

PRODUCE FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE

Luke 3:1-14

Key Verse: 3:8

“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.”

These days we hear terrible news about the war in Ukraine. Last week a missionary shared images of the utter destruction the war is causing. Ukrainians are enduring awful suffering and death. An Ukrainian sister in Podil UBF, Darina, experienced bombs exploding outside her residence. She was traumatized. After that, any loud noise—such as a slamming car door, sounded like a bomb exploding. So many Ukrainians are hungry, anxious, fearful and sleepless. Nevertheless, they pray earnestly to God. They fight with great courage and a “never give up” spirit. In fact, Darina overcame her fear by faith and preached the gospel boldly. She even went on Ukrainian TV and testified about Jesus, and many responded. Surely God is answering our prayers for Ukrainian people. We should continue to pray for peace in Ukraine and for the spread of the gospel even in the midst of war.

From today we begin to study Luke’s Gospel, which reveals Jesus’ humanity and his deity. Through this study we want to learn more about Jesus, not just theoretically but experientially. We want to meet Jesus, the Savior of all mankind, who came to seek and save lost people. We can also learn how Jesus prayed and raised his disciples, which is our spiritual direction for 2022 based on Luke 6:12-13.

Chapter 3 starts with John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. How did he prepare the way for Jesus? He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3). He exhorted the crowds, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (8a). John boldly preached repentance. When we hear the word “repentance” we may feel burdened or threatened. Yet it is the way to prepare for the Lord. For anything significant, preparation is important. We prepare to begin a new semester, pass a job interview, or get married. But

have we prepared our hearts to meet the Lord? How can we? John teaches that we can prepare for the Lord through repentance. This repentance is not general or theoretical, but personal and practical. Today, let's learn to repent, keep with repentance, and bear good fruit.

First, the word of God came to John (1-2). Luke begins with the historical background of the times. It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, about A.D. 29. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Three tetrarchs ruled as well: Herod Antipas in Galilee, Philip in Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias in Abilene. These political leaders had significant power. Yet they used it for their own benefit. They perverted justice and oppressed people. High priests were appointed by political leaders in order to maintain power. Annas was high priest from A.D. 6-15. Then he was deposed by the Roman governor Gratus, who appointed Caiaphas in his place. Under these leaders many people were suffering terribly. Luke records that there was serious poverty, various diseases, evil spirits, and oppression. People cried out for help, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

Why did Luke mention these leaders before introducing John the Baptist? This reflects Luke's view of history. From the world's perspective, these leaders were main figures of the times. But from God's perspective, they were just the background of God's redemptive history. The power and influence of worldly rulers lasts a short time and vanishes. But the work of God's word through his servants endures forever. At present, some political leaders seem to shake the world. But they will soon be gone and their power will be no more. On the other hand, God's history continues eternally through his word, and his servants are the main figures. When we see the world, there is no hope. But in God we can have real hope. Through Luke's Gospel study let's learn to see history from God's point of view.

What was God doing in those dark times? Verse 2b says, "...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." The phrase, "the word of God came," tells us that God spoke first; God initiates his salvation work. Though the world looks dark, God is not discouraged. God never gives up. God works faithfully through his words, given to his servants. God's word is not like man's words. God's word has power and authority to do what God desires;

God's word gives eternal life and it never fails. Apostle Peter referred to it as "the living and enduring word of God." And he added, "For, 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever'" (1Pe 1:23-25). God begins life-giving, mighty work by speaking his word in the darkest of times. God still speaks, even now, to those with ears to hear.

Look at verse 2b again. "...the word of God came to John..." Who was John? He was the son of Zechariah the priest (2). He grew up in a godly home. His life purpose was foretold by God's angel: he would go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn people's hearts back to God (1:17). John prepared himself to serve God by living a simple life in the wilderness. Then God spoke to John, his chosen servant.

