

How to Preach Repentance, Part 5

Luke 3:10-14

Follow along as I read Luke 3:1 and following. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

"And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" 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 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.'"

The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers, they come here with an utter lack of pretentiousness. There is no guile. There's no conceit. In fact, there is a total absence of pride here, total humility. Their humility comes across in how they present themselves. You don't see it as much in what that crowd

says, that's general there. But you do see it in the tax collectors. You do see it in the soldiers. When the tax collectors came, notice that they show a deference to John by calling him, teacher, *diaskalos*. They put him in the place of authority and themselves under his authority. It's a sign of respect, a sign of deference. They acknowledge John as a teacher, and they acknowledge that they are there as learners. They don't walk proudly before him, chins up, heads held high; they come to him in humility. They recognize John as a prophet of God. He's there to give them life-giving words. They're there to shut their mouths, really and listen. Why fill the air with their verbose language? Why not just be quiet, let him talk? Because God's speaking.

When the soldiers speak when they address John, it's on the heels of the tax collectors. The soldiers here actually associate themselves with the tax collectors. It's joined together in the text by a conjunction. The Greek is literally, what should we do, even we? Like, they're bad and you talked to them, so what about us? For us, what should we do? They're putting themselves on the same level as the tax collectors. It's in the way they pose the question. It's almost like they're

expressing here a very faint-hearted faith, as if, well, there may yet be hope for sinners like us.

Some of these soldiers, you have to understand, they'd been pretty brutal. They'd engaged in very violent acts. Some of them had done things that they can't undo, whether in the fog of war or simply in the fog of a bloodlust. Some of those things would make them look like moral monsters to most civilians, things that some people can't even comprehend. And they came forward, they lacked confidence that God would have anything left for them, but judgment, but wrath. And yet they came forward, reaching out in a very faint hope of mercy and grace. Even besides their actions, the soldiers considered themselves as outsiders, really, strangers, aliens to the promises of Israel. Most of them, as we said, were Gentiles, they knew they were in no position to demand. They were only able to look for some crumb of God's mercy.

Here's the point, folks, when people are under spiritual conviction, you're going to see them coming forward as humble, not proud. You're going to see them deferential, not arrogant. They've done the self-examination. They find themselves wanting

and they look for clarity about working out their moral obligation to God. This is a vertical issue, and they're coming to you to just help them with that vertical issue. It's an issue of finding a clear conscience before God, and they don't want to waste any time. This desire here to be right with God it's a clear sign that a change has taken place in their heart.

When you see signs of true spiritual conviction, when you see these external expressions of an internal remorse, what do you do? What do you, as a preacher of repentance, what do you do? This is subpoint B, in your outline. Well, you want to respond to those people by helping them. You want to teach them the steps of true biblical change. Look at those verses again, verses 10-14, "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?' 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.'"

That's the real difficulty, isn't, to work out repentance in the day-to-day, mundane issues of life, to walk in righteousness before God in both public and in private, in both word and deed, both internally and externally. People who are repentant, they are those who are truly wise. The repentant, they fear the Lord. They must change, and they must make the change in their personal lives first before they run off to change the world.

Now, we talk about teaching the steps of true biblical change. Basically, you don't have to have a big long list here. Basically, there are just two steps. We're just talking about two steps in biblical change. That's what John prescribes here. Just two steps. Step one: put off. Step two: put on. We could say, step one: turn from sin; step two: pursue righteousness. Put off and put on. Repentance requires a turning from and a turning to. Obviously, if you turn, something is at your back and something is at your front, right? Turn from and turn to. The call is to turn from and to turn to. Those are the two steps that John gives.

We've already covered the put off, the turn from aspect of repentance. That was the confrontation aimed at the general sins of the Jewish people, that was verses 7-9. We're going to see that the put off idea comes up again with the soldiers. But initially with the crowds and tax collectors, we see that John is telling them what to put on. He's telling them what to put on, the turn to aspect of repentance. As we walk through John's teaching here, we find that the biblical corrective goes deeper than we may have thought here. Okay? So just observe.

Let's start with John's instruction to the crowds. What did repentance look like for them? "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, whoever had food is to do likewise.'" Pretty simple. John is prescribing here one thing, just one, generosity toward those in need. Those with two tunics, those with food, share with those who have none. Be generous to those in need.

The tunic was just a, like a long undergarment that had sleeves, it was worn next to the skin like an undershirt. Men and women both, they wore tunics close to the skin, and if it

was cold, they wore two tunics to keep them warm. This is pretty simple to understand here, pretty easy to grasp. Share with those who lack clothing. Share with those who lack food. The basic necessities of life. Now, the clear implication of John's prescription is this: These good people, these neighbors, friends, relatives, they weren't doing this. They were not doing it. If they had an extra tunic or two, if they had extra food, they'd been using it on themselves. They'd been oblivious to those in need, those living in destitution and poverty. John isn't commanding here some kind of communism. People have a right to personal property. He's not commanding some kind of radical socialist ideal or something like that.

