

LUKE

“The Message of John the Baptist”

Luke 3:1-14

Sunday, January 15, 2017

By David A. Ritchie

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:1–14, ESV)

I. Introduction

- This last week I had the privilege of gathering with almost twenty other pastors of church that have been planted in West Texas or from West Texas in the last five years. Together we got to share our celebrations and challenges, as well as pray over one another. It was a great encouragement to me, as a major part of the vision of this church is to be a church-planting church. To hear stories of church plants that we have supported and help train and resource was a delight.
- But one thing is I walk away amazed at how similar church planters are. This group wears a lot of plaid, has a lot of facial hair, and have a lot of kids. Another thing that church planters have in common is that church planters are also *entrepreneurs* or sorts.
- We care about strategy. We care about strategic ways to plant a church. We talk about strategic places to plant a church. We wouldn't ever approve or fund a guy to plant a church in the middle of a cornfield, far away from any inhabited area, for example.
- However, *in the case of John the Baptist, the greatest spiritual awakening in 400 years began in the desert wilderness, where the crowds came to him.*
- In context of all of the incredible things prophesied about the birth of John and Jesus, Luke is ready to begin his gospel in full. The preparations have been made. Anticipation has built. Now what God has prepared for the ages is now launched.

- Verse 1 of chapter 3 begins with a role call of leaders. By now referencing Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, and the other contemporary politicians and priests, Luke is illustrating how John’s ministry is situated in human history, not the realm of mythology. Moreover, these beginning verses of chapter 3 suggest that there are global implications of John’s ministry and what is to follow.
- John receives the word of the Lord (“*the word of God came to John son of Zechariah*”) like an Old Testament prophet. The same word that came to Jeremiah and Hosea and Joel now came to John (Je. 1:1; cf. 1:4, 11; Ho. 1:1; Joel 1:1).¹
- More than just an unlikely location for revival, the “*wilderness*” serves as a symbolic backdrop for John’s message. Because even though they dwell in Palestine, God’s people have not yet entered into the True and Better Promise Land. God is getting ready to inaugurate a “new Exodus”²; a better Exodus. Instead of delivering them from an earthly tyrant like Pharaoh or Caesar, God will send forth a salvation that will deliver his people from sin and death itself.
- John the Baptist’s ministry was a profound spiritual movement in its own right. It’s easy to miss this because Jesus ministry was so much more significant. But when John’s ministry began it really was the biggest spiritual event of the last several centuries.
- In fact, John was so famous that at least 20 years after his ministry when the Apostle Paul was traveling through the city of Ephesus (which was more than a thousand miles from Judea), Paul encountered disciples of John the Baptist that hadn’t yet heard about Jesus (Acts 19:1-4).
- *But what was his message and why was it so powerful?*
- First of all, John was a Baptist. Now this doesn’t mean that he founded the Southern Baptist denomination or convention. He means he was a baptizer; one who immersed people in water.
- Baptism could have come from cleansing rituals or an acceptance ceremony of new converts into the community of God’s people.
- But wherever it came from we certainly know what John’s baptism meant. It was a visual representation of his core message – *repentance*.
- Now, “repentance” is a common word among Christian circles, but I think it is an often-misunderstood word.
- So for the rest of this time I would like to take some time looking at this text to unpack a biblical understanding of repentance.
- I’ll organize the rest of our discussion under two headings: **1.) *Repentance Defined* and 2.) *Repentance Applied*.**

II. Text

1. Repentance defined.

- John says that men must make prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. This message is rooted in the prophetic vision of Isaiah: mountains brought low and of valleys made high and of crooked ways being made straight. John is calling his hearers to recognize the reality of the mountains of their sin the valleys of their depravity and the paths that have been made crooked by their compromises. It is a message that intends to remove anything that would be an obstacle or obstruction between God and his people.
- Essentially, John is telling people to get ready for the messiah by recognizing their need for forgiveness, and posturing their hearts toward eternity, and “repenting.” This isn’t just important. It is necessary. As Fred Craddock once wrote, “The way to Christ leads through the

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 134.

