

## ***What Should We Do?***

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 3:1-18

*Christianity Today* magazine records a startling repentance story that began in the fall of 1949, when a 30-year-old pastor gave a series of heartfelt gospel messages to the people of his city. On opening night he told the audience that their “city of wickedness and sin” had two choices—repentance or God’s judgment. While initially the message rubbed people the wrong way, the series gained momentum. People came in droves. “Those who reject Christ,” the preacher thundered, “will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone to spend eternity.” And upon Jesus’ return, they could expect him to condemn the unrepentant with “fire coming from his eyes,” and a “sword coming from his mouth.” The series of messages was so intense that the pastor had to recruit an extra evangelist who would respond to people during the night. When nightmares of an angry God plagued listeners, someone needed to walk them through the hope of new life in Christ. Some of you know who this preacher is because he’s been in the news recently. It’s Billy Graham.

Graham’s message never undermined the need for human repentance before a holy God. But during the course of his ministry, Billy Graham did moderate his emphasis on God’s justice as he more pointedly preached God’s love and the meeting of the two in Christ. If we can imagine ourselves in the Los Angeles “Canvas Cathedral” in Billy Graham’s 6<sup>th</sup> “Sin Smashing Week” during his earliest crusades, we can imagine something of what it would be like to stand on the banks of the muddy Jordan River with John the Baptist.

We gather at the river to hear another young preacher, a “wild ox of a man,” Scott Hoezee calls him, with a spark in his eye and fire in his bones. God’s Spirit has been upon him since before he can remember. John hears God’s call in the wilderness and answers it, putting on that camel shirt every morning, munching his breakfast of honey and salted locusts on his commute to the river.

News about John’s message—repent and be washed clean—spreads into town faster than a desert wildfire. People from all walks of life make their way to the wilderness to hear this prophet. For all they can tell, this man looks and sounds an awful lot like Elijah. And when they hear John preach...they hear the very voice of God. That voice doesn’t mince words. That voice speaks to the ways God’s people have rejected him in their lives. And its message is urgent. The time to turn and repent is now.

“You spawn of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath! 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.” “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor. He’ll gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The message is clear. Judgment is immanent. Even people who think they are in God’s good graces because they can claim Abraham as their ancestor might be out. God’s family grows a different way than they thought. In verse 18 Luke summarizes John’s ministry this way: “With many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”

Do unquenchable fire and wrath sound like good news to you? They don’t to me. But Luke uses the Greek word for gospel here. John gave the “good message” to them through preaching a baptism of repentance.

By the time John the Baptist comes on the scene, God hasn't sent a prophet to his people for 400 years. 400 years of silence on the other end of the line. 400 years of wilderness wandering without the word of God. The people are more than ready to see evidence of God at work. Besides, politically and religiously the Judean world is a mess.

The second Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar, is on the throne. Jerusalem and Judea are under Roman occupation. The governor, Pilate, is a Roman appointee. Two of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Antipas and Herod Philip rule divisions of their father's kingdom. They are not exemplary Jewish princes.

Furthermore, the priesthood is corrupt. Annas and his son-in-law, Caiphas, are both "high priest." Having two high priests—or one official high priest and one who has unofficial but real authority—is like having two popes: all is not right with the world. When will God's Messiah come? We can see a hint of the anticipation in verse 15: "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah."

Those who come to the Jordan River region ready to repent are ready for a new priest. They are ready for a new king who will lead them through the River and into God's Promised Land. And they are ready to hear God speak, whatever He may say. Coming to John for baptism at the Jordan says, we are willing to prepare the way for the Lord."

People swallow their pride. One by one, they step down into the Jordan and submit to a baptism of repentance—the kind of baptism normally reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. They come out of the river and enter into a washed life—a life whose outward expression matches the inner cleansing they have been eager to receive. That's why John's message is good news. It leads to new life. Repentant hearts ask four of the most restorative words in human language: "What should we do? What should we do? What should we do? What should we do?"

John has some ideas.

Crowds: "The man with two undershirts should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax Collectors: "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Soldiers: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." The people clamor to demonstrate the genuineness of their repentance. No cheap confession without owning guilt or making amends. The people have heard God's voice through a megaphone; now their lives themselves will answer.

No fewer than six times in this passage the Greek word for "do" or "produce" or "bear" appears in this passage. It is the word used for trees that "produce good fruit" in verse 9.

When the people ask, "What should we do," they might as well be asking, "What kind of fruit should grow on our branches now that we are clean, healthy trees?" They aren't necessarily asking, "What are our obligations now?" though the question can have a sense of responsibility. One commentator said the question may be better understood this way: "We want to *do* something; what should it be?"

