

John, Repentance, and Possessions
(Luke 3:1-14)

Turn to Luke 3. Once every church year I speak to you about God and our money, or God and what we own. Usually this happens in the fall, and I thought about it last fall,, but nothing felt right, so I waited. This is your annual message on God and money.

The Christmas readings last month were from Luke 1-2. The very next teaching in Luke's Gospel, beginning of Luke 3, has to do with John the Baptist and repentance and money. So we will look at that Scripture.

I will tell you at the start that today's Scripture is not a kind Scripture, or perhaps I should say it does not feel kind. It might actually be very kind, but we'll feel something else.

Taking this Scripture at face value is disturbing in some ways. It makes me nervous and uncomfortable. But we'll still assume it means what it says, and we'll be nervous and uncomfortable. And, we'll stay in front of God. We will not turn away from God because some of what he says worries us or distresses us.

Luke 3:1-6 ¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—* ² *during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* ³ *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* ⁴ *As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:*
"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵ *Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.* ⁶ *And all people will see God's salvation.'* "

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins: 3:2b-3 says, *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* ³ *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

This is the summary of what John's baptism meant: *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. Let's slow down and think about that line. "Repenting" means turning, turning away from one way of thinking and acting toward a different way of thinking and acting.

So people repent, they turn their lives in some different direction, they change their lives in some way. And this change brings forgiveness of sins: *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. So we change our lives, turn them a different way, and our sins are forgiven.

When people grow up in a church that preaches these things, as I did, they can grow up with their lives already turned away from some of the sinful things from the start.

There is still sin that the children of the church should stop doing and turn from; that's always true for everyone. But if the children of the church begin to follow Christ while young, there won't necessarily be a big change.

But what about faith? Does the Bible not say that people believe to have their sins forgiven, they put their trust in Christ and he forgives their sins? Yes, the Bible says that.

But if we read those Scriptures, like Paul's letters, we will see that "believing" always includes a changed life. Always. "Repenting" describes changing our lives. What exactly should change? We'll get to that, but not quite yet.

So John's baptism means *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. That line occurs one other place in the Bible, right near the end of Luke's Gospel.

In Lk 24:47, Jesus repeats this after his resurrection: *repentance for the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all the nations*. That's the gospel that Jesus sends out. *Repentance for the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all the nations*.

On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter ended with much the same words. After Peter's sermon, the people said to Peter, "What should we do?"

Peter said, *repent and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

Repent and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. That's Peter. Jesus said, after his resurrection: *repentance for the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all the nations*.

It starts in Luke 3: John preached *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. So this is the core of John's message, and as far as Luke and Acts are concerned, this is the gospel message: repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.

John Warns the Crowds: 3:7-9 *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him. Two things in today's Scripture startle me; two things that I have read many times surprise me every time I read them. First is the way John the Baptist greets the crowds that come out to be baptized.

They are coming to be baptized. That's a good thing, right? "You brood of vipers! You children of snakes, spawn of serpents! You brood of vipers!" Why does John talk to these crowds like that? Where does that come from?

We've just read the wonderful Christmas story in Luke 1 and 2. The Spirit fills people with joy. Elizabeth rejoices, Mary exults, Zechariah praises God and ends with the way of peace, the angels say, "glory to God and peace to people." Old Anna in the Temple worships God. But the first crowds to respond are called: *you brood of vipers!*

Next line: *Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?* [repeat] There's some real education going on here. These crowds never knew there was any wrath coming.

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? "Wrath? There's wrath coming? Really? Who warned us? No one warned us. We didn't know. And we're escaping it? Really? How are we escaping it? By coming to be baptized by you?"

In 3:9 John says, ⁹ *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*"

If you are going to use an axe to chop through a tree root that's just sticking out of the ground, you pick up the axe, straighten your arms and place the head of the axe on the root, to figure out where to stand, to chop the root not your foot.

That's laying the axe on the tree root. So chopping will begin in three or four seconds. Soon, in other words. ⁹ *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

So people come out to John because they are interested in God, they want to move toward God; somehow they are attracted to this preacher about God.

And when they get there, they find out that they were in huge trouble they knew nothing about. God's wrath was building up on the horizon, moving toward them because of how they and others like them were living, and they have come to the only way of escape.