² N.T. Wright. *Luke For Everyone*. (Louisville: WKK, 2001, 2004), 33.

desert where John is preaching.”³ In other words, ***we are able to recognize the greatness of our Redeemer, only when we personally know the greatness of our need for redemption.***

- However, John’s not only is John’s location not the most seeker-sensitive environment, the tone of his message would seem harsh and offensive by our consumerist American standards. John’s message is an urgent spiritual wake-up call. *He is like a state governor coming on TV to tell residents of a city to flee or take shelter from an incoming hurricane, when the residents would much rather go about life as usual.* Marshall says, “John’s address to the people is deliberately harsh so as to awaken them to a sense of the realities of the situation.”⁴ This reminds us the word of God at times must confront and challenge us as much as it comforts us, and this truth should shape our expectations of what faithful preaching really is.
- But John didn’t want his hearers to think that the simple ceremony of baptism was enough to for salvation, nor was it simply enough to be a part of the nation of Israel.⁵ *Salvation is not something that comes by religious ritual or race.*
- True repentance brings fruit of a changed life, says John. This true repentance is absolutely crucial for salvation. It was then, and it is now.
- Martin Luther said as the first of his Ninety-Five Theses: ***“Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said “Repent”, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.”***⁶
- We often are tempted to false and insufficient definitions of repentance: such as thinking repentance to be a way of earning God’s salvation through good works, or beating ourselves up until we feel like you deserve to be close to God.
- Equally as wrong is the notion that repentance is simply being a sorry for that we did something wrong, especially when we got caught. Last night, our three year-old got in trouble for whacking his little brother in the face with a light-saber. He was certainly very sad – especially sad about the consequences of said event. But I would not describe him as repentant.
- John’s vision of repentance involves *an utter transformation of the mind and a new orientation of life toward the worship of God; a life immersed in the reality of a holy God.*
- Taking some inspiration from the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, here is a definition of “repentance” that I would like to give you: ***“Repentance is a work of grace in which the Spirit of God and the Word of God awakens our hearts to despise not only the dangerous consequences of sin but also despise revolting filthiness of sin. We repent when we grasp Christ’s extravagant mercy in such a way that we love God more than we love our sin, and, therefore, seek to walk in grateful obedience and constant union with the Holy Spirit.”***⁷

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 48.

⁴ Marshall, 139.

⁵ “John was aware of the danger of a “sacramentalistic” way of thinking that assumes salvation can be acquired by means of a rite (baptism, Luke 3:8a) or a privileged relationship (having Abraham as father, 3:8b). True repentance will produce fruit.” Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 132.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences: October 31, 1517*, electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1996).

⁷ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 219–221.

- And the really good news about this true repentance is this: ***Even though there is no sin so small that it does not merit judgment, there is likewise no sin so great that it cannot be forgiven where there is true repentance.***⁸

