

How to Preach Repentance, Part 2

Luke 3:7-9

Here's the second step: Expose the nature of their religious motives. Expose the nature, the true nature of their religious motives. John continues here in verse 7, with a stinging rhetorical question. "He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers!'" Then this, "'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" No doubt John, had growing up, living in the desert, had watched brush fires that rose up and spread quickly across the desert. He saw the wildlife flee. He saw the snakes, the vipers emerge from their holes, their nests; slither away to get away from the heat. Those cold-blooded creatures were sensing danger in that approaching fire. They fled. That's what John's asking here, but it's a rhetorical question. He's not expecting an answer. He's posing it so they'll think carefully about their motives in coming forward for baptism. He's warning here about hypocrisy. Are you really ready to admit that you're nothing better than a brood of vipers, that you are descended from that ancient serpent? You ready to talk about that? And as vipers, do you

truly sense the coming danger? Is that why you're coming, because there's a fire lit? It's heading your way. If so, come forward. Be baptized as an external testimony to your repentance, as a symbol of your forgiven sin. If so, do what fleeing vipers do before a coming brush fire. If you sense the coming judgment, are you willing to abandon everything just like the vipers do? Vipers fleeing the fire, they don't really try to hold onto their holes, do they? They say, well, I'll build another hole. I'm get'n away. You willing to make whatever change necessary, leave the comfort of your former nest? You willing to leave everything behind, flee for your life, find refuge in the grace of God? Or is some other motivation driving you?

And again, John's questioning here is penetrating; gets into the heart of their thinking; it causes them to examine their motives. Listen, folks, it is right to question motives. It's right to wonder about people's motives. Most people are religious for all the wrong reasons. When the Bible tells us that only a few will be saved, well, then we're right to ask questions to provoke people to think about their true motives

for coming to Christ. What are you really after? What do you think Christ will really provide for you?

People do religious things for wrong reasons all the time. Make no mistake. God will only save those who come to him with a repentant heart driven by the motives of repentance, hating sin on the one hand, longing for righteousness on the other, fleeing the just judgment of God for their own sins, fleeing to the God of all grace, all comfort. The brood of vipers need to be converted to become children of God. That's what has to happen.

Well, we've taken two steps of confrontation. Here's a third step we need to take: Clarify the root of the religious works. Not just clarify the nature, expose the nature of it, but clarify the root of their religious works. Take a look at verse 8, just the first sentence. It's a stark command, a very, very strong imperative here. "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance," or as I said earlier, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Implied in that command in its starkness and its strength, its power. Implied in the command is the insinuation, intentional on John's part, that the crowds were not bearing the appropriate fruit. In fact, the fruit coming out of their lives

was more consistent with the children of devil, the children of wrath. The poison and destruction of vipers was the product of their lives. The people confronted were bearing bad fruit, as indicated by verses 10 to 14. You can see they're coming, and their lives are filled with bad fruit. They demonstrate their viper-like qualities in the way that they live. Fundamentally, they were proud, they were self-centered, they had no fear of God before their eyes. Practically, it was manifest in some of what John corrected in verses 10 to 14.

Look at verses 10 to 11. John is showing that the people lacked compassion. They refused to be generous. They refused to share with others in need; just the basic necessities of life. They hoarded money and stuff for themselves. They refused to lift their eyes to look around and help others. In verses 12 to 13 he exposes there a heart of greed and extortion. People found legal loopholes in the law, allowing them to get ahead, take, make use of these tax franchises. Get over on their fellow man; that's what they were doing. In verse 14, John confronted here a willingness to extort, to intimidate people, to use size and power to get over on others, to abuse, to use authority and power for selfish ends. At the heart there's a lack of

contentment in all of that. And what was required here was a love for others; expressed in a willing to sacrifice self, and stuff, and convenience, and time, and energy, to sacrifice all of that for the good of other people. That's not in the heart of unregenerate people. It's what God has to give because that's who God is. God is love and he gives, and he gives, and he gives, and he gives. His people do the same thing. What was required was a commitment to justice and righteousness before God no matter what the cost. What was required was mercy and compassion, kindness, and generosity, even at the expense to self.

Notice the word, fruits. He's says not just bear fruit, but bear fruits. It's in the plural. The plural suggests that particular works are in view here, concrete deeds, not just a general vague notion of self-prescribed self-improvement. God is the one who defines the works that are required. Not man. Not Oprah Winfrey. God. As Micah said, Micah 6:8, "God has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." There had to be a lifestyle that demonstrated a changed heart. Again the plural word, fruits, points to a

productive life. It's a multitude of fruits coming out, produced on the tree, producing concrete evidence of genuine repentance. Look, folks, this is not behavior modification. This is not a 12-step program. This is not rearranging some habits and customs in life. This is radical repentance, the most fundamental level of the heart. It's the root of all thought and behavior and when the root is changed at the internal level, the behavior is gonna change at the external level. The whole life is going to be different.

