

How to Preach Repentance, Part 3

Luke 3:10-14

May 1, 2016

This is really the fifth message in a, in this series. So we'll start back where we started a few weeks back in Chapter 3, verse 1. Follow along as I read Luke 3:1 and following. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

"And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled,

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every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." 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 into the fire.' And the crowds asked him, '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.'"

That right there, folks, is how you preach repentance. There's an aspect of confrontation, verses 7 to 9, and then there's correction for those who express a sense of spiritual conviction, verses 10 to 14. And John, here, engages the people's questions. He tries to help them understand how to bear repentance-worthy fruits. And what we see here in this response of the crowds seems to indicate the internal work of the Holy Spirit, which for us is invisible on the outside.

We don't see it, but we do look for external evidence of the convicting, drawing, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit because we're trying to discern how to help the person in front of us. We're trying to determine what Christian love should look like in any given situation. We're trying to determine how Christian love ought to be expressed in any given situation, with any person that comes to us. The Spirit's hidden work of conviction and regeneration, it will always have external evidence. His hidden work, his internal work it becomes revealed at some point, whether it's the power of conviction to be discomfited about sin and righteousness and judgment, or whether it's the regenerating power that causes a sinner to be born again. Convicted sinners react. Regenerated sinners act.

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And the work of God does not remain hidden. And that's evident, here, even in our text, as the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, which is hidden from view in verses 7-9. All of it comes to light in verses 10-14. At the very least, what we're seeing here in the text in verses 10 to 14, we're seeing the evidence of spiritual conviction. By God's grace, the Spirit may regenerate some. He may cause some of these sinners to be born again.

But John had done his work. He'd done his part. He preached the confrontation of repentance and we covered those verses a couple of weeks ago. We saw six steps there of preaching confrontation. He called them a brood of vipers, and that was not just an insult. He was really identifying their true spiritual condition. They were not children of Abraham, they were children of snakes, of the Chief Serpent, Satan himself. He questioned their reason for coming to be baptized. He asked that question, calling them to examine their religious motives. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He called them to examine the true fruit of their religious works, telling them to bear fruits in keeping with repentance, worthy of repentance. He challenged the basis of their spiritual assurance. He rebuked

any spiritual presumption they had, any relying on their Abrahamic heritage, especially when their works showed something completely different. And, lastly, he warned them severely. He warned them sincerely about the coming wrath of God. They needed to know that they were in danger. They needed to know that even now, as they stood before him, the axe was aimed at the root of their lives. It was "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 was intent in his preaching on provoking the people, provoking them the fear of the Lord. He wanted them to reverence him, to be fearful of him, of coming judgment, so that they might turn from their sin. He wanted to prompt self-examination that would lead them to repentance and faith. He wanted them to find forgiveness of sins. Some came forward. Some came forward. Several groups of sinners came, and we see in the text, they were responding to John's preaching of repentance. There were the crowds, there were the tax collectors, and then there were the soldiers. And that represents the power of preaching repentance, it reaches every single heart. That was our first point last week. The power of preaching repentance. Luke records

these three groups of people coming to John for baptism because they're representative of the kinds of people that God saves. Pretty comprehensive. He reaches all kinds of people. These three groups of sinners show us what kind of sinners God saves. They signal God's intent, also, to provide a gospel that reaches to people of all kinds. I'm so thankful for that. I know you are.

The crowds, the first group there. They're the regular folks. They're people like you and me. These are friends and neighbors. These are relatives and coworkers. They're distracted, preoccupied; they're superficial, generally too distracted with trying to make a living. They're not really highly devoted to religious things. They're just trying to get by. The response of the crowds here, represents the power of preaching repentance to unsettle complacency, to provoke concern among the indifferent, the superficial, the unconcerned. The crowds illustrate for us the sufficiency of preaching repentance and the reach of repentance to convict just regular folks like most of the folks we're acquainted with. It may seem like they would be very responsive because they're so nice. But usually it's the really, really nice people who see no need.

Luke introduces for us a second group: tax collectors. We learned a good bit about them last week. These are the real sinners. These are the deep sinners. They're the committed sinners. They're the ones who have given themselves over to sin and money and pleasure and greed. Tax collectors attract around themselves a dubious line-up of, of unsavory characters. There are hooligans and thieves, brigands and prostitutes. They're all there, a company of sinners, a disreputable bunch, and they love to party together. We know who they are. Tax collectors, they represent the disenfranchised. They're the ones who are hiding in the shadows. They're at the dark, covert fringes of society. These are the people that are despised by the nobler people, and you know what? They could care less. They made that decision a long time ago. They're outcasts from society, from culture, but they've formed and embraced a new society, their own society. And within that society, they've developed their own culture. And through that, they've insulated themselves from the unfriendly glances of the more respectable people. They've learned to ignore the scorn, ignore the unkind remarks. The response here of the tax collectors, it represents the power of preaching repentance to convict and draw even the worst of sinners. They're not beyond the grace of God. Those who seem the

farthest gone are sometimes the quickest to listen. The message of repentance reaches to the very worst of sinners.