John calls the people to changed lives in the ordinary places where they already live. He calls them to generosity; to integrity and satisfaction in what they have. They don't have to leave their homes and jobs and join him in the wilderness—they can grow fruit for God's kingdom right where they already are. But together, their witness might just change the communities they occupy.

How would we respond today to John's call to repentance? Too often, I think I would rather sprint through the confession and repentance part and go straight to the restorative part.

Research professor Brene Brown specializes in the human experience of shame, including the ways not dealing with shame steals and kills and destroys. Brown recounts a time when she went to give a lecture. She expected to speak about shame as an obstacle to living a free and joyful life. She was told in no uncertain terms that her message was not welcome. The word “shame” was not to be mentioned. “People want to be comfortable and joyful,” her host said. “That’s all. Keep it joyful and comfortable....light and breezy.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Brown says, “I’d love to skip over the hard stuff, but it just doesn’t work. We don’t change, we don’t grow, and we don’t move forward without the work.... We *must* talk about the things that get in the way” (*The Gifts of Imperfection*, 2008, pp. 33-35). Without naming repentance, Brown identifies why confession and repentance are so important for our souls at a human level. We don’t get to go straight for resurrected living without going through Good Friday.

The good news of abundant life in Christ travels a bumpy road that includes judgment, agreeing with God about our flaws, failures, sins, and need. Dealing honestly with these things prepares the way for Christ to come straight to us even in these places of pain. We are people on the way, whose regular practice is to keep clearing that way until the day Christ comes again. We don’t get to reconciliation with one another or with him without it.

A few weeks ago I was ten minutes late to pick up my boys from school. I am a slow mover and a time optimist. Those things are deadly to the virtue of timeliness. It’s a real flaw. As they climbed into the van at 3:45 a storm was brewing. One of the boys said, “You were late. We hate when you’re late. Why can’t you come early and meet us inside like the other kids’ moms?” Daggers in my heart. Not exactly John the Baptist’s warning of fire and wrath, but words of judgment nevertheless. Especially that last bit about being like the other moms.

Right away all the “good reasons” for my tardiness came to mind. The eyes and ears of my heart clouded over. I was not in a mood to practice “preparing the way of the Lord,” to invite the Spirit of Jesus into that conversation with my boys. It was not a very happy ride home.

It took another person to point out, later, the subtext of my son’s confrontation: “We are afraid of being the last ones at school. We feel vulnerable standing outside waiting. We feel less important to you than whatever else you were doing.” AH.

The next day I had some reflecting to do, and some forgiveness-seeking to do. Painful as it was, my son’s confrontation was “good news.” We can only respond when we know what is wrong. Confessing to my son gave him the opportunity to practice forgiveness. His forgiveness and renewed trust released me from the guilt and shame I was feeling, and gave me a new opportunity to show I was sincere. We could start new again that day.

What a good gift repentance and forgiveness is even on a human level when it flows from knowing that we are already forgiven and loved by God.

On the heels of John the Baptist’s call to repentance comes the ultimate answer to that call: Jesus the Messiah, who will walk the road of repentance himself. He will submit to John’s baptism, even though he has no need to repent. He will come to teach and heal, to draw the hearts of the people to their God. And he will deal definitively with the sins of the world, taking them on himself at the cross. He will work out our forgiveness and reconciliation with the Father. Such a great salvation is worth anything and everything we might give up.

Tonight we stand with the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers, asking, “What should we do?” Some of us tonight need the encouragement this passage gives us to look to Jesus right where we are.

Maybe during Lent God has pointed out some areas of your life that need to be turned over to him. You hear John's words of judgment, you feel the separation of sin. You can see that a new, full, rich life with God and others opening to you on the other side of repentance. But turning around is just plain hard.

God is right there ready to meet you. It's not a 50-50 deal. God pays the penalty for our sin himself. His Spirit strengthens us to turn toward a new life with him, a day-by-day life that he will nurture and grow until the day he comes again. You are his new creation.

Or maybe you're living in an ordinary, difficult place. A work environment that's hard on your faith. A time when the daily needs you face are beyond your ability to meet. Because of Jesus, God's Spirit is in those places with you. Like the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers, you turn and look to Jesus in the ordinary, challenging places where you find yourself. God is more than able to grow fruit in your life even in difficult soil. He guides and assures you seek to make decisions in step with him. You are his new creation.

What do we do? We look to Jesus, walking the road of repentance and renewal with him. Just beyond our vision he is forming his new creation. And we're part of it. Thanks be to God.