

Preparing the Way

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[0 : 00] If you could please keep your Bible open in Luke chapter 3. This year in St. Columbus we're preaching through Luke's Gospel over the whole of the year. So we're doing a 50 sermon mega series on it which we're just at the beginning of. So far we've covered Jesus' childhood, we've looked at the buildup to his birth, his miraculous conception and birth. Last week we were looking at his circumcision and presentation at the temple and in passing we've read at the end of Luke chapter 2 of one incident when he was 12 years old again at the temple. But now as we go into Luke 3 Luke has hit the fast forward button and he zoomed along to where we find Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist as grown men of about 30 years of age. We don't know many of the specifics of Jesus adolescence, his teenage years or his 20s. We know that his job was a carpenter, a profession that he picked up from his father Joseph. Also it looks like Jesus' father died at some point when Jesus was a teenager or in his 20s. We know for certain that everything Jesus did between the ages of 12 and 30 where we meet him again here, everything was done as a fully human person and as a sinless person. So that's the fast forward effect, zooming through the teens and the 20s of Jesus to find Jesus at roughly the age of 30 beginning his ministry.

We find in verse 1 Luke writing to set the scene historically so that you know that what you're reading about is history, actual fact, not myth or anything like that. So you know the kind of era that Jesus was working in. It's in verses 1 and 2. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod the tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip and so on. This is roughly 18 years on from the last thing that Luke has written about Jesus when Jesus was 12 and it's all very specific.

Jesus was the Caesar the head of the Roman Empire. The Romans have conquered Israel and they've appointed Pontius Pilate as their governor in Judea and under Pontius Pilate you've got these provincial rulers mentioned like Herod and Philip and the whole picture of history that Luke is presenting here is bleak. Things are at a low ebb in Israel. The national leadership is abysmal. It's depressing. You've got Pontius Pilate who is every man every inch the kind of sleazy, lazy, money grabbing political leader. Think of John Prescott.

That's the kind of guy that he is. Living in this big mansion, grace and favor on a huge wage to get a huge pension, contributing very little to the national life, sleeping with his secretaries. That's the kind of leader he is, one who passes the buck on all the time when responsibility comes his way, uninspiring for the people. That's the kind of effect that Pontius Pilate had. He did such a poor job, was so inept as being the governor of Judea and we've got historical records of this. He lost his job in Judea because he was recalled by the Caesar to face a disciplined trial for having done such a woeful job.

[3 : 41] That's the kind of guy you have that the Romans have appointed. Underneath him you've got guys like Herod and Philip who have a leadership role called Tetra. They were brothers. Their father was Herod the Great, the one we know of from the birth of Jesus who ordered all the babies to be killed. Not a nice man. He wasn't royalty, Herod the Great. He wasn't an Israelite. He was an opportunist pagan who kind of climbed the greasy pole and somehow got this job appointed by the Romans to be a kind of puppet king over the Israelites.

He totally disrespected the Israelites and their religion and the people hated him. Their father Herod the Great. He was a nutcase. He had his wife, Herodias and Philip's mother executed because he was paranoid and thought that she was trying to overthrow him. He had most of his children killed. His last two sons strangled to death. He had another one of his sons drowned in a swimming pool. He was this kind of idiamine, Robert Mugabe figure who executed so many people, ruined the nation. He was universally hated in Israel, even by his own family. He knew that when he died nobody would mourn him. He couldn't handle the thought of people celebrating after his death. I'm not making this up. This is all history. He had a list drawn up of the most celebrated, loved people in Israel. He set orders in place that when he died they would all be executed because he couldn't handle the thought of there being no mourning after his death. That's the kind of guy Herod and

Philip's father was. These guys were damaged. They were messed up because they came from this kind of a family. It's depressing when you look at the historical scene because Pontius Pilate is just a leech at the top of the tree. The guys under him are messed up. Herod, the Herod that we're reading of here, Herod Antipas, he was bloodthirsty. He was out of control, sexual lust. He was the guy that took his sister-in-law and shacked up with her. Then John the Baptist criticized this. He had John beheaded. It was a bleak time in terms of the national leadership. It's also bleak in terms of the religious leadership. Caiaphas and Annas were the high priests. Even though there was only supposed to be one, so everything is one high priest. Everything is a skew. It's a bleak time in national life. It's in this context that John the Baptist comes to the fore. At this point, John the Baptist is living in the desert and the man is hardcore. He lives off wild honey, which he takes from beehives. For his clothing, he wears camel hair tied around his waist with a leather belt. He can survive alone in the mountains and in the desert like this. He's this hardcore, really classically Old Testament prophetic figure that the Word of God is coming to.