The third group: The soldiers. Luke introduces those who are falling under conviction here, as we said, these are likely soldiers who were dispatched by Herod Antipas, who is the ruler of that region, the tetrarch in that region. And he sent them, dispatched them there to investigate John's ministry. He wanted to make sure that John was not fomenting some kind of rebellion or provoking a popular uprising, leading the people against the government. That could have very well happened in that day. Herod Antipas didn't want that. Rome didn't want that.

So while these soldiers are there to check out John's ministry, to see what he was saying, they came under the influence of his preaching. They became convicted of their sins. These soldiers, as we said, were from all over the place. They were mercenaries, really, from places as far away as Europe and Iran, of mixed races. They spoke different languages originally, but they were able to communicate effectively by speaking the common language, the *koiné* Greek. This is how they heard and

understood John's preaching. These soldiers here, they were mercenaries, which meant they were able and willing to do the job of a soldier; that is, they were willing to kill. They were willing to inflict injury. They were willing to use the show of force to intimidate.

These guys projected power, and they were used as a means of social restraint. That's why Herod Antipas hired them; that's why he deployed them. And that which bound together this diverse band of mercenaries, it was a common allegiance to the one who had hired them for money. That's why they went to foreign lands; that's why they left their homeland, for money. It wasn't just about the paycheck. They also came with the prospect of earning a little extra income as well in whatever land they were occupying. We'll get to that later.

But the response of the soldiers, it shows the power of preaching repentance to cross every boundary we might think is significant. Ethnic boundaries, racial boundaries, social, cultural boundaries, the Gospel, the repentance message, goes across all of that. It doesn't matter who these men were. It

doesn't matter where they came from. It doesn't matter what their ethnic or cultural heritage, it doesn't even matter what their native language is.

John's preaching was able to reach in and provoke and humble every single heart. Message of repentance, the message of the Gospel, it is a universal message for a universe of sinners. It's a universal offer of the grace of God, which reaches all kinds of people. All of that really encourages us to trust God in preaching repentance because God's word has power. His Holy Spirit does the mysterious work of convicting, and drawing, and then regenerating sinners. And we just need to trust him and be faithful to preach the truth. We need to have courage to preach the truth and know that's why he put us here. That's why he left us here; didn't bring us straight to heaven when he saved us because he wants us to preach the truth.

We got into, second point last week. Toward the end of the message, we talked about how the preaching of repentance brings us to the practice of teaching true repentance. The practice of teaching true repentance. And this is where we begin to get

practical here. When teaching the corrective aspect of repentance, you want to first look for signs of true spiritual conviction. And then when you see those signs of conviction, you want to help people understand how to bear fruits worthy of repentance. You need to help them understand the process of true biblical change. So, as we said last week, and this is subpoint A, you first want to look for signs of true spiritual conviction. Look for signs of true spiritual conviction. The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers, they were all on the receiving end of John's very, very powerful confrontive preaching. And though these different groups represent a vast diversity, as we said last week, there's a unified response; they all say the same thing. Their expressions of spiritual conviction all came together in one question: What should we do? What should we do?

Look at verse 10, "The crowds asked him, 'What then shall we do?'" And again, in verse 12, the tax collectors asked him, "Teacher what shall we do?" Verse 14, the same question comes from the soldiers, "And we, what shall we do?" Same question and all following on the heels of John's preaching. It is a clear indication of spiritual conviction. These people are ready to

listen to instruction. Their hearts have been prepared by the preaching of John the Baptist, the preaching of repentance. John's ministry was having its intended effect. They wanted to know what fruit to look for exactly. If they're to bear fruits worthy of repentance, what should they do? Something must be done. They just needed to know what.

And we started making observations about this response, this unified response of the different groups, last week. There are a few more observations we can make here. That's what I wanna bring out for you right now. This is gonna help us as we engage in this kind of ministry, preaching repentance. This is gonna help us to recognize signs of true spiritual conviction. It's gonna give us some discernment this morning.