I often talk with people who claim to know God, but their lives manifest no evidence of repentance. Not only do they show no fruit of regeneration and repentance, but their lives are actually full of contrary works. I'll have them often read two lists in Scripture. One list is about the works of the flesh and the other list is about the fruit of the spirit. There are a number of places that I could turn in the Bible, that I can go, but, but I tend to go to one passage in particular. You can turn there, it's Galatians 5:19 and following. That passage brings two lists together in such a stark way that I find it very, very helpful in helping people to see where they really stand. There in Galatians 5:19 to 23, this is so useful in evaluating the

fruit of even your own life, but also whoever you're talking to. Back up to verse 16, actually, let me start there because this is really the issue. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." By the way, Galatians was written to people who were legalistic. They were influenced by the Judaizers, the people that tried to preached law, law, law to try to suppress all these evil impulses and desires. You know what? Preaching that to an unregenerate heart, it doesn't make them restrain their flesh. Paul knew that. Walk by the spirit and you won't gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, and these two are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." That is, you don't need an external pounding; you just need to do what you were designed by God to do because you have a new nature. Go with it. Let the Bible instruct you and inform and provoke and lead you. Verse 19, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

You don't know how many people that I've talked to and their lives are filled with that kind of thing and they'll look me square in the eye and say, I'm a Christian. You don't know how many Christians have been deceived into thinking that the Bible does not demand a change from that kind of behavior, and they look at me and say, You can't tell people to change like that, that's judgmental. They've been so deceived. "But the fruit of the Spirit," Verse 22, is what, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Listen, folks, it doesn't matter what you claim, what you say about yourself. The proof is in the life. The evidence is in how you live. Who you are become manifest in what you do, how you think, how you act, how you speak.

Well, we've talked about confronting the reality of the spiritual condition. We've talked about exposing the true nature of religious motives. We've exposed the true root of religious works. There's a fourth step we need to take in confrontational preaching of repentance. We need to, number four: Challenge the



basis of their spiritual assurance. Challenge the basis of their spiritual assurance. This is huge, folks, because there are so many who rely on all manner of false assurances. They inoculate themselves against the cure by believing that they are already healthy, believing themselves to have no need of a cure. After commanding them to bear fruit in verse 8, John continues with this penetrating challenge. He says, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father.'" Basically here, he's cutting them off at the pass. He's saying, Don't even try it. I know what you're thinking. Stop it right now. Don't even go there with me. The Jews believed themselves secure, nice and warm, wrapped safely in the refuge of their birthright. Free from concern about disfavor from God. They believed that the judgment of God is coming upon the nations, not on them. That's us, by the way, Gentiles. They didn't believe judgment would fall on the people of God, that is the Jews, the descendants of Abraham. It's amazing, in light of the times they lived in, that they could deny this about themselves. The Roman domination in their own land. In light of the exiles at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians; in light of, of, what's written in the law of Moses, Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28; in light of the prophetic warning after warning after warning throughout the prophets, major and minor, it's absolutely ludicrous that the

Jews could continue holding onto this national pride, this false sense of safety and security.

But, folks, that's the mystery of sin, isn't it? To find false confidence, to rely on that which will not save. The unregenerate are self-deceived. They harden themselves against the truth. They find ways to assure themselves. Oh that's not gonna happen to me. I guess that's another thing they hold in common with their father, the devil, who believes there will not be no accounting for his own life. That's the same as people today, people who've grown up attending church, putting money in the plate, eating potlucks, going to pancake breakfasts, hold weddings and funerals in a church, they dedicate their babies in the church, they've added that new wing onto the church, they've sweated, they've funded. Listen, all that stuff is good in and of itself, but it doesn't ultimately matter. What matters is do they manifest the fruits of repentance or do they not? If people would look at their actual fruit, if they examine their behavior in the light of God's truth, they would realize all those warnings in the Bible those warnings are aimed directly at them. They are the target of divine wrath, and there is a laser sight pointed directly on their foreheads. One squeeze of an eager

trigger finger, and it is all over for them. Rather than feeling comfortable and secure, the unrepentant should feel afraid. They should feel very afraid. They need to be unsettled that they might examine themselves and find the true basis of assurance by repenting from their sins and putting faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

People in our day find all manner of reasons for false assurance. They take comfort in false notions about God. They take comfort in a false view of themselves. But take a look at the fifth step of confrontation. The fifth step, number five: Rebuke the sin of their spiritual presumption. Rebuke the sin of their spiritual presumption. This is a first of two warnings, one in verse 8 and the other in verse 9. And the first exposes and rebukes spiritual presumption. They believe themselves to be indispensable to the plan of God, that God needed to preserve them to fulfill his promise to Abraham. Not so. Look at verse 8, "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.'" In other words, not only does God not need you; you're in danger of being replaced by a rock pile. Listen, the only difference

between dust and stones is the size, right? And if God created Adam from the dust of the ground, then surely he has the power to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Raise up, by the way, is the same verb that's used, talking about the resurrection. Resurrection power, creative power, he can raise up children for Abraham from rocks.

