

## How to Preach Repentance, Part 1

Luke 3:7-9

April 17, 2016

We have come to see how all true Gospel proclamation involves this message of repentance. Jesus preached repentance. The Apostles preached repentance. The students of the Apostles preached repentance. And all true preachers of the Gospel ever since have continued preaching a message of repentance. Without repentance, you no longer have the Gospel. You've actually replaced the Gospel with a false substitute, a damning substitute. So we need to be very careful as we learn this morning, as we hear from John directly, as we hear him speak to find out how he preached repentance because we want to go and do the same thing in our preaching. It's very important as we get started this morning to acknowledge, right from the very beginning, right from the start that repentance is not a human work. Repentance is something we do. It is something we're responsible for, but like faith, repentance is not of ourselves, "it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

At the same time, like faith, repentance is a command. It is a command of the Gospel. Luke 3:4 makes the Gospel nature of this man plain. You can see it there. It says, "Prepare the way of" who? "The Lord." The Lord, the one who came preaching the Gospel. "Make his paths straight." And how do we prepare? How do we make his paths straight? How do we level the ground? Luke 3:3, repentance. John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance requires us, as it says in Luke [Matthew] 3:8, you can see it there, it requires us to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance." The word that is used there, in keeping with is the word, worthy. Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Bear fruits that are befitting repentance. How we live has to correspond with an inward commitment to repentance? That is to say, what we do on the outside, what people can see it has to correspond to an internal heart attitude of repentance and faith. Repentance is not a human work. Repentance is a work of grace. It's wrought by God in the heart. It's manifest in the changed life through external behavior that people can actually see. They can concretely see the change. But it's not a human work. It's what God does.

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We need to say that, that it's not a human work because evangelicalism, as a movement, has drifted so far afield from this key Biblical doctrine that when repentance is preached today, many evangelicals who have grown up in evangelical churches, they believe you're preaching something false. They've gone so far in the other direction, abandoning this doctrine that when you preach repentance, they think you're adding something to the Gospel. They accuse you of preaching law, not grace; works, not Gospel. And again, that just indicates how far we have fallen from the true preaching of the Gospel, which will always include a call to repentance. But at the same time we want to be careful that we are not communicating error, that we are not guilty of what they are charging us with, that we are not making repentance a human work.

There is a fine line here. And none of us should make the fatal mistake of thinking that we can work hard enough, that we can just grit our teeth and fight a fight to accomplish repentance in our lives apart from the grace of God. We cannot do that. Repentance is not something we can manufacture on our own. Like every aspect of the Gospel, repentance is a gift of grace. In fact, the metaphor that Luke uses and draws from

Isaiah 40, it's meant to show us that. I mean, fill in every valley? Level every mountain? Chop down every hill? Who can do that? Humanly speaking, who can do that? You can't. That's the point. It's impossible for you.

I like how one commentator put it when he said, referring to this very thing in Luke 3:4 to 6, he said, quote, "The tectonic metaphor of filling valleys and moving mountains signifies the radical and fundamental act of repentance, which alters the landscape of personal and social life." End quote. Do you get what he's saying? It's a tectonic issue. It's like moving mountains, but God gives us the faith that can move mountains. And he is the God that created all this to begin with. He is the God that called all things into existence. He's the God that sent the flood and moved everything around the earth by judgment. He's the God who can regenerate one human life and many human lives. He's the God with the power. But if you think about what it would take to fill in all the valleys, to level every mountain, level every hill, the metaphor there is intended to show you how impossibly difficult it is to repent. It's meant to drive you to despair of your own efforts, your own works, your own ability to accomplish repentance on your own. It

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should humble you. That's the point. It's meant to cause you to look to God to accomplish in you what he has clearly commanded you to do. What you can't accomplish it on your own. God grants "repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth" 2 Timothy 2:25. It's his kindness, Romans 2:4, that leads us to repentance, but that said, do not mistake his grace and his kindness for indulgence. Don't mistake his grace for a license to sin, to live however you want to, as if grace covers over everything and you can just do what you want to do. God is very, very serious about his holiness and about this issue of repentance, fleeing from sin and pursuing his righteousness, and that's what we're going to see this morning.

I've traveled, as many of you have, to many different parts of this country. I often find in the more Christianized regions, what's hard to understand really, but in the more Christianized regions of our country there is a lackadaisical attitude toward the things of God. Do you ever notice that? It's in the Bible Belt the people just drift from things like church commitment, personal holiness, zeal for evangelism, the determination, a steady determination, consistent determination to grow into maturity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. People just tend to

shrug at those demands. People seemed to have become accustomed to ignoring authority, shirking responsibility, and essentially just doing whatever is right in their own eyes. They're fine with Christianity as long as they're free to practice it on their own terms, right? That's certainly true in our part of the world as well. Colorado, as a state, is known around the county for being quite hostile to the Gospel. That's certainly true in places you know like Denver and Boulder, known for their liberal politics, commitment to the license to live however one wants, the less restraint the better. That's how they vote.