When the word of God came, John was in the wilderness. The wilderness is not just a location; it is a quiet place where there are no distractions. To us, it can be a room in our church or home, our backyard, or a forest preserve. It is where we can listen to the word of God, meditate on it, and pray. However, many people hesitate to be alone in such a wilderness. They cannot bear to put aside their smartphone—which seems to have become one of our body parts. Some people fear being alone in the wilderness. Yet as we step into that wilderness, we find God there. We can listen to God's words rather than the noise of the world. Historically, many of God's servants went into a wilderness to listen to the word of God. Then, when God spoke to them, great revival movements began. Let's go into the wilderness to hear the words of God. God will surely bless us by granting the forgiveness of sins, strength, wisdom, joy, peace, and more.

Second, John preached a baptism of repentance (3-6). When the word of God came to John, what did he do? Did he stay in the wilderness enjoying heavenly rapture? No. Look at verse 3. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Through God's word, John came to know God's heart, which was broken over the sin of his people. God longed to speak to them through John so they may turn back to him and receive his Messiah. God wanted to restore a love relationship with his people. With God's heart burning, John went wherever people were, and

preached a baptism of repentance. The Jews had thought that baptism was only for Gentile proselytes. But John preached a baptism of repentance to everyone, including them.

What does “repentance” mean? It is translated from the Greek word “metanoia,” which means “to change one’s way.” It is to change focus from self to God. It begins with admitting we are wrong in light of God’s word. It is to renounce our self-rule and accept God’s reign. It is a radical change of purpose, life direction, values and desires. Repentance is motivated by the fear of God. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” Many people take God’s judgment lightly, like a haircut appointment they can break without consequence. This is not the case. At God’s appointed time, whether we want to or not, we will face the consequences of our actions. A time of judgment comes to each person to decide our destiny. This happens when we die, or when Jesus comes again. Now is the time to repent and ask God’s mercy. We should be ready to meet God. This is why repentance is vital.

In order to repent we should know what sin is. Sin comes from the Greek word “hamartia.” One translation of this word is “failure.” It is a failure to live up to God’s standard. God’s standard is set forth in the Ten Commandments. In simple form they read: *1) I am the Lord your God, have no other gods before me; 2) Do not worship false gods; 3) Do not take my name in vain; 4) Keep the Sabbath day holy; 5) Honor your father and mother; 6) Do not murder; 7) Do not commit adultery; 8) Do not steal; 9) Do not lie; 10) Do not covet.* Failing to uphold any of these commandments is sin, even though the social consensus approves or the legal system allows it.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus elevated the standard even higher to include the attitudes of the heart. For example, being angry toward another is sin, even if it remains in the heart and no action is taken. Having lustful thoughts toward someone is sin, even if it remains in the heart without being acted upon. The Bible also mentions sins of favoritism, hypocrisy, slander, gossip, cowardice, rebellion, and unbelief (Ro 1:29-31; Ja 2:9; Rev 21:8). Sin is failure, not only in doing what is wrong, but also in not doing what we should

do. Romans 1:21a says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him....” Failing to glorify God is sin. Failing to thank God is sin. Then there is indifference, ignorance, negligence, and there are more. Anyone who stands honestly before God and his truth will be convicted of sin. The Bible says, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro 3:23). As I went through this study, I was convicted of the sin of anger, though it remained in my heart, and negligence toward my family members, not to mention the failure to love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. God wants us to repent of our sins so that he can forgive us. His forgiveness brings reconciliation—with him and with others. He gives us real peace and eternal life. It is really refreshing to repent.

In verses 4-6 Luke quotes Isaiah to show that the ministry of John the Baptist fulfilled prophecy. When the word of God came to him, John became a voice calling in the wilderness. Like a king’s herald, he shouted, “Prepare the way for the Lord,” by making a highway for the King. This requires filling in valleys, making the mountains and hills low, the crooked roads straight and the rough ways smooth. It means proud people should humble themselves, those of low self-esteem should accept God’s love, complicated people should simply acknowledge God’s reign, the undisciplined should learn to live by God’s word. With such figurative language, John urged people to prepare the way for the Lord. Then what would happen? They would see God’s salvation. They would see the Messiah Jesus, who died for our sins and rose again from the dead (6). Let’s see how John carried out his ministry.

Third, John’s challenging message and people’s response (7-14). Many people came to John. They longed for God’s truth, like thirsty deer pants for streams of water. John did not praise them and thank them for coming. Rather, he rebuked them: “You brood of vipers!” It meant they were poisonous—bad influences—because of their pride and unbelief. And they were destined to die because of their sins.

