

How to Preach Repentance, Part 1

Luke 3:7-9

We have come to see how all true Gospel proclamation involves this message of repentance. Jesus preached repentance. The Apostles preached repentance. The students of the Apostles preached repentance. And all true preachers of the Gospel ever since have continued preaching a message of repentance. Without repentance, you no longer have the Gospel. You've actually replaced the Gospel with a false substitute, a damning substitute. So we need to be very careful as we hear from John directly, as we hear him speak to find out how he preached repentance because we want to go and do the same thing in our preaching. It's very important as we get started to acknowledge, right from the very beginning, right from the start that repentance is not a human work. Repentance is something we do. It is something we're responsible for, but like faith, repentance is not of ourselves, "it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

At the same time, like faith, repentance is a command. It is a command of the Gospel. Luke 3:4 makes the Gospel nature of this man plain. You can see it there. It says, "Prepare the way of" who? "The Lord." The Lord, the one who came preaching the Gospel. "Make his paths straight." And how do we prepare? How do we make his paths straight? How do we level the ground? Luke 3:3, repentance. John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance requires us, as it says in Luke [Matthew] 3:8, you can see it there, it requires us to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance." The word that's used there, in keeping with is the word, worthy. Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Bear fruits that are befitting repentance. How we live has to correspond with an inward commitment to repentance. That is to say, what we do on the outside, what people can see, it has to correspond to an internal heart attitude of repentance and faith. Repentance is not a human work. Repentance is a work of grace. It's wrought by God in the heart. It's manifest in the changed life through external behavior that people can actually see. They can concretely see the change. But it's not a human work. It's what God does.

We need to say that, that it's not a human work because evangelicalism, as a movement, has drifted so far afield from this key Biblical doctrine that when repentance is preached today, many evangelicals who have grown up in evangelical churches, they believe you're preaching something false. They've gone so far in the other direction, abandoning this doctrine that when you preach repentance, they think you're adding something to the Gospel. They accuse you of preaching law, not grace; works, not Gospel. And again, that just indicates how far we have fallen from the true preaching of the Gospel, which will always include a call to repentance. But at the same time, we want to be careful that we are not communicating error, that we are not guilty of what they are charging us with, that we are not making repentance a human work.

There is a fine line here. And none of us should make the fatal mistake of thinking that we can work hard enough, that we can just grit our teeth and fight a fight to accomplish repentance in our lives apart from the grace of God. We cannot do that. Repentance is not something we can manufacture on our own. Like every aspect of the Gospel, repentance is a gift of grace. In fact, the metaphor that Luke uses and he draws from

Isaiah 40, it's meant to show us that. I mean, fill in every valley? Level every mountain? Chop down every hill? Who can do that? Humanly speaking, who can do that? You can't. That's the point. It's impossible for you.

I like how one commentator put it when he said, referring to this very thing in Luke 3:4 to 6, he said, quote, "The tectonic metaphor of filling valleys and moving mountains signifies the radical and fundamental act of repentance, which alters the landscape of personal and social life." End quote. You get what he's saying? It's a tectonic issue. It's like moving mountains, but God gives us the faith that can move mountains. And he is the God who created all this to begin with. He is the God that called all things into existence. He's the God that sent the flood and moved everything around the earth by judgment. He's the God who can regenerate one human life and many human lives. He's the God with the power. But if you think about what it would take to fill in all the valleys, to level every mountain, level every hill, the metaphor there is intended to show you how impossibly difficult it is to repent. It's meant to drive you to despair of your own efforts, your own works, your own ability to accomplish repentance on your own. It should

humble you. That's the point. It's meant to cause you to look to God to accomplish in you what he has clearly commanded you to do. What you can't accomplish it on your own. God grants "repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth" 2 Timothy 2:25. It's his kindness, Romans 2:4, that leads us to repentance, but that said, do not mistake his grace and his kindness for indulgence. Don't mistake his grace for a license to sin, to live however you want to, as if grace covers over everything and you can just do what you want to do. God is very, very serious about his holiness and about this issue of repentance, fleeing from sin and pursuing his righteousness.

