

How to Preach Repentance, Part 4

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've got the crowds, the tax collectors, and then the soldiers. The soldiers: what are the soldiers doing here? It's not like they had discretionary time to go out into the desert and get religion for themselves. Like, like all soldiers they're enlisted into the service of some government official. So their time, their life is not their own. So what are they doing here on the scene? John's ministry, as we see in the first part of this chapter, it bordered on the western edge of Perea, and that was ruled by the tetrarch named Herod Antipas, and of all the Herodian rulers descended from Herod the Great, Herod Antipas was probably the most competent. He was probably the one who remained in most favor with Rome. And part of the favor was the fact that he, like the Romans, hated insurrections. He hated any popular uprising, any sign of rebellion. So anytime, anytime he saw something that might give a hint or a lead to insurrection or rebellion, do you know what he wanted to do? He wanted squelch it immediately, just stifle it. So, when he hears about John the Baptist, large numbers of people going out to him in the Judean, the Perea wilderness, Herod Antipas dispatched a contingent of soldiers to investigate. Someone liked John, with his magnetism and charisma, this power of influence. This guy might sway a zealous crowd. He might rise up, lead them against

the government, so Herod Antipas had to make sure John was not some kind of political zealot, fomenting a popular uprising in the desert. So the soldiers are there. Isn't it interesting that even the sign of oppression, the sign of hostile investigation, can be an opportunity that the Lord uses? Don't turn away the tax men, folks. Don't turn away the people at our government that come near to us. Sometimes there's a reason for it.

That's just a brief introduction into the groups that Luke describes here: the crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers. And we want to ask this question here at this point: Why does Luke highlight these three groups? Others came, too. Why these? Do you notice any groups here that are not listed? Who's missing? No political leaders, right? No religious leaders are here. There are no Herodians, no Roman officials. There are no scribes, no Pharisees, no Sadducees, no temple officials. We know they came. John 1:19 tells us that the Jews sent priest and Levites from Jerusalem to John, but that was only for investigative purposes, not because they had any interest in repentance. They didn't care about the message. In fact, John 1:22 says these priests and Levites, these officers of the temple, they insisted that John be clear, absolutely, abundantly

clear, about his identity, saying, "Who are you? We need to go and give an answer to those who sent us. So, what do you say about yourself?" So the religious leaders, they weren't there to humble themselves in repentance. They were there as judges. They were there to determine John's orthodoxy, to determine his identity. To see, are you claiming to be the Messiah? We'll see about that.

In fact, in Luke 7:28 to 30, Jesus told the people, "'I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John. Yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.' (When all the people heard this and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)"

You know who hates the message of repentance? The religious establishment. It totally turns things over for them. They like a system in which they are in charge and people are kept confined by their works, not a heart of repentance, not, not completely vertically devoted to God, but where they're beholden to them, they're beholden to the system. So the Pharisees, the

lawyers, the scribes, the religious leaders, the political leaders, they don't show up there. Why does Luke, then, highlight these three 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 that 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." 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.

Final group, soldiers, what are they there for? What are they showing us, here? The soldiers here show us how the power of preaching repentance crosses all boundaries, ethnic and racial, social and cultural. You understand this. I mean, I, I know that some of you have served in the military. Many of you have not. Soldiers live in a completely different world than civilians do. They do experience life and death from a very different vantage point. Military life is a different culture altogether, one that civilians really have a hard time understanding and appreciating. But this preaching of repentance, this confrontation of John's preaching, it penetrated these hardened soldiers, as well. Jews and Gentiles alike, those as close as Palestine and as far away as Europe and Iran. Whether these soldiers grew up in Israel, Parthia, Gaul, whether they were ethnically and culturally Thracians, or Parthians, or Romans, John's confrontational preaching humbled every single heart. Culture did not matter.

Repentance is a message that cuts to the heart of people of all kinds. Why? Because the heart is the same from person to person. We are all, every single one of us, created in God's image and all of us trace our origin back to Adam and Eve. All

of us trace our sin back to the fall of Adam. All humans, mankind, the law of God is written on all of our hearts. We all have consciences that either accuse us or excuse us. We all, alike, sense the guilt of our sin through the feeling of shame. We all react to our feelings of shame by some form of hiding. If we don't repent and turn to God and flee to him and come clean, we want to hide. That's what our shame does to us. We either run or we ignore or we counter-accuse or we deflect or we blame-shift. That's what shame does. So, just as sin is a universal reality, so also the power of preaching repentance has universal effect. No culture, no tribe, no tongue, no nation is insulated by its culture, by its tribe, its tongue or its nation from God's power to bring about repentance. That should be encouraging news, beloved. It should be encouraging, strengthening news. No one can escape the powerful, incisive message of repentance that reaches to every single sinner, the crowds, the tax collectors, even those rascally soldiers. I know what they're like. You just need to make sure you bring it. Bring it! Preach the confrontation and then be patient and pray and watch the Spirit work.