So, first let me give you a couple of grammatical details. These are going to be hidden from you in the English translation so I just wanna expose them to you first. The question that is posed by these three groups is posed each time in the aorist subjunctive. The aorist subjunctive. You're like, how do I spell aorist? Don't worry about it. I realize that means nothing to

you, but, but it just shows this verb tense, it shows what's being conveyed here. That basically, the question that all of these groups are asking, it's less about getting new information here. It has to do more with understanding moral duty. They're not trying to learn some new information that's completely foreign to them like how to write a computer program or something like that. They're trying to understand what's morally required. The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers with one voice, they're really asking the question: What is righteous? What does righteousness look like?

They realize they have not been behaving in a righteous way. That's a clear sign of spiritual conviction. They've come to see this as a moral issue. Repentance, for them, is a moral obligation. It's a matter of ethical change. Something has to be done. They're not pondering possibilities here. They're seeking here to set their wills in the right direction. They want to make behavioral changes. This is an issue of their conduct. This an issue of their behavior. It's an issue of how they live their lives. It's an issue of changing even their schedule, changing commitments, changing priorities, changing the calendar in their lives, their actions. They are coming here expressing the result

to change. You know what that demonstrates? That there's been some kind of an inward change of mind. The question that they're asking is an outward sign of an inward *metanoia*, an inward repentance, an internal repentance necessarily connected to external action. They are ready here to bear fruits of repentance.

There are some other signs I want you to see, and you can see just by observing the text. Now that you know what you're looking for, you can take a look at some of the outward signs that often accompany true spiritual conviction. I would say not always, but often. Often. First, the question that they ask is very simple and straightforward. They're saying, tell me, what to do? As we said, that's the verb, *poieo*. It's repeated seven times in this passage. There is a lot of emphasis on doing, a lot of emphasis on action. People who are experiencing spiritual conviction, they're usually generally very straightforward. Not much by the way of preamble, they just get to the point. You remember the contrast Jesus painted of the two sinners, the two people praying? One was a publican, a tax collector, and the other was a Pharisee, right? And the Pharisee had this long, flowing prayer, "I thank you, O my God, that I am not like other

sinner,” even this publican and he had this big speech to give God. What did the tax collector say? “Have mercy on me, the sinner.” That’s it. Straightforward. Getting to the point. Why is that? They want to be right with God. And they want to be right with God right now, immediately. They don’t want to waste any time chit-chatting about it. For them, what they long to do the most is please him. What they long for the most is a clear conscience before a holy, all-seeing God. They want to get to the point.

This is what Paul saw in the repentant Corinthians when they came under conviction for their sin. They were eager to work out repentance and to work it out immediately. In 2 Corinthians 7:11, Paul recounts the evidence of the Corinthian response. This is what he says as he recounts the evidence of Corinthian repentance, “For see what earnestness this godly grief has produces in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what desire for seeking justice! At every point you’ve proved yourself innocent in the matter,” or we could translate that last section, in every point you’ve proved yourselves repentant in the matter. They aren’t half-hearted and flippant,

like so many who profess religious faith today. The one who's are under conviction, they are earnest, eager, they're indignant, fearful; they long to do what's right, they are zealous for righteousness.

The simplicity of their question here, it points to a second set of observations we should make here connected to the simplicity of the question. The crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers, they come here with an utter lack of pretentiousness. There is no guile. There's no conceit. In fact, there is a total absence of pride here, total humility. Their humility comes across in how they present themselves. You don't see it as much in what that crowd says, that's general there. But you do see it in the tax collectors. You do see it in the soldiers. When the tax collectors came, notice that they show a deference to John by calling him, teacher, *diaskalos*. They put him in the place of authority and themselves under his authority. It's a sign of respect, a sign of deference. They acknowledge John as a teacher, and they acknowledge that they are there as learners. They don't walk proudly before him, chins up, heads held high; they come to him in humility. They recognize John as a prophet of God. He's there to give them life-giving words. They're there

to shut their mouths, really and listen. Why fill the air with their verbose language? Why not just be quiet, let him talk? Because God's speaking.

When the soldiers speak when they address John, it's on the heels of the tax collectors. The soldiers here actually associate themselves with the tax collectors. It's joined together in the text by a conjunction. The Greek is literally, what should we do, even we? Like, they're bad and you talked to them, so what about us? For us, What should we do? They're putting themselves on the same level as the tax collectors. It's in the way they pose the question. It's almost like they're expressing here a very faint-hearted faith, as if, well, there may yet be hope for sinners like us. Some of these soldiers, you have to understand, they'd been pretty brutal. They'd engaged in very violent acts. Some of them had done things that they can't undo, whether in the fog of war or simply in the fog of a bloodlust. Some of those things would make them look like moral monsters to most civilians, things that some people can't even comprehend. And they came forward, they lacked confidence that God would have anything left for them, but judgment, but wrath. And yet they came forward, reaching out in a very faint hope of

