

Repentance

Luke 3:1-20

Introduction

Prepare the Way: But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (Jn 1:12). How do I actually receive Jesus? That's the question I want you to keep in mind as we think through this passage.

- In 1520, a famous meeting between emerging European powers, England and France, took place when **Henry VIII** and **Francis I** met at a neutral site. But these kings won't just show up to a picnic table in a field. The site had to be prepared. Temporary castles were constructed, Henry VIII's covering a terrain of more than 100,000 ft². The tents, costumes, and decorations used so much "cloth of gold" (an expensive fabric woven with silk and gold thread) that the location became known as "Field of the Cloth of Gold."
- This isn't unusual in our day and age either. If you want the **Olympics** in your city, you better do some construction and cleanup. If the **President** is coming to town, there are going to be preparations made, both cosmetic and security.

Pave the Road: Quoting the Prophet Isaiah, this is what we learn about the ministry of John the Baptist in this passage. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

- The metaphor is down to earth (literally) but powerful. If you want the King to come to your house, then you need to get the road in the right condition. I've learned most of what I know about road construction from children's books (*Roadworks*, "Seal the road. Seal the road. Make it hot and squishy. Spread the sticky tar and stones. Sploshy! Splashy! Splishy!").
- As you're paving, especially in ancient times, you can't have just a normal dirt path worn from animal or human tracks for the king. You need something clear, compacted, and prepared. You need to remove boulders and fill in divots if you want the King with his vast entourage to come through.
- Here, it says that the preparation is not just patchwork (cf. Philly potholes) but miraculous terraforming. These aren't boulders to be moved but mountains; these aren't divots to be filled but valleys. This is the scale of transformation that is coming their way in Jesus. Major obstacles will be flattened (humbled) and deficiencies corrected (exalted).

This passage invites us to marvel at the transformative work that occurs when Christ the King comes to reside among his people and to personalize the question, what should my life look like if Christ is going to reside in me?

- How should the pathways in my soul be leveled for him to "make my heart [his] home" (Watermark)? What do I need to do to "prepare him room" (Peterson)?

1. Message of Repentance (vv. 1-6) ¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Who’s In Charge: Seven people are listed from the more important to less important (all important), starting with Caesar at the top of the Pyramid (e.g., top of the call sheet).

- **(1) Tiberius Caesar.** The great-great grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, but more importantly, the stepson of Augustus Caesar. His reign (14-37 AD) continued the famous peaceful time of Roman rule (*Pax Romana*).
- **(2) Pontius Pilate.** Famous for his role in Jesus’ crucifixion was like the local Roman guy in Judea (which included Jerusalem). Southern Israel.¹
- **(3-5) Tetrarchy (Herod, Philip, Lysanias).** Herod the Great (baby killer, wise men, etc.) died in 4 BC and his kingdom was divided into four (hence Gr. τετρα+αρχία; four+rule), his sister (not mentioned) and three sons. This Herod went by the name “Herod Antipas” (short for *antipatros* which means “like the Father”).
 - Considering the overlapping names and relationships, **family picnics would have been complex and confusing.** Herod Antipas, for instance, found himself entangled in a controversial marriage with Herodias, his niece and the wife of his half-brother, another Herod named Philip (often confused with Philip the Tetrarch, yet another of Herod the Great’s sons, who ruled a different region). The matrimonial shuffle, with Herod Antipas marrying Herodias—who was both his brother’s wife and his niece—drew sharp criticism from John the Baptist because it was both incestuous and unlawful (which led to J the B’s execution).² Herod Antipas also had another brother (Herod Archelaus).³
- **(6-7) Annas and Caiaphas.** Not simultaneous priests but signify the religious leadership of Jerusalem. Annas was removed as high priest by the Romans (15 AD) and his son-in-law eventually became the high priest (until 36 AD). Jesus is brought first to Annas (Jn 18:13-23) before the currently serving HP Caiaphas (HP emeritus). Cf. the Bush-Clinton years.

History and Theology: Why are these historical details here? (1) They’re **true** (verified by external, non-Christian sources). The Bible goes to great lengths to show that Christ came at the right time in history, to real people, in a real place (cf. Gal 4:4). But there are lots of historical

¹ We sometimes conflate Galilee and Judea and other regions as “first-century Israel.” A Galileean would be as out of place in Jerusalem as an Irishman in London or a Texan in New York (accent, culture, etc.).

² Herod the Great’s palace was also called the herodium.

³ Herod Archelaus = ἀρχή + λαός = rule + people. Cruel, inefficient, and unpopular leader. One of the worst of the Herodian dynasty.

details not included. (2) They're theologically **important**. These are the human rulers that have the people in political, economic, and religious bondage. Yet, who does God come to? A seemingly crazy wilderness prophet.

