**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE CALL TO REPENT**

**Luke 3:1-20**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 3. Today we continue our series in Luke called “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”. As we have seen over the last two months, Chapters 1 and 2 have told us the origin stories of two of the central figures in redemptive history: John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ. We have read about their parents, their miraculous births, and the promises of God that they have come to fulfill. Chapter 3 marks a turning point in Luke’s gospel, as we find that these two children are no longer children. They’re grown men now, and are finally ready to begin doing the work that God has called them to do.

Today’s text will focus on the ministry and message of John the Baptist. As the forerunner who came to prepare the way for Jesus, John the Baptist had a crucial role to play in the fulfillment of God’s plans of salvation. His role was to declare a message that would prepare Israel to trust and obey the Messiah when he arrived, a message that can be summarized in one, incredibly important word: repent! Repentance was the heart of his message, and therefore it must be the heart of my message as well.

Repentance literally means “to turn”. To repent is to turn away from sin, and to turn towards God. It is a reorienting of one’s life away from the things that offend God, and towards the things that glorify God. Repentance is an act of will done with the help of God’s grace. It always requires us to do two things: the application of our will to *stop* doing what is wrong, and the application of our will to *start* doing what is right. That’s what it means to turn away from our sin. But what makes repentance *repentance* rather than mere *resolutions*, is that the resolutions we make are made with God’s help, for God’s glory. True repentance always involves a humble dependence on God’s grace to change our lives, and a desire to glorify him through our changed lives. Let me give you three examples of what this looks like:

* Say you just sinned by speaking to your spouse in a harsh, angry way. True repentance is humbly depending on God’s grace to help you both to resolve *not to speak* angrily to you spouse in the future, and to resolve *to speak* words that will encourage, strengthen, and comfort you spouse in the future, in a way that glorifies God.
* Or say you just sinned by dishonouring your parents, whether it was by disobeying them, or by disrespecting them by your words or attitudes. True repentance is humbly depending on God’s grace to help you both to resolve *not to* dishonor your parents by your words, actions, and attitudes, and to resolve *to do* what honours your parents by your words, actions, and attitudes, in a way that glorifies God.
* Or say you just sinned by lusting after another person. True repentance is humbly depending on God’s grace to help you both to resolve *not to* fantasize about a person, and to resolve *to start* treating and thinking about people in a way that glorifies God.

Repentance is hard. It involves dying to the things we love, and it involves living in a way that often seems impossible. It involves changing parts of our lives that are deeply ingrained in our identity and embedded within our deepest desires. But as difficult as repentance is, it remains a crucial part not only of the Christian life, but of the Christian message.

Sometimes we fall into the error of thinking that Jesus never told people to repent. We think that he only told people to believe in him. We know that John the Baptist spoke about repentance, but we tend to think of him like the strange uncle in the family who’s always talking about the same thing. We love him, but we don’t really take him seriously. But how did Jesus summarize his ministry in Luke 5:32? “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to…” To what? To faith? To trust? No, “to repentance”. John the Baptist came to call people to repent, and Jesus came to call people to repent.

As we look at our text today, we need to submit ourselves to what John says about repentance just as we would submit ourselves to what Jesus says about repentance, because both of them speak with the authority of God.

The title of this message is **John the Baptist and the Call to Repent**. My aim today is to show you that we must **Prepare for the Lord by Preparing Your Life.** We will have three points today:

1. The Urgency of Repentance
2. The Nature of Repentance
3. The Aim of Repentance

 (1) **THE URGENCY OF REPENTANCE**

Our text today begins in typical Lucan fashion as he sets the cultural, historical context for the events to follow. Luke mentions several historical figures who were key political players during this time. Let me tell you a little about each of them:

