

The Gospel According to Luke / “Prepared for Faith by Repentance”

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I am a creature of habit. My day starts by snoozing my alarm. I wake 9 minutes later and quickly get dressed, brush my teeth and run upstairs. If it's cold I start my car to melt the frost. I come back in and grab all of my children's backpacks and shoes and I put them by the door. I fill up their water bottles and make sure their lunches get in their bags. I help my kids with their hair, or with making good decisions regarding what kind of jacket they need. I gently argue with my youngest son about why he has to go to school at all and I convince him that today will be a fun day with all of the friends. Then I grab my coffee. Pour protein powder in a blender bottle and hurry my kids out the door. We have to leave no later than 7:52 or they will be late.

I do that every Monday through Friday. And that's just what things are like before I leave the driveway. Every Monday through Friday. When I get to work and when I get home after, there are more patterns, routines, habits and many times I fall into all of them as if I'm on a predetermined path.

Are you a creature of habit? Do your days and weeks have a predictable flow and shape? From when you wake up, to what you eat and what you wear, to the coffee shop you visit and what you order.

What about the tasks you accomplish each day at work or in the home and what your time winding down at night looks like. Your bedtime is and the routine that gets you there. Do you do it over and over again Probably. We are all creatures of habit. We order our lives around patterns.

Sometimes we do it to bring stability to our lives, or to reduce anxieties. We make plans each day to care for our needs and the needs of others that we're responsible for. For example: It's good to get the right amount of sleep, good to exercise, good pray before meals and bedtimes with your children. These are good patterns. One thing about patterns though, or habits, is that they are not very easy to start or to change. We are resistant to change. If a pattern exists in your life long enough, it will take a great effort or an existential force applied to you to change it.

We collectively just experienced one of these powerful existential forces that disrupted all of our patterns: The beginning of Daylight savings time last Sunday. It's just one hour, right? And yet for many people it takes them days to recover as their whole sleep cycle is shifted and we experience a nationwide jet lag. Children and Adults are irrationally angry. There is a statistical uptick in car accidents, heart attacks and depression following the time change. For all these reasons there's just been a bill passed in the Senate to make Daylight Savings time permanent so we don't have to go through this again. So we can stay in our patterns.

There are many good patterns in our life, but because of the reality of sin in this world our lives are also characterized by sinful patterns. Patterns that are not good for us or others. Our thoughts, behaviors, actions, habits and patterns are all stained by sin. And truly, without intervention, it is impossible to change.

And yet a change is what we need.
So an intervention is what we need.

As Jesus is talking about his sin-defeating salvation to the crowds in Luke 18, he says:
“What is impossible with man is possible with God.” (Luke 18:27, ESV)

This morning we are diving into the message and ministry, not of Jesus, but of John the Baptist as he prepares people for the seemingly impossible change that Jesus Christ will bring.

Our big idea for today is that

God's Salvation is for those who repent of their sin

1. Repentance is a gift given through God's Word and Spirit
2. Repentance is comprehensive, life-changing, and visible
3. Repentance is humbling and prepares us for life in Christ's Kingdom

As we get into these points, I want to read our passage in full one more time today.

God's word from Luke 3:1-14

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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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.
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,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

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? 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. 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."

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." 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." (Luke 3:1-14, ESV)

As we first get into this passage I'm reminded of how Luke begins this Gospel account he's started.

Luke 1:3-4

it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:3-4, ESV)

Luke's passage today reads like a history lesson. And an orderly account is what he's giving. Real names, times and places.

Luke 3:1-2

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 It-ur-aea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke is setting the scene. Locating us in a time and place. Giving us the cast and setting up a very interesting contrast. A contrast between the powerful people and a voice in the wilderness. Between the places of power, places like Rome and the Temple, and a man in the desert. A contrast between those who have it all, and someone who appears to have nothing, and yet John the Baptist possesses a treasure far greater than anything.

John knows

God's Salvation is for those who repent of their sin

1. Repentance is a gift given through God's Word and Spirit

Rome at this time has conquered many lands. It has a vast and sprawling empire. Tiberius Caesar rules over it all, but governors are appointed in different areas to maintain order so that Rome keeps what it has conquered. This is Pontius Pilate's job. Still, more leaders are needed at the local level and this where the Tetrarch's come in. They're like mayors. They are Jewish in their background, but very fond of Roman money, power and prestige. Along with the political system of the day, the Jewish people in these areas are part of a religious tradition where priests and high priests and their disciples occupy a unique spiritual leadership in the lives of the people.

