

Luke 3:1-14, Part 1 6-17-18
The Message of John: Repent

Are you aware that we are now at the halfway point between Christmases? Yea – I bet some of you procrastinators are not ready. Just like there were some who were not ready for the original Christmas. But, it was not because God didn't give them some preparation help. God sent prophets for centuries, telling His people what to expect from Messiah, but then most especially He gave a special preparation gift just before the arrival of Christ and that gift we call *John the Baptist*. He was the forerunner of the Lord, and we will spend three weeks studying who he was and what he says to us from the pages of God's word. Luke 3:**1-14** *Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. 5 'Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; 6 and all flesh will see the salvation of God.'"* 7 So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 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.

John is certainly one of the most fascinating and mysterious characters in the history of the world. I wish they could produce a full-length movie of his life, but we aren't given nearly enough

information on him for that. We are, however, given enough material for a mini-series. So, we will take three Sundays to look at this great man, beginning today with the message of John. In verses 1 and 2 Luke provides complete information for dating the ministry of John the Baptist who came bursting forth like a comet onto the scene of redemptive history. Luke introduces us to him as an Old Testament prophet. Notice how the Scriptures introduce other prophets. Jeremiah 1:**1-2** *The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, 2 to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.* Hosea 1:**1** *The word of the Lord which came to Hosea the son of Beeri, during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel.* Joel 1:**1** *The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel.* Luke 3:**2** *In the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias.* John is, in a sense, the last of the Old Testament prophets. Today we look at the message he brought, which was the same message many of the old prophets preached and that message, in one word, is “repent.” Everywhere we find John in Scripture the word “repent” or “repentance” is nearby. **3** *He came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* This verse mentions baptisms and forgiveness but *repentance* is central. To undergo the baptism was an outward expression of your inner repentance. The forgiveness of sins resulted from the repentance. John performed baptisms. He offered forgiveness, but he preached repentance. The message of John in a word is *repent*. And he teaches us here of the necessity, the evidence, and the urgency of true repentance.

First, we look at the necessity of repentance. Clearly this was the message of John, but is it the message for today, or was this just an Old Testament thing, just a *John the Baptist* thing? Well, it was certainly a John the Baptist thing, his message. But what did His greater cousin preach? Well, look at Mark 1:**14,15** *Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”* John preached repentance. Jesus preached repentance. What do you think the disciples preached? Mark 6 is where Jesus sends out his 12 on a preaching tour; and what were they to preach? **12** *They went out and preached that men should repent.* I trust you see that repentance is not the message of John exclusively. In Luke 5:32 Jesus describes his mission **32** *I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.* And what is it that Luke 15 says causes joy in heaven? Is it when a sinner says a prayer? When a person walks an aisle

after a sermon? It doesn't say that. Luke 15:7 *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*. All heaven rejoices when a sinner repents.

OK you say, so John preached repentance and Jesus preached repentance and the disciples preached repentance. So what? The *so what* is that we also get to preach repentance. "Repent" must be the message of the church and, if it is not, our message is unbiblical or sub-biblical. Our Lord gave us only one message to preach and that message sounds the clear note of repentance. Just before He ascended to the Father Jesus said this to his guys. Luke 24:46-47 *"Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* This is **the** divinely authorized gospel message and the apostles were faithful to it. When Peter stood before a crowd on the day of Pentecost he preached that great sermon about Christ and concluded by telling his hearers to repent. In the next recorded sermon in Acts, Peter again in Acts obeys his Lord, and declares 3:19a *Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.* This is the biblical gospel. It is the only one Christ commissioned us to preach. It was the message of John and Jesus and the disciples and the apostles but I must tell you it is not, by and large, the message of the Christian church in America in 2018. To a great degree we have forsaken our King's mandate by ignoring His word and choosing to preach a man-made half-gospel. We have told men to believe and to accept Jesus and so on. But we have failed to tell them to repent and turn from sin. In fact, the most popular evangelism methods in this country don't even mention the word or the idea of repentance. AW Tozer says that any objection raised against this truncated gospel is met with the triumphant reply, *"But we are winning them!"* Then Tozer asks, *"Winning them to what? To true discipleship? To cross-carrying? To self-denial? To separation from the world? To holy living? To nobility of character? To love for God? To total committal to Christ? Of course, the answer to all these questions is no."* (Man, the Dwelling Place of God p.136) We are doing no one any favors when we leave repentance out of our evangelism. Paul describes his ministry in Ephesus by saying Acts 20:20-21 *I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.* And if we are faithful to Scripture this must be said of us, that we speak of faith in Jesus Christ, **and**, not only, but **and** repentance toward God.

