

Before You Get the Gospel, Part 2

Luke 3:1-3

Have you ever stopped to wonder why Luke spends so much time introducing us to John? I mean he's almost had an equal amount of airplay as the Lord Jesus himself. Luke opens this massive Gospel with the visit of Gabriel to announce the birth, a remarkable birth, but not of Jesus first. He announces the birth of John first, and then of Jesus. Two baby announcements: John first, then Jesus. After that, two birth narratives: John's and then Jesus'. Even the prophetic songs that follow, they give an amazing degree of attention to someone other than Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Most High. We are supposed to focus not first on Jesus, but on the forerunner, on a herald, who runs before the king with a message. Why? What makes him so special? All of the four Gospel writers begin the story of the Gospel with John the Baptist. It's as if, before they can talk about Jesus, they need to introduce John.

John represents the restoration of the true priesthood. He represents the return of God's prophetic voice to Israel after a

400-year silence. John was called to this ministry by God. He was providentially credentialed. He was providentially prepared. He was uniquely qualified. It comes briefly and quickly in the text and you have to slow down to see it. But Luke reminds us of that back in verse 2, that John is the son of whom? Zechariah, right? And that takes us back to what was recorded in Luke 1:5, that Zechariah was not just any ordinary person, he was a priest. He was of the division of Abijah, and he served according to the custom of the temple, and he was burning incense in the sanctuary when Gabriel visited him.

So John is a priest. He comes from a priestly line. He's not an iconoclast; he's not some wild-eyed maverick who smashes his way through all the, Israel's ancient customs. John's born into a priestly family on purpose, to remind people what the priesthood was actually for: to point Israel back to God. His heart is singly focused, attuned to God's interests, not man's. Folks, that's how all preachers and teachers of God's word should be, right there. Luke also reminds us in verse 2 that John was entering into the ranks of the prophets. An establish cadre of men whose been called into the prophetic ministry. It's easy for us Gentiles to miss the import of the statement there,

“The word of God came to John,” there in verse 2. But it’s really a clear indication that John was being called as a prophet of God. The word for, word, there is not the common word *logos*, it’s the less common word, *rhema*. The word, *logos*, it’s pretty broad in its different uses. It could be referring to a single word, sometimes referring to an entire theology like the Apostolic Gospel. Ephesians 1:13 says, “The word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation.” That’s the word *logos*. But *rhema* can refer to a single phrase or statement, such as, in this case, John’s calling into ministry. And it just so happens that what Luke writes parallels the calling of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:1. It’s almost word for word in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It says in Jeremiah 1:1, “The word of God which came to Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah.” You know what the word there for, word, is in the Septuagint? *Rhema*. This is the calling. This is the calling. This is his day of his public appearance to Israel in his public office of a prophet. John, born into the home of a priest, both Zechariah and Elizabeth were of the tribe of Levi, so he had the right credentials. He’s born into a godly home. Both of his parents were, as it says back in Luke 1, “They were righteous before God. They were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” So, he was raised in the faith. And then

he was prepared by God out in the harsh, isolated conditions of the desert. John here is providentially prepared to be this preacher of repentance. An extremely important figure. Yes, he thought of himself as a voice, but he looms large on the pages of Scripture. Even if he's rightly eclipsed by his cousin, Jesus Christ.

But you know what Jesus said about John? Turn over to Matthew, your gonna have to turn back in your Bibles to Matthew Chapter 11, verse 7. Matthew 11 verse 7, I wanna show you what Jesus thought of John, the significance of his ministry. John's disciples, you may remember in that chapter, Jesus in Matthew 10 had sent out his disciples to go preach the kingdom and then some of John's disciples came and were asking Jesus, "Are you the one we are to look for?" And Jesus answered those questions in the affirmative. Yes, everything you see, the fruit of my ministry coming out, all the truth, I am the one. And John's disciples went away and Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. And look at what it says in Matthew 11:7, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" That's supposed to be a bit humorous. No, you can see reeds shaking in the wind anywhere; you don't need to go to the

wilderness to see that great sight. So, "What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?" They're picturing John right then. Uh, no, that's not what he is. "Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet?" Oh, "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there is arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." Jesus acknowledged not only the significance of John, but the significance and the essential nature of his ministry preparing for Christ's own ministry. Without John's ministry, we wouldn't have Jesus' ministry. Pretty important.

So what was his ministry? What was his central message? It's Repentance, the necessary baptism of Repentance. We're just going to get an introduction to the message of repentance at this point because the rest of the chapter that we read earlier it's going to help us understand repentance very clearly, but notice in verse 3 just this, "John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So when John came out of the desert

wilderness, he went into the region of Galilee, it was also called the Judean countryside, north of the political district there of Judea, which was governed by Rome. But it was west of the Jordan River. Plenty of water. John 3:23 tells us he was "Baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there." That's right between Galilee to the west and the Decapolis which is to the east of the Jordan River. And I want to be careful here as we get into this lest you get the wrong idea that John came preaching salvation by works. That is, get baptized, get forgiveness. You do one, you get the other. That's not what he's saying, and we need to be very careful here and accurate. When you understand the terms and the nature of what John was doing when he baptized people, you'll see that baptism and repentance were internal attitudes first, and then they were expressed outwardly in works. Forgiveness it was based on an internal heart change, not external work. The external work was simply the sign and the symbol of what had happened on the inside.