Just our first point, the power of preaching true repentance. Here's our second point. Our second point is, the practice of teaching true repentance. The practice of teaching true repentance. And again you gotta insert a word into your outline, the word, teaching. Okay, the practice of teaching true repentance. Listen, beloved, when you trust God in your evangelism and you do what John has taught us to do here, the confrontational aspect of preaching repentance, when you exercise the courage to lovingly confront people like this, you're gonna get different responses, okay? Many are gonna turn away from the message. They're gonna cut off the friendship. You're not gonna see their, their number showing up on your phone anymore. They're not gonna call. They're not gonna come around. They either ignore you, marginalize you. They may feign interest at first, then they'll lose interest. Some will, some will just right away heap scorn on you, distracting themselves from their own guilt by putting you down, making you feel foolish. Others may show interest at first, but once you get into the details of what repentance really requires, as you bring this correction to their lives, they'll peel away.

But listen, there will be others. There will be a precious few who come under divine conviction, and they're going to want to know more. Those are the people that you want to help with the teaching of true repentance. Teaching repentance, this is the corrective part of preaching repentance, which comes after the confrontational part. Teaching repentance, like we said, involves two basic things, okay? You've got on the one hand, when you preach repentance, you've got to confront, and then you've got to correct. And when you do the correction, it also involves two things. First of all, you want to look for signs of true spiritual conviction. True spiritual conviction. Then, when you see those signs of conviction, you want to tell those people what to change and how to change.

Let's consider the first issue for today. Look for signs of true spiritual conviction. Look for signs of conviction. John had just confronted the crowds who came out to be baptized. He exposed their true spiritual condition here. He challenged their motives for coming. He exposed the root of their religious works, and he challenged the basis of their spiritual assurance. He rebuked that spiritual presumption and all that confrontation, like I said, was in hopes that these crowds would

hear the warning of verse 9, that they were facing a very clear and present danger from God. Judgment was imminent. The axe is raised and it's aimed at the root of their lives. The fires are lit. The flames are rising, roaring, greedy to consume their dead lives. Branches, trunk, roots, swallow them whole.

They need to repent. Look at those verses again, verses 10 to 14, "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?' 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.'"

Luke has portrayed for us three groups of people who are showing signs of true spiritual conviction. You say, how can you tell? Well, these three groups of people, they couldn't be more different, could they? But all three of them ask exactly the same question, what shall we do? Or better yet, what should we

do? They were asking about moral obligation. What ought we to do now that we have heard this? These people want to know what repentance entails. They've heard John call for fruits of repentance. They want to know what will demonstrate the fruits of repentance. What should we do?

The verb is *poieo*, which refers to, doing something, okay? That is to say, it's not a theoretical thing. It's not something that's just a, a frame of mind that you get in. This is something actual, something practical. What should we do? They are asking about something that they understand will be accomplished by effort. It will be manifest in something visible, something identifiable. It's interesting the verb shows up actually multiple times in the text, same verb, *poieo*, in each question, verses 10, 12, and 14. But the verb also shows up in verses 3, 8, and 9. Look at verse 3. It says, "Make his paths straight." Same verb, *poieo*. In verse 8, it's, it's the word, bear, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." That is, do fruits. The warning in verse 9, "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit," same word, *poieo*. The non-*poieo* tree is cut down and thrown into the fire. Then again, verse 11, the word, *poieo*, is translated, do. "Whoever has food is to do

likewise.” What’s the, do? It’s to share. That is seven times if my math is right. The crowds wanted to know what to do, and they are asking the right question.