He has this message. It's in verse 3. He went into all the country around the Jordan, reaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Some of you might be thinking, well, okay, that seems like quite a normal religious message. Repent and get baptized. There's nothing all that controversial here about this guy or his message, but that's where you're wrong. In the Jewish world at that time, 2,000 years ago, baptism was an accepted part of the Israelite religion, but the people who were baptized were almost always Gentiles.

They were not Jews. If you wanted to go and tell people you're unrighteous, you're a sinner, you don't know God, you have to repent and be baptized, you think, okay, well, that happens, but it's the Gentiles that we do that to you. Then we receive them by baptism, water baptism by sprinkling, and that's how they become followers of the Israelite religion.

[7 : 44] John the Baptist isn't preaching this message to Gentiles. He's preaching it to Jews. He's preaching it to Israelites, the people who thought that they knew God. If anyone in the world who would think, I know God, I'm okay with him, it would be these Israelites. Yet he's telling them, you need to repent so that your sins will be forgiven. That's the center of this chapter, this controversy, the center of the whole of Jesus' life and ministry.

It's because of the central place of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' message that we find John preaching here. I want us to look at repentance, to look at it in four ways from this chapter. You have the points there if you want to follow them on the sheet that comes in the handout. First, why is repentance necessary? We're in verses 3 to 7.

Section number one, repentance is necessary because Jesus is coming. Now John is preaching his sermon here in direct fulfillment of a prophecy made by a man called Isaiah back in the Old Testament. And Isaiah's prophecy was that the Lord, that Yahweh, God, was coming and that he was on his way to redeem and to save his people. It's a picture in Isaiah of this great king who's returning from a far off land to come and take the people that he loves and make them safe and save them. And as he comes on his way, if there's anything in his way that will slow him down, it needs to be obliterated because nothing will hold him back. If there's a mountain that's in his way, he'll blast through it. If there's a big valley that he can't cross, he'll fill it in. He is coming. So everything needs to get ready for that. And that's the message that Isaiah was preaching and that was his prophecy, was that the Lord would come back to return his people. Nothing should stand in his way. Everything needs to get ready for him to come. And that's what's fulfilled in Jesus. That's what's about to be fulfilled because John the Baptist here is preparing the way for Jesus to come and he's using this prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus is about to come and that's the reason that people need to repent because the king is on his way back as we speak. As John was speaking here and he was telling people to repent, to be baptized,

Jesus was approaching to be baptized himself to stand in line with this repentance movement to redeem his people, to save them. So in anticipation of that, he's telling them you need to repent. So that's reason number one. Reason number two is what he says next, which is that we all belong to either Jesus or Satan and there's no in between. There are only two kinds of people in the world. People who belong to Jesus or to Satan. John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers. Now there are many people who are responding to his message of repentance and they're coming in droves to be baptized and John tells them exactly why they need to repent and he calls them a brood of vipers and we think, well that's a odd thing to say. Someone who is complying with your preaching. But if you want to get the full impact of this, you have to step back a couple of thousand years and put yourself into the shoes of a Palestinian Jew, someone raised on the Old Testament, someone steeped in it. If your whole worldview was learned in a religious school where you learn to memorize the Old Testament in Hebrew, to rattle it off and everything in your worldview goes back to the Garden of Eden and all goes back to God creating the world perfect and a fall into sin coming through what? Through the devil being in which animal? A snake, a viper, a serpent. And if the whole of your worldview grows out of that and grows out of God's promise in Genesis 3.15 that from then on there would be a constant struggle between those who belong to the serpent, to the viper and those who belong to Eve. If you thought like that, that the whole world is divided up into people who belong to the snake, to the devil or to God and to Eve and then this religious preacher comes and calls you a brood of vipers. He's saying that you belong to the devil and that is why you need to repent. That's why repentance is necessary. Maybe you can then see that. You can say okay, well repentance is necessary but you're thinking okay, but what is it? What does it look like? What's repentance? And that's what John goes on to next in our second point. There's a lot in here in verses 8 to 20 and we're going to pick it up into four parts here, A, B, C and D. What repentance looks like? He answers that for us by relating repentance to different areas of your life to show you what repentance looks like. Because repentance doesn't exist in a vacuum, it exists in life and in reality.