The same time, ironically, Colorado has also been known for its conservative brand of religion. Colorado Springs to our south has been known as the center of conservative Christian politics. It's the home of many mega-churches and para-church ministries. Up here in the north, northern Colorado is populated by many people, hard-working farmers, most of whom have a religious background; many of whom actually have a Protestant religious background, so they're on the right side of the Reformation. But on paper, it might appear that the state, because of all the Christian influence, would soon be one for the cause of Christ. When we look around, we see something

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different, don't we? As you talk with people and these are not just any people, these are professing Christian people, you find them to be pretty comfortable with just a little bit of religion. Not too much, just enough to keep the parents happy, keep the parents off my back, just enough to instill good morals in the kids but don't get too serious about it. After all, ski season is coming, or the Broncos are in the playoffs, or my kids have soccer practice, or we have a family thing, or hunting trip, fishing tip, and whatever, on and on it goes; reasons why they're not serious about the Gospel.

I'm concerned this part of the country has just enough religion to inoculate people from the true, saving Gospel. I believe that most people in our city, in our county, in our region and I'll say this, I believe that most church going people are not Christians at all. And they're not going to heaven. And I'm concerned about it. You say, that's a pretty brash statement, preacher. You going to back that up? Consider this for a moment. Jesus warns us, or should I say he warned religious people. Matthew 7:21 to 23, he said this, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, 'Will enter the kingdom of heaven," but who will? "The one who does the will of my father,

who is in heaven. On that day..." What's that day? It's the Day of Judgment, it's the day when all people are gonna give an account before God. "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? 'And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Do you see what's happening there? These hypocrites are so blinded that they are justifying themselves to the Lord's face. They're standing in front of him telling him this. It's as if, Oh, look over here at my good deeds and don't worry about my iniquity. They've not repented of their lawlessness. And they have engaged in their own self-styled brand of religion. That was just as true in Jesus' day as it is in our own. Do we really believe that that text only applies to Jesus' immediate audience and not to the religious people of our own city? Or in our own families? Why else would the Spirit record this warning in Scripture if not to warn all religious people at all times in all places?

Later on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus taught the crowds using parables, and he told one about the sower who went out to sow seed, Matthew 13. The same kind of seed, sown all throughout



the field, and Jesus described four different soils on which the seed fell, right? Hard-packed soil, rocky soil, thorny soil, and good soil. Jesus described, then, four different outcomes, only one of which bore fruit. Only one of which yielded crops proved to be productive. One out of four. Even if we remove the hard ground from consideration, the other two were non-productive soils. You know what? They were clearly religious people. Again, do we believe that Jesus spoke those words only to that original audience and did not intend for us to take heed? Of course we don't believe that. But we often neglect to apply these passages meant to teach us discernment about people, discernment about their hearts, their motivations, their responses, their professions, their professions of assurance. We often fail to apply the clear teaching we see in Scripture to the people in flesh and blood right in front of us. Why do we do that? Because so often we're prone to give people a pass. We're so often prone to fear man rather than God.

The enemy actually counts on our reluctance to apply God's truth to the people around us, the people in our own families. He's worked very hard to provide people with an easy, comfortable brand of culturally acceptable religion, which looks

remarkably similar to Christianity, but it's actually another religion altogether. They use the same Bible, but they don't really know what it says; they don't know what it means. They use the same terms, but they don't know what they mean. They go to church, but they don't evangelize, they don't sacrifice, they don't grow in any sanctifying grace. Why? Because they have no understanding of repentance. They don't get the demands of the Gospel. Knowing what Gospel so many people have heard, it's very likely no one has actually told them in the first place. The easy gospel, the non-repentance gospel, the take Jesus, but never change gospel, the get me into heaven, but I don't have to do anything here on earth gospel. That has produced a bunch of people who are completely ignorant of the truth, but at the same time, they're completely arrogant and intransigent. They're stubborn. You can't tell them anything because they don't, think they know better than you. They think they're doing just fine, thank you very much. No, they haven't studied anything for themselves. They haven't read any books they haven't done any homework. But they don't need to because they're just, they're quite sure that what you're saying is just your opinion, just your interpretation, that's how you look at it. They're utterly unwilling to admit their need to learn. They refuse to submit themselves to the authority of Scripture, to put themselves

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under the gaze of this Book, let alone the authority of any local church. Some pastor, elder, who do they think they are? Right? Stubbornly insist they know the truth even if they can't explain anything about it.