* Tiberius Caesar in verse 1 was the step-son of Caesar Augustus, who was the Roman Emperor who decreed the census back in Luke 1 that led Joseph and Mary to return to Bethlehem. He was a former Roman general who became Cesar in 14 AD.
* Next in verse 1 is Pontius Pilate, but let me first address Herod and Philip to provide some needed context. The Herod in verse 1 is also known in history as “Herod Antipas”. He was the son of Herod the Great, who was a vassal king of Rome who ruled over a vast region that encompassed much of ancient Israel. Herod the Great was the Herod who was part of all the Christmas narratives in the gospel. He was the one who ordered the execution of all the baby boys under 2 in the area surrounding Bethlehem in Matthew 2. When Herod the Great died in 4 AD, his kingdom was divided into four territories, each ruled by a “tetrarch”, which refers to one of four joint rulers over a Roman province. Three of those territories were divided among Herod the Great’s three sons: Herod Antipas (the Herod we see in Luke 1:1), Philip (also in 1:1), and Archelaus. The reason why Archelaus isn’t mentioned in our text is that Caesar Augustus had banished him around 6 AD for political reasons.
* Pontius Pilate is the one who took over Archelaus’ territory. After Archelaus was banished, Rome assumed control of his territory, the land called Judea. It chose Pontius Pilate, a Roman prefect, to govern Judea on its behalf. That is what we see in verse 1. This is the same Pilate who approved of Jesus’ crucifixion.
* Then we read about Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene, at the end of verse 1. He was the fourth tetrarch of Herod the Great’s kingdom. Not much is known about him, but sources outside of the Bible confirm that there was a public figure named Lysanias who lived in that region during this time period.
* Lastly, we read in verse 2 that these events took place “during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”. It seems a little odd at first that two men are mentioned for one office. It’s *one* high priesthood, and yet there are two men named. John, in his gospel, gives us some insight here. In John 18, John writes about the arrest of Jesus and his presentation before the high priest. This is what he writes:

“First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.” (verse 13)

“The high priest (Annas) then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.” (verse 19)

“Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.” (verse 24)

In other words, Caiaphas was the current high priest, and Annas was the former high priest. Annas was still called high priest, however, much like former presidents are still called “President”, and it’s apparent that he still exercised much influence in support of his son-in-law Caiaphas.

The point of this brief historical survey is to show you once again that the events in Luke’s gospel are rooted in history. They aren’t made up by him, and they aren’t fairy tales. They happened in real places among real people at a real time in history. Indeed, as we see in verses 19-20, John the Baptist knew Herod Antipas, and Herod Antipas knew John. John spoke out against Herod’s immorality, and was imprisoned and ultimately executed for it. Luke includes all these details so that we can have certainty that he’s talking about facts, not fiction.

Luke continues in verses 2-3: “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.” There’s three parts to John’s message: baptism, repentance, and forgiveness of sons. John came to call people to repentance, with the symbol of repentance being baptism, and the goal of repentance being the forgiveness of sins.

I should note as a brief aside that the baptism mentioned here is different from the baptism that Christians are called to participate in. We see that in Acts 19, where Paul encounters some disciples who were baptized according to John the Baptist’s teaching. Paul teaches them that John’s baptism was only meant to prepare people for Jesus. Now that Jesus has come, they no longer need John’s baptism. Instead, they need Jesus’ baptism, and Paul proceeds to baptize them in the name of the Lord Jesus. And so, don’t be anxious if you haven’t been baptized in the name of John. That doesn’t need to happen anymore.

Now we get to the heart of our first point: the urgency of repentance. In verses 4-6, Luke quotes a lengthy passage from Isaiah 40:3-4. This prophecy tells us several important things about John’s ministry and message. The first and most obvious thing it tells us is that John himself was the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Isaiah prophesied of one who would cry out “in the wilderness”, and Luke tells us in verse 2 that John received the word of God “in the wilderness”. John was a prophesied prophet, and his message is summarized in verse 4: “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

We only prepare when we know that something is coming. We don’t just pack our suitcases when we have nowhere to go. We pack them when we’re going away. When we know that something is coming, we need to prepare accordingly. Verse 4 tells us that we need to prepare, because the Lord is coming.

Two questions arise from this. First, what is the Lord coming to do? And second, how are we to prepare for what the Lord is coming to do? I think the rest of the Isaiah prophecy tells us, but let’s just look at John’s answer in verse 7, since he summarizes it so succinctly: “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?’” What is the Lord coming to do? He is coming to bring his wrath.