And against the backdrop of this cast of the rich and the famous and powerful, we have John: the man in the desert. But John has something that the powerful people of his day do not. Actually two things. John has the Holy Spirit and John has the Word of God

We first hear about John the Baptist in Luke 1 when an angel comes to John's father Zechariah and tells him:

Luke 1:13-17

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 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."

When we're told about John what we find out is that he has mission and is filled with the Holy Spirit of God. In the Old Testament scriptures we normally see that prophets are temporarily filled with the Holy Spirit at unique times for unique purposes. But John is a different. He is continually filled with the Holy Spirit from before his birth. Why is this important? What does the Holy Spirit do?

The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, brings us comfort, directs us, causes us to desire to obey God, enables us to understand his word and empowers us with spiritual gifts.

At this time and with this spirit of God living in him, John is unique among men. He's unique for all sorts of reasons, but chief among them, is the power of the Holy Spirit working in John. John's actions, and preaching, all that he is - it's all influenced and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

John has the Holy Spirit but he also has the Word of God.

At the end of Luke 3:2 it says

“the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

It didn't come to Caesar, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas or Caiaphas. The word of God came to John. The insignificant character on our list is the one that God used. This should be great encouragement to any of us who feel like we are the insignificant ones. God sees people differently and most significant thing about you is how God sees you. That idea becomes even more powerful when we see how Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. Let God's definition of your significance be the only one that matters.

So against all expectations, the word of God came to John. He's given a message and mission.

Luke 3:3

And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3, ESV)

Now for Christians, or for anyone remotely aware of Christian practices, Baptism is a normal part of what we do. When people make their faith in Jesus public and want to be identified as member of Christ's church they go under the waters in imitation of Christ's death, a picture of them dying to sin, and they are brought out of the water in imitation of Christ's resurrection, brought out into a new life, clothed in Christ's righteousness that has been purchased for them through Jesus' sacrifice at the cross.

Baptism at this point in history has none of these connotations. Jesus hasn't died yet.

In fact, Baptism as a practice is not found in the Old Testament scriptures at all. There are many different kind of washing rituals in the scriptures that are a normal part of Jewish life and their ceremonial temple practices, but they wouldn't have been called a baptism. Baptism as a Jewish practice exists in the time between the Old and New Testaments and primarily exists as a cleansing ritual, following circumcision, for someone who is converting to Judaism from another religion. It's an initiation into a new faith. It's a bath for an unclean gentile before they can become Jewish.

John's baptism is different. It's not the washing of the body but the cleansing of the heart that he has in mind because as John is given God's Spirit and God's word he knows that there is only one response: repentance. A real change in direction and affection.

Some good news for us here today is that God's spirit is still at work and God's word is still speaking to us. John had the Holy Spirit and the word of God and Christians, so do we.

John, filled with the Holy Spirit, was calling the hearts of the people to repent. He was calling them to prepare their hearts for the good news of Jesus. And now we have the Good news of Jesus.

Now that Jesus has accomplished salvation for us through the shedding of his blood in our place, the same Holy Spirit that cried out through John now causes our eyes to be opened and see our need for a savior. That same Holy Spirit causes us to understand the scriptures and see how our sin separated us from God. That same Holy Spirit causes us to rightly see Jesus as our only hope and enables us to turn from sin and turn to Christ both through repentance and daily confession.

The word and spirit that John the Baptist had is ours and through them we rightly see our sin and our need for a savior. Repentance is the first step we take towards God when we come to faith. As it says in Mark 1:15 and as we sang earlier this morning we repent and believe. We have to rightly see the stain on our hearts before we can come to Jesus for cleansing.

Repentance is the first step we take towards God when we come to faith and it is important that we don't misunderstand repentance. Repentance is more than just saying "I'm sorry".

This is our second point for today.

God's Salvation is for those who repent of their sin
2. Repentance is comprehensive, life-changing, and visible

As we pick up in the passage, Luke brings in Isaiah's prophecy regarding John the Baptist.

Luke 3:3-6

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

*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.
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,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (Luke 3:3-6, ESV)*

John went out and proclaimed a message of repentance. He went out "as it was written" in Isaiah. So as John calls people to repent, it's Isaiah that helps us know what it means to repent. Look at the language he uses.

*Every valley shall be filled.
Every mountain and hill shall be made low.
The crooked shall become straight.
The rough places shall become level ways.*

Think about it...