Do you know something? What we're facing in our culture, in our time is nothing new. This goes all the way back to the cultural religion practiced all the way back in Isaiah's day. Listen to this passage. At the beginning of Isaiah's prophecy, Isaiah 1, and you can turn there if you want to, but we're going to be right back here but listen to Isaiah 1:10-20, "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" Okay, now stop for a second. When Isaiah wrote, 700 years before Christ, where was Sodom and Gomorrah? Oh, yeah, at the bottom of the Dead Sea. It was judged; it was gone. Who's he talking to here? Jerusalem. "Hear the word of the Lord you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" says the Lord; 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this

trampling of my courts? 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.’” He says, I don’t like the mix. “‘your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 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. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.’” Do you know what he’s saying? Will you repent? “‘Come now; let us reason together,’ says the Lord: ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

Warning. Confrontation. That’s the preaching of the Gospel right there. Beloved, those words are remarkably contemporary, aren’t they? It’s amazing that there are people in churches all

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through our city, all through our county, all through our region, all through our state, country, expand it however you want to, there many people are doing this very thing. They go to church every Sunday, they take the name of God on their lips, they claim the blood of Christ covers their sins, and all the while their lives never change one fraction. They don't move a fraction of an inch. They don't move a half of a degree. Nothing changes in their trajectory, let alone a 180 turn from sin.

When Jesus Christ came to his people, you can turn back to Luke Chapter 3, but when Jesus Christ came to his people, he found the same intransigence. He found the same stubborn heartedness, the same obstinate attitudes. John 1:11 says, "Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." The Jews. What does that mean, that they didn't receive him? Does it mean, Oh, no thank you and they're very polite about it. No, it means that after he preached his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, those pleasant, hardworking country folks, they tried to throw him off of a cliff.

Folks, if that happened to our Lord at the hands of good Jewish people, it can happen to us if we're clear at the hands of these nice Greeley people. It doesn't take much for people to

turn on you. Jews didn't want to hear Jesus' calls to repentance. They ultimately followed the lead of their religious leaders, and they crucified their own Messiah. Like so many today, they wanted to believe they were doing just fine. They wanted to believe they were okay. They're descendants of Abraham after all, and they don't need to trouble themselves with things like humility and repentance, self-examination, confession of sin. How morbid, how unsatisfying. I'm here for joy. I'm here for happiness. I need a lift my week. Leave us alone we're doing just fine. And just to warn you, if you continue telling us things we don't want to hear, you're taking your own life in your hands there, preacher.

That, folks, is why God threw John the Baptist into the mix. Nothing is gonna stop him, right? He's amazing, and he threw him there to break up the fallow ground. God sent John to prepare the way before Christ, to confront this religious obstinacy, this religious intransigence. Some of the most hardhearted people on the planet are religious people who are self-satisfied. Well, here's how he did it. Here's what we're going to find out as we go through Luke's Gospel here. Luke 3:7, let's start reading. "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 in to the fire.' And the crowds asked him, 'well, '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.' As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, 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 with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat

into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'”

Three sections there, and they form a chiastic structure. We've talked about that before, where it's like an X at the top ends there, two sections that confront people with warnings of coming judgment, and then one section there in the middle that corrects people. So confrontation and correction. Correction flanked by confrontation. And the correction shows people how to bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

First warning there in verses 7-9, that's what we'll cover this morning. Second warning is in verses 15-17 and then flanked by two dire warnings. We see the corrective there in verses 10-14, and that's instructive for us, isn't it? On the one hand, people are not inclined to listen to the corrective unless they've received the confrontation. The preaching of repentance, the preaching of the Gospel requires confrontation, but preaching repentance is not only confrontation, it's, on the other hand, providing correction. To preach the Gospel, to call sinners to repentance and faith, we have to do both things. We



need to confront and we also need to correct. We need to diagnose the problem, expose the problem, and then come along with the remedy as well. That's the essence of Gospel preaching.

You know the mistake today? There's preaching of the remedy with no understanding of the confrontation. They just give Jesus, give Jesus, give Jesus; heaven, heaven, heaven; love, love, love; but absolutely no understanding of why I'm taking this into my life. They have no understanding that they are sinners and they're heading for hell and wrath is facing them. They don't feel that same fear. There's no fear of God before their eyes, and they say, Sure, I'll still keep Jesus in my back pocket so that I can pull that card out when I get to heaven, when I stand before Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, I say, I got baptized, I went to church. They need to understand they're sinners, too. They need to understand what the corrective is for. And they won't understand that unless we, beloved, unless we confront them. You say, well, that sounds judgmental. No, no, we're not gonna be judgmental. We're not judging anything; we're confronting. We're confronting sin. That's what we're doing. So anybody that calls you judgmental, just say, no, I'm not

judgmental. God's the judge. I'm just bringing the confrontation.

How do we apply this passage to our own lives? How do we apply it here in our church? I mean are you all a brood of vipers? Some of you, yeah, maybe. No, no I'm just kidding. No, we're here because we're believers, right? We're here because we love the truth. We're here because we're listened to this Gospel call, this, this call to repentance, this call to, to turn away from sin and give ourselves completely; embrace Jesus Christ. We've given ourselves, so what are we going to do? Quite simply we need to preach like John preached. We need to learn how to do this for ourselves. We need to become skillful in the way, the manner we deal with people so we can lovingly confront their sin, lovingly correct them and teach them the Gospel. It's not something you can do, often times, it's not something you can do in five minutes with a little tract. You need to take time. We need to preach the Gospel the way John preached; the way Jesus preached. Calling people to repentance it means two things: confrontation, correction. If you're gonna preach repentance, you have to confront sin. You have to correct sinful behavior. Anything less than that is not just misleading, but it's

unfaithful. It just creates more hypocrites. So don't do it. Let's learn how to do this together over the next couple weeks, we'll be going through this.