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mercy and grace. Even besides their actions, the soldiers considered themselves as outsiders, really, strangers, aliens to the promises of Israel. Most of them, as we said, were Gentiles, they knew they were in no position to demand. They were only able to look for some crumb of God's mercy. They had the same attitude of the Canaanite woman in Matthew chapter 15. I don't know if you remember her, but Jesus told her, remember, he said that, it seemed off-putting at first, but he was really drawing out her faith. And he said to her, "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," implying, You, Canaanite woman, are among the dogs. He was saying, basically, my priority is Israel. To turn away from that priority is not right. Her response in the next verse she said, Oh "yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She was not offended. She was just happy to be by the table. The word there that Jesus used for dogs not talking about the snarling, rabid dogs that used to tear people apart, run in packs. He was talking about little lap dogs, you know, that you have at your table. We've got one of those at our house. It's a little piece of carpet that runs around barking. Have you seen those? This is the Canaanite woman. She said, Lord, even the dogs, even the little lap dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. She was not put off. Her faith pressed

forward, humbly but persistently. She wanted to find out what crumbs were left for her. And that's the same attitude of these soldiers as well. They know they're wicked. They know they've done deplorable things, but they're humble, and they come seeking mercy.

Here's the point, folks, when people are under spiritual conviction, you're going to see them coming forward as humble, not proud. You're going to see them deferential, not arrogant. They've done the self-examination. They find themselves wanting and they look for clarity about working out their moral obligation to God. This is a vertical issue, and they're coming to you to just help them with that vertical issue. It's an issue of finding a clear conscience before God, and they don't want to waste any time. This desire here to be right with God it's a clear sign that a change has taken place in their heart. Both Testaments use words that highlight that internal change that is the starting point for repentance. The Old Testament words for repentance are *naham* and *shuv*. In the sense of that first word, *naham*, it's the picture of like breathing deeply, like sighing. There's an outward physical display of inward feelings, especially sorrow, maybe even like a groan. So *naham* is like the

feeling of pain and sorrow over something, regretting it to the point of, I've got to do something about this. You've felt this. I've felt this. It's the starting point for repentance, this feeling of remorse.

New Testament words describe repentance, *metamelomai* and *metanoeo*, and they express the same internal/external senses here. The verb *metamelomai* has the word, *mela* at its root, which is a word that means, care or concern. *Metamelomai* has the same kind of thing as *naham*, feelings of remorse, regret. That's what's going on at the heart level, *naham*, and *metamelomai*, when you see people coming forward with a desire to repent. True repentance is not gonna be without these feelings of spiritual conviction.

So when you see signs of true spiritual conviction, when you see these external expressions of an internal remorse, what do you do? What do you, as a preacher of repentance, what do you do? This is subpoint B in your outline. Well, you want to respond to those people by helping them. You want to teach them the steps of true biblical change. Teach them the steps of true

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biblical change. Look at those verses again, verses 10-14, "The crowds asked him, '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.'"

Notice how none of those instructions requires some religious act of contrition, some form of penance. There are no prescribed sacrifices here, no sacrifice eight lambs and then go say, you know, ten Hail Marys' and you know, climb the cathedral at Rome and you'll be good. No, no works of religious devotion here. Just simple instructions about concrete behavior. And notice every single one of John's prescriptions, it sends people back to their regular, normal lives. He's not saying, if you want to demonstrate repentance, come live the way I live. Come join me in the wilderness. Get on a diet of locusts and wild honey. Put on some of these really rough, unappealing, unattractive clothes. Join me in my little group here, my little

religious circle. Righteous obedience is not about doing the extraordinary. It's about the ordinary. It's about the routine of daily living. It's not uncommon for me to have conversations with people who tell me that they want to follow God, they insist that they want to follow God, and they tell me how they have some big plans for serving God. Some of these people maybe fancy themselves as having prophetic kind of a ministry. I've heard all manner of grandiose plans, things like confronting political corruption, bringing an end to world hunger, putting an end to child trafficking. All are very high and noble-sounding goals. Problem is, in many of their personal lives, they are an absolute moral mess. They live every single day and the way they live is absolutely scandalous. Their eyes are on the distant horizons and they ignore the path that's immediately before them, and they refuse to consider the steps of their feet. They care more about doing big things for God, and they care very little about pleasing Him in the small decisions of their private lives.