The first thing we see here is repentance and lifestyle verses 3 to 8. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father. Our repentant person's lifestyle overall is fundamentally different in basic ways to that of a non-repentant person, someone who rejects the Gospel. Look at what John says at the beginning here of verse 8. Produce fruits in keeping with repentance. A repentant outlook is consistently outworked in lifestyle in the same way that a seed will grow. It will consistently outwork itself in its essence to grow into a plant which will then produce fruit. It's being consistent with what it is, a seed in doing that and developing into a plant bearing fruit. And what he's saying to them here is that someone who is truly repentant about his or her sin at the core of it will then be consistent with that eventually.

[14 : 08] Will produce fruit that is in keeping, that is in line with that repentance. The problem that the people John was speaking to had was that they relied on their official status as Abraham's ethnic descendants. And that was what made them okay with God. And that status of official external religiosity went hand in hand with their unrepentant lifestyles.

And because their lifestyles were unrepentant, because they weren't repentant, there was no fruit in their lives to show that they had repentance. Now this theme of bearing fruit as a Christian is really big in the New Testament. It's worked out all the way through Jesus, through Paul. You know, Jesus spoke about it in John 15. Think of Paul in Galatians on the fruit of the Spirit. It's even back in the Old Testament. Sam 1. You know, the godly person is like a tree planted by a stream whose leaves are always green.

It's the same picture all the way through the Bible of repentance and the way it works itself out in your life. So John has this message. It's really stark that there is an axe at the fruit of every tree. And the ones that aren't bearing fruit, the trees that are not repentant trees will be cut down and burned. So John starts to expand on this and he gives three other specific applications of repentance to lifestyle. The next one is repentance and possessions versus 10 and 11. What should we do then? The crowd asked. And John answers, the man with two tunics should share with him who has none and the one who has food should do the same. How do you live in a repentant way? If you're repentant about your sin, it will have a knock on effect in your attitude to possessions. Your own rule over your things suddenly becomes a lot less important. You love God more than anyone else because God forgave you when you belong to the devil. He took you and forgave you so that you could belong to him. And because he forgave you, you love him more than anyone else and you love your neighbor more than yourself because God served you and therefore you want to serve others instinctively. And when you see the opportunity to help someone in material need, you don't grumble about giving from your own abundance. The person who's asking here is a person in abundance who's got two coats and he's giving one to someone who has none. So the person who's repentant sees giving from their possessions as a way to love people who are in need. Then we see repentance related to money. In verses 12 to 14, tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked them what should we do. And soldiers came as well. Now I want you to notice as we're going through this that the people who are coming and repenting and being baptized, look at who they are. They're ordinary people, the crowd, they're tax collectors, they're our soldiers. The tax collectors were the lowest of the low in this world because they were the sellouts who worked for the Romans.

I've heard in sermons people trying to illustrate what kind of people tax collectors were and it's really unfair on our traffic wardens but I've heard it said they're like them but they're not at all. Because traffic wardens are, whether you appreciate when they give you a ticket or not, they're doing a job that is necessary in some senses socially and civic life. But imagine, okay, to get a full impact of what the tax collectors were like, imagine we had lost World War II and our country was ruled by the Nazis. And then you had people who were from Scotland who worked for them, who sold out on you and who did it out of greed because they wanted money more than they wanted to work among their fellow countrymen.

So imagine that, people that had sold out, how much you would resent them. People hated the tax collectors that other Jews did. That's the kind of people they were. And the only reason that they would become tax collectors was greed. It wasn't out of, oh, the Romans are so wonderful, they're doing great things in our country and they're really letting us celebrate our culture so I want to work for them. It was greed. It was because if you worked for them, you would get paid a high wage and they would turn a blind eye when you extorted other people and bumped up their taxes and took more than the Romans asked you to. So you had them, tax collectors coming and repenting and you have soldiers who were Gentiles and they were coming as well. And these were tough men. These were trained warriors who grew up in a literally kill or be killed environment. These were men who regularly killed other people who lived in a culture where raping the local women was the norm.

[19:07] And they are coming and they're repenting of their sin. And what you don't find in the mix here are the religious leaders of Jesus day. What you don't find are the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We know that they were present here because it tells you in the other gospels, but none of them show any interest in repentance or a repentant lifestyle because they rejected the gospel and they rejected Jesus. So you've got tax collectors and soldiers repenting and wanting to know what it looks like in their lives. And John focuses on money with them because tax collectors were greedy and he's telling them, okay, well, if you want to repent and show that in your life, don't collect more money than you're required to. Don't be driven by the love of money because that's the root of all kinds of evil.