So as we look at the confronting part of preaching repentance here in verses 7 to 9, I want to show you here six things that we need to do as we confront people with the demands of true repentance. You might call these, six stages of confrontation or six steps of Gospel confrontation. One by one, step by step, these six things will penetrate deeply into the heart of every single sinner, and they reveal what's truly at stake in the heart of biblical repentance. What's at stake?

Let's start with a first point, confrontation number one: Identify the reality of their spiritual condition. When you're preaching repentance and you're going to enter into this confrontation, you need to identify the reality of their spiritual condition. Take a look at verse 7. "John said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers!'" Whoa! Harsh! You don't build mega-churches with that message, do you? In fact, I wonder how many

seeker churches have actually handled in any kind of depth the ministry of John the Baptist. I just wonder. "Brood of vipers." John's language here, as you see all through his preaching, it's full of metaphors that come from his familiarity with the desert. That's what you would expect. Right? Any preacher that comes from the country preaches a lot about, he has metaphors and images and things like that that come from the country. City preachers, same thing. John, he's a desert preacher, so he talks about things like, like everything awful in the desert, right? Vipers, fruitless trees, rocks, barren wasteland, all of these things are fitting images, though, for his life's work. This is exactly how God providentially prepared him for the people he was going to confront. Obviously this sounds pretty harsh, "Brood of vipers" but we actually need to ask the question: Is John just intending to insult them, to snap them to attention here? Is that what he's doing? Or, is there a really good reason he calls them a "Brood of vipers"? You guessed it. There's a good reason. There's a very good reason. You people are so sharp this morning. It's really good.

John actually characterizes the Pharisees and the Sadducees over in Matthew 3 verse 7. He characterizes them as a "Brood of

vipers" as well. That passage, over there, in Matthew 3:7-10, it sounds very familiar to what we're reading here. It says in Matthew 3:7, "When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" Same thing, right? That whole section sounds familiar to this section here. In fact, the verb here in our text, "He said." "He said therefore to the crowds," it's in the imperfect tense. And it indicates that he repeatedly said this. John was characteristically calling out his countrymen, exposing them as a brood of vipers. It wasn't just the religious leaders that were a bunch of snakes; it was the whole culture.

Remember, he's talking to a religious culture. The Pharisees, especially, these guys were a movement of the people. They were like well-known businessmen in Jerusalem, in town, in cities, who, who were concerned as businessmen. They were respectable; they were part of this group. Pharisees, they were concerned to practice, recover the practice of Judaism for the sake of coming generations. They wanted to be good enough to receive the Messiah to themselves. They were respected men, culturally speaking, socially speaking. They were political men.

They were admired, they were upheld by the common people. So, while the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they may have characterized the condition of the people. They were the special targets of John's confrontation, Matthew Chapter 3, but the truth is, all the people were the offspring of vipers. That is to say, contrary to their cultural claim to be children of Abraham, like he exposed in verse 8, John is denying that claim. He's saying, not only are you not children of Abraham by evidence of your works; he's saying you are actually viper's children. And what does that mean? They're children of the devil.

Vipers, a venomous class of snake. They're cold-blooded animals. They slither in the dust. They're wily, crafty, poisonous, dangerous, all those are reminders of that original curse on the serpent, right? Satan in Genesis Chapter 3. David identified the men around him, violent men around him in Psalm 140 as the same kind of men. He called them evil men, violent men who plan evil things in their hearts and stir up wars continually, stir up con, a conflict, dissension. They make their tongues sharp as a serpent's and under their lips is the venom of asp, of asps and vipers. That's what Paul quoted in Romans 3:13, when he indicted the entire unbelieving world, not

just Jew, but Gentile too. He said, "Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues, they keep deceiving. The poison of asps is under their lips, whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." That is exactly what John is confronting here. These people are the offspring of poisonous serpents. You say, you sure about that? Is that what he's saying? Yeah, I am sure.

Over in John Chapter 8, Jesus leveled the same charge at the people he's talking to. Turn actually to John 8:37 just for a moment. The Jews in John 8, they're trying to claim, once again, their connection to Abraham. And they're trying to silence Jesus' Confrontations as if they don't apply to them. "Because we are children of Abraham." So Jesus said, starting in John 8:37, this is Jesus talking, by the way, he says this, "I know that you are offspring of Abraham; and yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.'" Ooooooh, he just made a distinction there, didn't he? "They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them," well, "'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what

Abraham did. You are doing the works of," that, "your father did." Oohh, They said to him, 'We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.'