So let's walk through these terms just one by one, get a little clarity on the concepts, get an idea in our head about what John was doing. We'll look first at the word proclaiming,

then, baptism, then, repentance, and then, forgiveness of sins. First, John came proclaiming. The word there is *karusso*, *karusso*, which is the word for preaching the Gospel. It's used 60 times in the New Testament, and get this, it's always used referring to the proclamation of the Gospel and its themes: salvation from sin, righteousness, rescue from judgment and wrath to serve God by faith. It's the preaching of Christ and his righteousness. In fact, the Gospel is sometimes summarized by the noun form of the verb *kerygma*. *Kerygma*. Jesus summarized the Gospel and joined it together with the concept of repentance at the end of Luke's Gospel in Luke 24, when he's walking with the two forlorn disciples on the road to Emmaus. The text says there in Luke 24 that Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead," and then what? "And repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem." It's important to note that proclamation, that preaching started with John right here in Luke 3:3.

Second word, not just proclaiming, but the second word John came proclaiming, baptism. Baptism, what's that? Baptism is a

word transliterated into the English directly from the Greek word *baptizo*. It means quite simply, to immerse, to submerge in water. Going all the way under. There were some mystery religions in Jewish sects in the region like the Essenes. They used baptism as a cleansing ritual to initiate new members into their group. They borrowed the ritual itself from Judaism. Jews practiced baptism also as a right of initiation not for themselves, but for proselytes, Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. So basically, Gentiles were converts to the Jewish faith. They learned from the law and the prophets the excellence of the revealed religion of Israel, the excellence of Israel's God and they wanted to join themselves like Ruth did to Naomi, your people shall be my people; your God my God. And part of the entrance into that Jewish religion, the Jews required the Gentiles to go through ritual purification: baptism. To wash off their Gentileness. To wash off their impurity. They were separating themselves from their own defiled race. Gentiles need to be washed from head to toe. Immersed in cleansing waters. So this ritual of baptism, it symbolized the need of cleansing, a Gentile acknowledgement that they were indeed unclean creatures. They were defiled, and they could only join the believing community by admitting that they were unclean, forsaking that uncleanliness, and they were becoming clean through washing.



Now, all that's good, okay, when Jews are baptizing Gentiles. But when John started baptizing Jews, that's another matter altogether. What? You want us to be baptized? We're Jews! And that's why John said in verse 8, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Do not even 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 to Abraham." Don't even try that with me, John is saying. Don't claim your physical lineage to Abraham that that exempts you from admitting that you, too, are unclean. Just as unclean as a Gentile, just as in need of washing. You are unclean. You're filthy before God. The Jews needed to admit, along with the Gentiles, the words of Isaiah 64:6, "We have all." We, Isaiah puts it in the first-person plural: "we," me and all the other Jews. "We all have become like one who is unclean. All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, all our iniquities, like the wind, blow us away."

Most of the nation, they didn't want to hear that. They wanted to hear that they're okay, that they're doing pretty good. Give us encouragement. Come on, don't be so harsh. Don't

look at all my bad stuff. Come on, look at the good stuff. They wanted to see themselves as noble victims of other people's crimes, the innocent party that received more than its fair share of abuse and suffering from the nations of the world. Admit that we are as dirty as a Gentile? Are you kidding me? They are the ones that they..

So John had to rebuke them sternly in a way that only he was prepared by God to do there in verse 7, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits." You want to say that you're repentant? Bear fruits showing it. I guess that takes us to the third word, the main point of what we're learning today. For Jews to admit that they were no better than unclean Gentiles, you know what they had to do? They had to humble themselves. They would have to take a good, hard look in the mirror of God's law and admit their sinfulness from the inside out. They had to admit their defilement, their need for cleansing. That could only happen if they had a profound change of mind. That is what the word, repentance, is a profound change of mind. The word is *metanoia* and that has the word for mind, *noia*, imbedded in the word, *metanoia*.

There's been a popular strain of theology in our day in evangelicalism. It really has been rebuked, discredited, many have come to repudiate its doctrines, but the effects of this erroneous theology remain with us even to today. I run into people all the time who've bought into this. And they teach that the word *metanoia*, change of mind, means, merely intellectually changing your mind about who Jesus is. Here's how they say this goes, they say, Yea you once believed that Jesus was just a man or something less than he really is and that you've received new information and you have realized that he's more than that. He's the Son of God, he's the Savior, he died on the cross for your sins. They teach that that in and of itself is repentance. It's just changing your mind, and by that you gain eternal salvation, and you should never ever question it again. Get this, even if your life never changes, they say you can point back to a date and a time when you changed your mind about Jesus. You're good to go. And anybody who tries to have you question that, you just point them to that date. You point them to your baptism certificate. I'm not overstating this at all. I wish I were, but I'm not. I run into this all the time, beloved, and it makes my work as a pastor really, really hard. That is not repentance. That's an inoculation against the true Gospel. That's a change

of mind that happened only at the place of the intellect. And if it happened at the intellect only, it's not repentance. It's not what's talked about here. That's merely an intellectual understanding of the words. It may be even an ascent to their truthfulness.

