

How to Preach Repentance, Part 3

Luke 3:10-14

Turn back to Luke 3. Look at Luke 3, Luke 3 verse 7 and following, John, "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.'"

You can stop there for today. As we pointed out last time, to preach repentance, you have to do two things, and we see both of those things here in the text. First, you must confront, that's verses 7-9, and then you must correct, that's verses 10-14. The first half of what we read here, verses 7-9, that's, that's the confrontation part of preaching repentance. First thing you can see, there, just by way of review is that John called them a brood of vipers. And, and, this was not an insult; he wasn't just insulting the people who were coming to be baptized, he was identifying the reality of their true spiritual condition. They were not truly of their father Abraham like they thought. In reality they were of their father the devil. It's a hard truth; John confronted them with it.

John second, he exposed the nature of their religious motives. He, he asked those coming to be baptized to examine in themselves the reason for their coming. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He's not expecting an answer; he just wants them to think about it. Were they coming because they truly sensed the danger of imminent judgment, or were they

coming for some other reason altogether? Examine your motives, that's what he's saying there.

Third thing: John called them to clarify the real root of their religious works. These are religious people, these are church going people. If I can be anachronistic for a moment, they were synagogue attending people, okay? They were, they were the people like your friends and neighbors. And they were coming out and he said, "What is the real root of your religious works? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance," he said. That command implicitly questions the nature of their works. They'd already had been performing works, so he's making an implicit judgment on the works they'd been performing. They're not truly repentance-oriented works. Are your works growing out of a root of repentance, *metanoia*, the *metanoia* in the Greek, the, the change of mind, the change of heart, the absolute regeneration that takes place in the mind and the heart? Or are your works growing from some other root? If they were to take stock of how they actually lived, no matter what their spiritual heritage, their fruits proved what really lay hidden at the root.

Fourth thing: John challenged the basis of their spiritual assurance. He said there in verse 8, "Do not even begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" Don't even start that. If they didn't bear the fruits of repentance, then they didn't share the faith of their father Abraham, okay? And if they didn't share his faith, then claiming Abrahamic parentage did them no good at all. The basis of their spiritual confidence was faulty, it was misleading. In truth, they should be very, very concerned about their true spiritual condition. None of them was safe in the harbor of Abrahamic lineage. Apart from Abrahamic faith, they were completely exposed before the coming wrath of God, and they need to repent. John's being merciful here to preach to them.

Number five, fifth thing: John rebuked their sin of spiritual presumption. They were armed with false assurance here and they felt just fine presuming on the grace of God. I'm one of Abraham's children. I'm fine. God will forgive me. I'm okay. John rebuked that attitude in verse 8, "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 for Abraham.'" They were out in the desert a lot of stone out there,

a lot of dead rocks and John said, if you presume on the grace of God, thinking that you can claim to belong to Abraham when you live nothing like him, you're in danger of being set aside. God didn't need them. He could start over with stones from the ground; cause the rocks to come alive. He could regenerate them to repentance, faith, and good works. God has that kind of power, to use stones from the ground to fulfill his unconditional promise to raise up children to Abraham. Don't presume upon God. Humble yourself.

Finally, sixth point: John confronted the people when he preached repentance to them to reveal the imminence of their spiritual danger. It was a coming judgment, it was right at the door, the axe is raised. "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And that was the purpose of the confrontation, to provoke in them the fear of the Lord. He didn't want them to continue on armed with nothing but false, flimsy assurance. Their false assurance would be like holding up a shield made of tissue paper and trying to fend off the flame thrower of divine wrath. Any false basis of assurance will wither instantly on that day as if it never existed.

Listen, folks, those who preach the Gospel complete with this call here to repentance and faith, those are the preachers who preach in the fear of God and with genuine love for people. Those who preach a half Gospel without the call to obedience, without a demand for repentance, you know what? They're fearful, they're hirelings, they're wolves maybe, tickling the ears of people with this false assurance. All they accomplish with those smooth, pleasant sounding doctrines of ease, all they are doing to people is hardening sinful hearts. You've heard it before, soft preaching makes hard hearts; hard preaching makes soft hearts. John's preaching here softened the heart. Many evangelical religious in our country embrace this half Gospel, and they prefer to embrace this lie from the pit of hell, but, beloved, we, we here, have been called at such a time as this, in this late hour, to recover the preaching of repentance, to help people rediscover what the Gospel actually is because they don't know it anymore. They need to understand what it actually says, what it actually means, what it actually demands, and what it actually promises: forgiven sin, clear conscience.

Listen, if we stop here at verse 9, if we only preach the confrontation part of repentance, do you know what happens? We leave people in despair, don't we? They don't know where to go. We need to go all the way. We need to help them secure the hope of the grace of God and then pursue a life of repentance that is pleasing to God. And that's what John did. To give the correction without the confrontation that just builds hypocrites, right? Religious types who simply rearrange the furniture of their lives as external works. But to give the confrontation without the correction, well, that's brutal. That just leaves people in despair. We don't want to do that either.

