

God Loves You - Repent!

Luke 3:1-22

Key Verse: 3:8a

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

Many weeks ago, prior to our Christmas celebrations, we spent a bit of time studying about the exciting life of one old man named Zechariah. If you recall, he and his wife had the fortune of bearing a child in their old age - their son John. In the angel's promise to Zechariah, it was prophesied that John was not going to be your ordinary snotty nosed child of old parents. The angel said to Zechariah, “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” This passage is the fulfillment of this promise and indeed we will see that John was a remarkable person. And the way John made ready the hearts of the people was through the message of repentance. Today what I want to share with you are the following questions: Why do we need to repent? When do we need to repent? Who needs to repent? And how can we repent?

Before we begin, let's cover some background information regarding John. Luke does not explicitly talk about John besides what's written in verse 2, “...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.” However, the book of Matthew gives us a better picture of John's character. Matthew 3:4 says, “John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” John was not a typical man. He did not have a typical birth and I doubt he had a typical childhood. But despite his unusual ways, he was the perfect man for the job of preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah.

Israel was still under Roman rule, governed by Pontius Pilate. Under Pilate were tetrarchs that rule various regions of Israel. In short, Israel was still an occupied nation living under oppression from a foreign government. The people were longing for relief and were desperately seeking for someone, in particular the promised Messiah, to come and save them. But the peculiar thing about the Jews was that despite their long history of foreign occupation, they never considered themselves to be “under rule” by a foreign government. They always claim steadfast to the notion that they were a people under God and under no human authority - all the while paying taxes to a foreign King and being mistreated by foreign soldiers. Their identity as God's people were remarkable but their obstinate pride in this identity was even more astonishing.

Because of such a mentality of pride in the minds of the people, it would take someone tremendously strong and unflappable to preach a message of repentance. And John was this person. He probably had crazy hair with a fro that reached several inches from his head. He wore nothing but the skin of a camel - and not the nice soft ones like Dan's camel hair coat. He wore it straight from the camel's carcass - unprocessed and probably not even washed. He might have killed the camel himself. Furthermore, John ate nothing but locusts and honey. He carried with him a bag of fresh locusts that he would stuff into his mouth and wash it down with honey - not from a Honey Bear bottle but straight from the hive. The religious leaders of those times were preoccupied with their fancy garments and making sure they were ceremonially clean by washing their hands with egg shells of water. They spent considerable amount of time

trimming their beards and eating nothing but Kosher foods. So when John came along chewing on his locusts and licking the honey off of his fingers, the people noticed something was different about him. John probably frightened away all the Pharisees with just a scolding glance from his fiery eyes and a crunch of a large locust. And unlike the Pharisees and the religious leaders, John boldly preached a message that struck and chord in the hearts of the people. When he spoke, people listened and they came to listen to him in droves. His message was simple, to the point and it might have sounded harsh but the people responded for that was what they needed to hear. And thus John prepared the hearts of the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What was this message that John spoke so powerfully? Verse 3 says, "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John didn't drone on and on for hours while saying nothing like the religious leaders. He spoke briefly and simply but with sharp words that cut right into the hearts of the people. He rebuked them and exhorted to them to repent for Jesus is coming. And thus we come to the first question, "Why do we need to repent?"

Take a look at verses 23 to 37. Within that long list of names we can observe a few things. First of all, there are names of biblical heroes such as Abraham and David and also a few of the famous, or infamous, such as Adam, Noah, Jacob and Joseph. Then there are a couple of people named after a sheep and a fish - Ram and Salmon and a whole bunch of people named Mattathias or its derivatives (i.e. Mattatha). But the most important observation is that besides just 2 names, these are the names of generations and generations of sinners. Only God and Jesus were not sinners - the rest were liars, murderers, adulterers, idol worshippers, rebels and all around sinners of all sorts. Sin didn't enter gradually into society - it entered humanity from the very first name, Adam. From that point on, sin separated man from God by putting obstacles and hinderances between God and man.