God’s wrath is his holy anger against our sin. When we react in anger, we are almost always acting in sin. We lose control of our emotions, we say things we never thought we would say, we do things we never thought we would do. Our anger is characterized by a loss of control. That’s not what God’s anger looks like. God’s anger is always perfectly commensurate with his justice. It is always controlled, always measured, never more and never less than what our sin deserves. Our sin deserves much wrath. It doesn’t just deserve a slap on the wrist. All of us without exception, including me, including the most righteous person you know, has offended God by our sin to such an extent that we all deserve eternal punishment in hell: a never-ending reality empty of joy, empty of love, empty of goodness, and empty of God.

Now, in verse 9, we see that God’s wrath is not only coming, but coming soon: “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 is trying to tell us that God’s wrath is just around the corner. It’s on its way, and it’s going to be here any minute! “Even now”, he says, “the axe is laid to the root of the trees.” The axe of God’s wrath is poised to strike against sinners. He’s taking aim, and he’s ready to swing. And he’s not just going to chip off some tree bark. He’s taking aim at the roots. The axe swing of his wrath will destroy any of the trees it falls upon. And to show us that these trees have no hope of survival, John tells us that the chopped up trees are then thrown into the fire and burned.

You may be wondering, how can it be that God’s wrath is imminent? After all, God still hasn’t brought about the fullness of his justice against sin. Two thousand years after John the Baptist spoke about the axe laid to the root of the trees, we’re still waiting for Judgment Day. How can we say that God’s wrath is imminent? The answer to this question is simple: though Judgment Day itself may not be imminent, the judgment we will receive on Judgment Day will be imminently determined. Our verdict that will be pronounced on each of us on Judgment Day will be determined within each person’s lifetime. The average person will live 70-80 years in this world, some less, some more, and it is the decisions that we make in those 70-80 years that will determine our eternal destiny.

If, after we died, we still had a chance to change the way we lived and change the decisions we made, whether it be in purgatory or in any other interim state of existence, then it could not be said that judgment is imminent. Each of us would have this lifetime, *plus* the many lifetimes before Judgment Day arrives to change our eternal destiny. But the reality is that the Bible doesn’t teach that we will have another chance after this life. Instead, as Hebrews 9:27 says, “…it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment…”

Judgment is imminent. Yes, we may have 70-80 years, but what is 70-80 years old when compared to the immortal existence that each of us will live? All of us will live forever. The only question is whether it will be in heaven or in hell. When we recognize that we will live forever, then 70-80 years is nothing but a blink of an eye. Therefore, in a very real sense, we can say that even now the axe of God’s wrath is laid at our roots, and our eternal destiny hangs in the balance.

That answers the first question. Now the second: what are we to do to prepare for the Lord’s coming? John tells us in verse 8: “bear fruits in keeping with repentance”. We prepare for the Lord by preparing our lives through repentance. We need to repent, and we need to repent urgently, for God’s judgment is coming.

(2) **THE NATURE OF REPENTANCE**

John then expands on what repentance looks like, which leads to our second point: the nature of repentance.

John begins in verse 8 by addressing one of the main barriers to genuine repentance. He says “And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” John is addressing the kind of thinking that says, “I don’t need to repent because of who I am.” His Jewish listeners had become so comfortable in their identity as the chosen people of God that they just couldn’t see God cutting them off from himself. They believed that God’s judgment was going to land on the nations out there, not on them. “Abraham is our father”, they told themselves. “We have the right bloodlines, the right “spiritual credentials”, and therefore we don’t need to heed the call to repent.”

It’s easy for Christians to start thinking the same way, isn’t it? You may listen with some interest about God’s imminent judgment, and you may pay a little attention to the call to repent, but ultimately you say to yourself, “I don’t need to repent because of who I am.” You tell yourself that you were born into a Christian home, or you accepted Jesus into your heart, or you attend church every week – you look at your “spiritual credentials” – and you convince yourself that there is no way that judgment could ever land on you. It’s going to land on all the bad people out there. Therefore, there’s no need to repent. God has forgiven you, and will forgive you no matter what you do.