- **Bondage:** The true captivity they face is not Rome (just like it wasn't Pharaoh). Their shackles are not chains but sin.
- **Redeemer:** If they needed a politician, God would have sent a Senator. If they needed a coup, God would have sent a General. They needed a substitutionary Savior, so he sent his Son.

Expectedly unexpected, a humble prophet, not a royal ruler.

Repentance: John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, whose birth we learned about in Luke 1, shows up as an adult now. He's going around **baptizing** so much, that he now goes by the name John the Baptist (i.e., Baptizer).⁴

- In Judaism, "baptisms" were for cleansing (e.g., bathe to get clean). He's saying, quite clearly, "y'all stink" (spiritually).

He is calling them to **repent** (μετάνοια). **What is repentance?** It is a change of mind (or heart) that leads to a change of behavior.

- Repentance isn't simply turning around from one direction and going another. It fundamentally involves a change of heart (turning from sin and turning to Christ).
- "If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction" (Bonhoeffer). Repentance means getting off the wrong train, getting on the right train, and going the right way. It involves a total change of allegiance, attitude, values, etc.

Faith and repentance end up being two sides of the same coin (inseparable). That's why Jesus says to "repent and believe" (Mk 1:15).

- We talk a lot about faith. What about repentance? "There are far too few tears of repentance in our churches today. If revival should break out, one of the most obvious signs will be the renewal of deep, heart-breaking, repentance" (Hammett).
- "Jesus came 'to call sinners to repentance.' [Too often] the church is offended that he calls sinners and the world is offended he calls for repentance" (Wax).

The story of baptism and forgiveness of sin will make more sense as the gospel progresses, but let's keep the focus clear: **John is bringing a prophetic call to deal with sin**. It's the call we all have to respond to, you can't be saved until you admit you're lost. You can't be forgiven unless you admit you need forgiveness. You can't be free until you want the chains removed. We are not here to affirm your sin, we're here to offer you freedom from it.

- ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Rom 6:20-22).
- You cannot have your sin and your Savior. Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin (Jn 8:34). But the grace of Jesus has freed you from sin, and if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (Jn 8:36).

⁴ Cf. Matt 3:1, Mk 1:4, Lk 7:20, Jn 1:6-8, Acts 19:3-4.

- **Repentance isn't the burdensome obligation to fight sin but the gracious invitation to experience freedom.**

Prepare: Luke points out that the time has come, as Isaiah 40:3–5 says, for the King to come. And that means we need to prepare for his coming. Get the roads ready, and pave the way (literally). This isn't just a king but the King of kings. He doesn't adapt to the roads, the roads adapt to him.

- God is not here to follow the idolatrous paths you've carved in your heart but to pave a new way of righteousness in your life. God is not here to bargain with you or make a deal. He's God, let him be God.

2. Fruit of Repentance (vv. 7-14) ⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

Harsh Words: How's that for an opening line for a crowd eager for you to baptize them: "You brood of vipers! You'd be hard-pressed to see John as a crowd-pleasing preacher. Be careful that we don't short-change people by telling them what we think they **want** to hear more than what they **need** to hear.

- We are not good people who need self-esteem (we are not good). We are not even just broken people who need encouragement (though we are broken). We are sinful people who need to repent.
- The gospel is good news for everyone but **feels** like bad news to the self-righteous. You only appreciate the magnitude of grace when you realize the truth of sin.

Perplexing Question: Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? What is this question getting at? Ironic (vipers need to be destroyed, not forgiven), pointing to grace. Rather than destruction, we are getting an opportunity to turn.

Fruit: ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Martin Luther wrote his "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" (retroactively understood to catalyze the Protestant Reformation), famously called the 95 Theses (because it contained 95 propositions). The very first thesis states: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

- "Real repentance manifests itself in concrete action" (Bock).

- It's one thing to baptize your body, but it's another to transform your life. "It is much easier a thing to walk an aisle than to take up a cross" (Mark Dever).
- **Many choose remorse rather than repentance, feeling sorry over changing.**

Danger: And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

- You are not a believer because of your religious heritage (a dangerous presumption of Jews). You are not saved because you are born into a Christian family, sprinkled as an infant, or (even) a member of a church. You are saved if you **repent of your sin and believe in Jesus**. Are you relying on the wrong thing for assurance of your salvation?
- You are not God's child by heritage but by adoption. The "tree" of Israel is being pruned. The dead branches are cut off. And those who place their faith in Jesus will be grafted into.⁵
- ¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned (Jn 15:1-6).

So What Question: The crowds asked him what the "fruit of repentance" looks like.