At first, sin made man ashamed to be with God. When God called Adam after he sinned, Adam hid from God for he knew that he did something he shouldn't have done. But as humanity rolled on, people no longer felt ashamed of their sins but became preoccupied by it. It is described in the account of Noah that man's thoughts were only evil, all the time. Then as time went on, man became proud of their sins. The modern time would be a good example of this. In our days men and women are proud of their promiscuous lifestyles. We have things like gay pride parades and pro-choice rallies. Those who incite rebellion are perceived as free thinkers and those who create new ways to defile the name of God are seen as heroes of free speech. From here, sin will take mankind to its final destination - death. If sin is left alone, it will lead man to death for by choice, through our actions, inactions, thoughts, deeds and motives, we have put ourselves down a slippery slide that ends in hell.

Unfortunately, the terrible thing about sin is that when we commit it, we think we're getting away with it. There is no bolt of lightning that comes down to strike us down. There is no booming voice from heaven accusing of us our sins. God loves us so much that he does not strike us down immediate upon sin. Rather, he gives us a chance to come to him in an effort to resolve our sin problem. But be assured, that one day Jesus will come and when he comes, there will no longer be a second chance at repentance. He will come and God will judge all those in the world. John speaks of this clearly in verse 17, "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with

unquenchable fire.” Sinners are the chaff and when God judges the world, he will separate the chaff from the wheat and the chaff will burn forever in hell.

However, the good news is that repentance can avoid all this doom and gloom. Let’s read verses 5 & 6, “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.” Repentance, sincere repentance, is the straightening of the crooked and smoothing of the rough. It removes the obstacles, hinderances and anything that separates us from God - in other words, repentance leads to forgiveness of sins. Notice that repentance leads to forgiveness of sins and not a cure or immunity from sin. The fact is that when we disobey God, there is nothing that we can do that will rectify the situation.

Once I got pulled over while driving a company car and I pleaded with the officer giving him a lot of good reasons why I took off from a red light like a rocket. I said this is company car so I’m not used to it - it was a V6 while my normal car is a 4 cylinder and so I didn’t know the pedal was so sensitive. I gave him a lot of good reasons. But nothing could change the FACT that I broke the speed limit and thus subject to a ticket. Only the mercy, understanding and forgiveness by the officer could prevent me from getting a ticket. Likewise, there is nothing we can do to erase our sins but if we repent of our sins, there is a chance that God will forgive us. And unlike the mean cop that pulled me over, God wants us to repent and he is willing to forgive us every time. He doesn’t demand traffic school, fines to be paid and he certainly does not take away our licenses to live. The only thing that God wants is a sincere repentance in our heart and he is willing wipe the slate clean - every time. This is the grace of God and this is why we need to repent.

Next, “when do we need to repent?” Some people live with the illusion that there is always time to repent later and then they get hit by a bus before they could even say “I’m sorry”. The truth is that we don’t know when our end will come and so there is no time like now to repent. John illustrated the urgency of the situation in verses 7 and 9. Verse 7 says, “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?’” By saying, “flee from the coming wrath” John evokes a sense of desperation in the people and thus the dire need to be saved immediately. Verse 9 says, “the axe 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.” This verse clarifies the urgency even better. John says that the axe is already at the root meaning that in any minute, God will cut down those trees that bear bad fruit. The axe is at the root, there is no time to delay. We cannot say, “we’ll repent tomorrow when I have more time.” We can’t assume that there will be a tomorrow.

Though this may sound a bit harsh, it is actually a blessing for the fact that we have this very passage to learn from is an example of God’s grace and His desire to see us in His Kingdom. Though the time is short, God gives us a clear warning and gives us a chance to repent, if we act on it right away.