"Then Jesus said to them, Look, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I not here of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot hear my word.'" Notice the choice of words there. It's not will not, it's cannot. There's an ability issue here. John 8:44, "'You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'" "

Powerful stuff. You see what Jesus is saying there? Everyone is doing what he's born to do. You will be what you are born to be. You'll act in accordance with your nature. If you're born of God as a true child of Abraham, then you will receive and obey everything that Jesus said and taught. But if you're not born of God, you remain a child of the devil. And you cannot



escape that inborn nature. You can't stop doing what the devil has designed you to do, how he influences you. Not on your own you can't. Folks, that's the issue in this first point. When engaging in confrontation, you need to help people see the reality of their spiritual condition. They may be nice people; many of them are nice people. I like to have them as neighbors. So do you. Greeley people are so much nicer to live next to, oh, than some other places in the country I won't mention. They're nice neighbors. But if they're not of God, if they're not born from above, if they're not born again, you know what they really are? A brood of vipers.

When people see the reality of that, it awakens them to a need. Apart from regeneration, which is immediately manifest in repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ, it's subsequently, by the way, regeneration is subsequently demonstrated by continuing repentance from sin, continuing faith in Christ. But apart from being born again, people are dead in their trespasses and sins. They are, Ephesians 2:2 to 3, they're fated to "following the course of this world." They're enslaved to "The prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." They're like brood beasts,

led around like dumb animals by the passions of their flesh, caring about the desire of body and the mind. They're by nature children of wrath. They live continually under condemnation because they are in reality a brood of vipers. They descend from serpents. They descend from the unbelieving seed of the chief of the serpents, Satan himself. That ancient viper is known for deception, poisonous speech, unbelief, even murder. In fact, he is the greatest murderer who has ever existed because he murdered the entire human race by leading the human race into unbelief and denying God. He's a murderer. He's a liar.

That's the true nature of the unbelieving world. And yes, even among nice folks here in small-town, USA. We've confronted them, right? Here we go, identifying them as snakes, unregenerate children of the devil. I do caution you that when you do speak to your neighbors and friends that you don't start out with the, brood of vipers, language. They need to kind of come along to understand what you're talking about, right?

But John takes here, a second step of confrontation as he preaches repentance. Here's the second step: Expose the nature

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of their religious motives. Expose the nature, the true nature of their religious motives. John continues here in verse 7, with a stinging rhetorical question. "He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers!'" Then this, "'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" No doubt John, had growing up, living in the desert, had watched brush fires that rose up and spread quickly across the desert. He saw the wildlife flee. He saw the snakes, the vipers emerge from their holes, their nests; slither away to get away from the heat. Those cold-blooded creatures were sensing danger in that approaching fire. They fled. That's what John's asking here, but it's a rhetorical question. He's not expecting an answer. He's posing it so they'll think carefully about their motives in coming forward for baptism. He's warning here about hypocrisy. Are you really ready to admit that you're nothing better than a brood of vipers, that you are descended from that ancient serpent? You ready to talk about that? And as vipers, do you truly sense the coming danger? Is that why you're coming, because there's a fire lit? It's heading your way. If so, come forward. Be baptized as an external testimony to your repentance, as a symbol of your forgiven sin. If so, do what fleeing vipers do before a coming brush fire. If you sense the coming judgment, are you willing to abandon everything just like

the vipers do? Vipers fleeing the fire, they don't really try to hold onto their holes, do they? They say, well, I'll build another hole. I'm get'n away. You willing to make whatever change necessary, leave the comfort of your former nest? You willing to leave everything behind, flee for your life, find refuge in the grace of God? Or is some other motivation driving you?

And again, John's questioning here is penetrating; gets into the heart of their thinking; it causes them to examine their motives. Listen, folks, it is right to question motives. It's right to wonder about people's motives. Most people are religious for all the wrong reasons. When the Bible tells us that only a few will be saved, well, then we're right to ask questions to provoke people to think about their true motives for coming to Christ. What are you really after? What do you think Christ will really provide for you?

People do religious things for wrong reasons all the time. Make no mistake. Years ago I read a number of stories about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Her memoirs came out around 2007-

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2008, somewhere around there. She was a Roman Catholic nun, you remember, who tragically devoted her entire life to false religion, doing good works to please a Christ that she, actually by her own testimony, never knew. Some have tried to make her a hero by calling her the Saint of Doubt. The Saint of Darkness for all those dark souls plagued with unbelief. She endured what some have called, the dark night of the soul, but her darkness lasted her entire lifetime. All the way to the grave and beyond. By her own testimony, she never really knew Christ. Journalist Shawna Crabtree wrote, quote, "No sooner did Teresa start her work in the slums of Calcutta than she began to feel the intense absence of Jesus, a state that lasted until her death, according to her letters." End quote. In fact in one of her letters written in the 1960s, she was writing to her father confessor, who you would hope would have pity on her, pull her from the slums of Calcutta, and help her to understand the Gospel, but he didn't understand it. Mother Teresa wrote this, "The darkness is such that I do not see neither with my mind nor with my reason, the place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me. When the pain of longing is so great, I just long and long for God, but the torture and pain I can't explain." She was a tormented soul, folks. She was in darkness. She knew no Christ.