As we have seen, we do no one any favor by leaving out repentance and we may well do someone great harm by presenting them with a half-truth. Repentance must be preached by

Christians because it must be experienced by sinners. It must be. Repentance is not an option. Not then, not now. When has God ever made repentance an option? Was it an option for Nineveh? Jonah preached “repent or perish.” Was it an option for Israel? Amos preached “repent or perish.” Was it an option for Judah? Jeremiah preached “repent or ___? Be captured.” Repentance is never optional. And there are no substitutes for it. In our text in Luke 3 you find this to be so. John spoke to a people who felt they were alright. They did not need to be converted. They did not need to repent. Why not? They were Jews, the chosen race, right? The sons of Abraham. In our text in Luke **3**, Jesus mentions what they would say. *We have Abraham for our father.* John says that won’t help. And he dramatized this point by calling the Jew to be baptized. Baptism symbolizes cleansing and when a Gentile was converted to God the Jews would baptize him to wash away the Gentile filth. Now John is saying, “You Jews need cleansing too.” It doesn’t matter if you were born into a Christian home or a Christian nation or a Christian church, you too must repent. Don’t be deceived. But many are. I was sitting in a restaurant once reading the magazine *Christianity Today* when a drunken fellow rambles up to me and looks at what I’m reading. He says, *Listen Sonny, I was born a Christian, and I’ll die a Christian and I don’t have to be re-born a Christian.* If you agree with that fellow you disagree with Christ. The apostle Paul declared this in Act 17:**30** *having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.*

On to point two because John the Baptist went one step beyond the command to repent. He spoke about the evidence of repentance. 3:**8a** *Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance.* John says, “Show some behavior, some fruit that backs up your claim to repentance.” There was in John’s day and in our own a large amount of superficial, even feigned repentance that is far from the genuine article. And the only way we can know if repentance is true or false is by the fruit it produces, by the behavior that results from it. Repentance is experienced in the heart, in the spirit of a man, but what is in the heart will be seen by the outward behavior. John here says there must be some real-life, outward demonstration that you truly have repented.

And what is repentance? Everyone knows it means being sorry for your sin. But it must go beyond that. Imagine a man who gets drunk and beats his wife. And afterwards he just feels awful. Oh, he is so sorry. But then next weekend he does it again and feels so bad. But next weekend he does it again, and so on it goes. Is that repentance? No, that’s sorrow, but only sorrow. Your dogs experience that when you catch them getting into the trash. They roll over on their backs, looking so submissive and contrite – but as far as you can tell they haven’t repented because if you leave the pantry door open they will be in the trash again. Like dogs, like people. But real repentance is

going to result in real change. Read with me how the Westminster Larger Catechism defines repentance: (together)

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.

Repentance involves turning from, abandoning the sin. Proverbs 28:13 *He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.*

Someone wrote this:

*'Tis not enough to say, I'm sorry and repent,
And then go on from day to day just as we always went.
Repentance is to leave the sins we loved before,
And show that we in earnest grieve by doing them no more.*

Repentance means grieving over sin, hatred of it and the running away from it. That is much more than you get from simple sorrow. II Corinthians 7:8-10 *For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it—for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while— 9 I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. 10 For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.* There is a natural, worldly sorrow over sin and a godly sorrow. The latter only is true repentance and the latter also shows up in one's conduct.

John said, 3:8a *Bear fruits in keeping with repentance 9 every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* Your repentance needs to be seen. In Acts 26 the apostle speaks before a ruler and says this Acts 26:19-20 *So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, crying tears appropriate to repentance. Oh no – making a statement appropriate to repentance? Actually it says - performing deeds appropriate to repentance. Notice – **deeds.*** Some can cry their eyes out. Repentance may produce tears, but it is not tears. Repentance is also not promises. Some of you have said, “I’ll never” umpteen times. Repentance requires behavior that backs up the words and the tears and reveals a genuinely contrite heart. That and that alone is

true repentance and that is a mark of salvation. You aren't saved by your works, but your works show forth genuine repentance. I once shared the gospel of Christ with a young woman who was living in a sexually illicit relationship. She believed the gospel as I presented it and the issue became whether or not to leave her boy-friend and I pleaded with her to do so. Why? Because cleaning up her life would save her? No. But because if her repentance were to be true, it had to bring about a break with her sin.

