, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” It seems like a small thing, the word of God coming to one (at that time) unknown person, and yet it was what set the whole work of God in that generation in motion.

What does it mean that “the word of God came to John”? That an Amazon delivery driver brought a copy of the Old Testament to John’s campsite out in the wilderness? Of course not. It means that the word of God came into John’s heart, and that this was the essence of what convicted him and equipped him for his mission.

Has the word of God come to you? I believe it could happen to God’s servant at one or more turning points in their life. As we said, it doesn’t mean that was the first time John ever read the Bible. John had studied it his whole life, and he already knew from his parents that God had set him apart for a great work. And yet, he couldn’t begin that work until somehow, the word of God came to him in a new way with power. I think many of us understand this. Even now we may even be in a position of seeking for the word of God to come to us newly. You want to serve God, but you don’t feel empowered for it yet; you need the conviction of one word of God to show you how you need to move.

The word of God coming to us is the work of God’s grace—it’s not something we can make happen. But that doesn’t mean it comes at random or that there’s nothing we can do to prepare ourselves for it. Where was John when the word of God came to him? He was in the wilderness. He had already separated himself from the world for the purpose of prayer and searching the scriptures, making himself holy; making himself receptive to the Spirit. When John needed the power of the word of God, he didn’t just goof off until he was hopefully hit by a bolt from the blue; he devoted himself and sought God until he had a clear vision of what God had for him to do. John’s consecrated life, even before he began his specific mission, was the expression of his faith in the power of God’s word. If we need new power from the word of God, we could do a similar thing, seeking the word of God by attending a retreat or a conference. Or we could even do it in the midst of our daily life, through a decision to daily pray and search the scriptures with a specific prayer topic for direction. God will surely reward and bless and use greatly anyone who is that earnest in seeking his word.

Was there a specific Bible verse or passage associated with the word of God that came to John? Of course. If nothing else, I’m sure it included the prophecy from Isaiah about the mission of Christ’s forerunner, which Luke quotes in verses 4-6: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. 5Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. 6And all people will see God’s salvation.’” Probably John had heard and read this passage many times growing up. But one day in the wilderness he really saw how it was for him. What a great hope these verses contain for how a person’s life can bless the world.

With the power of God’s word in his heart, John began his mission life in earnest, going all around the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was the work that best prepared the way for Jesus. Next, let’s look at the content of John’s preaching.

1. John’s uncompromising message (7-9)

John preached that people should repent, and he baptized those who came forward to do so. But what does it really mean to repent, or what is repentance? We all have an intuitive sense of what repentance means, but it’s good to think about what true repentance involves, so that we can know how to seek repentance when we need it.

There are multiple elements of true repentance. The Greek word for repentance can be used in some contexts as simply, “to change one’s mind.” Of course, not every change of mind is real repentance. I might change my mind about whether I like sour cream or not, but that change is not repentance. But it’s definitely true that there is no real repentance unless somehow we begin to think differently—unless the way we think about something changes. So, in helping Bible students to repent, we reason with them, trying to help them understand in their mind that behaviors that the world things are normal and acceptable are really not okay with God.

However, only thinking something is wrong is not enough. We might think in our head that we need to repent of something, but in truth lack any real conviction to do so. Another aspect of repentance is regret or remorse, the painful realization that we have done wrong. Again, just having remorse or regret isn’t repentance. Sometimes we regret something we’ve done just because we’re afraid of facing the earthly consequences of it. Nonetheless, remorse is an important part of repentance. Unless we are convicted to the point of feeling genuine remorse, our repentance is not from our heart. Then, in true repentance, that remorse is accompanied by the earnest desire to change ourselves, to actually become the type of person who does not commit that act anymore.

Most of all, true repentance is something done before God. The most eloquent Biblical expression of a repentant heart is found in Psalm 51. In Psalm 51:4 David says: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.” True repentance sees God as the true and impartial judge and trembles before him.

Repentance before God is also based on the hope that God is merciful and willing to forgive. In this sense, true repentance is only made possible by the gospel. John baptized people who came to repent as an encouragement, as a reason to hope and trust that God is willing to forgive and give them a clean start. But John could not tell them the full good news that God will fully wash away all the sin of repentant sinners who trust in the blood of Jesus that was shed for them on the cross. We can all repent in bigger and smaller ways. But the most important is the gospel repentance in which we are convicted that we are fundamentally sinful beings who have no claim on God’s love and favor. Through this repentance, coming to the end of our self-righteousness, we can come to Jesus and receive his forgiving grace freely. Through gospel repentance followed by faith in Jesus, we are born again.

True repentance is a gift of God’s grace. And God often gives this gift through the preaching of his word, through a preacher who calls sinners to repentance by proclaiming God’s holiness without compromise—someone like John the Baptist.