She knew no love of God. Nothing. She did not know God as, Abba Father, as you and I do. That's so sad.

True believers, honestly, we do feel discouragement at times, but to be characterized by a lifetime of continual darkness? That's the condition of the unregenerate. As 1 John 1:5 to 6 says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him, while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." Mother Teresa needed someone, desperately needed someone to expose the true nature of her spiritual motives because she wasn't doing good works out of a regenerate heart of repentance and faith. What's interesting, just a side note there, God did send someone to expose her to the truth. John MacArthur once visited Calcutta, and he went and visited her orphanage and shared the Gospel with Mother Teresa, and she rejected it. He left her with a copy of his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*; prayed for her. It's so sad that she didn't embrace the message of that book, embrace the Gospel: repentance and faith. God will only save those who come to him with a repentant heart driven by the motives of repentance, hating sin on the one hand, longing for righteousness on the other, fleeing the just judgment of God for

their own sins, fleeing to the God of all grace, all comfort. The brood of vipers need to be converted to become children of God. That's what has to happen.

Well, we've taken two steps of confrontation. Here's a third step we need to take: Clarify the root of the religious works. Not just clarify the nature, expose the nature of it, but clarify the root of their religious works. Take a look at verse 8, just the first sentence. It's a stark command, a very, very strong imperative here. "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance," or as I said earlier, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Implied in that command in its starkness and its strength, its power. Implied in the command is the insinuation, intentional on John's part, that the crowds were not bearing the appropriate fruit. In fact, the fruit coming out of their lives was more consistent with the children of devil, the children of wrath. The poison and destruction of vipers was the product of their lives. The people confronted were bearing bad fruit, as indicated by verses 10 to 14. You can see they're coming, and their lives are filled with bad fruit. They demonstrate their viper-like qualities in the way that they live. Fundamentally, they were proud, they were self-centered, they had no fear of

God before their eyes. Practically, it was manifest in some of what John corrected in verses 10 to 14.

Look at verses 10 to 11. John is showing that the people lacked compassion. They refused to be generous. They refused to share with others in need; just the basic necessities of life. They hoarded money and stuff for themselves. They refused to lift their eyes to look around and help others. In verses 12 to 13 he exposes there a heart of greed and extortion. People found legal loopholes in the law, allowing them to get ahead, take, make use of these tax franchises. I'll explain that next time. Get over on their fellow man; that's what they were doing. In verse 14, John confronted here a willingness to extort, to intimidate people, to use size and power to get over on others, to abuse, to use authority and power for selfish ends. At the heart there's a lack of contentment in all of that. And what was required here was a love for others; expressed in a willing to sacrifice self and stuff and convenience and time and energy, to sacrifice all of that for the good of other people. That's not in the heart of unregenerate people. It's what God has to give because that's who God is. God is love. And he gives and he gives and he gives and he gives. His people do the same thing.



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What was required was a commitment to justice and righteousness before God no matter what the cost. What was required was mercy and compassion, kindness and generosity, even at the expense to self.

Notice the word, fruits. He's says not just bear fruit, but bear fruits. It's in the plural. The plural suggests that particular works are in view here, concrete deeds, not just a general vague notion of self-prescribed self-improvement. God is the one who defines the works that are required. Not man. Not Oprah Winfrey. God. As Micah said, Micah 6:8, "God has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." There had to be a lifestyle that demonstrated a changed heart. Again the plural word, fruits, points to a productive life. It's a multitude of fruits coming out, produced on the tree, producing concrete evidence of genuine repentance. Look, folks, this is not behavior modification. This is not a 12-step program. This is not rearranging some habits and customs in life. This is radical repentance, the most fundamental level of the heart. It's the root of all thought and behavior and when the root is changed at the internal level, the behavior is gonna

change at the external level. The whole life is going to be different.

I often talk with people who claim to know God, but their lives manifest no evidence of repentance. Not only do they show no fruit of regeneration and repentance, but their lives are actually full of contrary works. I'll have them often read two lists in Scripture. One list is about the works of the flesh and the other list is about the fruit of the spirit. There are a number of places that I could turn in the Bible, that I can go, but, but I tend to go to one passage in particular. You can turn there, it's Galatians 5:19 and following. That passage brings two lists together in such a stark way that I find it very, very helpful in helping people to see where they really stand. There in Galatians 5:19 to 23, this is so useful in evaluating the fruit of even your own life, but also whoever you're talking to. Back up to verse 16, actually, let me start there because this is really the issue. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." By the way, Galatians was written to people who were legalistic. They were influenced by the Judaizers, the people that tried to preached law, law, law to try to suppress all these evil impulses and

desires. You know what? Preaching that to an unregenerate heart, it doesn't make them restrain their flesh. Paul knew that. Walk by the spirit and you won't gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, and these two are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." That is, you don't need an external pounding; you just need to do what you were designed by God to do because you have a new nature. Go with it. Let the Bible instruct you and inform and provoke and lead you. Verse 19, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