Verse 8 answers the next question, “who needs to repent?” It says, “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.” In the beginning I mentioned that the Jews were tremendously proud people. So proud in fact that they drove themselves to the point of denial that they were being occupied by foreign people. This extreme sense of national pride and identity as God’s

people apparently made the Jews feel that they were not sinners. As soon as John said, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance," he immediately followed it up with, "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." Through this John tells us that heritage, connections, ancestry or affiliations do not excuse us from having to repent. So this means that the simple answer to the question, "who needs to repent" is - EVERYONE needs to repent.

We live in Chicago where people can ALLEGEDLY buy their way out of convictions for crimes committed, buy their way to be "elected" to high office and be "allowed" to bend the rules for profit. It seems to be all about who you know that gets you places and gets you exempt from unpleasant situations. Once, I went with pastor Mark Vucekovich to city hall to meet with an alderman so he can try to "influence" a city inspector to give us a permit to do some work to the main center building that would otherwise be against code. Thankfully it was denied and we didn't have to rely on a shady relationship to do what is against code. In another example, I used to edit and produce videos for UBF using software that was obtained by someone who had access to it at their work place. This is clearly pirating and completely against the law but the thought was that it was okay because we were doing God's work. These examples tell us the prevalence of people trying to use connections and relationships to get away with breaking the law. And even Christians will try to justify breaking the law under the guise of "serving" God thinking that because we have a connection with God, it's okay. Of course, in extreme circumstances, we have to break human laws to obey God. But outside of such situations, we're just using God as an excuse to justify our actions. And God does not take kindly to those trying use Him as an excuse to be exempt from having to repent and thus implying that they are without sin.

Just as there is nothing we can do to remove our sins, there is no relationship, heritage or connection we can claim to say that we are without sin. The Israelites thought that because they were God's people, they were without sin but John said that heritage means nothing. That heritage was about as useful as a pile of rocks in bringing them forgiveness. Only repentance could bring them forgiveness. Likewise, just because we, as Christians, have accepted Jesus as our God, it doesn't mean that we don't have to repent. God does not "understand" us and forgive us automatically. God does not say that because we are Jesus' "peeps" so we're okay. No, he demands the same sincere, heartfelt and complete repentance as he demands from Jews, Muslims, atheists and whomever else. Therefore, everyone needs to repent. Paul clarified this in Romans, "for ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

So the last next question is, "how can we repent?" Many people confuse repentance with regret. Repentance is not just feeling bad about what we've done. Merely feeling bad will land you in a therapist's bed and popping pills to fight depression. Merely feeling bad will make you condemn yourself over and over again. Merely feeling bad fixes nothing - in fact it makes things worse. Remember Peter and Judas in the bible. Both denied Jesus but Peter repented and God restored him to be the leader of the early church. Judas only regretted but never repented. In the end he gave the money back and committed suicide. So the thing to do is not to regret but to repent and John tell us how. Verse 8 say, "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."

John says that we must first produce fruit in keeping with repentance. This means that our repentance must lead to something that is desirable and pleasing to God. So, obviously, just feeling sorry isn't going to get the job done. Rather, our repentance should lead to a decision - a decision to stop doing whatever it is that is causing us to sin. But furthermore, the challenge in repentance is not only the actual cessation of what causes us to sin but also the underlying reasons for our sins.

Verses 10 to 14 illustrate this point well. After hearing the message of repentance, the people asked what they should do. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." This answer suggests that there was a lot of social injustices going on in those times. So John tells them that they should share their wealth with others for ignoring those in need is sin. But John is also rebuking their selfishness - they didn't share because they were selfish and thus they also needed to repent of their selfishness on top of their neglect. To the tax collectors he answered, "Don't collect any more than you are required to," thus telling them to stop taking advantage of the system and essentially robbing people. But also John is rebuking their greed and worship of money. And to the soldiers John said, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." Here John is telling them to stop roughing up innocent people for money but also that they also have an underlying sin of greed, violence and thanklessness.