How did John tell people to repent? Let’s go back to the passage and look at verse 7. “John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” John really does not pull any punches, accusing the people coming to him of being wicked like snakes. Maybe John knows that some of them really are devils who have been stirred up from their nest because they see God’s judgment coming. To prove they are sincere, John says in verse 8, they need to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” John insists that only giving lip service to repentance is not going to cut it with God. Fruit in keeping with repentance means actual changed behavior—to stop doing the acts that we say we repent of. I admire this standard because it’s very simple and cuts out all possibility of self-deception about whether we’ve really repented. Some people are very stubborn, and so we think that they can never repent, but that’s not necessarily true—I’ve seen such people suddenly and drastically change their lifestyle. Other people are very self-critical, always talking about their shortcomings. We might think such people are often repenting, but that’s not necessarily the case either. It’s all about the fruit.

John also makes us realize that pride is what really keeps people from repenting. In verses 8b and 9 he continues, “And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” This refers to the religious pride of some Jewish people, especially the religious leaders, who thought they were exempt from judgment just because they were physically descended from the man of faith, Abraham. Us evangelicals are not immune to religious pride, either. When we begin to pat ourselves on the back because we think we have the right answers, rather than serving sinners as forgiven sinners, it’s hard for God to use us for anything good.

So what do you think about John the Baptist’s style? Do we need to become more like John the Baptist to serve students today? I would say yes, but not in a superficial way; it requires wisdom. We have enough people who scream at each other on social media as if they were John the Baptist, but without any real spiritual authority. On the other hand, seeing such discord and polarization causes other people to become shy and unwilling to interact with others about real problems. What is the solution? What I learned from the leaders’ conference is that we have to build personal trust relationships with students and open their hearts; then, we can touch the hard sin issues without compromise. Our ministry’s focus is on one-to-one discipleship. This type of ministry can work powerfully with the message of personal repentance even when the culture at large does not tolerate the expression of Christian-based values. Let’s pray clear spiritual vision like John had about how to confront sin.

1. John’s practical shepherding (10-14)

Finally, an important part of John the Baptist’s ministry was that he helped people practically. When people were convicted by John’s message, they wanted him to tell them specifically how to change their lives. In verse 10, the crowd, cut to the heart by John’s warning, asks, “What should we do then?” In response to this question, John he gave very down-to-earth answers. He gave them examples of fruits of repentance. Look at verse 11. “John answered, ‘Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.’” What could indicate a changed heart better than deeds of mercy for the poor? I think that whenever we are convicted of something in our heart to repent of, we need to find some way to change our actions practically. For example, I felt convicted of a need to repent of not listening well to others. I found one way to address this practically is to give more of my time to others, not just being busy with my own things, so they feel more free to open up and share with me.

John even gave different directions for people in different walks of life. In verses 12 and 13, when tax collectors came to be baptized and asked John what they should do, he said, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” To the soldiers he replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” Clearly, these directions would not be easy to follow, because they meant taking a big reduction in income. But John didn’t shy away from specifics. The similarity of John’s direction for the tax collectors and soldiers reminds me that still today, to survive in this world, many people take up jobs where they are expected to take advantage of others or con them out of money somehow. We don’t like to encounter those people in our dealings. But actually, their conscience is inwardly tormented by having to live dishonestly; it’s a big obstacle preventing them from coming to God until they can repent practically.

I’ll never forget one time I when took my car in for an oil change at one of these drive-through oil-change places, and I didn’t know it was one of the shady ones where they try to upsell you to some other service like an engine flush that’s actually easier than an oil change but they charge $100 for it. I basically fell for it, but the strange thing was that while I was sitting there in my car getting the service done, the owner walks up to me and starts talking to me. He said, “I used to run a regular mechanic shop, but then I realized these oil change places are a lot easier money. What are you gonna do?” At the time I was caught off guard and didn’t know what to say. I just thought, “Why is he telling this to me?” But later I realized that he must have had a guilty conscience and he was somehow trying to confess his sins, I guess to anybody who would sit and listen. If I had realized that at the time, I could have shared the gospel with him—and told him he could start repenting by not ripping me off! But now, whenever I think of that guy, I realize that the world is still full of people who need to hear the message of repentance and will respond to it. If we have ears to hear the spiritual need behind people’s words, that mechanic’s question is really the same question the tax collectors were asking John the Baptist. “What are you gonna do?” means “I need someone to show me a better way to live.” That’s why it’s so important for a shepherd to understand the real situation of people’s lives and what they are really stuck in and need a way out of. That’s the real ministry of repentance.

Thank God for the ministry of John the Baptist. Next week we’ll see explicitly how John pointed the way to Jesus. May God’s word come to us to show us the way to serve him in 2021. May our hearts be receptive to repent and be changed from the inside out. And let’s pray to carry out the ministry of repentance as good shepherds.