That's the real difficulty, isn't, to work out repentance in the day-to-day, mundane issues of life, to walk in righteousness before God in both public and in private, in both

word and deed, both internally and externally. And I'll be honest. I've come to become rather suspicious of that kind of religion. In Ephesians 5:15, Paul says, "Watch then how carefully you walk, not as unwise, but as wise." That is, watch your steps. Ignoring the change that is required in the day-to-day life that's a telltale sign of unwise living, and it is the clear evidence of a false profession of faith. But people who are repentant, they are those who are truly wise. The repentant, they fear the Lord. They're driven by those internal attitudes we mentioned earlier: *naham* and *metamelomai*, sorrow, remorse over sin. They must change, and they must make the change in their personal lives first before they run off to change the world.

Now, we talk about teaching the steps of true biblical change. Basically, you don't have to have a big long list here. Basically, there are just two steps. We're just talking about two steps in biblical change. That's what John prescribes here. Just two steps. Step one: put off. Step two: put on. We could say, step one: turn from sin; step two: pursue righteousness. Put off and put on. Repentance requires a turning from and a turning to. Obviously, if you turn, something is at your back

and something is at your front, right? Turn from and turn to. I mentioned the Old Testament words for repentance, *naham* and *shuv*. There's an internal sense of sorrow, remorse, and that's *naham*. But there's also an external change, as well and that's the word *shuv*. It refers to a turning around and going the other direction. Both of those together, *naham* and *shuv*, they involve the whole person. *Naham* looks internally at the sorrow that changes the mind, and then *shuv* looks externally at the change of direction, the result of a changed mind. The whole thing here is a picture of conversion.

Greek terms correspond to the Hebrew in some sense. I mentioned *metamelomai*, that internal sense of sorrow and remorse. That's accompanied with the word *metanoia*. The verb is *metanoeo*. That verb *metanoeo* describes a turning, and it's one that happens first, most fundamentally at the spiritual level. The word for the mind, *nous*, is at the root of the word *metanoeo*. So this is a verb that refers to a deep, internal change of mind, a turning of the will. It's like a rudder of a ship. That little tiny rudder turns the entire vessel in one direction or another. Our mind at the internal part of our life it's like the rudder that turns our entire life. You turn that

and it turns the entire life. That's why *metanoeo* is the key New Testament term for biblical repentance. It begins with the sorrow that's expressed by *metamelomai*, but it culminates and causes a change, *metanoeo*, true repentance. Now, if all that is Greek to you, don't worry, we'll keep it simple here. Just gonna keep two concepts in mind, okay? Put off and put on. Just two steps to biblical change. The call is to turn from and to turn to. Those are the two steps that John gives.

We've already covered the put off, the turn from aspect of repentance. That was the confrontation aimed at the general sins of the Jewish people, that was verses 7-9. We're going to see that the put off idea comes up again with the soldiers. But initially with the crowds and tax collectors, we see that John is telling them what to put on. He's telling them what to put on, the turn to aspect of repentance. As we walk through John's teaching here, we find that the biblical corrective goes deeper than we may have thought here. Okay? So just observe. To discover the process or the steps here, the, the turning from and the turning to, the steps of biblical change, we'll sort of in some of these things, reverse engineer these commands. Okay? We're going to start by identifying new behavior John's

instructing people to put on, both root and fruit. Then we're going to look back to see what behavior had to be put off, both at the root level and the fruit level, okay?

Let's start with John's instruction to the crowds. What did repentance look like for them? "The crowds asked him, 'What then shall we do?' And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, whoever had food is to do likewise.'" Pretty simple. John is prescribing here one thing, just one, generosity toward those in need. Those with two tunics, those with food, share with those who have none. Be generous to those in need. The tunic was just a, like a long undergarment that had sleeves, it was worn next to the skin like an undershirt. Men and women both, they wore tunics close to the skin, and if it was cold, they wore two tunics to keep them warm. This is pretty simple to understand here, pretty easy to grasp. Share with those who lack clothing. Share with those who lack food. The basic necessities of life. Now, the clear implication of John's prescription is this: These good people, these neighbors, friends, relatives, they weren't doing this. They were not doing it. If they had an extra tunic or two, if they had extra food, they'd been using it on themselves. They'd

been oblivious to those in need, those living in destitution and poverty. John isn't commanding here some kind of communism. People have a right to personal property. He's not commanding some kind of radical socialist ideal or something like that. What he's commanding is actually more penetrating and convicting because on a routine, daily basis people had to be constantly aware. To obey this command, the crowds had to be cognizant of others. To be generous, to share, to look out for people in need, you have to look out. You have to look out beyond yourself, beyond your own life, beyond your own schedule, beyond your own preferences and desires. You have to look for those who don't have. They had to look for opportunities to share with people in need.