- **An exceedingly practical question.** It doesn't matter how "spiritually proficient" you are if your life does not look like Jesus in the way you treat people. "Loving God" is only the first part, it always leads to "loving your neighbor." If [you] speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but don't have love, [you are] a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Cor 13:1). If you can quote every Bible verse but beat your wife or steal from your job, etc. it doesn't matter.
- **Crowds:** If you have extra clothes or food and someone has none, give it to them. Generosity is a hallmark of Christlikeness. You can always hoard more. God isn't going to check the balance of your IRA. He calls us to generous self-giving, not entitled self-taking.
- **Tax Collectors:** Hated as rich, traitors, thieves (explain more as Luke goes along), cf. "sinners and tax collectors or sinners and prostitutes." Do your job but don't steal. The goal is not to get as rich as possible.
- **Soldiers:** More like the police (cf. Mali bribes). When you have a gun and no oversight, it's easy to bully and intimate to get rich. When you're in a position of power, will you help others or help yourself? We might not extort but our lack of contentment might cause us to sin to pad our pockets.

⁵ The stones raised up might be Gentiles. Just like stones cannot praise God without supernatural life, neither can any who are dead in sin. It all points to God's power to save.

Do or Done?: If you do these things, does that mean you have repented? Not necessarily. These are the **fruit** not the **root**. **Faith is the root, repentance is the fruit.** Isn't that what John says? ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

- Luther, again, says (basically) that the first commandment (have no other gods before me) is first not just in sequence but in logical priority. Commands two through ten (whether idols, sabbath, murder, covet, etc.) can only be broken once you've broken the first.
 - You have to want, rely on, believe in, trust, depend on God completely. When you love something more than God, you sin, which leads to the fruit of unrighteousness rather than repentance.
 - In order to trust Christ, you must first stop trusting in false gods (including the most often followed god in our society – self).
- Both initial repentance and a life of ongoing repentance are characterized by trusting God more than the sin that lies to us with its false promises. **What do you actually rely on?**

What is repentance (again)? It is a **change of heart** (love, trust, allegiance) that leads to a **change of behavior** (the fruit). The heart is the root, the behavior is the fruit.

- If there is no changed behavior (no fruit) then there is no transformed heart (no root), but you don't fix it by tying some fruit on the tree (e.g., tying apples to a lemon tree).

Does your life bear the fruit of repentance? If not, then your heart might not have been changed by the gospel. Don't confuse the evidence of salvation with earning salvation but also, don't act like you somehow can be saved yet show no evidence of it.

3. Expecting Salvation (vv. 15-18) ¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

Ready: Now they're ready to see the real Messiah Expectation but uncertainty, *something* is going on, is it **the something?** This isn't just **popular curiosity** because it pierces their hearts.

Greater: John makes it clear that his role is preparatory. He is not the one, he just is setting the stage for the one. He isn't salvation, he is just clearing the path for it. Jesus is so much greater than John—John, whom Jesus says there is no one greater born of women (Matt 11:11)—that John isn't worthy to untie his sandals. Culturally, untying someone's sandals was considered a job for slaves or servants, the lowest of menial tasks. John is saying he is even lower than that in relation to Jesus.

- That is how great the person and work of Jesus is!

Different Type of Baptism: He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. John's baptism was important and good, but it was preparatory. It didn't change the heart. Jesus will change us by his Spirit (cf. Acts 2).

- Even our water baptism now, as important as it is as an act of obedience, a public declaration of salvation, and a formal uniting with the local church, is a symbol of the spiritual baptism that happens at salvation (there is no second, later baptism; **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**, Eph 4:5).
- The gospel transforms us (we don't actually transform ourselves). If I can save myself through obeying then I am relying on myself.

Be Ready: ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

- Wheat from the chaff (toss in the air and the wind blows the chaff away and the wheat falls into the pile).
- Be ready. The leveling that comes with the Messiah will destroy everything in its path unless they repent. **There is no refuge from God, only refuge in God.** It is not what you do but what has been done for you by Christ that saves you. What you do is either from faith in Christ or from your own deeds. When you examine your life, are your works of faith?



4. Rejecting Salvation (vv. 19-20)

¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Risky Repentance: People don't like the call to repent. It got John arrested, and ultimately killed.

- It is easy to kill the messenger rather than turn to God (John isn't the problem, he just points it out).
- You might not be executing any prophets, but be careful that you're not rejecting God's salvation simply because you want to stay in your sin.

Conclusion:

You are called to the same response of these people, to repent and believe. We trust in Christ and allow him to transform our lives, uproot our mountains of sin, and fill in our valleys of shame. We need to prepare our hearts for Christ to dwell as king through faith and repentance.

- What sin in your life do you need to uproot, and how does trusting in Christ allow you to do that?

- What does it look like to pave a new path of repentance and righteousness in your life?
- What ground needs to be leveled? What paths need to be cleared? What tunnels need to be dug? What potholes need to be filled?
- **Be prepared; the King is coming!**