This is actually a standard feature of the gospel, and if you look for this theme in the Bible, there are quite a few places where the good news makes no sense until people first realize that there is bad news they knew nothing about.

We ourselves are in this story. **We** come to God, because we are interested in him, attracted to him in some way. And when **we** come, we find out that the only way God could receive us was to sacrifice his own Son. The only way Jesus could become our Good Shepherd was by submitting to a horrible death. And this he did.

Then it begins to dawn on us what kind of trouble we were in. And this is not just for some other bad people out there. This is every single human. In Eph 2 God tells us that we were all by nature children of wrath. But he loved us and sent his Son who loves us.

You all don't look nearly that bad to me. I don't look that bad to me. Not great, but not that bad. God had to turn that kind of destruction in on himself, in order to rescue us?

Children of snakes! John is educating these people, showing them their real trouble, and showing them that their repenting is the only way to escape this storm of wrath.

John Demands Repentance Fruit (3:7-9) ⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

John's worried about something: that people will be baptized but not actually change. That will do them no good, as far as the coming wrath is concerned, none at all.

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance . . . ever tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Fruit in keeping with repentance means there are real changes. Repenting means a change of thinking and acting. There has to be evidence. We do not become perfect, and not everything changes. But if there is no change, then there was no repenting.

And do not begin to say to yourselves, we don't need to produce fruit, we're okay. John mentions Abraham. God blessed Abraham with a powerful blessing, and God included all of Abraham's descendants in this blessing. The crowds were Abraham's descendants.

John thinks they'll try to get out of this that way. "We don't need to repent. There's no wrath coming to us. We're already blessed by God." Don't even start that, says John.

There is only one way to escape the coming wrath, only one way to get your sins forgiven: baptism and a repentance that has fruit. But what should that fruit be? Repenting means changing; what's supposed to change? Now we get to that.

John Describes Repentance Fruit, Part One: Back to Your Daily Life: Lk 3:10-14 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" ¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. ¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

The core of repenting is in ordinary daily life. How do we live with the people that are around us? That's the question.

We can make what happens when we're alone to be the most important part of our changed life. Is our private life with God, praying or whatever, the place of repentance? No. Our private life with God is important, but that's not what John talks about, at all.

We can also make some kind of going away to be the most important part of our new life, our changed life. These crowds made a trek out to the Jordan area to hear John preach. But he did not tell them to stay out there, or to return every few months.

He sent them all back. He even sent back tax collectors and soldiers. In some ways both of these people have jobs that go against the kingdom. But John did not call them to change their jobs, nor did he make repentance fruit something outside those jobs.

He sent them right back into tax collecting and soldiering, and producing repentance fruit would be how they lived in those roles.

Sometimes God calls people to change their lives, and sometimes God changes our lives by circumstances. But neither of those are repentance changes. Repenting takes place in our home, our marriage, our work, our school, our play, and so on: back to daily life.

We sometimes hear that repentance is a matter of the heart, the mind. But not for John it wasn't. But for John fruit meant action. Modern Christians are often misinformed about this: we assume a big gap between heart and actions.

Jesus said: good fruit comes from good trees, and bad fruit comes from bad trees. He added that good fruit does not come from bad trees, and bad fruit does not come from good trees. See Matt 7:15-20. See also Mark 7: what's in the heart always comes out.

We cannot produce the repentance fruit John asked for without a changed heart. But he did not ask for that, as Jesus normally did not ask for that. Changed life is essential.

John Describes Repentance Fruit, Part Two: Can't Serve God and Possessions

I said earlier that two things in today's Scripture surprise me every time I read them. The first was John's rough insulting way of greeting the crowds that came to be baptized: "You children of snakes! Who warned you to flee?" He sounds sorry they will escape.

My second surprise is John's description of repentance fruit. The people really were alarmed by his rough opening, and they wanted to be baptized and repent and be forgiven, and they wanted to produce fruit that fit with repentance. What would that be?

John gives six specific examples of repentance fruit, and every one of them has to do with money or possessions. That is my second surprise. When people ask, "what should we do," John answers by talking about money and possessions, and nothing else.