When the valley is filled, it's not a valley anymore. When the mountains are made low, they are not mountains anymore. For the valley to be filled, it is so comprehensively changed, so fully changed that it ceases to be a valley. In Ephesians we're given a powerful example of what repentance looks like in the life of a person.

Ephesians 4:28

28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

For the thief to repent they not only stop stealing, they become generous. That's what it means for the thief. The thief becomes generous. He who was stealing is now giving. What else could this look like?

Well the person who physically abuses people, would not just stop being physically violent. Instead they change so completely that they are characterized and known by their gentleness. It's like liars becoming truth advocates. Those who have used people in the past begin to serve people. Those who have dishonored God, worship him.

When we repent of our sin and turn to Christ, a change has been made and if a change has not been made, we have not repented.

Now there will still be daily sin and daily confession. Biblically, repentance is seen and talked about as more of an over-arching transformation of trajectory than a response to every sin. But for besetting sin, sin that habitually dominates us and has convinced us to hopelessly expect it as inevitable, for these sins, we should seek repentance.

So here is a serious question:

Are there areas of your life where you sin without sorrow? If there's an area in your life where the answer to that question is "yes", then repentance is necessary. For the believer and the non-believer.

If you're here today and not a believer in the gospel, in the salvation that Jesus Christ offers and you look at your life and see valleys of sin and despair that you could fall into and never return from, or mountains of sin that are towering over you and you're just wondering when is it all going to fall?

Romans 5:8 says

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In the middle of the desperation and fear - God shows his love for us. He is faithful and able to forgive. Able to make the crooked straight and able to make the rough path level. No one is too far gone. You don't need to trust in your ability to make this change happen. You already know that you can't. Instead, trust in God and listen to voice crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord in repentance. Are you willing to be converted and for your life to change? If you've never come to Jesus in faith before, the way to come is repentance. Seeing the trajectory of your life and by God's grace turning around and starting over. Becoming what Jesus calls "born again."

If this is you today, myself or any of the other Pastor's here today would love to talk with you. If you came here with a friend today, they would love to talk with you.

At the end of Luke's quotation from Isaiah it says
"and all flesh shall see the salvation of God"

It's Jesus. God's salvation is not hidden from us. It's found in Jesus.

We cannot think of John's baptism of repentance without Jesus. In fact between the end of today's passage and Jesus' baptism by John a little later, there are only 6 verses. John prepares the way for Jesus with his preaching and his baptizing and then Jesus is there. John's goal is to point people to the salvation of God because he knows a life of following the savior, following Jesus, bears the fruit of repentance. He's tilling the soil for Jesus to plant.

This brings us to our last point for today.

God's Salvation is for those who repent of their sin

3. Repentance is humbling and prepares us for life in Christ's Kingdom

Luke 3:7-14

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? 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. 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."

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."

Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”

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.”

3. Repentance is humbling and prepares us for life in Christ’s Kingdom

In the rest of our text for today we see this in the responses of two different kinds of people that engage with John the Baptist and his message.

- People who think they have answers
- People who know they don’t

Have you ever been around someone who confidently pronounces a common word incorrectly and often I’m originally from New York City so I grew with a lot of these. Where people say:

Espresso vs. Espresso

Supposably vs. Supposedly

Irregardless vs. Regardless

These are so funny to me. Sometimes these wrong pronunciations were so entrenched in the culture that you had to say them to be understood. If I went to the deli, I needed to ask for fresh “Mootserelle” instead of Mozzarella Cheese. If I went to a restaurant, I had to order Fried “Galimod” instead of Calamari.

And there was no arguing with people about the right way to say these things It is comical, yet also tragic to be around a person who is consistently wrong about something while they are convinced they are right.

In this last section of our passage John encounters a group of people that he calls a “brood of vipers”. In Matthew’s account of this altercation, he identifies this group as the pharisees and sadducees in Matthew chapter 3.

So what did this group of people get so tragically wrong?

3. Repentance is humbling and prepares us for life in Christ’s Kingdom

• People who think they have answers

These are people who refuse to be humbled. They are so wrong in what they are saying and yet they are too prideful to be corrected. They think because they are children of Abraham that John’s message doesn’t really apply to them. If you know anything about this group of people in the Bible, these are people who wanted everyone else to know how good they were, how holy they were. They always showed up at the right places, sat in the right seats for the sake of being noticed and even now they show up to be baptized by John, but not because they think they need cleansing. They show up to the new spiritual ritual to make everyone else think that they are the cleanest.