So let me ask you a question. What virtue is required by John's command here? We see the fruit of regular habitual sharing with others, but what's at the root? What is the root that grows and produces this kind of sharing? It's the virtue of love, isn't it? Love. Love is the virtuous root that bears the righteous fruit of sharing, of generosity. That's what repentance meant for the crowds. They needed to love their neighbor as themselves. The clear implication here is that they were not

obeying this command, to love their neighbor as themselves. Anybody here feel convicted by this? We ought to because we don't do this well either, we have to admit.

Notice here that John does not go back to Leviticus 19:18 and command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He doesn't quote it in response to their question. He didn't need to. These people were Jews. They knew the commandments from childhood. So John, he just commands the fruit, which for them corresponded to true repentance. Live out love for neighbor. John calls for concrete actions of sharing, of generosity, a command which, if received in a truly repentant heart, it would produce that action. Now for those in the crowd who were truly repentant, you'd know it by the fact that they would begin to practice what? Sharing, right? They'd start to look. Maybe they'd be imperfect at first. Maybe inconsistent at first, but increasingly, over time, they'd begin to practice the habit of watching out for those in need, sharing what they have in excess, even in down to the very tunic on their bodies. The truly repentant in this crowd, they'd be willing to sacrifice personal comfort. They'd be willing to forgo a full belly to clothe and feed those without means. They'd be willing to endure

personal discomfort. They'd be willing to change their schedules. They'd be willing to make new commitments in their life, to make room for others.

Let's reverse engineer this a little bit, trace out the repentance in the crowds in very clear terms. What did the crowds need to put off? Well, at the fruit level, they needed to put off the single-minded concern they had for personal comfort, for personal satisfaction. That's the fruit level. At the root level, this means they need to put off self-centeredness, selfishness. They needed to name and confess those sins at the root and the fruit. They needed to ask God to forgive them for being focused on selfish concerns only and for neglecting the neediness of their neighbors. They needed to repent of selfish indifference. What did the crowds need to put on? What did they need to put on? What did they need to turn to? Well, at the root level, they needed to put on love, right? Colossians 3:12, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and be "loved," put on, "compassionate hearts." Love. Love and compassion for their neighbor. Mercy and concern for those in need. At the fruit level, they need to be watchful for those in need. They needed to practice looking for people to help. And whenever they found

people in need, they needed to share the basic necessities of life. No grumbling, no complaining, no whining about it. Share. Share at the cost of personal comfort. Share at the cost of personal satisfaction. That's the crowds, too busy making a living to notice those in need, too preoccupied with personal health, wealth, and prosperity to care for those in absolute destitution, indifferent to the concerns of others, selfishly in pursuit of personal comfort, satisfaction. The command to them, look, share your stuff. It's just stuff.

Next group, the tax collectors verses 12-13. "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.'" As we mentioned last time, tax collectors, they worked for tax franchises. They'd collected the indirect taxes required of the people by Rome: the poll tax, customs taxes, duties. These are the unpopular taxes that Rome collected as a foreign power, charging people that they'd conquered for the privilege of doing business in their own land. So obviously the Jewish people were not happy about this arrangement at all. It was adding the insult of foreign taxation to the injury of foreign occupation. This is, we are Americans.

This is taxation without representation, isn't it? It's the ultimate. So the owner of the tax franchise, he bid for the contract with Rome; having won the contract, they advon, they advanced the amount of money that they bid to purchase the collection rights. They hired a bunch of tax collectors to go out and extract money from the population. The owner of the tax franchise added his own percentage to that which was to be collected for Rome because he needed to make a profit for his enterprise. Tax collectors, here, working for the franchise, they were hired and authorized to collect a certain amount from the population, the amount owed to Rome, the amount for the tax franchise. But the incentive for many of these unscrupulous tax collectors, the incentive to be unpopular with their friends and neighbors, the Jewish people, to extract money for the purpose of giving it to a foreign power incentive, was the opportunity for them to jack up the percentages, to assess goods dishonestly, to make money by taking advantage of their position over the people.

And notice that John does not tell the tax collectors to stop being tax collectors. He doesn't tell them to quit their job and get into another line of work. He simply tells them,

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“Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” In other words, be a tax collector if you wish. John expresses no moral issues with the profession itself, which is remarkable, by the way, for a prophet of God to affirm the right of a foreign, conquering power to collect taxes from conquered Jews. Not popular. But John is in agreement with Jesus’ words later, right? Luke 20:25, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Tax collection profession, in and of itself, that’s not the issue. The issue was the greed that motivated so many in the tax collection business. The issue is the greed, so John tells the tax collectors here, be a tax collector, if you like. It’s lawful for you to be employed as a tax collector, only collect what you’re authorized to collect. Don’t collect more. The tax collectors, in submission to their employers, they could do what they were hired to do, but they could no longer make dishonest assessments. They could no longer add exorbitant percentages for personal profit. The grammatical construction, here, of the command, it calls attention to the greed that’s involved with what the tax collectors were doing. John says, be a tax collector, but do it lawfully. Be an honest tax collector.

