JOHN THE BAPTIST PREPARES THE WAY

Luke 3:1–20

Key Verse: 3:3

“And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

What do you do when you’ve done something wrong? Do you treat it lightly, brush it off and ignore it, or justify it? Do you even persist in doing what’s wrong, thinking it’ll make your guilt go away? Actually there’s more to doing wrong than just our personal failings. We need to see all our wrongdoings in the context of who God is, in our relationship with him, and in the context of others. In today’s passage Luke records the ministry of John the Baptist. His main work was getting people ready for Jesus. To do that, he had to help people deal with what was wrong in their lives. That’s no fun task. His main message was repentance. In light of all the extreme language John uses, we may think repentance is about condemning, judging or harsh rebuking. But it’s not, really. In this passage Luke shows us where the call to repentance comes from, why we need to repent, and what it means to do so. Repentance is actually positive. May God draw us to his open arms through the message of repentance today.

In verses 1,2a Luke begins with the historical setting. The fifteenth year of Tiberias Caesar refers to the year AD 29. The name list of other rulers makes us think about the worldly “powers that be,” both political and religious. The powers of this world are so complex and layered and intimidating. In every generation these worldly “powers that be” can make it seem like nothing will ever change, like it’s too hard to get anything done. But that’s not the case.

Read verse 2b. Here Luke describes the beginning of John’s ministry as similar to the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah or Hosea. God’s people were chronically turning away from him, and things would go from bad to worse. Yet even in the darkest of times God would give his word to his servant, and with that word his servant would begin to call his people back to him. The angel told John’s father before his birth, “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (1:16,17). Later, after John was born, his father said to him, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins…” (1:76,77). The tremendous task of preparing people to get ready for the Lord starts with one person who’s actually ready to listen to God.

Luke uses the familiar Old Testament expression “the word of God came to” so and so (e.g. Ge15:1,4; 1Sa15:10; 2Sa7:4; 24:11; 1Ki6:11; 12:22; 13:20; 16:1,7; 17:2; 18:1; 19:9; 21:17,28; 2Ki20:4; 1Ch17:3; 22:8; 2Ch11:2; 12:7; Isa38:4; most minor prophets also). It’s especially repeated about the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jeremiah: 44 times; Ezekiel: 50 times). In beginning his ministry John wasn’t making things up in his own head, with some clever ideas; the living God was actually speaking to him. “The word of God coming” to someone is a powerful experience. It first changes that person, and then it changes what seems to be an unchangeable world. With real inspiration from the power of the word that he received from God, John began his work. It happened, Luke notes, “in the wilderness.” It was a literal place where John grew up (1:80). It also can refer to any desolate, lonely place. If we’re constantly focused on people and immersed in all the cultural noise around us, we get so distracted it’s almost impossible to hear God’s voice. To “hear” his word, for it to “come to” us, we’ve got to withdraw from it all, quiet ourselves and start listening seriously.

Read verse 3. When God’s word came to him, John knew what to do. God wanted to use him to call people back to himself. Without God’s revelation we can’t see what’s wrong with ourselves, with our culture or with our times. But when God reveals his word, things become crystal clear. Though the particulars change from generation to generation, the substance is always the same. What is it? God is calling people to repentance. John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It means he was baptizing people in the Jordan River. But it was not a mere superficial ritual. It was called “a baptism of repentance.” It implied full immersion into repentance.

What is repentance? It involves many things. First it means recognizing what’s wrong in our lives, really seeing our sin as sin (Ro7). It means taking responsibility for our own wrongdoing instead of justifying it or blaming it on others. Repentance also can mean grieving over our sins. But most of all, repentance means turning away from our sin and turning back to God. It’s not just about correcting misbehaviors but restoring our relationship with God. In the Bible repentance is often equated with the word “turn.” It’s almost like making a U-turn, away from our sin, away from the world, and turning straight back to God. God wants us to hear the message of repentance, not because he wants to punish us, but because he’s inviting us back to himself. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” John was telling people that God wants us to repent so that he can forgive our sins. This is the real reason Jesus came, to give us God’s forgiveness. The key to experiencing God’s forgiveness is our repentance. We’ve got to come back to him.

Repentance is a major theme for Luke. The word is repeated 13 times in Luke’s Gospel and another 10 times in his other book, Acts, for a whopping 23 times—far more than any other book in the New Testament. Luke quotes Jesus as saying that he came not just to “call sinners,” but he adds the words “to repentance” (5:32). Luke uniquely tells us how Jesus taught people to stop worrying about how other people need to repent and to focus on how we need to repent (13:1–5). He tells his famous parable of the prodigal son to show us what repentance really looks like. It’s very simple: come back to God, just as we are. Like the father in the parable, God is ready to run to us and welcome us back with open arms, if only we would come back to him. Elsewhere, Luke says that repentance leads to life (Ac11:18). If that’s so, then why all the harsh language in today’s passage? It’s because in our sin we become so proud, so hardened, we won’t take God seriously. We need a spiritual jackhammer.