And the soldiers, he says, don't practice extortion. You know, don't falsely accuse people. He says of things they haven't done so that they then have to bribe you to not put forward their accusation, to have them locked up. And he's telling them, be content with your pay. Repentant people have been forgiven and accepted by God. They know they're loved by him unconditionally. So the desire to be justified by your bank balance alone disappears because you're justified by faith alone. And the fourth area of repentance in lifestyle that John focuses on, this chapter focuses on his repentance and sex in verses 19 and 20. But when Herod rebuked John the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he'd done, Herod added this to them all, he locked John up in prison. Herod hears John's message about repentance for the forgiveness of sins and he rejects it. Herod heard John speak a lot and always rejected his message. And you can see in his life what his being unrepentant looked like in his sexuality. He had rejected the gospel and in his life you can see that he's full of lust for his sister-in-law. He takes Herodias, who was married to his brother Philip, and he takes her away from Philip and makes her his sexual partner. And when you look at Herodias and his approach to sex as an unrepentant person, you can see so much there about what it means to be repentant and to be unrepentant. Herod uses it for self gratification at the expense of others. He doesn't care about his brother, about ripping up his brother's marriage because he wants the woman for himself. He doesn't care about Herodias ultimately. She's just a piece of meat that he wants to gratify himself. He doesn't esteem her or respect her. She's just an object that he wants in order to fulfill his fantasies. But a repentant person's attitude to sex should be very, very different from this. I've got this point here, the main application of Rolophus comes together in the notes that our society is sexually but not materially promiscuous. But the Gospel turns this on its head by making us materially but not sexually promiscuous. Let me explain that. Okay? And our society, which is post-Christian, which is unrepentant over its sin, people are sexually but not materially promiscuous. Our society is really heavily into casual sex, all the way across the UK. An enormous number of people will have woken up this morning next to someone that they met for the first time last night.

They were both pretty drunk and they met in a club and went home together and had a meaningless one night stand. They don't love each other. The normal way this happens is that the girl just wants to be loved by a guy. She wants a relationship with a man who'll be there long term and that's what she's attracted to more than anything. The guy on the other hand does not want commitment or a relationship. He wants someone to have casual sex with no strings attached who he never has to see again afterwards. And the girl doesn't realize this about the guy and she thinks, well, I really want this relationship with this guy so I'll give him what he wants and the hope that he'll still be there tomorrow. So she sleeps with him and the guy is thinking, this is exactly what I want. Someone who's only just met me but will sleep with me so there's no commitment involved and they break up and the cycle goes on and on every weekend and that's the way that it is. Our society is sexually promiscuous. We'll give ourselves to whoever comes along because at the core we don't think ourselves are worth much. But on the other hand, we are not materially promiscuous. If you want proof of this, spend half an hour on Princess Street watching all the charity workers trying to stop people. Excuse me if you've got a minute and with cancer relief or whatever or with a homeless charity, can you stop just for a minute? Just a talk, never mind give them money. Watch them, I feel really sorry for them because they're doing something noble and yet if you watch them for half an hour maybe two people will stop and a thousand people will walk by. Someone will give you his or herself, no problem, right away. They've never met you, they don't love you, you don't love them but they'll give you their selves but they won't give you a fiver from their wallet. Think of after the tsunami struck, after New Year a few years back. There was a national appeal for Brits to give money to help the tens of thousands who lost their homes and families and the same British public who spent that New Year partying away giving their selves to others in casual sex only raised something pathetic, it was like a million pounds, it was something abysmally low like that. It worked out that the average Brit gave pennies literally to the tsunami appeal. So if I'm your typical post-Christian Westerner I'll give you myself, sleep with you because myself isn't worth much and because ultimately I want your life for my benefit but I will not give you my money or my possessions because there is so much more to me than myself and because life is about me being benefited.

See so we are sexually but not materially promiscuous but the gospel changes everything and flips this all around with the way repentant people are to be when it comes to sex and to money because a repentant person's life works on a completely different paradigm to the non-repentant person. The repentant person is sorry for his sin and he's received free grace forgiveness and because of that life is different. The old way of your life for my benefit is gone, there's a new way of my life for your benefit and the big way that that affects money and sex is that it makes you materially but not sexually promiscuous.