Now as one commentator put it, an honest tax collector was in principle a starving tax collector. So what John was calling them to do, not in principle maybe, but in effect, it really did threaten their livelihood. The tax collectors would see their profit margins drop significantly, and maybe they could eke out a living as an honest tax collector, but not likely. So repentance for these tax collectors, it could require an entirely new line of work. And if that was the implication, were they willing to do that? You see, that's what true repentance requires sometimes, to change your life completely, to get into a new line of work. Is following God with a clear conscience. Is it worth it to you? Those who were repentant, they answer that question with a resounding, Yes!

Let's reverse engineer this one as well. What did the repentance of the tax collectors entail? What did the tax collectors need to put off? Well, at the fruit level, they needed to put off the practice of using the system to cheat people. What they were practicing was a form of institutionalized robbery. That needed to stop. At the root level, the tax collectors needed to put off the heart of greed, the love of money. They were serving mammon, not God. It relied

on unrighteous mammon to get them what they wanted, to buy friends, to purchase pleasures, whatever. They need to repent of their idolatrous love of money. What did the tax collectors need to put on? Well, at the root level, they needed to put on a heart of contentment, trusting not in riches for provision and satisfaction, but trusting in God and God alone. At the fruit level, they needed to be willing to work, not work the system for their advantage, but to work hard with their own hands. The repentance that was required for tax collectors, it's summarized by Paul's command in Ephesians 4:28, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." What's the motivation? What's the repentance required of a thief? Not just stop stealing, but start sharing. So, stop stealing, work hard so that you can share. That's the idea. Generosity, not greed.

So we see the fundamental issue once again is love of neighbor, right? Here's where we see that the tax collectors and the crowds, they're really guilty of the same sin. They're both guilty of failing to love their neighbor as themselves. The crowd would have considered themselves above the tax collectors

because they didn't use the system to cheat people, but their indifference to people in need, same effect. Their failure to share, that put them in the same category as the tax collectors. All of them are failing to love their neighbors as themselves. All of them are needing to repent. Tax collectors have no problem recognizing their low status in society. They have come to terms with that. Their duty is to repent of their lust and greed. But the crowd, many of them would be reluctant to admit they were on the same level as tax collectors. They'd be reluctant to admit they're on the same level as those thieves, those brigands and hooligans. That they are just as guilty before God. So the crowds had an added sin, the sin of pride, of believing themselves better than the common sinner. Look, it's only by the grace of God that any of these people repent.

Well, that's the crowds, the tax collectors. Let's consider the soldiers. What about them? "The 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.'" You may have noticed, but John's answer to the crowds commanded a positive behavior. His response to the tax collectors corrected a negative behavior, but his

answer to the soldiers, he does both. He corrects a negative behavior and he commands a positive behavior. You can see that the response to the soldiers here is the most comprehensive answer of all three. I believe there's a reason for this. I think he was briefer with the crowds and tax collectors because they shared a common Jewish heritage. As Paul said of his fellow Jews in Romans 2:18, They are those who, "know God's will," and, "they are able to, "approve what is excellent because they are instructed from the law." That is to say, there has been a prevenient work in their life of law teaching. They'd grown up being instructed from the Law of Moses. They'd read the prophets. They'd heard it in the synagogues. This is just a reminder. The crowds, the tax collectors, even though they came from opposite ends of the social spectrum, they shared a common cultural milieu. They came from the same background. They all knew this Levitical command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's not that they didn't know the truth, it's that they weren't practicing the truth.

But the soldiers, being from various Gentile countries, with all different ethnicities and cultures, they didn't have the Mosaic Law as the backdrop of their thought life. According

to Ephesians 2:12, as Gentiles, they were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, they were strangers to the covenants of promise. So John gives them a little extra help. He clarifies for them exactly what to put off and exactly what to put on. The way the ESV translates the verse, it looks like there is just one thing to put off, extortion, which they were engaging in by threats and false accusations. And that's really an accurate way to render the sense here. But the way it's actually written in the Greek, John is actually prohibited two things, because there are two verbs here, extorting through force on the one hand, making false accusations on the other hand. Both of them had at the root a desire for money. They both involved getting money.