Now, when people hear the popular gospel that omits repentance they will often not understand this. Mickey Cohen the notorious gangster was once asked by a friend to invite Jesus into his life. This he professed to do, but he changed nothing about his life. So when his friend confronted him about his continuing to be a gangster Cohen said, "*What do you mean, you never told me I would have to give up my work.*" Right. But John said, Jesus said, Paul said, God said, "You must repent and bring forth fruits of repentance." When we leave this out we end up with "converts" but not disciples.

The word of God says if a man bears no fruit he's not the real deal. *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* Consider those who have not been to church in years, don't read their Bibles, don't pray. They live their lives without reference to God, without concern for Him. It seems from the text that there if there is no evidence of genuine repentance in the life, they are cut off and fire-bound. If your life is not marked by deeds in keeping with repentance, my friend, fear for your soul. God help you!

The fruit of repentance will be there when a man is born-again. Maybe a specific task must be performed. You return something stolen – with interest. You write a letter of apology. You pay a creditor that you have ignored. You break up with a lover whom you know is not God's will for you. Remember the story of little Zaccheus, the pint-size tax-collector? When the grace of Christ entered this man's life he turned from his money-loving ways and pledged to repay those he had defrauded four times what he had taken. You see, repentance is going to show itself differently in each life, depending on a person's particular sins. But it must be expressed. In Luke 3 John says, "Bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance." **10** *And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?"* What's the answer he gives? He says you show repentance by this – verse 11 – concrete generosity. **11** *"The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise."* In verse 12 the notoriously greedy tax collectors came **13** *and he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."* Justice treatment demonstrates repentance. **14** *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.” Note that he doesn’t say, “Quit being a soldier.” John was not a pacifist, but he addresses the particular sins of the particular man and says this is what repentance means for you. Now, what does it mean for you? How will you show your repentance? Turning from sexual impurity to chastity? Turning from greed to generosity? Turning from laziness to diligence? Turning from grumbling to gratitude? Turning from pride to humility? What behavior can you bring under the Lordship of Jesus? What apologies do you have to offer? Maybe you have been a Christian a long time, this still applies to you, for as Luther says in the first of his 95 theses, the Christian life is one of continual repentance.

Well, we have covered the necessity of repentance and the fruits or evidence of repentance, thirdly and finally, the urgency of true repentance. The urgency is expressed by John the Baptist in two places. In verse 7 he refers to the wrath to come and in **9** *the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* This refers to judgment and the coming wrath and you need to repent for that very reason –wrath is coming. In a sense the wrath of God has already fallen on the unrepentant. Ephesians 2:3 describes the natural man as a child of wrath. John 3:36 says that if one does not obey God’s son the wrath of God abides on him (present tense). But in another sense the wrath of God is reserved for the future. Colossians 3:**5-6** *Consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience.* The book of Revelation is full of the description of the coming wrath of God and the New Testament tells us that this wrath will come at the return of Christ. And when will that be? Huh? Jesus said, “Of that day and hour no one knows.” He will come back when you least expect it. He will come suddenly as a flash of lightning. And that is just why repentance is urgent. Christ may come today. You may perish today. Your opportunity to turn, to repent, is now. You do this by detaching from sin, and attaching to Christ. Putting away your folly and putting on Jesus.

Jesus says that if you will not, you will be cut down, cut off and thrown into the fire. If you haven’t been cut down yet, maybe it is because God is patiently waiting for you to repent and bring forth fruit. But His patience does run out. And you never know when it will be too late. If you aren’t sure you are in Christ, saved from the wrath to come, this is the hour of your salvation. As we go to prayer commit your way to the Lord, give up your sin, and lay hold of His mercy that is offered in Jesus. This is a life or death decision. I plead with you to choose life.