Once people understand through Gospel confrontation that they're in trouble, and when God assists them by his Spirit to reach out for Christ as their only hope, that is a regenerating miracle that God does. Once they reach out to Christ for help, you can step in and be there to help them. That's what God called you to do. He didn't call you to regenerate their heart; that's his business. He called you to respond to a heart that is regenerate. That's our business. That's how we work. When these people see the confrontation, when they hear it, when they have

eyes to see and ears to hear, when their hearts are open, then they become desperate to learn what they need to do.

Listen, if they're truly repentant, nothing is going to stand in their way. They will bear fruits worthy of repentance, guaranteed. Repentance and faith, those are two sides of the same coin. Those are the first signs of a regenerate life where God has been working. Once the Spirit regenerates the sinner, the first breath of that born again creature is repentance and faith, and it happens instantly. New life turns from the old; it follows the Lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ. So take a look here at verses 10-14, because once you confront, you need to correct. After the confrontation, you need to come with correction for those who want to repent. We are gonna cover these verses, this correction aspect of preaching repentance here. We're gonna cover these verses in two outline points. I want to make some observations here, verses 10-14, which will illustrate our first point.

First point: The power of preaching true repentance. The power of preaching true repentance. If you see that there is real spiritual power in confronting people the way John did, the



way Jesus did, the way we see illustrated throughout the Scripture, you know what's gonna happen if you see that? You will have the confidence you need to preach repentance and preach it boldly. God is going to take our courageous preaching, weak though it may seem to be, he's going to use our preaching, this confrontation and correction, to effect real change in people. That's what we see here. You may feel like you're shooting nothing but BBs out of a BB gun at a huge iron wall. Do you know what you're doing actually? You're dropping mother of all bombs on that wall. Just, it's a spiritual thing and you can't see what's going on. You're preaching words and you think, Ah, I'm just, I'm not good at this. I'm not getting the words right. I can't remember, what are the steps, aahh, six steps of confrontation. I can't remember that sermon. You start preaching this and you know what? Man, you are causing all kinds of spiritual trauma in the sinner. Don't look on the outside. Don't look on the outside. The sinner has a way of putting up a front and won't let you see anything. Don't worry; your preaching is effective in God.

That's what we're seeing here. Several groups listed here. These are the ones who responded to John's preaching of

repentance. There were certainly other groups of people, as well, other types of people who came to be baptized, but Luke highlights these groups as representative to show us what John's preaching actually accomplished. This, folks, is how he prepared the way of the Lord. This is how he made his paths straight. Look at it here, first of all, there are the crowds, verse 10. These are the *am ha'aretz*, the people of the land. These are the, the *hoi polloi*, just regular folks, regular people like you and me. These aren't the poor and the destitute because John here, notice what he commands them, commands them to share what they had: extra tunic, extra food. Share with those who are truly poor and destitute. So these people aren't the poor and destitute. They're not the beggars. These crowds just represent regular folks, people like me and you. You can imagine these people as like your friends and neighbors, your family, your coworkers. They don't seem overtly bad, at least from casual observation. Many of these folks are just busy. They're preoccupied with making a living, like many people you know, friendly, sure, but they tend to be relatively superficial, distracted, uninterested in spiritual things. That's the crowds. Okay?

There's a second group of people here a group of people who do seem to be more overtly bad, and you're supposed to get that here, that they are bad people. We know from our Bible reading, right, that tax collectors were a disreputable bunch. You didn't want to hang around them. They weren't like the tax collectors of our day, you know, the IRS employees with the white collars and the nice suits. These guys were more like the Mafia. They wore suits, maybe, but they were Mafia suits. It might help you to know a little bit about how they came into their profession so you can see the significance of their inclusion here in the story. Basically, there were two kinds of taxes collected in Israel at this time. There were direct taxes and indirect taxes. Direct taxes, like property tax or head tax, they were collected by the Jewish Council. So they were the national councils like the Sanhedrin, there were local councils like synagogue councils, even officers or officials of the temple courts.

Tax collectors weren't involved in collecting any kind of direct taxes. They were involved in collecting indirect taxes. You say, What are those? Well, like toll taxes for using a road. Customs taxes for international commerce. Duties on goods that maybe you purchased in another place and brought'em back. These

are taxes involving trade and commerce. To common people, direct taxes seemed maybe more reasonable. They supported the infrastructure of government, things like military and police; administrative operations of the state. But these indirect taxes, taxes on the tolls, taxes on customs and duties, these seemed like pure robbery from the Romans. They didn't like the Romans in their pockets at all, and these indirect taxes were exactly that. The indirect taxes, they represent the oppression of Rome, the, the overbearing insinuation of this pagan power to make money off of a conquered Jewish people. The Romans, they were smart. They preferred to shield their own officials from direct contact with the people, when they tried to collect this tax and they used private tax collection enterprises as a buffer. They wanted the money; they just didn't want to deal with the populace. Very clever. So, private businessmen, entrepreneurs, they would bid for the right to collect taxes from the people, and highest bidder won the contract from Rome, advanced whatever amount of money that they bid, and then they got to work, getting your money. You might say they took up a collection, but it was not a voluntary thing. It was mandatory. And they had the brute to back it up, to recoup the amount that they'd already paid to Rome. Also, to make a bit of profit, the tax collection enterprise hired tax collectors to encourage men,