You don't know how many people that I've talked to and their lives are filled with that kind of thing and they'll look me square in the eye and say, I'm a Christian. You don't know how many Christians have been deceived into thinking that the Bible does not demand a change from that kind of behavior, and

they look at me and say, You can't tell people to change like that, that's judgmental. They've been so deceived. "But the fruit of the Spirit," Verse 22, is what, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Listen, folks, it doesn't matter what you claim, what you say about yourself. The proof is in the life. The evidence is in how you live. Who you are become manifest in what you do, how you think, how you act, how you speak.

Well, we've talked about confronting the reality of the spiritual condition. We've talked about exposing the true nature of religious motives. We've exposed the true root of religious works. There's a fourth step we need to take in confrontational preaching of repentance. We need to, number four: Challenge the basis of their spiritual assurance. Challenge the basis of their spiritual assurance. This is huge, folks, because there are so many who rely on all manner of false assurances. They inoculate themselves against the cure by believing that they are already healthy, believing themselves to have no need of a cure. After commanding them to bear fruit in verse 8, John continues with

this penetrating challenge. He says, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father.'" Basically here, he's cutting them off at the pass. He's saying, Don't even try it. I know what you're thinking. Stop it right now. Don't even go there with me. The Jews believed themselves secure, nice and warm, wrapped safely in the refuge of their birthright. Free from concern about disfavor from God. They believed that the judgment of God is coming upon the nations, not on them. That's us, by the way, Gentiles. They didn't believe judgment would fall on the people of God, that is the Jews, the descendants of Abraham. It's amazing, in light of the times they lived in, that they could deny this about themselves. The Roman domination in their own land. In light of the exiles at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians; in light of, of, what's written in the law of Moses, Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28; in light of the prophetic warning after warning after warning throughout the prophets, major and minor, it's absolutely ludicrous that the Jews could continue holding onto this national pride, this false sense of safety and security.

But, folks, that's the mystery of sin, isn't it? To find false confidence, to rely on that which will not save. The

unregenerate are self-deceived. They harden themselves against the truth. They find ways to assure themselves. Oh that's not gonna happen to me. I guess that's another thing they hold in common with their father, the devil, who believes there will not no accounting for his own life. That's the same as people today, people who've grown up attending church, putting money in the plate, eating potlucks, going to pancake breakfasts, hold weddings and funerals in a church, they dedicate their babies in the church, they've added that new wing onto the church, they've sweated, they've funded. Listen, all that stuff is good in and of itself, but it doesn't ultimately matter. What matters is do they manifest the fruits of repentance or do they not? If people would look at their actual fruit, if they examine their behavior in the light of God's truth, they would realize all those warnings in the Bible those warning are aimed directly at them. They are the target of divine wrath, and there is a laser sight pointed directly on their foreheads. One squeeze of an eager trigger finger, and it is all over for them. Rather than feeling comfortable and secure, the unrepentant should feel afraid. They should feel very afraid. They need to be unsettled that they might examine themselves and find the true basis of assurance by repenting from their sins and putting faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

People in our day find all manner of reasons for false assurance. They take comfort in false notions about God. They take comfort in a false view of themselves. But take a look at the fifth step of confrontation. The fifth step, number five: Rebuke the sin of their spiritual presumption. Rebuke the sin of their spiritual presumption. This is a first of two warnings, one in verse 8 and the other in verse 9. And the first exposes and rebukes spiritual presumption. They believe themselves to be indispensable to the plan of God, that God needed to preserve them to fulfill his promise to Abraham. Not so. Look at verse 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.'" In other words, not only does God not need you; you're in danger of being replaced by a rock pile. Listen, the only difference between dust and stones is the size, right? And if God created Adam from the dust of the ground, then surely he has the power to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Raise up, by the way, is the same verb that's used, talking about the resurrection. Resurrection power, creative power, he can raise up children for Abraham from rocks.

But those rocks, made children for Abraham, are going to demonstrate the fruits of repentance that Abraham did: the repentance of faith. They're not going to keep acting like vipers; people who claim to belong to Abraham. All the while these people were acting contrary to the faith of Abraham; they were manifesting an extremely sinful attitude. There's a sense and attitude of spiritual presumption here. They were presuming on the grace of God. It's as if they feel like they can demand God's protection and blessing, all the while living in opposition to his holiness. Who do they think they are? Do they really think God will ignore their sinful actions, overlook, just because they claim Jewish parentage? It's Preposterous. Presumptuous.