The rest of the Bible talks about other things. I'm not saying that this is all there is. I am saying that for John, that's all there was, which we must take seriously.

John gives six specifics which boil down to three general calls. The first call concerns how we handle what we have. What happens with what we have?

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." John is obviously speaking to people much poorer than we are. Share your extra clothes, and share your extra food. Give them to those who lack.

Remember what we're talking about here: the repentance that brings forgiveness of sins. No one earns forgiveness, no one deserves it. It is a gift to those who trust, and trust always includes willingness to live God's way. Share what you have.

How much do we share? John said: if you have two coats, and someone beside you has none, give that person one of your coats. What do repenting people do with what they have? They share it with those who lack.

How much is not really the point. Here's the point: *if someone could know every detail about how I handle what I have, would it be clear to that person that I was devoted to God? If someone knew every detail of what I do with my money and my possessions, and knew nothing else, would it be clear from that alone that I was devoted to God?*

That is an essential question to ask. Because it is not just John, but in all the Bible.

The first repentance fruit: how do we handle what we own? John's second repentance fruit: how do we get more? How do we get more? ¹² *Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"* ¹³ *"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.* ¹⁴ *Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely.*

The second thing John says to the soldiers is "don't accuse people falsely." That does not seem to have anything to do with money. But that's not the whole story.

That Greek word, "*accuse-falsely*," is used one other place in the NT, in the Zacchaeus story in Luke 19. There Z. says, "If I have *cheated* anyone, I will repay him fourfold." That word *cheat* is the same as *accuse-falsely*. We don't know the context, but somehow soldiers were in a place to get money by accusing people falsely. Its still getting money.

John's repentance fruit for tax collectors and soldiers: be completely honest in how you get more. Don't use fear or power or dishonesty to get more than is yours by right. Again, do not use fear or power or dishonesty to get more than is rightfully yours.

Taxes are a common temptation here, also electronically copying music and other entertainment, and what we do with lost things we find, and so on. How we get more, if every detail were known, should give evidence that we are devoted to God.

Repentance fruit #1, how do we handle what we have? #2, how do we get more? #3, be content. John ends with this word to soldiers, who never get paid much, survival and no more: *be content with your pay.*

1 Tim 6:8: *if we have food and shelter, we will be content.* Poverty means not enough food to hold off hunger, not enough clothes to cover our bodies and be warm, not enough shelter to protect us from the weather. That's poverty, and God is no friend of poverty.

If we have those things, God has been kind to us. This is a mark of someone who has repented for the forgiveness of their sins. *Be content with your pay.*

If we have food to hold off hunger, clothes to cover our bodies and be warm, and shelter to protect us from the weather, with this we will be content.

This one seems to me laughable. It sounds ridiculous. Coveting and wanting more is built so deeply into our society, and so deeply into each one of us, including me.

Our society is good in important ways. God's people could be more thankful for this. But in the matter of contentment, we're sick. I'm especially concerned about children and youth. Everyone is sick with the appetite for new, more, better, bigger, smaller, newer.

We are always one or two things short of contentment, and we never figure out that lie. It is in the world and in the church and it's doing fine in me. Kids, what you need to know is that this is all an evil sickness, a sinful sickness.

Don't trust your parents, don't trust me. We've all got it, we're nearly as spiritually sick as the rest. If we have food, clothing, and shelter, with this we will be content. This contentment is the repentance fruit that brings forgiveness, and this is a fight every day.

And it's not a new battle. Remember that 2000 years ago John thought this was the biggest thing bringing wrath on the crowds wanting baptism.

Where to start? If you're actually interested, then ask and seek and knock. Those who hunger for righteousness will be filled. Ask God for contentment, seek for it, knock at that door.

John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance means change, and there needs to be change. What needs to change? John sent us back to our daily life, and called for daily choices between God and money, God and possessions.

God wants us. We don't see these things as God's competition in our lives, but it is. He wants us. He's calling us to leave the competition, calling us to himself.

This is part of the education that happens when we move toward God. We learn that some things that we like God sees as competition. Not all things we like, by any means, but some. Some are serious competition, so serious that we can't keep them and still love God. We think we can. But he says we can't. He is calling us to leave the competition.

Coming?