

REPENTANCE AND ITS FRUITS
LUKE 3:1-14

What is the beginning of the spiritual life? **Martin Luther** said in the first of his 95 theses of discussion against the Roman Catholic Church, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Repentance is at the beginning of the spiritual life and it continues all throughout the spiritual life. Even more importantly, when John the Baptist began his ministry, the first thing he preached was repentance. And still more importantly than that, when Jesus began His ministry, He preached, “The time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.”

The start (and continuation) of the spiritual life is repentance.

As the forerunner of Christ, it was said of John that “among those born of women there is no one greater than John...” (7:28). It was John’s responsibility and calling to prepare people for Jesus, the promised Messiah. Yet, as important as he was, his ministry was brief and what we know of what he preached and did is limited. In fact, Luke (like the other gospel writers), condenses John’s preaching into one summarized message, which is given in Luke 3:1-14. *The message is about repentance* — and that message about repentance contained the hope of forgiveness that sinners like the Pharisees and you and I need. From this message we learn the priority and nature of repentance —

TO BE FORGIVEN, KNOW THE TRUE NATURE OF REPENTANCE — AND REPENT.

In this account of John the Baptist’s ministry, John preaches **four components of repentance**...

1. The **CONTEXT** for Repentance (vv. 1-3)
2. The **ANTICIPATION** of Repentance (vv. 4-6)
3. The **WARNING** of Repentance (vv. 7-9)
4. The **FRUITS** of Repentance (vv. 10-14)

1. The CONTEXT for Repentance (vv. 1-3)

• Repentance is for all TIMES (vv. 1-2a)

- ✓ As Luke records the beginning of John's ministry, he puts it in historical context. He identifies seven activities/people who were prominent at that time.
 - In v. 1 he identifies five civil and political people:
 - ... **Tiberius** was well into his rule as Caesar (**15 years**); his rule began in 14 A.D., so this would have been 29 A.D. He was obviously well known, but ruled from a distance (Rome), so his influence was largely known through his governors and other rulers.
 - ... **Pontius Pilate** was governor of Judea from 26-36 A.D. He was proud, arrogant, violent (**13:1**), an unwise decision maker, and weak. And he was generally opposed to the Jewish people and they had disdain for him. What might be notable is that Luke seems to be doing some foreshadowing, as Pilate will become prominent in Christ's trial and crucifixion.
 - ... This **Herod** was Herod Antipas, whose father was Herod the Great, governor over region including Israel; when Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among three sons, including Herod Antipas who received the area of Galilee, which made him prominent in the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. He ruled from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D.
 - ... **Philip** was one of the many brothers of Antipas; he ruled the region of Iturea and Trachonitis (NE of Galilee) from 4 B.C. until 34 A.D. This is the only NT reference to him.
 - ... **Lysanias...of Abilene** was relatively unknown until inscriptions were found in the region (west of Damascus) with his name. Those stone inscriptions were from the time of Tiberius' reign, authenticating Luke's historical work and the authenticity of the Bible.
 - In **v. 2** he identifies two religious people who were prominent:
 - ... **Annas and Caiaphas**, were both **high priests** — the top of the religious structure in Israel; they had significant power, which they corrupted — and they distorted truth (**Mt. 23:1ff**).
 - ... Annas held the title of High Priest from A.D. 6-15; he was eventually replaced by his son-in-law, Caiaphas, who had the title from A.D. 18-36.
 - ... It appears that while Caiaphas had the title during John's and Jesus' ministry, Annas still had tremendous popularity and influence — perhaps even being the main power of the office.
 - ... While there was only one formal high priest (Caiaphas), Annas was likely still referred to as High Priest in the same way that we refer to retired Presidents as "Mr. President."
- ✓ As historians have put all these events together, it appears that John's ministry began between 28-29 A.D. That still fits with v. 23 — Jesus was **about thirty years of age...**; precisely, He was about 32 (if he was born in late 5 or early 4 B.C.), but that still fits "about 30."