What he's commanding is actually more penetrating and convicting because on a routine, daily basis people had to be constantly aware. To obey this command, the crowds had to be cognizant of others. To be generous, to share, to look out for people in need, you have to look out. You have to look out beyond yourself, beyond your own life, beyond your own schedule, beyond your own preferences and desires. You have to look for those who don't have. They had to look for opportunities to share with people in need.



So let me ask you a question. What virtue is required by John's command here? We see the fruit of regular habitual sharing with others, but what's at the root? What is the root that grows and produces this kind of sharing? It's the virtue of love, isn't it? Love. Love is the virtuous root that bears the righteous fruit of sharing, of generosity. That's what repentance meant for the crowds. They needed to love their neighbor as themselves. The clear implication here is that they were not obeying this command, to love their neighbor as themselves.

Next group, the tax collectors, verses 12-13. "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.'" As we mentioned last time, tax collectors, they worked for tax franchises. They'd collected the indirect taxes required of the people by Rome: the poll tax, customs taxes, duties. These are the unpopular taxes that Rome collected as a foreign power, charging people that they'd conquered for the privilege of doing business in their own land. So obviously the Jewish people were not happy about this

arrangement at all. It was adding the insult of foreign taxation to the injury of foreign occupation.

Notice John does not tell the tax collectors to stop being tax collectors. He doesn't tell them to quit their job and get into another line of work. He simply tells them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." In other words, be a tax collector if you wish. John expresses no moral issues with the profession itself, which is remarkable, by the way, for a prophet of God to affirm the right of a foreign, conquering power to collect taxes from conquered Jews. Not popular. John is in agreement with Jesus' words later, right? Luke 20:25, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

Tax collection profession, in and of itself, that's not the issue. The issue was the greed that motivated so many in the tax collection business. The issue is the greed, so John tells the tax collectors here, be a tax collector, if you like. It's lawful for you to be employed as a tax collector, only collect what you're authorized to collect. Don't collect more. The tax collectors, in submission to their employers, they could do what they were hired to do, but they could no longer make dishonest assessments. They could no longer add exorbitant percentages for

personal profit. The grammatical construction, here, of the command, it calls attention to the greed that's involved with what the tax collectors were doing. John says, be a tax collector, but do it lawfully. Be an honest tax collector.

Now as one commentator put it, an honest tax collector was in principle a starving tax collector. So what John was calling them to do, not in principle maybe, but in effect, it really did threaten their livelihood. Tax collectors would see their profit margins drop significantly, and maybe they could eke out a living as an honest tax collector, but not likely. So repentance for these tax collectors, it could require an entirely new line of work. And if that was the implication, were they willing to do that? You see that's what true repentance requires sometimes, to change your life completely, to get into a new line of work. Is following God with a clear conscience. Is it worth it to you? Those who were repentant, they answer that question with a resounding, Yes!

So we see the fundamental issue once again is love of neighbor, right? Here's where we see that the tax collectors and the crowds, they're really guilty of the same sin. They're both

guilty of failing to love their neighbor as themselves. The crowd would have considered themselves above the tax collectors because they didn't use the system to cheat people, but their indifference to people in need, same effect. Their failure to share, that put them in the same category as the tax collectors. All of them are failing to love their neighbors as themselves. All of them are needing to repent. Tax collectors have no problem recognizing their low status in society. They have come to terms with that. Their duty is to repent of their lust and greed. But the crowd, many of them would be reluctant to admit they were on the same level as tax collectors. They'd be reluctant to admit they're on the same level as those thieves, those brigands, and hooligans. That they are just as guilty before God. So the crowds had an added sin, the sin of pride, of believing themselves better than the common sinner. Look, it's only by the grace of God that any of these people repent.

Well, that's the crowds, the tax collectors. Let's consider the soldiers. What about them? "The 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 may have noticed, but John's

answer to the crowds commanded a positive behavior. His response to the tax collectors corrected a negative behavior, but his answer to the soldiers, he does both. He corrects a negative behavior and he commands a positive behavior. You can see that the response to the soldiers here is the most comprehensive answer of all three. I believe there's a reason for this. I think he was briefer with the crowds and tax collectors because they shared a common Jewish heritage. As Paul said of his fellow Jews in Romans 2:18, They are those who, "know God's will," they are able to, "approve what is excellent because they are instructed from the law." That is to say, there has been a prevenient work in their life of law teaching. They'd grown up being instructed from the Law of Moses. They'd read the prophets. They'd heard it in the synagogues. This is just a reminder. The crowds, the tax collectors, even though they came from opposite ends of the social spectrum, they shared a common cultural milieu. They came from the same background. They all knew this Levitical command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's not that they didn't know the truth, it's that they weren't practicing the truth.