But those rocks, made children for Abraham, are going to demonstrate the fruits of repentance that Abraham did: the repentance of faith. They're not going to keep acting like vipers; people who claim to belong to Abraham. All the while these people were acting contrary to the faith of Abraham; they were manifesting an extremely sinful attitude. There's a sense and attitude of spiritual presumption here. They were presuming on the grace of God. It's as if they feel like they can demand God's protection and blessing, all the while living in opposition to his holiness. Who do they think they are? Do they really think God will ignore their sinful actions, over look, just because they claim Jewish parentage? It's Preposterous. Presumptuous.

Metaphor here of dead lifeless stones is a picture of every sinner. In reality, every sinner is as lifeless as rocks. The crowd itself is like a pile of stones; no life, no innate ability to produce fruit. That is the natural condition of every single sinner. God doesn't need people who see themselves as privileged, who think of themselves as entitled, as if God owes them something. That is a very low view of God. That is to presume on his grace, to believe that he's obligated to bless spiritual pretenders who trade on Abraham's name. Listen folks, there are a lot of people doing that today, people trading on God's name.

I was talking to some students the other day. They were telling me how many students in their own classrooms claim to be Christians but give no evidence of it in their lives. These students have only the vaguest understanding of Jesus. They know his name and they know that he has something to do with love, but the rest of it they make up from their own imaginations, kinda like from Disney cartoons. Do you know what that's called? Bible identifies that sin in two ways: Taking God's name on your lips and not actually following him that's called taking God's name in vain, number one. You're taking his name upon you, but

it's in vain. It's meaningless, it's worthless. You can't do that. You know what it is number two: To claim you believe in God, to claim to be Christians, knowing nothing of true Christianity, it's the sin of idolatry, too, because you're crafting for yourself a god that you prefer, a Jesus that you want to follow, a Jesus who will tolerate your sin. All the gaps that people have in their theological understating, they simply fill in the gaps with their own imaginations. They make Jesus into their own image, so many people like that around us. They've crafted a culturally defined, culturally refined religion using Christian terminology, but it has nothing to do with the Bible. They've done exactly what the cults do, ignoring the meanings of biblical terms, hollowing out the words, and then injecting into those terms their own culturally acceptable meanings.

Take time, some time to examine when you hear people talk about love. What do they really mean? It sounds more like indulgence. Or when they say, I love thus and such; they're talking really about lust. The word, believe, that means all manner of things. Sometimes it means something as, as vague and syrupy as, whatever generates warm feelings in me; that's

believe. Sometimes, believe, means my own personal opinion about the way the world works. Look, there's all manner of spiritual presumption in this, taking God's name in vain, erecting an idol in God's place, and God will not ignore that wicked behavior. He will recompense the wicked. People better get ready, some of our own friends and neighbors, some of our coworkers and relatives, they'd better get ready. I don't know if you're looking around folks, looking in the headlines, reading the headlines, but things are going from bad to worse, and the return of Christ is nearer now than it ever was. Time is running out. And the sin of spiritual presumption will not go unpunished.

Confrontation part of the preaching repentance continues. It's eventually getting to the essence here in the heart of the issue. We've walked through all these steps, five steps so far: The spiritual condition, the true motives, the root of, of religious works, the false assurance, the spiritual presumption. All of this confrontation leads to a final confrontation. At the end of the day, you've got to reveal the imminence of their spiritual danger. You've got to reveal the imminence of their spiritual danger, that's a sixth point. First warning we talked about spiritual presumption, assuming people have nothing to

fear from God because he's their friend after all. Second of two warnings in verse 9, is meant to provoke a fear of God. Look at it in verse 9, "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." John tells the people fruitless trees are cut down and burned. And there's already an axe, it's been aimed directly at your root, and it's held up high, ready to fall. That is to say, judgment is imminent. It's upon you. It's here. And John's hope here is that the dire warning will provoke in them a healthy fear of the Lord, and that's our hope, too, folks, as we preach this same message and warn people, that people will abandon their spiritual presumption, that they'll fear the Lord and turn away from evil. The consequences are dire. This is the unpleasant part of preaching repentance, but it's so necessary. If we love others, we need to engage in this vital step of warning people.

Look, what kind of a doctor would know someone is dying of cancer but refuse to tell them because he doesn't want to trouble them? What kind of a fireman would drive by a burning house at night and refuse to wake up the people inside because after all, they're sleeping, they're peaceful, they love their



pillows. That's bad. We'd fire those doctors and those firemen, right? They're a menace to society. Likewise, what kind of Christians are we if we refuse to tell people the truth? Beloved, we need to warn them. We're morally obligated to warn, because you know why? Because we know. You say, no I don't, well, I didn't know that. Well, you do now. We have to tell them. It's our job. That's what we're here for. It's the loving thing to do. Think about it. God warned us, didn't he? He woke us up from our spiritual death. He didn't leave us in our sins. He was gracious to confront that. He called us forth like Lazarus from the tomb, and he didn't let us continue walking around in our grave clothes. He peeled those things off. He loved us enough to trouble our false sense of peace. He told the truth about our spiritual condition. He exposed the evil of our evil works. He called into question our every motive, every thought. We count him kind for doing so, a wonderful, merciful Savior.