PRODUCE FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE

Luke 3:1–20

Key Verse: 3:8a

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

In the previous passage we saw how the boy Jesus grew through his great desire to learn, as well as through his obedience. Now his forerunner John the Baptist begins to prepare his way. Today’s passage tells us that before Jesus can come into our lives in any real way, we first need to repent. In this passge Luke shows us what real repentance is, and what it produces. May God help us to accept John’s message personally.

Read verses 1–2a. The fifteenth year is probably A.D. 28. Who were these people? Tiberius had replaced his stepfather, Emperor Caesar Augustus. But Tiberius was a dark, depressed man who never wanted to be emperor. In A.D. 26 he withdrew from Rome and let his advisors run everything. Caesar’s representative in Palestine was Pontius Pilate, a man who failed to stand on the side of truth. Herod, Philip and Lysanias, the local rulers, were three remaining sons of Herod the Great. They had divided up the area into their own territories. The brothers Herod and Philip shared the same wife. And then there were the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. They were supposed to be men of prayer, but they were nothing but religious politicians. It shows that John the Baptist began his ministry in dark times.

Read verse 2b. This expression places John the Baptist in a long line of prophets in history. In dark times God would give his word to his servant, who would, in turn, challenge his people to repent. God chose John the Baptist even before his birth (1:13–17). Miraculously, he was born to elderly parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. By now they both had probably died, and John was living alone in the wilderness (1:80). He went there to get out of the noisy world and really listen to God. It seemed that just one person like John was too weak, and that the times were too dark. But when the word of God came to him, John the Baptist shook the dark and wicked world. Like him, we should devote ourselves to listening to God until even one word of God comes to us. When God’s word comes to us, God works powerfully.

Read verse 3. In those times, only non-Jews who wanted to convert to Judaism had to immerse themselves in water, representing being cleansed of all their impurities. But John the Baptist began to require this even of Jews. “Repentance” is key. In his writing Luke strongly emphasizes repentance. Matthew uses the word “repent” seven times, and Mark, three times, but in his Gospel and Acts Luke repeats this word 25 times. What does it mean to repent? We commonly think it means to stop doing bad things. That’s partly true. But repentance is deeper. Literally, the Greek word means to have a change of mind. To repent means to change one’s mind about God, about sin and about myself. We think God isn’t real, or that he’s oppressive. We think sin is desirable. We think we’re right, that we didn’t do anything wrong. But when we repent, we realize God is real, sin is like poison, and we can finally admit we’re wrong. Only when our mind is changed in these ways can our behavior truly change. Mainly, to repent means to come back to God (1:16). Read verse 3 again. The other key word is “forgiveness.” Only those who repent experience God’s forgiveness. The Greek word was used in medical language to describe the release of a disease. For Luke the medical doctor, forgiveness meant spiritual healing, the healing of all our sin-sicknesses (Ps103:3). Our efforts won’t work; only God’s grace of forgiveness heals our spiritual sicknesses. Luke used the word “forgiveness” more than all the New Testament authors. In his Gospel and Acts he puts these two words together: repentance and forgiveness. They were the main message of Jesus and his apostles (24:47; Ac2:38; 17:30–31). In the Bible we learn many things, but we need to get the main point: repentance and forgiveness in Jesus.

Read verse 4. John was the “voice of one calling in the wilderness.” His main work was to “prepare the way for the Lord.” Kings would send forerunners ahead of them wherever they traveled. Likewise, John’s task was to get people ready for Jesus. In telling this story all the Gospels quote Isaiah 40:3. But Luke alone adds Isaiah 40:4–5. Read verse 5. This is a metaphor for what repentance is. A valley is when we’re too down on ourselves; a mountain, when we’re too proud. Crooked roads and rough ways are when we mistrust God and rebel. We can have all these terrains somewhere in our hearts. We need God’s help to see all the wrong ways in our hearts and repent of them, so that Jesus can come in. Read verse 6. One of Luke’s major themes is that Jesus is our Savior (2:11). Jesus is the “horn of salvation” who gives us the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of our sins (1:69,77). Simeon called him God’s “salvation” (2:30). Jesus is God’s salvation for all people (6; 2:10b,32). Tragically, so many people can’t see God’s salvation. We can see it only when we repent.