2. Repentance applied.

- After hearing John’s preaching, we are told that three groups of people come up to John to receive further instruction. They knew they needed to repent, but they just didn’t know *how*. They needed to know how to apply repentance.
- These three groups of people were the wealthy and privileged class of Jerusalem, the tax collectors, and the soldiers.
- To the first group, the wealthy, John says to give care and compassion to the poor. He suggests that a true repentance is visible by a tangible love for the marginalized and the broken. In other words, a vibrant spirituality never simply terminates on oneself. It always bears the fruit of love for people. This also shows a unique emphasis of Luke’s gospel, which is that there is always both a personal and a social dimension to the gospel.
- The next group is tax collectors. Stein says, “They [Tax collectors] were hated and despised by their fellow Jews. Dishonesty among tax collectors was the rule (*Sanh 25b*), and their witness was not accepted in a court of law.”⁹ John calls them to integrity and honesty.
- The last group is soldiers. Many commentators note that these were likely Jewish soldiers employed by King Herod, not Roman soldiers.¹⁰ Marshall says, “The form of their question may convey the undertone, ‘What shall we do—even we (καὶ ἡμεῖς) whose calling is especially out of keeping with Jewish piety?’ (Zahn, 194f.)”¹¹ To them John calls them use their power to serve people and not abuse them.
- The first thing that I want you to notice is that “John shapes an answer appropriate to the special temptations peculiar to each.”¹²
- Secondly, he does not tell the wealthy to become poor or the tax collectors or soldiers to quit their jobs. Instead, he calls them from sins that seem to best their social position or profession.
- As Robert Stein writes: “John did not require his hearers to follow his particular “desert life-style” or [a monastic life-style]. Rather the life of one awaiting the kingdom of God is to be lived out in the world.”¹³
- To the wealthy John called for repentance from the sins of greed and lack of compassion
- To the tax-collectors, he called for repentance from she sins of corruption and dishonesty
- To the soldiers, he called for repentance from the sins of abusing influence and power
- So if we are to apply this to ourselves we might ask: *how can we do what we do, but in a distinctively Christian way? How can we do what we do that visibly illustrates the kingdom of God on earth?*
- Ask yourself: *what are the besetting sins of your vocation? What are the besting sins of your culture?*

⁸ See: Westminster Smaller Catechism.

⁹ Stein, 133.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134.

¹¹ Marshall, 143.

¹² Craddock, 48.

¹³ Stein, 133.

- I'll go first. There are temptations that are particularly common to pastors. We have a somewhat public role, and it is easy to be led out of a desire to gain the approval of people. It is easy to associate our ministry success or failure with our value as people. It is easy to want fall sway to the fear of man. Thus, for pastors, repentance looks like having a confidence that is firmly in Christ and the identity we have in Christ.
- As far as culture goes, last week, as our elders were studying and praying together, we felt that busyness really is one of the defining sins of our culture.
- But John's message was not simply turning away from sin; it also included embracing a new life in God.
- This is huge. One of our convictions at Redeemer is that if you are a Christian, the day that the Lord saved you was also a day he ordained you for ministry and mission. This doesn't mean that all Christians are called to quit their jobs to seek employment of a local church. What it does mean is that you are called to declare and display the gospel with your everyday life; in your home, in your neighborhood, at your workplace, and in your city.

III. Conclusion

- Now before we end our time today, I think it is appropriate here to talk about how John's ministry of baptism gives the foundation for what would later become a Christian sacrament.
- Baptism is a Spiritually charged symbol of our faith, that publically proclaims that we have repented from sin and embraced Christ.
- And like repentance, baptism is a crucial step in the journey of Christianity.
- On the day the Apostle Peter stood up to preach the about Jesus's life, death, and resurrection to the crowds in Jerusalem for the first time, people were cut to the heart. They asked what they must do to be saved. Peter said, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 2:38, ESV).
- *Do you need to display your repentance through baptism?*
- We often celebrate our baptisms at Easter as part of our celebration of Jesus's resurrection.
- If you need to be baptized, sign up for Easter baptism today.
- However, there is a difference in the way John baptized and the way we baptized. John's baptism was an act of anticipation of the cleansing forgiveness that the Messiah would give. **But whereas John baptized on the basis of what Jesus was going to do, we now baptize on the basis of what Jesus has done.**
- Paul says this about baptism in Romans 6: *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."* (Romans 6:3–5, ESV). Victory over death. Union with Christ. Hope of resurrection. This is what the gift of repentance gives us.
- So Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people of joyous repentance. May we live our lives before the face of a holy God. May we live lives the display the beauty of God's kingdom.
AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1) *What do you think of when you hear the words “repent” and “repentance”?*
- 2) *If you were to come up with a definition of repentance according to the preaching of John the Baptist (Lk. 3:1-4), what would that definition be?*
- 3) *John seems to call people to repentance to sins that are common to their culture and vocation (i.e. job). What are the sins that are common to your culture and vocation? What does repentance look like in your case?*
- 4) *How is baptism a picture of the gospel? Have you been baptized?*