In all three examples, merely stopping their actions would not lead to fruit in keeping with repentance. God would not be pleased if a tax collector collected only what was required but still teeming with greed inside. Rather, along with repentance of our actions we also need repentance of the heart. This is a complete repentance that can lead to a decision that bears fruit. To be sure, we are weak and we cannot maintain this decision on our own. God knows this and he is ready and willing to help us. When we come to him repenting of our actions and also of the sins in our heart, not only does he promise to forgive us, he can help us maintain the decision in heart to put those sins in our past.

When I was a younger man I used to be very angry at the world. During my high school days, I was bullied by a bunch of people who used to spit on me, throw food at me and generally make my life very miserable. I used to stand on the balcony of my house and look up into the sky asking God why all this was happening. I became emotional, frustrated, angry, conflicted and confused. I hated the bullies so much that I laid awake at night how I would beat them up and even kill them. Whenever I saw those people, my heart burned with rage and images of me exacting my vengeance upon them flashed across my mind. But the one thing that bothered me the most was the question "why". In some way I understood that mean kids do mean things but "why me"? My anger and violent thoughts were as much a product of not knowing this answer as much as it was about those kids. In doing so, I subconsciously doubted God's ability to save me and even His love for me. By asking "why" I was telling God that I don't trust Him to do what is right and that somehow he was being unjust toward me. This carried with me into college where now it shifted from bullying to racism and my pain shifted from anger to isolation, loneliness and fear. However, in the midst of my utter hopelessness, God spoke to me through John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." This one verse was a nuclear bomb that exploded in my heart. It put into light all my sins of distrust, selfishness and pride. All these years I thought it was the world making my life miserable and I doubted God's sovereignty over me. But in reality was that I thought I

deserved something better. That I should be treated better and that I had, somehow, done something worthy for God to reward me. It was all about me, me, me. Then God showed me that I was angry and frustrated because I wanted to control my own destiny but evil people were preventing me from doing so. I could not control being poor, I could not control people being mean to me and I could not control God and tell Him how to do His job. God showed me that apart from Him, I am nothing. I felt like nothing and I now I understood why - I was away from God. From that point, I surrendered to God all those thoughts of vengeance, fear and anger and I repented of the murder in my heart, incessant worrying and self righteousness. God heard me and He forgave me. He gave me a new heart that desires to serve, love, that does not fear death and that always reminds me that I am a wretched sinner in need of God's grace. I can't say that I am perfect in all these things but this is the fruit that God bore through me when I could truly repent. Repentance led to a fruit of a changed life and I praise God for His mercy and grace.

As a final note, I'd like us all to read verses 21 and 22, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" God loved Jesus and God revealed His deep love for Jesus for all the world to see. Then at the end, God showed how much he loved us by crucifying His son for the whole world to see. Jesus died so our sins may be forgiven and God displayed this love for us in Jesus' death. Therefore, there is no question that God loves us and he wants to forgive us. There is no question that God sends people like John into our lives not to chew us out but to show us our sins so that we can repent and be forgiven.

The message of repentance is always difficult to accept and perhaps even harder to preach. The common reaction to the message of repentance is "I'm okay" or "I'm not as bad as the next guy." This is then immediately followed by, "who are you to tell me that I'm a sinner - I know all your sins!!" Perhaps this is why God sent someone as spirited and intimidating as John the Baptist - it's not easy to argue with a guy that chews on locusts and wears animal hide. The truth is that we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness and it is true that none of us is qualified to condemn another's sin. Therefore, it is very important that when we hear this message of repentance as preached by John, we don't react to it as our sinful nature would move us. Rather, we must react to it in thankfulness of God's grace for he has reminded us of our need for forgiveness and ultimately our salvation. Let us repent together of all our sins within and without. Let us repent together of our sins of action and inaction, of our thought, heart and motive. Let us repent together today and seek the strength of Lord Jesus to help us turn away from our sins.