- ✓ While the historical data is helpful to pinpoint the events and people that were prominent at the time, that's not the most important part of this information.
- ✓ What is important to note is that when John's and Jesus' ministries began it was in the context of a broken world, corrupted by sin and wickedness. All seven of these men "symbolized the moral and spiritual darkness that the Light of the world (John 8:12) came to dispel" [MacArthur].
- ✓ *And that darkness would be dispelled with the message of repentance.* Jesus did not come to overthrow corruption and wickedness in the world by changing political policies and power structures; He came with the simple message of repentance to change men's souls. That was adequate under corrupt Roman rule — and it's adequate today. What the world needs is to repent.
- ✓ It is also important to note that as Luke begins to unfold the message of repentance, he is placing it in multiple life contexts — Gentile and Jew, civil/political and religious — and repentance is effective and appropriate for all situations — something that we see expanded in v. 3 —

• Repentance is for all TROUBLES (vv. 2b–3)

- ✓ When Luke says, **the Word of God came to John**, he uses a slightly atypical word for "word." He uses a word that refers to a direct message or specific utterance. A similar phrase is used in the OT at the beginning of the ministries of several of the prophets (Jer. 1:2; Ezk 1:3), which is probably what Luke is suggesting here; this is the start of John's prophecy (which emphasizes that he is not speaking for himself, but he is speaking as the mouthpiece of God).
- ✓ When he adds **the son of Zacharias** he is doing something similar (Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1); "this is a prophet."
- ✓ Luke also provides geographic information:
 - John was **in the wilderness** when he received the prophetic call. That was the area in which he was raised (1:80), perhaps by Zacharias and Mary, or perhaps as an orphan by others.
 - His ministry (v. 3) was in the area **around the Jordan** — always in the **area of the Jordan River**, though at least at the beginning, mostly in the southern area, in Judea near Jerusalem (**Mk. 1:5**).
- ✓ Crowds (v. 7) made their way to him, and to all who came, he preached a message of **baptism of repentance** that would produce **forgiveness**. We will look more closely at baptism next week, but for now, think of the word "identify." John was calling the people to identify themselves with repentance. They needed to agree that they needed the cleansing work of repentance in their lives.
- ✓ **What is repentance?** (And why is it important?)
 - This noun appears 22x in the NT, and Luke uses it more than any other writer (11x, and the vb. 14x). It is a message for sinners, not the self-righteous (**5:32**). It produces joy in Heaven (**15:7**).
 - What then is it? To repent is to "change the mind" — about God, Christ, and sin.
 - ... As we think of the mind, we know that it refers to "the inner man" — heart and soul.
 - ... So to change "the mind" is to change one's heart attitude towards sin — it is to grieve over sin so that we confess it and turn away from it, *and* so that we turn towards Christ for hope, life, and salvation. It is not an intellectual ascent that God exists (like the demons, Js. 2:19).

- ... It is an inward rejection of sinful desires and actions *and* faith in Christ that produces new inward desires for Christ and results in obedience to Him. It's a change of heart and life (20:21).
- ... Thomas Brooks rightly said, "True repentance is a thorough change both of the mind and manners. Repentance *for* sin is nothing without repentance *from* sin." Cf. 1 Thess. 1:9.
- ... *Is repentance hard?* Certainly. It's to die to self and mortify sin. It is to resist the flesh. But it is also to enjoy the blessings of new life. That's why Thomas Watson said, "Either sin must drown or the soul burn. Let it not be said that repentance is difficult. Things that are excellent deserve labour. Will not a man dig for gold though it makes him sweat?"
- ... You will "lose" something in repentance (get ready for v. 7); but the gain will supplant the loss.
- ✓ What does repentance produce? What is the gain of repentance? **Forgiveness.**
 - To say that sin is forgiven means that the penalty of sin is cancelled, the guilt of sin is removed, and there is freedom from the bondage of sin. There is liberty and freedom.
 - And John emphasizes forgiveness of *sins* (plural). *All* sins can be forgiven. *Any* sin can be forgiven (murder, terrorism, sexual sin, bitterness, hatred...). This was Jesus' message (4:18).
 - Whatever the trouble, whatever the sin, *it can be forgiven*. You are never beyond forgiveness. John's simple sermon "be baptized in identifying with repentance for forgiveness" was enough for all the problems and sins of that day. And it is enough today.
 - To receive the gift of forgiveness, you simply need to repent.
- ... Do you know you are forgiven? That God has taken away the penalty for all your sin?
- ... If you are here this morning and struggling with your sin — wanting to stop sinning and not able or carrying a weight of guilt that is crushing, I urge you to do what John said to do 2000 years ago — repent. Turn away from sin ("take it from me, Lord") and turn to Christ in faith and obedience ("I believe that You died for my sin and that you are worth living for today").
- ... Just as John called people to repentance and promised forgiveness, so when you repent, you also will be forgiven (24:47; Acts 5:31).
- ✓ The message of repentance was what John's hearers needed, what we need, and what has always been needed (and anticipated). John was preaching what he was called to do by the OT —