When John says “Who warned **you** to flee from the wrath to come?” He is exposing their charade. No one warned them. They don’t think any wrath is coming for them. Their faith is in Abraham’s righteousness back in the day so it doesn’t matter what their hearts are like before God now. These people have put all their faith in Abraham being their father and have not honored God as their father.

The Old Testament does not often use the title Father to refer to God. We take it for granted on this side of Jesus' ministry. However, if we look back at Isaiah we see two important texts

Isaiah 63:16–17

You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from old is your name.

Isaiah 64:8-9

O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever.

When it comes to our sin, our repentance, and God's redemption even the prophet Isaiah, whose texts these very religious people would know well, even Isaiah says that it is more important to relate to God as the Father that we've sinned against than to point to Abraham as the Father of a nation.

The state of our hearts before God is personal, we don't inherit it. This is humbling for the pharisees. It's humbling for us too. It means that we're responsible. On one side it means that it doesn't matter how good your parents were or if they brought you to church every Sunday. You will not be right with God simply because your parents were.

On the other side, it gives great hope. It doesn't matter what kind of brokenness you have come from or experienced. Lots of people have messed up families. Bad stuff, evil stuff in their rear view. It does not define you. It does not define your relationship to God. If your heart is right before God through Jesus, there is no shackle of personal history that can keep you from his grasp. You are his.

As we finish up our passage we see that there's a second group of people that have gathered to see what John the Baptist is up to in the wilderness.

3. Repentance is humbling and prepares us for life in Christ's Kingdom

• People who know they don't have answers

Luke 3:10-14

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." 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."

If you spend any time counseling people or discipling people you will most likely encounter a moment where you are asked "just tell me what to do, and I'll do it." This is what people say when they know that something is really wrong and they think you might have the answers. And in three different instances we see the crowd respond to John's message, and John's encounter with the prideful religious leaders and they are thinking "If the axe is coming for them, I'm a goner."

"John. Just tell me what to do?"

And John, filled with the Holy Spirit, uniquely ministers truth to each group in the crowd who want to change. John, who helps people prepare to meet Jesus through repentance, shows each group what repentance will look like for them.

As we saw before in

Ephesians 4:28

28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

For the thief, repentance looks like becoming generous.
This same idea comes back in three different ways.

A crowd of people with more than enough is told to share with those who don't. Tax collectors, who were hated because they got rich through Rome's power and their own people's misery, they were told to do their job honestly and to not take advantage of people. And lastly, a group Jewish Soldiers, think local police, they are told to be content with what they have so that they might not sin against the people they've been tasked with keeping the peace for, using their authority to take from others.

In all of these cases John's command is very straightforward and simple. And yet he is not simply correcting actions, he is exposing the hearts of the crowd at the point of their specific weakness. He speaks to the ways that each group in the crowd is uniquely positioned to break the second greatest commandment that Jesus will tell us about: Love you neighbor as yourself.

Priests called people to sacrifice something else for the removal of their sins. John calls people to sacrifice themselves. Many in his day looked at John the Baptists like he was a Jester. A joke out in the wilderness wearing camel's hair and eating locusts. But John isn't the Jester of the King. He's the Herald. And as he calls people to repent, he's preparing them to meet the king, to serve the king, and to live in the kingdom.

Our actions need to be changed for sure, but God looks on the heart. We don't just need to do better we need our hearts transformed. John helped the crowds realize this truth and Jesus showed them, and us, the way.

Jesus says in

Luke 9:23-25

23 And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. 25 For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?"

Are you preparing to live in God's kingdom?

Do you see your need for repentance or do you sin without sorrow?

If you've been saved by Jesus Christ, ask yourself honestly, is your life changing in response to the gospel or have you become a creature of habit when it comes to ignoring sin. Every time we sin it's because we believe that our plan is better than God's. That our sin will satisfy us, or make things right, or provide security, or bring us comfort.

It won't. Only a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus will do that. But to have a good relationship with someone requires honesty about where things are. So how are things between you and God? If things aren't where you want them to be, think today about what might need to change. We have the Holy Spirit and the word of God. Yes, real change is too difficult to make happen on our own, but we are not on our own.

John the Baptist called people to repent before the good news of Jesus was truly seen and understood. People responded because of a promise that was made. That a Savior would come. How much more should we respond in light of the promise that was kept?