I grant that those notions are true and accurate, okay? But it lacks the change in the will and the affections. That is the core part of the word *metanoia*. True repentance, true *metanoia* involves all three of these fancy Latin words: *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*. *Fiducia* refers to the change of will and the affections and that won't happen unless the understanding, the *notitia*; and the ascending to the truthfulness of the Gospel, that's the *assensus*, won't happen with that. Many people, though, understand, but few ascent intellectually to the truthfulness of the message. They get the terms, they just don't agree with it. And then,, then of those who understand the terms, there are many who even assent to the truthfulness of the Christian faith. Our churches are filled with people like this who stop short of anything more. Fewer still, though, possess and demonstrate that crucial element called *fiducia*, the change in the affections, as demonstrated by a new direction of the

will, a new direction of the life. They stop short of that. Don't make me change anything. Don't make me change anything, I want to do this or that. I have things that are priorities to me and this is one of them. Listen, you don't add Jesus to your life as if he's just another element or a token or a trophy on your shelf. He's not a get-out-of-hell-free card, get into heaven. You don't flash his name before the gates. He's a replacement. He replaces everything that you are; all your dreams, all your hopes, and all your ambitions, all your sin, all your self-righteousness, all your idolatry, all your vacations, replaces all of that with himself. You happy with that? I sure am.

The Apostle Paul described true repentance in the Corinthian church, 2 Corinthians 7:10 to 11 when he said this, "For godly sorrow produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly sorrow produces death. For see what earnestness this godly sorrow has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter." In other words, in every point, you've proved yourselves repentant. That's why John the Baptist's question challenged those Jews who were

coming forward for baptism. He said to the crowds, who warned you? Who warned you? That is what prompted this sudden change of your dull minds. This change in your cold affections, this change in your stubborn wills, what is really driving you? What is motivating you to go through this rite of baptism? Prove yourselves by bearing the fruit of repentance. I can't tell you how many times I've described this concept of repentance to those who've grown up in evangelical churches and you know what? They look at me with suspicion. Sometimes even with dismay, even anger. This is not what they heard in their churches growing up. And even though I show them using passage after passage of Scripture that this is the truth, that this is what Jesus taught, embracing the Gospel demands your repentance, you know what? Sadly, so many people refuse. They walk away. They've wandered.

We, beloved, have wandered so far from the historic protestant faith. What the Reformers taught. What the Puritans taught. What the Apostles taught. They don't even recognize it when they hear it. They've been inoculated against the true Gospel and those who inoculate them. Those who proclaim a false or half Gospel are one day going to give an account for creating

a host of false converts who fill the churches, unwilling, unable to hear anything but smooth words of false assurance that they've been hearing all their lives. But God have mercy on us. There are a few, though, when they hear it, they embrace the message of repentance. They forsake their sin, their self-righteousness. They forsake their pride, their justifications for sinful thinking. They humble themselves. They admit their desperate need. They embrace repentance. They find in the Gospel a precious healing balm for weary sin-sick souls.

For those who were truly repentant, there's a fourth word. A fourth word For them, forgiveness of sins. "As far as the East is from the West," beloved. That's how far God separates the sins of those who've been forgiven, for those who've come to hate their sin, their sinful selves. Forgiveness is the most welcome news at all. It's what they're after. It is the good news. It is the Gospel truth. And people who are repentant, they care for little if anything else; have all their sins wiped away. That's what John came preaching to the crowds. And he came because he was setting their expectations about what they were going to find in Jesus. That the Messiah's rule begins with the heart. It begins in the mind, with the thinking and once that is changed,

radically changed, it extends outward from there. For the Kingdom of God isn't an external political reality; it is an internal, spiritual reality. Jesus' reign over those whose hearts are truly his, it's for all those whose hearts belong to him by repentance and faith. They and they alone, they're the ones who find forgiveness of sins. In John's day those who came forward to submit to his baptism had to humble themselves to enter into the waters of cleansing, to recognize their need for full immersion in cleanliness, immersion in the grace of God. They demonstrated their repentance there in the waters of baptism and bearing fruits consistent with true repentance. But those who rejected repentance, some of them even went through John's baptism, didn't they, but they remained in their sins. The symbol was just a symbol for them, just a picture, denied the internal reality in their hearts.

Well, we've seen the need, we've seen the preacher, we've seen the baptism of repentance. So much more to say. We're going to get more clarity on that fundamental doctrine next time. But beloved, just know this, before you get the Gospel, you need to get this concept of repentance. Embrace it. Make sure that you, having been instructed in this, that you're not spreading a



# PILLAR OF —TRUTH—



false or a half Gospel. Call people to repentance. It's a part of the Gospel. Help them to see that they need to forsake sin and self and the world and all its allurements. They need to turn and embrace Jesus Christ alone. You know why? Because he tolerates no sin, he tolerates no rivals, he tolerates no other gods before him. Amen.