Jesus warns us, or should I say he warned religious people. Matthew 7:21 to 23, he said this, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, 'Will enter the kingdom of heaven,'" but who will? "The one who does the will of my father, who is in heaven. On that day..." What's that day? It's the Day of Judgment, it's the day when all people are gonna give an account before God. "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? 'And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Do

you see what's happening there? These hypocrites are so blinded that they are justifying themselves to the Lord's face. They're standing in front of him telling him this. It's as if, Oh, look over here at my good deeds and don't worry about my iniquity. They've not repented of their lawlessness. And they have engaged in their own self-styled brand of religion. That was just as true in Jesus' day as it is in our own. Do we really believe that that text only applies to Jesus' immediate audience and not to the religious people of our own city? Or in our own families? Why else would the Spirit record this warning in Scripture if not to warn all religious people at all times in all places?

You know something? What we're facing in our culture, in our time it's nothing new. This goes all the way back to the cultural religion practiced all the way back in Isaiah's day. Listen to this passage at the beginning of Isaiah's prophecy, Isaiah 1:10-20, "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" Okay, now stop for a second. When Isaiah wrote, 700 years before Christ, where was Sodom and Gomorrah? Oh, yeah, at the bottom of the Dead Sea. It was judged; it was gone. Who's he talking to here? Jerusalem. "Hear the word of the Lord you rulers of Sodom!

Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!  
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?' says the Lord;  
'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of  
well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of  
lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has  
required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain  
offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath  
and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and  
solemn assembly.'" He says, I don't like the mix. "'your new  
moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become  
a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out  
your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make  
many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your  
deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good;  
seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the  
fatherless, plead the widow's cause.'" "

Do you know what he's saying? Will you repent? "'Come now;  
let us reason together,' says the Lord: 'though your sins are  
like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red  
like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing

and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you'll be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'"

Warning. Confrontation. That's the preaching of the Gospel right there. Beloved, those words are remarkably contemporary, aren't they? It's amazing that there are people in churches all through our city, all through our county, all through our region, all through our state, country, expand it however you want to, there many people are doing this very thing. They go to church every Sunday, they take the name of God on their lips, they claim the blood of Christ covers their sins, and all the while their lives never change one fraction. They don't move a fraction of an inch. They don't move a half of a degree. Nothing changes in their trajectory, let alone a 180 turn from sin.

That, folks, is why God threw John the Baptist into the mix. Nothing is gonna stop him, right? He's amazing, and he threw him there to break up the fallow ground. God sent John to prepare the way before Christ, to confront this religious obstinacy, this religious intransigence. Some of the most hardhearted people on the planet are religious people who are self-satisfied. Well, here's how he did it. Here's what we're



going to find out as we go through Luke's Gospel here. Luke 3:7, let's start reading. "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 in to the fire.' And the crowds asked him," well, "'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.'

"As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, 'I baptize you with

water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"

Three sections there, two sections that confront people with warnings of coming judgment, and then one section there in the middle that corrects people. So confrontation and correction. Correction flanked by confrontation. And the correction shows people how to bear fruits in keeping with repentance. The preaching of repentance, the preaching of the Gospel requires confrontation, but preaching repentance is not only confrontation, it's, on the other hand, providing correction.

To preach the Gospel, to call sinners to repentance and faith, we have to do both things. We need to confront and we also need to correct. We need to diagnose the problem, expose the problem, and then come along with the remedy as well. That's the essence of Gospel preaching. Quite simply we need to preach like John preached. We need to learn how to do this for

ourselves. We need to become skillful in the way, the manner we deal with people so we can lovingly confront their sin, lovingly correct them and teach them the Gospel. It's not something you can do, often times, it's not something you can do in five minutes with a little tract. You need to take time.

We need to preach the Gospel the way John preached; the way Jesus preached. Calling people to repentance it means two things: confrontation, correction. If you're gonna preach repentance, you have to confront sin. You have to correct sinful behavior. Anything less than that is not just misleading, but it's unfaithful. It just creates more hypocrites. So don't do it. Let's learn how to do this together.

