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The Words, Works, and Person of Christ

The Gospel of Luke

The Fruits of Repentance

April 23rd, 2023

Sermon Text: Luke 3:1-18

Scripture Reading: Luke 3:1-18

We know that the church today is so often plagued with what we call *easy believism*. This thinking maintains that all a person need do to be saved is to exercise mental acknowledgment to the gospel – to “simply” believe in Christ. This is an eternally fatal error and a false gospel.

We see easy believism exposed in our text this morning as John the

Baptist preaches a call to *repentance*, and then we are told that:

Luk 3:18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

Good news. The gospel. But what had John just been preaching – what was this “good news” he proclaimed? –

Luk 3:8-9 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.”

This past week in the Revelation Bible study, we saw that the “eternal gospel” preached by the first of the 3 angels in chapter 14, was an announcement of impending divine wrath and judgment upon the wicked. And we said that (with G.K. Beale’s help) *the gospel is not only John 3:16, but it is John 3:17-18 as well.* That is to say, *the gospel not only announces God’s saving grace in Christ to all who believe, but it includes a declaration of wrath and condemnation and judgment upon all who refuse to believe in Christ.*

And that is the very thing we have here in the gospel as John preached it. Let’s move in for a closer look:

Luk 3:3-6 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.”

A “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” That was the message he preached.

Now, repentance is a kind of forerunner to faith – the two are never present apart from one another. A genuine Christian has repented and believed. This was the nature of John’s ministry and message – *preparatory*. His baptism was apparently different from Christian baptism which would come in Christ, but it was not totally divorced from it either. It was, as we say, *preparatory*. You see this in these words from Isaiah which John quoted (or which perhaps Luke added) – “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*”

The Lord Jesus, the Christ, was about to appear publicly and begin His ministry. John is calling upon the people to, we might say, *roll*

out the red carpet for the King, make preparation for His arrival, accept Him and bow to Him so that you might receive the salvation He brings. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. How? By repenting. For those who do, the King brings a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

But woe to His enemies. The baptism He brings for them is fire.

Luk 3:16 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.

Repentance and its fruits. That is the subject we are considering this morning. The gospel is not a message of easy believism devoid of any repentance. The good news includes this:

(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.”

Repentance is Preparation

We *prepare* for many things. Being prepared is a wise thing – it is a fool who makes no preparations. Preparing is taking action so as to be ready for some future event – even some future *possible* event. We try to save money, to be prepared. We carry life jackets, flares, and other devices so that we are prepared if the boat sinks. So we say once more, it is only a fool who does not prepare.

However, the fool’s foolishness increases exponentially when it comes to preparing the way for Christ. Why? Because many of the things we prepare for are only “if’s.” *If* the boat sinks. *If* I lose my job. But there is no IF when it comes to Christ.

Luk 3:7 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?”

See it? *These things are certain. The wrath of God is coming.*

How then do we prepare? John tells us – *repent*. There IS something we can do to invite the Lord to come to us. There IS something we can do to make His way level to come to us with salvation. There is no merit in this – even this repentance is a gift from God – but repentance is a way in which we can remove the hills and obstacles which we have set up against the knowledge of the Lord. Repentance, you might say, is a first step. And like all first steps, *it must be first. You cannot skip over it.* That is what easy believism does. It skips over the first step – it skips over repentance.

So then, just what is this thing called repentance? What does this preparation look like? John tells us – and so does Isaiah:

Isa 1:12-20 “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? (13) **Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me.** New moon

and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

(14) Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. (15) When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

(16) **Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,** (17) **learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.** (18) “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (19) If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; (20) but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Let's ask ourselves this – *is there anything that the sinner can do?* We know that salvation is entirely of the Lord. We know that salvation is entirely of His grace and that there is nothing we can do to obligate God to save us – nothing that we can contribute to cause us to be saved.

Nevertheless, this question still stands in light of what John is preaching – *is there anything that the sinner can do (ie, is responsible for doing) to prepare himself for the Lord to come to him?* Well, apparently there is. Because:

Luk 3:8 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.

First of all, *stop claiming to have merit with God because of who you are or what you have done.* The Jews, as you know, were given to boasting that they had special favor with God because they were descendants of Abraham. This was

their confidence. They saw no need to change at all. They presumed that they were prepared for the Messiah because, after all, they were His chosen.

Joh 8:33 They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

This of course is the fatal error so many people make today – not just the Jews. On one basis or another, they think that God is going to accept them because of who they are or what they have or have not done.

Luk 18:10-12 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

For us, it can be supposed merit such as this:

- I go to church every Sunday
- I give my tithes
- I'm not as bad as that other guy
- I have been baptized
- I know Bible verses

But if I have not *repented*, then all of these things are nothing – in fact, they are a stench in the Lord's nostrils as Isaiah told us.