Metaphor here of dead lifeless stones is a picture of every sinner. In reality, every sinner is as lifeless as rocks. The crowd itself is like a pile of stones; no life, no innate ability to produce fruit. That is the natural condition of every single sinner. God doesn't need people who see themselves as privileged, who think of themselves as entitled, as if God owes them something. That is a very low view of God. That is to



presume on his grace, to believe that he's obligated to bless spiritual pretenders who trade on Abraham's name. Listen folks, there are a lot of people doing that today, people trading on God's name.

I was talking to some students the other day. They were telling me how many students in their own classrooms claim to be Christians but give no evidence of it in their lives. These students have only the vaguest understanding of Jesus. They know his name and they know that he has something to do with love, but the rest of it they make up from their own imaginations, kinda like from Disney cartoons. Do you know what that's called? Bible identifies that sin in two ways: Taking God's name on your lips and not actually following him that's called taking God's name in vain, number one. You're taking his name upon you, but it's in vain. It's meaningless, it's worthless. You can't do that. You know what it is number two: To claim you believe in God, to claim to be Christians, knowing nothing of true Christianity, it's the sin of idolatry, too, because you're crafting for yourself a god that you prefer, a Jesus that you want to follow, a Jesus who will tolerate your sin. All the gaps that people have in their theological understating, they simply

fill in the gaps with their own imaginations. They make Jesus into their own image, so many people like that around us. They've crafted a culturally defined, culturally refined religion using Christian terminology, but it has nothing to do with the Bible. They've done exactly what the cults do, ignoring the meanings of biblical terms, hollowing out the words, and then injecting into those terms their own culturally acceptable meanings.

Take time, some time to examine when you hear people talk about love. What do they really mean? It sounds more like indulgence. Or when they say, I love thus and such; they're talking really about lust. The word, believe, that means all manner of things. Sometimes it means something as, as vague and syrupy as, whatever generates warm feelings in me; that's believe. Sometimes, believe, means my own personal opinion about the way the world works. Look, there's all manner of spiritual presumption in this, taking God's name in vain, erecting an idol in God's place, and God will not ignore that wicked behavior. He will recompense the wicked. People better get ready, some of our own friends and neighbors, some of our coworkers and relatives, they'd better get ready. I don't know if you're looking around

folks, looking in the headlines, reading the headlines, but things are going from bad to worse, and the return of Christ is nearer now than it ever was. Time is running out. And the sin of spiritual presumption will not go unpunished.

Confrontation part of the preaching repentance continues. It's eventually getting to the essence here in the heart of the issue. We've walked through all these steps, five steps so far: The spiritual condition, the true motives, the root of, of religious works, the false assurance, the spiritual presumption. All of this confrontation leads to a final confrontation. At the end of the day, you've got to reveal the imminence of their spiritual danger. You've got to reveal the imminence of their spiritual danger, that's a sixth point. First warning we talked about spiritual presumption, assuming people have nothing to fear from God because he's their friend after all. Second of two warnings in verse 9, is meant to provoke a fear of God. Look at it in verse 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." John tells the people fruitless trees are cut down and burned. And there's already an axe, it's been aimed directly at your root, and it's held up high, ready

to fall. That is to say, judgment is imminent. It's upon you. It's here. And John's hope here is that the dire warning will provoke in them a healthy fear of the Lord, and that's our hope, too, folks, as we preach this same message and warn people, that people will abandon their spiritual presumption, that they'll fear the Lord and turn away from evil. The consequences are dire. This is the unpleasant part of preaching repentance, but it's so necessary. If we love others, we need to engage in this vital step of warning people.

Look, what kind of a doctor would know someone is dying of cancer but refuse to tell them because he doesn't want to trouble them? What kind of a fireman would drive by a burning house at night and refuse to wake up the people inside because after all, they're sleeping, they're peaceful, they love their pillows. That's bad. We'd fire those doctors and those firemen, right? They're a menace to society. Likewise, what kind of Christians are we if we refuse to tell people the truth? Beloved, we need to warn them. We're morally obligated to warn, because you know why? Because we know. You say, no I don't, well, I didn't know that. Well, you do now. We have to tell them. It's our job. That's what we're here for. It's the loving

thing to do. Think about it. God warned *us*, didn't he? He woke us up from our spiritual death. He didn't leave us in our sins. He was gracious to confront that. He called us forth like Lazarus from the tomb, and he didn't let us continue walking around in our grave clothes. He peeled those things off. He loved us enough to trouble our false sense of peace. He told the truth about our spiritual condition. He exposed the evil of our evil works. He called into question our every motive, every thought. We count him kind for doing so, a wonderful, merciful Savior. Rightly so. Shouldn't we do the same for others? Shouldn't we be his vessels of mercy to those who are currently vessels of his wrath prepared for destruction? Yes, we should.

Father, it's a hard message, a difficult message, but one we need to preach, one that we need to proclaim. We need wisdom on how to have difficult conversations like these. But we do need to have the difficult conversations. We pray for your mercy and your help in guiding and directing us and teaching us what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. Help us to spot opportunities for the Gospel and walk through the doors that you have opened for us. Give us grace and wisdom. Amen.