But the soldiers, being from various Gentile countries, with all different ethnicities and cultures, they didn't have the Mosaic Laws as the backdrop of their thought life. According to Ephesians 2:12, as Gentiles, they were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, they were strangers to the covenants of promise. So John gives them a little extra help. He clarifies for them exactly what to put off and exactly what to put on. The way the ESV translates the verse, it looks like there is just one thing to put off, extortion, which they were engaging in by threats and false accusations. And that's really an accurate way to render the sense here. But the way it's actually written in the Greek, John is actually prohibited two things, because there are two verbs here, extorting through force on the one hand, making false accusations on the other hand. Both of them had at the root a desire for money. They both involved getting money.

But it's interesting to parse this out a little bit, to kind of break it out a little bit to see what is really going on. The first verb, extortion through force, the root word literally means to shake or to cause to quake. It's the root word *seismos*. Do you recognize that? We get the word, seismic, as in earthquake: geological, troubling, intensified event. It's

intensified here with a preposition to give the comprehensive meaning not just, to shake, but to shake violently. It's like a big earthquake. Translated in the ESV, extort by threats. That's what these soldiers were doing. They were intimidating people. They were causing people to shake, to quake, to be terrified, afraid. Why? Because frightened people are willing to forfeit money just to get that threat away from them. These guys are like the original Mafioso. They offer protection in order to keep your business safe from thugs and hooligans. And by the way, if you don't pay up, we'll break your legs. That's this.

The second verb translated in the ESV is extort by false accusation. It's a very descriptive word here. Literally, the word means, to show the figs, like fig trees. I'm not a fig farmer, but evidently to show the figs, the farmer had to shake the tree, the fig tree aggressively. If you shake the branches, the ripe figs drop to the ground, you gather them up. So this provided a picture for a common metaphor of the, what we would call, shaking someone down. That's what is going on here. The method for extorting money in this case, it wasn't the threat of physical violence; shaking someone down involved the threat of false accusation, trumped-up charges, which could lead to a

false imprisonment, which could really disrupt your life. Put a little gift in the hand of that friendly soldier, I can make all these charges go away, disappear. It's basically blackmail.

So that was the sinful fruit that needed to be abandoned, extorting money from people through physical intimidation, through blackmailing people by false accusation. What's at the root of this kind of behavior? Well, basic greed is certainly at the root of this behavior; in fact, that is part of the reason foreign soldiers became mercenaries. They used the skills that they had, their adeptness at making war, at fighting battles, martial arts and all that. They went off to make money in foreign context. Once they made enough money to improve their station in life, they could return home to buy that farm, start that business, raise a family, or whatever.

So John called them to repent of that greed. Not just by putting off the sinful behavior, but by putting on righteous behavior. Righteousness meant not just uprooting the root of greed, but replacing that greed with the root of contentment, gratitude. The soldiers needed to be content with their wages, to accept their pay. Again, notice John doesn't command the



soldiers here to stop being soldiers. Military is a noble profession, nothing wrong with being a soldier. In fact, we learn from Romans 13:1-4, that the military and the police, those functions of government, are divinely appointed restraining forces for the good of society.

So I hope you see the need to put off and put on and see these as aspect of repentance illustrated here in these three groups. Each group, the crowds, tax collectors, the soldiers, each of them had sins that characterized them. Each of them had specific ways to work out repentance. In each case, the visible fruit, it represented what was deep at the root. John had confronted those who came for baptism. And the fact that some had been convicted here of their sins, the fact that some sought to obey John by bearing fruits worthy of repentance, this is illustrating for us, the power of preaching repentance.

When John saw the signs of true spiritual conviction, he responded with compassion, with help, specific concrete help, not just platitudes, not just, "be warm, be filled," but tangible instruction teaching people the steps of biblical change. That's what we need to do folks; we need to do the same

thing for people. And we need to do the bold, courageous work of confronting sin. We need to follow up with those who respond. Those who show the signs of spiritual conviction, we need to teach them the steps of biblical change. We need to teach them to put off sin and put on righteousness. That takes time. It takes energy. It takes thought. It takes prayer. It takes biblical understanding.

That's what we're called to do. We can't be lazy with this. And beloved, we need to be practicing this as well, don't we? In fact, Martin Luther called the Christian life a life of repentance, day by day putting off and putting on, turning from sin and turning to righteousness. That's how we need to live, folks, so our lives are bearing witness to the power of the Gospel to transform from the inside out. Now you know how, alright? Let's do it together and pray and ask the Lord for help.