2. The **ANTICIPATION** of Repentance (vv. 4–6)

- In verses 4-6, Luke quotes from **Isaiah 40** to affirm the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist.
 - ✓ The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are warnings of the judgment of God; it would still be more than 100 years of trials and trouble before Judah would be taken into captivity in Babylon (Is. 39:7), where they would be held for 70 years before they could return to their land. Much trouble was ahead.
 - ✓ Isaiah 40 is the beginning of the promise of deliverance from Babylon and restoration to the promised land. In Is. 40-48, Isaiah reminded the Israelites of God's greatness and grace to keep His promises to them. And 40:1-11 focus on the promise of comfort that will come from YHWH (40:1).

- The message of comfort will be delivered first by ***one crying in the wilderness***. In Isaiah, the prophet is probably referring to himself, calling the nation of Israel, living in a spiritual wilderness because of her sin, to repentance. All the Gospel writers apply Is. 40:3 to John the Baptist.
- His message is one of preparation — ***make ready...*** That refers to the straightening of a pathway for a king that is coming to visit. It is parallel to John's call for repentance to make their way ready spiritually for the coming of the Messiah.
- ✓ In v. 5 there is a shift from what the people are called to do, to what will be done for them:
 - ***Every ravine...every mountain...*** will be changed by someone else; God Himself will do the work of filling and bringing low, not the nation of Israel. (To say this is to point to God's grace.)
 - "Just as God parted the sea in the exodus, so he will remove all of creation's obstacles for his people as he delivers them." [Bock]
 - The result of this leveling work is that ***all flesh will see the salvation of God*** (v. 6) — salvation will be evident to all and that people from all nations will be saved (Gen. 12:3; Rev. 5:9).
 - With this we also see that while Isaiah 40 anticipates the final leveling at the MK, Luke is also using the passage to make a spiritual analogy of what God will do in their hearts. Whatever is crooked, unrighteously high or low, will be straightened and leveled into conformity with God.
 - The crookedness and perversity of love of self, money, the world, pursuit of pleasure, ease, and comfort, the passing pleasures found in "Thessalonica" will all be straightened and made right.
 - In grace, God will make all things right at the end of time (Zech. 12:10; 14:20-21). And until that time, He will make things right personally in individuals who repent.
- As Luke records the story and sermon of John the Baptist, he is reminding his readers (and us), that John's message is part of a bigger picture than just John and just the salvation of Israel at that time.
 - ✓ John's message was *preparatory for the Messiah* — "Get ready for the Messiah's Kingdom. Get ready by repenting — and He will come and make straight everything that is crooked."
 - ✓ In that way, John's message was about much more than just the salvation of the people of A.D. 29.
 - ✓ Repentance is the story of salvation for Israel and all people everywhere in every time.
 - ✓ Since the rejection of God as King in 1 Sam. 8, Israel had been largely in rebellion against God. The prophets consistently called them to repentance so that they could enjoy the blessing of obedience.
 - ✓ John the Baptist is in that tradition; but he is so much more: he is anticipating the Messiah and the blessings that will come with forgiveness — *AND* the blessings that will come with His Kingdom.
 - ✓ Is it any wonder that there is an urgency to His message "Repent!"? It's a message that is centuries old and it is the only message of hope for Israel — and us.