John’s message of repentance goes further. Read verses 7–9. John called the crowds a “brood of vipers.” A brood is a group of offspring of an animal, such as a brood of puppies or kittens. A brood of vipers is a group of baby snakes. They were especially nasty because vipers were known to eat their way out of their mother’s womb. John was saying their sins made them like vipers. When a field was burning, vipers would appear, squirming their way out. But John was warning them that they wouldn’t be able to escape God’s judgment. They thought their physical descent from Abraham would save them. But John said God could raise up his children out of stones. And he warned them that without repentance, God was about to cut them down and throw them into the fire. Why was John using such strong language? It was because they were coming out to be baptized but hadn’t repented.

Read verse 8a. Literally in Greek, the plural form “fruits” is used. Basically, there are two kinds of repentance: repentance without fruits, and repentance with fruits. Repentance without fruits is superficial. It mean only feeling guilty about what we did. But feeling guilty doesn’t mean we’ll stop. Repentance without fruits means only promising we’ll change. But mere words aren’t the same as actions. Basically, repentance without fruits is done before people, not before God.

Repentance with fruits starts with grieving over our sins before God. David in the Bible is a good example. He committed adultery with a woman, then had her husband killed. He tried to cover it up. Then God sent Nathan the prophet to confront him. Finally David confessed and wrote a poem to God in Psalm 51:4: “Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.” Even though he was the greatest king of all Israel, David humbly confessed his sins. And he shows that when we sin against people, we’re really sinning against God. Sin isn’t just bad performance or wrong deeds; it’s a rejection of God, rebellion against him. God created us, sustains us and loves us so much. But we still sin against him. When we realize how true this is about us, we grieve. This grieving process is the first healthy step toward repentance. 2 Corinthians 7:10a puts it so simply: “Godly sorrow brings repentance…” Repentance with fruits happens when we grieve over our sins against God.

Jesus helps us understand what the fruit in keeping with repentance is. He said in 6:43–45: “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit…A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” In light of Jesus’ words, the fruit of repentance starts with a changed heart. Then it moves on to a changed way of talking. But ultimately, the fruit of repentance is not just about what we feel or say; it’s about what we actually do. Jesus said the deeds that show we’ve repented are to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who mistreat us, to give to everyone who asks us, to do to others what we would have them do to us, and to lend without expecting to get anything back (6:27–35). We need to demonstrate our repentance by our deeds (Ac26: 20). James wrote: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? … Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (Jas2:14; 3:13). When our lives are full of good deeds, we’re bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Mt5:16; 1Ti2:10; 5:10,25; 6:18; 1Pe2:12).

Look at verses 10–14. It’s repeated three times; people humbled themselves to come and ask, “What should we do?” This question is the best response to the message of repentance there is. Too often we hear, then forget. But these people were serious about making life changes. John told them specifically what to do. Read verse 11. Repentance means sharing our possessions and food. It’s something we can do every day, everywhere. Then Luke mentions some unlikely people: Even tax collectors and soldiers came and repented (12,14). They were hardened sinners, but John’s message cut them to the heart (Ac2:37). He didn’t tell them to quit their jobs but to change their ways. Read verse 13. Repentance means not abusing situations or taking advantage of others. Read verse 14. Repentance means learning to be content, not greedy, and not to accuse others. We need to repent Monday through Saturday, not only among church people but also in the real world. The general principle here is to change the way we deal with people and with money. Before repenting, we put our money and possessions first; after repenting, we sacrifice our material things for the sake of others. Luke often shows how important the way we treat people and money is. God is closely watching the way we deal with people and money. May God show us what we need to change in our lives practically.

Read verse 15. They thought this about John because he was so powerful. But John drew attention away from himself to Jesus. He had a big ministry, but it didn’t go to his head; he maintained an unworthy servant’s attitude. Read verse 16. The baptism of the Holy Spirit really changes us and enables us to bear the fruit of repentance. Through it, we gain the assurance of forgiveness and the hope of God’s kingdom. Our hearts and our values change. Read verse 17. When wheat and chaff are together on the threshing floor, we can’t tell the difference. But Jesus will one day sift them out, when he comes again. Chaff represents unrepentant, uncommitted people; wheat, those who have the fruits of repentance. Read verse 18. Here, to “exhort” means to urge to do something. To our surprise, Luke said John’s message of the vipers, the axe and the fire were “good news.” But John’s ministry didn’t last long. He got locked up in prison when he rebuked Herod for his adultery and many other evil deeds (19–20).

May God help us to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our hearts through real repentance. May God help us to produce the fruits in keeping with repentance in the way we actually live. May God grant us his word and use us to prepare the way for Jesus by helping others also to repent.