John helped them to avoid God’s judgment: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (8a). Repentance is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process with a purpose of bearing good fruit. Repentance is a lifelong struggle to grow in the image of Jesus. This is the “fruit of repentance.” Fruit ripens

over time. A good seed will produce good fruit; a bad seed will produce bad fruit. Words alone can be deceptive, but one's fruit of life reveals who they really are (Mt 7:18-19). In order to bear good life fruit, we need to keep with repentance. As I review my life, times of repentance wrought by God's grace stand out: turning away from the American Dream to marry a godly woman and live as a humble shepherd; turning away from inbred pride and rebellion to practice humility and obedience; turning away from selfishness to practice God's love, turning away from pride in human ability to trust the word of God; and so on. By God's grace and faith in Jesus Christ I could change, grow, and be a blessing in some ways. However, now, as I prepare to take up the mission of serving as General Director, I need to grow more in keeping with repentance. As my key verse, Galatians 2:20, says, I pray to stay united to Christ crucified, and for Christ to live in me so I may truly reflect his humility, obedience and love. May God help me to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

What hinders us from growing? Look at verse 8b, John said: "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" The Jews were proud of their pedigree as descendants of Abraham. Based on this pedigree, they assumed they were God's people without needing to repent. They were greatly mistaken. John said, "For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." God did not need their pedigree at all; he wanted their repentance. Their pride of pedigree was nothing but a hindrance. The same is true for us. Pride hinders repentance. There are many kinds of pride: national, educational, social, economic, religious, and even spiritual. For example, someone may think that they have superior Bible knowledge. So they do not listen to what a Bible student says. This pride chokes us and keeps us from growing spiritually. We should examine ourselves to see what pride may be in our hearts. As we repent of our pride, our spiritual eyes open; we see that we are indeed sinners, destined to perish. Then we can repent, receive God's grace and bear good fruit.

It was not easy to repent of their pride. To help them, in verse 9, John warned of God's impending judgment: "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." God judges people based on the fruit of their lives. God

does not show favoritism. Those who bear good fruit are blessed; those who do not are condemned. In brief, God's judgment is imminent; bearing good fruit is essential; there is no excuse. This is why we must repent of our pride.

When John preached repentance, did the people run away, bring a lawsuit, or try to stone John? No. They were moved by his message—cut to the heart. They asked sincerely what they should do. In verses 10-14, John held a Q&A session to guide practical repentance. The first question came from the crowd: “What should we do, then?” John answered specifically: “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same” (11). Repentance is being mindful of needy people. We should share clothes and food with them. At present Ukrainian brothers and sisters are in need of food, shelter, transportation, clothing, and safety. Our missionaries to Ukraine, John and Maria Peace, managed to flee to Budapest, Hungary, where M. Andrew Kim is hosting them. But they have lost their car, their home, and all their savings. In that situation, they are caring for over a hundred Ukrainians who are in dire need. This is the time to help them and many others who are in need. We should share generously with those fleeing Ukraine. This is practical repentance. We should also care for people's spiritual needs by sharing the words of God.

The second question was brought by tax collectors. They too asked what they should do. John did not tell them to change their careers. He did not even tell them to share with others, but only to stop cheating. He helped them to overcome greed. In our modern society, people respect those who make a profit by any means. Such people become CEOs. Yet, their motivation is often greed. The Bible says, “greed...is idolatry” (Col 3:5). We should repent of greed and learn to trust God each day to supply our needs.

The third question came from the soldiers, who also asked what they should do. John replied, “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (14b). He wanted them to do what is right as soldiers instead of coercing people for their benefit.

When we think about the Q&A session, John's answers can be summarized with three words: “Share with those in need! Be honest! Be

content!” Repentance is more than an internal struggle; it should bear good fruit, which is seen through a change of lifestyle.

Today we have learned how to prepare the way for the Lord. It is by repenting of our sins so that we may receive forgiveness. It is by keeping with repentance until we produce good fruit of growing in Christ’s character. Let’s begin Luke’s gospel study with repentance and bear good fruit.