Repentance, therefore, necessarily begins with the acknowledgment that we are nothing before God. That all of our so-called righteousnesses are filthy rags in His sight. That our "good deeds" are of no more worth to God than a greasy rag on the floor of the shop. That who we are is limited to this alone – *we are sinners under the Lord's condemnation*. This is where repentance begins.

Luk 18:13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to

me, a sinner!'

Now, listen to John describe what else repentance is:

Luk 3:10-14 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."

Is John, in his preaching of the gospel here, commanding these people to do the impossible? Well, look at what he is telling them:

- Share from your excess so that your neighbor who has none will have food and clothing. Stop hoarding it all to yourself

and ignoring the needs of the poor.

- Stop ripping people off financially. Take only what is due to you and no more.
- Stop using your position and authority to extort from people – stop peddling influence we might properly say today.

Now, let's ask again – *was John commanding these people to do the impossible?* The answer is obvious – no! Even today unsaved people can and do obey the law. If for no other reason than the fear of punishment, they cease to do evil. At least the kind that could send them to prison.

Therefore, when we present the gospel to people, we must tell them of their need to repent. To stop doing the evil they are doing and start doing good instead – *if for no other reason than Christ is coming to judge them.*

Why, then, do we say that repentance is a gift from God, just as faith is? Isn't repentance then

something that the sinner can do himself? For example:

2Ti 2:24-26 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, (25) correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, (26) and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

2Co 7:10 For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

God grants the sinner repentance. God produces repentance that leads to salvation. So then, we ask once more – isn't repentance an impossibility for the sinner?

Consider this:

Luk 3:9-10 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?”

There was, at least in part of this crowd, some awakening, some fear of judgment – else they would not have asked this question. Certainly some could have asked it out of mockery, trying to trip John up, but John seems to deal with their question as if it were honestly asked. *What then shall we do?* And he tells them.

- Stop stealing and be content
- Stop ignoring the needs of your neighbor
- Stop abusing your power and instead use it as God intended

Isaiah tells the sinning Jews the same kind of thing. Listen again:

(16) Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, (17) learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause

There is only one reason that a person would refuse to obey the command to repent, and that is simply this – he doesn't want to. And there is the issue. His desire. His heart. His affections (what he loves). He could repent, but he doesn't want to repent. And this is why repentance is a gift from God – because it requires a change of heart. It requires a sinner to begin to fear God – and that change is only something God can do.

If you are listening this morning, and you are still persisting in your sins – loving this present world, walking in pride, turning a blind eye to people who are truly in need when you have the means to help, having no real interest in the things of the Lord – then you have not prepared the way of the Lord to come to you and save you. You have not repented.

The person who will not repent is just like these guys:

And as he was troubled thereabout, he espied two men come tumbling over the wall on the left hand of the

narrow way; and they made up apace to him. The name of the one was Formalist, and the name of the other Hypocrisy. So, as I said, they drew up unto him, who thus entered with them into discourse.

CHR. Gentlemen, whence came you, and whither go you?

FORM. and HYP. We were born in the land of Vain-glory, and are going for praise to Mount Zion.

CHR. Why came you not in at the gate which standeth at the beginning of the way? Know you not that it is written, that he that cometh not in by the door, "but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber?" [John 10:1]

FORM. and HYP. They said, That to go to the gate for entrance was, by all their countrymen, counted too far about; and that, therefore, their usual way was to make a short cut of it, and to climb over the wall, as they had done.

CHR. But will it not be counted a trespass against the Lord of the city

whither we are bound, thus to violate his revealed will?

FORM. and HYP. They told him, that, as for that, he needed not to trouble his head thereabout; for what they did they had custom for; and could produce, if need were, testimony that would witness it for more than a thousand years.

CHR. But, said Christian, will your practice stand a trial at law?

FORM. and HYP. They told him, That custom, it being of so long a standing as above a thousand years, would, doubtless, now be admitted as a thing legal by any impartial judge; and besides, said they, if we get into the way, what's matter which way we get in? if we are in, we are in; thou art but in the way, who, as we perceive, came in at the gate; and we are also in the way, that came tumbling over the wall; wherein, now, is thy condition better than ours?

Bunyan, John. The Pilgrim's Progress - Unabridged With Original Illustrations .

And so it is. Formalist and Hypocrisy met their end – which end was hell. Why? Because they chose to refuse to repent, trusted in an external religion with no new birth, and played the hypocrite.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good.

(Isaiah 1:18) “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (19) If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; (20) but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”