This kind of thinking is a cancer within the church. It says, “As long as I have received Jesus into my heart, I can live however I want to.” It’s hard to imagine an attitude that is more arrogant and proud. It says essentially, “Salvation is about *me*! It’s about what God is doing for *me*. It’s about getting what *I* want on *my* terms. I wanted salvation, and God gave it to me, and if I want to live a certain way, God can’t say otherwise. God *owes* me forgiveness. Salvation is *my right*.”

In answer to this kind of thinking, the apostle Paul says this in Romans 2:4:

“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

God is kind and patient. He is forbearing in his mercy and slow to apply his justice. He forgives the sins of anyone who calls upon his name for salvation, saving all who trust in the work of Christ on the cross on their behalf. But though salvation is free, it must never be presumed upon. We presume on salvation when we claim it as our right, and once we do that, we make salvation about *us*, when God intended it to be about *him*, and show that we were never saved in the first place.

John reminds us that salvation is about God, not us, in the second half of verse 8: “For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.” John is saying that, if you think you’re something, remember that you are nothing, for God can replace you with the stones of the earth. Any grace that you receive is purely a gift from God’s kind and merciful hand, and not the result of anything that you possess in yourself: not your looks, not your good works, and not your “spiritual credentials”.

God saves us for himself. He saves us for *his* glory. He saves us so that through our faith *and* our lives we might display the excellence and beauty of his perfect and holy character. When we say that we want God’s salvation without at the same time being willing to change our lives, we don’t bring God any glory. Instead, we *deprive* God of his glory, for we say that reality is ultimately about us, and not about God. We say that we’re saved so that we can live how we want, not so that we can live the way God wants. That’s a “me-centered” version of the gospel, which is no gospel at all. God’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, so that through our faith *and* our lives we might bring him glory.

Now John gets practical. The crowds ask him in verse 10, “What then shall we do?” What does repentance look like, and what does it require of us? The following verses tell us three things about repentance.

First, our text shows us that the call to repentance applies to everyone, regardless of social class, regardless of worldly position. He addresses the entire crowd of people in verse 11. But in order to show that no one is exempt from the call to repentance, Luke also writes that John specifically addressed tax collectors in verse 12, soldiers in verse 14, and Herod the Tetrarch himself in verse 19. All three categories of people were influential. They wielded power that they could easily use for their own benefit. They were the social elites of their time. But despite their positions of worldly success, they were called to repentance as well. The wrath of God cares nothing of worldly success. All will face God’s judgment, and therefore all must repent.

Second, repentance is generally characterized by a fundamental shift in how we treat other people. The crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers are all essentially told to change the way they treat people. The crowds must share with those in need. The tax collectors are to stop taxing people more than they should. And the soldiers are to stop wielding their power and influence to get other people to do what they want. Across social divides, the call to repentance is essentially a call to love your neighbour as yourself.

This doesn’t mean that this is *all* that repentance is. Loving your neighbour as yourself is one of the two greatest commandments, but it is only one of them. The other is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Luke doesn’t record John saying anything about loving God. That doesn’t mean that John didn’t teach it. Luke writes in verse 18, “So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.” Luke is simply providing us with a snapshot of John’s ministry and message. And his point here is that repentance isn’t just an internal process or a state of mind. It results in outward, visible life changes, particularly in the ways that we treat others.

Third, and related to the second, although repentance results in outward, visible life changes, repentance starts with the attitude of our hearts. We see this in his address to the soldiers in verse 14: “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusations, and *be content with your wages*.” Why do soldiers extort, and why do they threaten? It’s because they’re *not* content with their wages. They feel like they need more money, and the only way to do it is through unlawful means.

Discontentment is really at the heart of each of the pictures of repentance in our text. People don’t share their clothes or food because they’re not content with what they have. They feel like they need more, and therefore they can’t spare what they have. Tax collectors collect more than they’re authorized to, because they’re not content with their wages. In other words, repentance doesn’t just result in a changed life. It results in a changed life that comes from a changed heart.

And so, all of us must ask ourselves, “How is my life, and how is my heart? Am I doing what I should be doing for other people? Am I content with what I have?” All of us have failed to love our neighbours as ourselves. All of us have failed to be content with what we have. We need to take time, not just this week, but every week, to repent of our sin and turn humbly towards God for help, that we might glorify him with our faith and our lives.