You see the devil has non-Christians fooled into having grossly distorted values where they'll give up what's truly expensive, what's truly precious and cling on to things that are basically worthless. It's the easiest and best way to rob someone is to distort and skew their sense of value. Imagine a thief comes to you and says yeah and those diamonds that you've got, diamonds are actually rubbish, I don't know if you know that but they're not worth anything and neither is your gold, gold is rubbish, just throw it in the bin, just get rid of it, it's not worth keeping but you've got all these piles of old newspaper in your house, all these old copies of the daily record, they are priceless, they're so good, cling to them, never let anyone have them. So you do, you throw out all your diamonds and your gold and they're lying outside in the bin and you're sitting there thinking oh daily record, it's old, it's ah and then the thief is outside raking through your bin and taking what's truly precious and that is what the devil has done in fooling our society into thinking what's truly priceless, yourself, yourself as you give it to someone else in sex, in marriage, in union with another person, by making that worthless and by taking things that are worth, that are incomparably less like money, possessions, food and making you think that those are the things to cling to and never give to anyone else. So that's the way that the gospel changes us because it makes us materially promiscuous, it makes us willing to show love to needy people with our material things, it makes us willing to give your second jacket to someone who doesn't have one, to give some food to a starving person, to give your money to the needy, rather than clinging to it because that's the most precious thing, but it changes your view of sexuality as well so that you're not sexually promiscuous, you want to align it with not casting your pearls before swine because this is the greatest pearl God has given you, so you're not just going to trample on it, give it away every weekend to someone you don't love who doesn't love you, and you want to keep the greatest pearl God has given you and cherish it in the most deserving of circumstances in God's pattern for sex. So that's what we see there, what repentance looks like in your lifestyle. The third thing we see is to repent because of Jesus. What's interesting here is that people are repenting, and they're repenting because of John the Baptist primarily, they think that he might be the Christ, but John tells them in certain terms that he's not, he's not the Messiah, and we're just going to actually go through this really quickly because we're running out of time, but he paints this picture of Jesus, that Jesus is so much more awesome than he is, that he's not even unworthy to tie up his sandals, and he's only baptizing you with water. Jesus will baptize you with fire, with the Holy

[29 : 25] Spirit, and Jesus is there, you know, he's been saying before about having an axe at the root of every tree, and Jesus is doing the same thing with a winnowing fork, so repent because of Jesus. Third point, fourth point, repent because of the good news. Now, reason three, you know, is solemn, is serious, it's repent because of Jesus, because of his power, his glory, because of the fact that he's there sorting out the wheat from the chaff, it's the same picture of taking what's fruitful from what's unfruitful, that's repentant from what's unrepentant, maybe you're thinking, this is really heavy, this is like being beaten up with a Bible, and, but maybe there's stuff in your life that you feel is exposed, and there are wrong nerves that are having big biblical fingers pooched on them, and you want to get out of here because, like, this is not good news, this is awful, and if that's you, look at verse 18, and with many other words, John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them, repent because of the good news. The message that John is bringing is fundamentally good and not bad news. How is this message that you have to repent good news? What's like if you're asleep and you wake up, I wake you up shaking you, saying the building's on fire, that's bad news, but if I keep on shaking you and say, come with me, I'll show you the way out, I know the way out, then it's good news, hard to take it first, but it's good news, and it's the same thing, but so much greater when someone tells you that God is really angry at your sin, and that you offend God by your rebellion and by your rejection of Him, and that a penalty has to be paid for that, that's bad news, it is, but if I then tell you that Jesus has paid the penalty for those who will repent, and I tell you, so come on, repent, you know, repent because of the good news, it is good news, isn't it? It's good news. It's good news because with real repentance, with repentance evidenced by a repentant lifestyle and all the things that we've seen, with that real repentance comes real forgiveness, not hypothetical, not possible forgiveness, but actual forgiveness.

You know, Romans 8-1, in Christ you're a new creation and there's no condemnation for you anymore. Real repentance brings real forgiveness, so please recognize that repentance is absolutely necessary, it's not an optional extra in life, it's completely necessary, repent because Jesus is coming, repent because you naturally belong to Satan, repent because you reflect that in your unrepentant lifestyle, and on the basis of your having repented, live like repentant people, be materially but not sexually promiscuous, repent because of Jesus, because He's so much more awesome than John, and we should want to repent just because of what we're reading from John's mouth, and repent because what I'm telling you today is good news, so may God give us the grace, the power through His Spirit to be repentant if we're not, and if we are to live like repentant people. Let's bow our heads and pray together.

Our Lord and our Father, we thank you that you are a God of grace, that you're the God of the Gospel, the God who calls us to repent with the sure promise that with repentance comes forgiveness, so Lord for those of us who are really struggling with this, who want to reject it, who do not like to be told that we have to repent, we pray for you to have patience with us, for your Holy Spirit to convince us through the power and the truth of your word that repentance is necessary, and Lord for all of those of us who have repented, we ask for you to help us to bear this kind of fruit in our lives, that we would live like repentant people, and we worship you for the Christ who comes and tells us to repent and to enable us to, and we thank you that this is a message of good news, so Lord we pray that you'll help us to see it like that, in Jesus' name, amen.