I want to show you here six things that we need to do as we confront people with the demands of true repentance. You might call these, six stages of confrontation or six steps of Gospel confrontation. One by one, step by step, these six things will penetrate deeply into the heart of every single sinner, and they reveal what's truly at stake in the heart of biblical repentance. What's at stake?

Let's start with a first point, confrontation number one: Identify the reality of their spiritual condition. When you're preaching repentance and you're going to enter into this confrontation, you need to identify the reality of their spiritual condition. Take a look at verse 7. "John said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers!'" Whoa! Harsh! You don't build mega-churches with that message, do you? In fact, I wonder how many seeker churches have actually handled in any kind of depth the ministry of John the Baptist. I just wonder. "Brood of vipers."

John actually characterizes the Pharisees and the Sadducees over in Matthew 3 verse 7. He characterizes them as a "Brood of vipers" as well. That passage, over there, in Matthew 3:7-10, it sounds very familiar to what we're reading here. It says in Matthew 3:7, "When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" Same thing, right? That whole section sounds familiar to this section here. In fact, the verb here in our text, "He said." "He said therefore to the crowds," it's in the imperfect tense. And it

indicates that he repeatedly said this. John was characteristically calling out his countrymen, exposing them as a brood of vipers. It wasn't just the religious leaders that were a bunch of snakes; it was the whole culture.

Remember, he's talking to a religious culture. The Pharisees, especially, these guys were a movement of the people. They were like well-known businessmen in Jerusalem, in town, in cities, who, who were concerned as businessmen. They were respectable; they were part of this group. Pharisees, they were concerned to practice, recover the practice of Judaism for the sake of coming generations. They wanted to be good enough to receive the Messiah to themselves. They were respected men, culturally speaking, socially speaking. They were political men. They were admired, they were upheld by the common people. So, while the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they may have characterized the condition of the people.

They were the special targets of John's confrontation, Matthew Chapter 3, but the truth is, all the people were the offspring of vipers. That is to say, contrary to their cultural claim to be children of Abraham, like he exposed in verse 8,

John is denying that claim. He's saying, not only are you not children of Abraham by evidence of your works; he's saying you are actually viper's children. And what does that mean? They're children of the devil.

Vipers, a venomous class of snake. They're cold-blooded animals. They slither in the dust. They're wily, crafty, poisonous, dangerous, all those are reminders of that original curse on the serpent, right? Satan in Genesis Chapter 3. David identified the men around him, violent men around him in Psalm 140 as the same kind of men. He called them evil men, violent men who plan evil things in their hearts and stir up wars continually, stir up con, a conflict, dissension. They make their tongues sharp as a serpent's and under their lips is the venom of asp, of asps and vipers. That's what Paul quoted in Romans 3:13, when he indicted the entire unbelieving world, not just Jew, but Gentile too. He said, "Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues, they keep deceiving. The poison of asps is under their lips, whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." That is exactly what John is confronting here. These people are the offspring of poisonous serpents.

Over in John Chapter 8, Jesus leveled the same charge at the people he's talking to. Turn actually to John 8:37 just for a moment. The Jews in John 8, they're, trying to claim, once again, their connection to Abraham. And they're trying to silence Jesus' Confrontations as if they don't apply to them. "Because we are children of Abraham." So Jesus said, starting in John 8:37, this is Jesus talking, by the way, he says this, "'I know that you are offspring of Abraham; and yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.'" Ooooooh, he just made a distinction there, didn't he? "They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them," well, "'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works,' of that, 'your father did.'" Oohh, "They said to him, 'We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.'

"Then Jesus said to them," Look, "'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I'm not here of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand

what I say? It is because you cannot hear my word.'" Notice the choice of words there. It's not will not, it's cannot. There's an ability issue here. John 8:44, "'You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'" "

Powerful stuff. You see what Jesus is saying there?

Everyone is doing what he's born to do. You will be what you are born to be. You'll act in accordance with your nature. If you're born of God as a true child of Abraham, then you will receive and obey everything that Jesus said and taught. But if you're not born of God, you remain a child of the devil. And you cannot escape that inborn nature. You can't stop doing what the devil has designed you to do, how he influences you. Not on your own you can't. Folks, that's the issue in this first point. When engaging in confrontation, you need to help people see the reality of their spiritual condition.