(3) **THE AIM OF REPENTANCE**

Now let’s put all this into context and remember that repentance isn’t an end in itself, but a means to a greater end. This leads us to our third point: the aim of repentance.

Repentance is the way that we prepare for the Lord. Packing your suitcase isn’t an end in itself. It is a means to the end of going on your trip. In the same way, repentance isn’t an end in itself. It is a means to the end of receiving the Lord.

John reminds the crowds of this in verses 15-17. They must repent in order to prepare for the coming Christ. Being powerfully convicted by his preaching, they begin to wonder whether he might be the Christ, the promised King who would lead Israel out of captivity and restore it to its former glory.

John is very clear that he is not the Christ. The Christ is mightier than he is. As great as the crowds believe John to be, John tells them in verse 16 that the Christ is so much greater than him that he is not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals. One duty of slaves at the time was to untie the sandals from the master’s feet. The Jewish people thought this was so degrading that Hebrew slaves were not required to do this. John is saying both that he is the servant of the Christ who is his master, *and* that he is so inferior to the Christ that he is not worthy to perform the most menial of tasks for him.

John then explains that, since the Christ is greater than him, he also brings a greater baptism. His baptism will not just be with water. It will be with the Holy Spirit and fire. For those who are prepared for him through repentance, they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The very power and presence of God will fill them and infuse every aspect of their lives.

But for those who are not prepared through repentance, they will be baptized with fire. As John said earlier, those who do not repent will be cut down at the roots and thrown into the fire. Just as John’s baptism submerged people into water, the fires of judgment will completely engulf those who do not repent. And verse 17 tells us that the Christ himself will do this: “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.”

The wheat of course is the fruit of farming, kept by the farmer for his use. The chaff is the useless husk that serves no purpose but to be burned. Those who receive the Lord with repentant hearts are the wheat, gathered together into his barn. Those who do not receive the Lord because they were never prepared for him through repentance are the chaff, to be cast away from his presence forever in the unquenchable fire of his justice.

The Christ is none other than Jesus himself. Jesus is the Christ, the one who is mightier than John, the one who would bring both the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the unquenchable fires of God’s justice. Which one we will receive will depend on how we receive the Lord. For those who receive the Lord in repentance, they will receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and be saved from the wrath of God. For those who do not receive the Lord in repentance, they will face the full fury of God’s wrath in an eternity in hell.

Repentance doesn’t save us. Only Jesus can save us. But repentance is the mark of all who have truly trusted in Jesus for salvation, who have received him into their lives, and who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ died on a cross to satisfy the full wrath of God towards everyone who puts their trust in his Son. Every last drop of God’s justice is absorbed in the death of Jesus on our behalf, and now salvation is offered as a free gift to anyone who would receive it.

Only those who repent have received it, for only those who repent *can* receive it. We cannot receive salvation without knowing that we need to be saved, and we only know that we need to be saved if we know that we are sinners. Repentance is the mark of all who have truly been saved, not just as a one-time acknowledgement of sin, but a daily orientation of the heart away from sin and towards God.

Wherever you may be in your journey of faith, the gift of salvation is offered to you. But to receive it, you must first repent. Even if you have never repented of your sins before, there is nothing that says that it cannot be today. I urge you, therefore, to repent, that you may be prepared for the coming of the Lord to receive salvation, and not judgment.

**CONCLUSION**

This concludes Luke’s narrative of the ministry and message of John the Baptist. As great as John was, he came only to prepare the way for the greater one, Jesus Christ, both for his Jewish audience, and for us. And he does that by calling us to repentance.

Repentance is a heavy topic. It can lead people to be weighed down by their conscience as they become burdened by all the guilt of their sins and failures. That is not how the Lord would leave you today. Repentance is not an end in itself. It is the means to receiving Jesus. And for those who receive Jesus, he brings only comfort, not condemnation. Repentance is for the glory of God, and it is also for the joy of God’s people, as we turn from the sins that cause only destruction and misery in our lives, and turn towards the God who truly satisfies.