3. The **WARNING** of Repentance (vv. 7-9)

- Because of (***so***) his calling as prophet and the message of comfort that is to be found in repentance (Is. 40), John began ***saying to the crowds*** (v. 7) a specific message:

- ✓ While he was speaking to the **crowds** generally, what he says indicates that he is addressing a specific group within the crowd (e.g., v. 8b — Jn. 8:38-39), which Matthew clearly says (**Mt. 3:7**).
 - ✓ He calls the Pharisees a **brood of vipers** — the inference is that they are following the chief serpent, Satan (Gen. 3); they are deluded by evil ideologies that originate with Satan (cf. **Jn. 8:44**).
 - ✓ To call them this means that they have not really repented; they are coming for baptism in some form of self-righteousness and without repentance.
 - ✓ When John asks the question, **Who warned you to flee...?** there is irony for they certainly knew the warnings of God's wrath; it goes back to Dt. 28-30 and permeates the prophets especially (cf. Zeph. 1:7, 14). Undoubtedly they even taught about God's wrath.
 - ✓ So John isn't questioning their knowledge. He is questioning their motive: "you are not repentant, so why are you pretending to align yourselves with those who are repentant? Don't you realize what repentance is about? It's not about escaping God's wrath by external acts of self-righteousness.
- Real repentance is not about external acts (like John's baptism), but a transformation of heart that leads to **bearing fruit** (**v. 8**) — doing things that reflect what the root (heart) of an individual is. Yes, it is actions, but it is actions that flow from a changed heart (which will be illustrated in vv. 10-14).
 - ✓ This fruit is also what makes life hopeful and livable. It's how we endure. We are forgiven by Christ so that Christ can produce His transforming work in our lives (which is also satisfying to us, **8:8**).
 - ✓ We don't endure because our circumstances change, but because *we* (and our hearts) have changed.
 - In contrast, what the religious leaders believed is revealed in v. 8 — **we have Abraham for our father...**
 - ✓ There is a sense that they *did* have Abraham as their physical father (ancestor) — cf. **1:55, 73**.
 - ✓ But salvation is based on spiritual transformation not physical heritage. These were saying what the Pharisees said to Jesus (were they the same men?) — cf. **Jn. 8:39, 53**.
 - ✓ When John says that **from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham**, he means:
 - Salvation (and escape from wrath) is a work of **God** and not man. There is nothing life-giving or capable in a stone to produce life. Men, like stones, are completely incapable of pleasing God.
 - Spiritual life and fellowship with God is based on spiritual transformation. Notably, the OT New Covenant states that God will transform hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, denoting the inward transformation of the follower of God (**Ezk. 36:26ff**). Perhaps John is also alluding to that truth.
 - As a further warning, John tells them that an **axe is already laid at the root of the tree...** (v. 9).
 - ✓ God is ready to judge; it is imminent. We say similarly, "the axe is ready to fall." Jesus also says it (**13:9ff**).
 - ✓ The warning is all-inclusive — **every tree...** There is no escape for non-repentant self-righteous people.
 - ✓ If there are brambles where there should be grape vines and fig trees, they are coming out and then going into a consuming judgment of **fire** (cf. Jer. 11:16; Ezk. 15:6-7).
 - ✓ The warning of repentance is that it is necessary to repent, and that if one does not repent, there will be permanent and horrible consequences. And that leads to a question —