You say, Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, time out. Wait a second. Why is that the right question? Didn’t the rich young ruler come to Jesus with essentially the same question? Wasn’t he seeking salvation by works and he went away sad? That’s a very insightful observation. Thank you for making it. It’s a great question. Let me address that for you. Turn over to Luke. You’re in Luke. Turn over to Luke 18 for a moment, Luke 18 in verse 18 to 23, and we’re going to consider, just as we close here, this bright evangelism prospect. This guy who walked up to Jesus unprompted and asked him what seemed to be such a hopeful question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Well, that sounds strikingly similar to our passage, right? Same question. Do you remember how Jesus answered him? Jesus said: look at it there, “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” He was basically quoting the second half of the Ten Commandments. Here’s what the rich young ruler says. He says, “All these I have kept from my

youth.” Well, that’s pretty bold. He’s definitely not a kid growing up in my family. But “All these, I have kept from my youth.” He says, okay, let’s just take him on face value.

Do you notice one difference between this man and the crowds, the tax collectors, soldiers? None of them are declaring to John their own righteousness. They had just endured the confrontational preaching of John the Baptist, that call to repentance. And after hearing that, and only after hearing that, after dealing with the exposure of their spiritual bankruptcy and exposed to their spiritual danger, that is when they asked the simple question, what should we do? No such confrontation had happened here. Take a look at verse 22. Jesus says, you want salvation by works? Okay, let’s go all the way with that. Do all the works. When Jesus said to, “when Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven,’ and then, ‘come, follow me.’ When the rich young ruler, heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.”

Now obviously, Jesus didn’t contradict the entirety of teaching of Scripture that salvation is by grace alone through

faith alone. So why did Jesus just prescribe the liquidation of his entire estate followed by a single summary act of charity, and then this call to follow him? Because Jesus was doing for the rich man exactly what John had done for the crowds who came to be baptized. He confronted the rich young ruler. He was exposing the fact that this man loved his stuff, his money, his possessions. He loved his extreme wealth, and he did not want to part with it. The rich young ruler had a log sticking out of his eye that blinded him. It was called the love of money, and he was unable to judge himself or anything else clearly. Not only had he failed to keep all of the commandments Jesus listed here, he had been committing idolatry by worshipping his wealth. He'd failed to love the Lord God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He was unwilling to love his neighbor as himself. So when he departed from Jesus, you know what? He revealed his heart, his commitment to continue loving himself. No love for Jesus, which means he remained stubbornly committed to his violation of the greatest commandment.

Go ahead and turn back to Chapter 3 now. Listen, the crowds, tax collectors, soldiers, the issue is not what question they asked, even though they asked the right question, as we'll

see. What distinguished them from the rich young ruler is that their hearts had already been prepared by the preaching of repentance. They had been prepared by confrontation. John's ministry was having its intended effect. They asked the right question. In fact, Joel Green, the commentator, points out, quote, "The question of the crowds, 'What then should we do?' is repeated by the tax collectors in 3:12, the soldiers in 3:14, a lawyer in 10:25, a ruler in 18:18," that's what we just saw, "a Jerusalem audience in Acts 2:37, a jailer in Acts 16:30 and a zealous Jew in Acts 22:10." These are referring to Paul, there. And get this, he goes on, "Apart from the one exception in 18:18," that's the rich young ruler passage we just looked at, "Apart from the one exception in 18:18, "in each case the question is provoked by instruction, preaching, or a miraculous event in immediate context. This query demonstrates in an explicit way that the redemptive visitation of God demands response." That is exactly right, folks.

The preaching of the Gospel, the preaching of repentance, it demands a verdict. Don't be so quick to dismiss any call to change behavior as salvation by works. That's not only naive and simplistic, it's biblically inaccurate and it could be very

spiritually damaging. The call to repentance is a call to change your direction, to change your behavior. The call of the Gospel is a call to new life, means a new direction and, yes, it means new behavior. Who, after all, would deny the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if anyone is Christ he is," what? "a new creation," right? A new creation.

"The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." What is that referring to if not at just the most superficial level, some aspect of behavior: words, speech, acts? Let's go deeper, internal: thoughts, attitudes, motives. It goes even deeper: Are you regenerate or are you not? That's something you cannot do on your own, that is why it's completely and wholly of the grace of God. Repentance and faith, it goes deep, to be sure. It delves into the very heart. It bores into the mind and it changes the thought life at the level of belief and trust, then affection and volition; and that new way of thinking, based on the regeneration of the spirit, the new birth, it results in an entirely new life.

For the crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers to ask, almost like a chorus who are singing in perfect unison, what

PILLAR OF
—TRUTH— 

should we do? Listen, that's exactly the right question. This is an issue of moral obligation. Something must be done.