To explain further what repentance means, Luke quotes from the famous prophecy of Isaiah about John the Baptist’s coming as the forerunner of Jesus. Read verses 4–6. Originally this was a prophecy for the people of Judah who’d been taken into Babylonian Captivity. God was announcing that he was bringing them back home. They would have to travel a long way through a rough terrain. So God promised to build a highway for himself and for them. But this wilderness highway was also a metaphor. “The wilderness” is this spiritually treacherous and dead world without God. “Every valley” can symbolize our depression, our inferiority or fatalism; “every mountain and hill,” our pride; “the crooked,” our hearts twisted by painful things; “the rough places,” our thoughtless rebellion. All the wrong attitudes hidden in our hearts are judged by the word of God (Heb4:12). John’s message of repentance was like blasting dynamite in granite and using a giant earthmover to go deep enough to effect real change. This is true in every generation because we all have the same tendencies to be so prickly and difficult towards God. Another thing to note here: only after all the hard work of leveling and straightening does “all flesh…see the salvation of God” (6b). It tells us that only through personal repentance can our spiritual eyes be opened to see the beautiful gift God is offering us.

John’s message was tailor-made for the people of his time. Read verses 7–9. Calling them “vipers” meant they were so clever and poisonous. Talking about “the wrath to come,” “the axe” and “the fire” are references to hell. Why such harsh language? John mentions their thinking they are children of Abraham. It means they think they’re good because of their ethnicity. They think God won’t harm them no matter what they do. They think they’re better than others, even. So John says that God can chop them down and raise up children for Abraham from stones. This is eventually what God did when the Jews rejected the gospel of Jesus and God began working in the most unlikely Gentiles. Spiritual pride and complacency are still enemies of the gospel. John’s words warn us to reflect honestly on ourselves with the question: “Where’s my fruits?” Repentance isn’t just talk. It’s not just getting emotional. Repentance is practical. Repentance produces “fruits,” meaning real results. They are the fruit of the Spirit in our inner lives (Gal5:24), as well as the fruit of good influence on others. These verses wake us up spiritually. Though God is so gracious, if we’re really going to repent we still need a sober warning about the reality of his judgment.

How did people respond to John? Look at verses 10–14. We’ve got three groups here: “the crowd,” “tax collectors” and “soldiers.” The last two groups are surprising; they’re not the people you’d expect to be taking John seriously. They all ask the same question, “What should we do?” It means they recognize they’re in big trouble with God. They’re serious about repentance. There’s a theme here. Everyone seems to be struggling with the same thing: selfishness and greed. More than any other New Testament author, Luke records so many teachings about the Christian and money. Repentance largely has to do with what we’re doing with our money. Are we stingy? Greedy? Squeezing others to make more money? Or are we generous, willing to share, ready help the needy? God is watching, and he’s serious about what we’re doing with our money. Finally, we should be aware of a misunderstanding. We don’t earn our salvation through our repentance. Rather, repentance gets us ready for Jesus, and only Jesus gives us the forgiveness of sins, when we repent and believe in him (cf. Ac2:38). Also, his grace to us is never a license to continue in sin. Like the people of John’s day, we too need to produce fruits in keeping with repentance.

John’s powerful ministry filled everyone with expectation; they were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Christ (16). If they gain great admiration, it’s predicable for people to become delusional. How did John handle this? Read verse 16. He makes a contrast here between two baptisms: his baptism with water, and Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. Water baptism is only an outward symbol of washing our sins away. But Jesus’ baptism actually burns out our sin inwardly. Even if it’s only on the basis of these two baptisms, Jesus is clearly still way more powerful than John. John adds that he’s not worthy to untie the strap of Jesus’ sandals, the most lowly task. His words rebuke our attitude of doing God a great favor even by the very little we might do for him. Like John, if we’re going to help people spiritually, we’ve got to be quick to point them away from ourselves to the incomparable greatness of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ. People need to remember Jesus, not us.

John concludes with one more warning. Read verse 17. This is another allusion to Judgment Day. There’s an immediacy to his words here: “his winnowing fork is in his hand,” meaning, he’s already doing it. Separating the wheat from the chaff means separating the righteous from the wicked. “His barn” is God’s eternal kingdom, and the “unquenchable fire” is hell, the place our Lord Jesus also warns us about (12:5). We need to know why we need to repent.

Luke characterizes even these dire warnings to repent or face judgment as “good news” (18). He also ends the passage as he began it, with Herod. Herod’s response to put John in prison rather than listen to him and repent shows what happens when we share this urgent need to repent: we should expect such a strong backlash.

Read verse 3 again. May the word of God come to us as it did to John. May it inspire us to real repentance. May God give us the courage to give people his life-giving message of repentance, so that they can know the forgiveness of sins in our Lord Jesus.