4. The **FRUITS** of Repentance (vv. 10–14)

- If there is judgment for some of those who are baptized, then **what shall we do** (v. 10). This question is repeated in **vv. 12 and 14**. “How can we bear fruit?” “What do we do?” *There is sense of panic.*
- John provides three answers —
 - ✓ To all (**v. 11**) — if you have covering (**tunic**) and food, share what you have to those who have need.
 - He is telling them that what they have is not just for them; God gives us abundance so that we can share with those who have need. Repentant people don’t hoard, they share.
 - He is also crossing societal barriers — it doesn’t matter who needs clothing and who needs food; if they need it share it.
 - ✓ The **tax-collectors** (**v. 12**) wondered what they could do. They had a contract with Rome to collect certain taxes for a particular area and they could then add a surcharge to that tax for their own profit. Those additional charges were often exorbitant and difficult for people to pay.
 - John’s response is simple: **collect no more than what you have been order to** (v. 13).
 - He doesn’t say, “become a shepherd” (or anything else); he says, “be honorable and fair in what you do in your profession.” “Be honest stewards.”
 - ✓ Some **soldiers** also asked (**v. 14**), “what about us...?”
 - These soldiers were probably not Roman soldiers but local troops employed by Herod Antipas. Perhaps they were assigned to the tax collectors.
 - John says **do not take money from anyone by force** (no “shakedown”), or by **false accusation** (extortion), but **be content** (he uses put off and put on principles!).
 - This was not only a challenge for the soldier because of cultural thinking, but because they were paid poorly — they made 225 denarii annually; 35–85 denarii less than an average laborer. They had real financial need. What should they do? Don’t sin to get what you want. Be content.
 - ✓ What is John saying in these admonitions? He is saying there is a kind of fruit that comes from genuine repentance. *What does repentance look like?*

• Repentant people have transformed **LIVES**

- ✓ The outward manifestations of transformation are going to look different according to the responsibilities a person has. *But there will be change in how one lives.* When one repents he doesn’t just keep living the way he used to live. Jesus doesn’t forgive so we can keep sinning. He forgives and cleanses so that we will live in new and transformed ways.
 - People with plenty give it away.
 - People with advantage don’t manipulate, abuse, and control.
 - People with need don’t use their position to coerce others, but cultivate contentment.
- ✓ Real salvation always results in changed life (see 6:27ff). It should be obvious to all.

- Repentant people have transformed **HEARTS**

- ✓ But John isn't saying only "do good things" — he is addressing heart issues.
- ✓ For the person who shares in v. 11, he is saying that true repentance is demonstrated when a person is no longer self-indulgent but sacrificial. He is more compassionate toward someone's need than he is interested in self-preservation.
- ✓ For the tax-collector, he has an ability to manipulate, and control others. He has authority that cannot be resisted or appealed. And he uses his authority to care for others rather than using it for his own advantage. He looked to meet needs rather than creating or aggravating needs.
- ✓ For the soldier, his need was likely genuine, but his need didn't transform him into an angry, violent, and ungodly man. He cultivated a trusting contentment in God when he was hungry.
- ✓ So don't hear that repentance is a self-improvement program. It's not. It's a heart-change program. It's about being changed from the inside out (**Lk. 6:43-45**).

5. Some **Implications of Repentance**

- **Don't manage sin; repent of sin.** Don't trust in religious position, trust in Christ's position.
 - ✓ If you are not a follower of Christ, you need a new start in life; that start comes when you repent and go to Christ as your hope and life.
 - ✓ If you are a follower of Christ, keep repenting and keep going to Christ for transformation.
- **What is the evidence of your transformed life?** What is different in your life today because of repentance?
 - ✓ What resource have you shared?
 - ✓ What advantage have you laid aside?
 - ✓ What sinful activity in your life has changed?
- **What is the evidence of your transformed heart?**
 - ✓ Where does your mind go when you are hurting, suffering, or tempted?
 - ✓ Are you manifesting the Spirit's fruit in your heart (**Gal. 5:22-23**).

CONCLUSION:

What is the beginning of the spiritual life? It begins with repentance. And it continues in repentance. The message of God to us is — "repent." And our message to the world is repent. Repentance was the hope and message for Tiberius, Pilate, Annas, Caiaphas, the Pharisees and Sadducees, everyday citizens, and you and me. Repent — and then let repentance bear its fruit and change your life.

BENEDICTION: **Jude 24-25**