in this really what's clearly an unsavory task of extracting money from fellow citizens. The job held out promise for personal benefit as well, personal profit. The tax collectors added a percentage to make the profit that was required by the whole enterprise, and then additional percentages were charged, by the way, on a fluctuating scale. It was kind of a subjective call. It was based his assessment and that went to the tax collector; went to pay off his boat payment and all that kind of stuff and also his squad of goons that beat it out of you. He had to pay those guys. These guys exercised their own judgment, assigning the percentages, assessing the value of your goods, assessing the tax you owed. You think our tax system is broken? This system was rife with opportunity for bad people to take your money. If you've ever wanted to be thankful for the IRS, this might be the moment.

But the whole thing here is driven by absolute greed. Tax collectors, they were not a popular group. These were social pariahs. No one wanted to be around them. The crowds, they didn't want to be around them. One commentator named Alfred Plummer, he wrote of them, he said quote, "These tax collectors were detested everywhere because of their oppressiveness and

fraud, and they were classed with the vilest of mankind. The Jews especially abhorred them as bloodsuckers for a heathen conqueror. For a Jew to enter such a service was the most utter degradation. He was excommunicated and his whole family was disgraced." End quote.

Another commentator wrote this, his name's James Edwards, he wrote quote, "Tax collectors were despised and hated. Mishna and Talmud preserve scathing judgments of them from later periods lumping them together with thieves and murderers. A Jew who collected taxes was a cause of disgrace to his family, expelled from the synagogue and disqualified as a judge or a witness in court. The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean. The Jews were forbidden from receiving money, including alms, from tax collectors since tax revenues were deemed robbery." End quote. So if you're poor and you're begging out on the street, if a tax collector comes by, you're to close your hand and pull it back. You can't receive any of their money.

There were two rabbinical schools of thought in the first century Judaism: Hillel and Shammai, two famous rabbis. These two men disagreed; their schools disagreed on many points of

doctrine, many points of practice, but they came together in unity on this point. Both Hillel and Shammai taught, that it was permissible for Jews to lie to tax collectors, and they could do so with impunity. They could do so and not incur sin. That's what they taught the people. That's how much tax collectors were despised by the Jews, obviously. Think about, why did someone become a tax collector, then? Well, that's because they had no other avenue, or at least they thought that. It took a certain kind of sinner to become a tax collector. It took someone who, who just didn't care anymore. Right? Ah, forget social convention, forget what people think about me. Who cares? I've already lost my reputation. I might as well have some money, too. Sins are already so bad, family standing already so low, whose greed maybe was altogether so consuming. None of that mattered to them anymore.

And tax collectors, as you might imagine, attracted other seedy characters as well. They surrounded themselves with the ruffians, that they hired for protection and for extortion. Their profligate lifestyles and their tendency to blow money on booze and partying that attracted all the worst kinds of people: prostitutes, lowlifes, all the worst kind of outcasts. Well,

that's the tax collectors, right? They're mingling with the crowd.

Why does Luke, then, highlight these groups of people in particular? Because, folks, these groups illustrate for us the true power of preaching repentance. The effectiveness of preaching repentance. And we need to see that. This is the point. You and I need to be convinced that this uncomfortable, confrontational aspect of preaching repentance that it's worth the trouble. That's it's worth risking relationships over. Yes, it's pleasing to God to preach repentance, but it is also effective in accomplishing God's purposes. Are we just wasting our time here? No, we're not. It is effective. It's effective for accomplishing what God wants to accomplish in the heart.

Listen, the crowd's coming forward, convicted by John's confrontation. They show us the power of repentance preaching to reach just regular people: the masses, people who are caught up in all the ebb and flow of life, people who are superficial, in deep, and everybody in between, people who are distracted and focused, and everybody in between. Your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, your family, when you preach repentance to them



by the grace of God, he makes this message of repentance effective in their hearts. None of this is our own doing; it's by the Spirit of God. The crowds show us the sufficiency of preaching repentance and that points to the absolute sufficiency of the Gospel to save. It's about the breadth of repentance. It's ability to reach and convict regular folks like most of the folks we come in contact with.

It will also reach those who seem the furthest from God's grace. That's the tax collectors. The tax collectors here show us the power of repentance to preach sinners of all kinds, even those we consider to be the farthest flung, the farthest gone. This is about the depth of repentance here, and it points to the infinite reach of God's grace to reach the farthest-flung sinners. I am so thankful for that message, aren't you? I love the saying of Corrie Ten boom, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still." The love of God: To write of it would drain the ocean dry if all the ocean would turn into ink. You couldn't write about it enough. God's amazing grace, the penetrating preaching of repentance, it reaches all, breadth and also depth, to even the very worst of sinners.