But it's interesting to parse this out a little bit, to kind of break it out a little bit to see what is really going on. The first verb, extortion through force, the root word literally means to shake or to cause to quake. It's the root word *seismos*. Do you recognize that? We get the word, seismic, as in earthquake: geological, troubling, intensified event. It's intensified here with a preposition to give the comprehensive meaning not just, to shake, but to shake violently. It's like a big earthquake. Translated in the ESV, extort by threats. That's

what these soldiers were doing. They were intimidating people. They were causing people to shake, to quake, to be terrified, afraid. Why? Because frightened people are willing to forfeit money just to get that threat away from them. These guys are like the original Mafioso. They offer protection in order to keep your business safe from thugs and hooligans. And by the way, if you don't pay up, we'll break your legs. That's this.

The second verb translated in the ESV is extort by false accusation. It's a very descriptive word here. Literally, the word means, to show the figs, like fig trees. I'm not a fig farmer, but evidently to show the figs, the farmer had to shake the tree, the fig tree aggressively. If you shake the branches, the ripe figs drop to the ground, you gather them up. So this provided a picture for a common metaphor of the, what we would call, shaking someone down. That's what is going on here. The method for extorting money in this case, it wasn't the threat of physical violence; shaking someone down involved the threat of false accusation, trumped-up charges, which could lead to a false imprisonment, which could really disrupt your life. Put a little gift in the hand of that friendly soldier, I can make all these charges go away, disappear. It's basically blackmail.

So that was the sinful fruit that needed to be abandoned, extorting money from people through physical intimidation, through blackmailing people by false accusation. What's at the root of this kind of behavior? Well, basic greed is certainly at the root of this behavior; in fact, that is part of the reason foreign soldiers became mercenaries. They used the skills that they had, their adeptness at making war, at fighting battles, martial arts and all that. They went off to make money in foreign context. Once they made enough money to improve their station in life, they could return home to buy that farm, start that business, raise a family, or whatever. So John called them to repent of that greed. Not just by putting off the sinful behavior, but by putting on righteous behavior. Righteousness meant not just uprooting the root of greed, but replacing that greed with the root of contentment, gratitude. The soldiers needed to be content with their wages, to accept their pay. Again, notice John doesn't command the soldiers here to stop being soldiers. Military is a noble profession, nothing wrong with being a soldier. In fact, we learn from Romans 13:1-4, that the military and the police, those functions of government, are divinely appointed restraining forces for the good of society.

This is what Paul says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist," have been, "instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one that is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain." Cops don't carry guns for nothing. "He's the servant of God," again, "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." That passage was very meaningful to me personally as a brand new Christian because I came to Christ when I was in the military. I first read this passage while I was heading off to war. The soldiers who stood before John, if they could forsake greed and pursue instead contentment with their wages, you know what? They'd be a part of God's restraint on human society. They would become a tool of God's common grace. It's not just allowable to be a soldier or be in the police force, joining the military, joining law enforcement, it's not just tolerable, it's a noble profession. Military, law enforcement, they can be used as God's servants for the good of

others. They can be very tangible expressions of the call to, get this, "love your neighbor." In fact, we authorize them as a society to protect our neighbors, don't we? To protect their personal property and their livelihood, their physical safety. We want them to do that. It's loving your neighbor, obviously. Extortion through intimidation and blackmail that is the very opposite of loving your neighbor as yourself. The soldiers needed to repent of that, be content with their wages, live righteously, become a tool of God's common grace.

Listen folks, I know you're not into this. This is Greeley, Colorado. But there are groups out there who want to turn you against the cops. They want to turn you against the military and against law enforcement and all that. Don't do it for a minute. Don't entertain and harbor those kind of thoughts for one second. It's unrighteous. You're battling against God in Romans 13. I understand that there are sinful people who do those professions. You need to hold them accountable for that, but do not marginalize and do not slander law enforcement and military.

So I hope you see the need to put off and put on and see these as aspect of repentance illustrated here in these three groups. Each group, the crowds, tax collectors, the soldiers, each of them had sins that characterized them. Each of them had specific ways to work out repentance. In each case, the visible fruit, it represented what was deep at the root. John had confronted those who came for baptism. And the fact that some had been convicted here of their sins, the fact that some sought to obey John by bearing fruits worthy of repentance, this is illustrating for us, the power of preaching repentance. When John saw the signs of true spiritual conviction, he responded with compassion, with help, specific concrete help, not just platitudes, not just, "be warm, be filled," but tangible instruction teaching people the steps of biblical change. That's what we need to do folks; we need to do the same thing for people. And we need to do the bold, courageous work of confronting sin. We need to follow up with those who respond. Those who show the signs of spiritual conviction, we need to teach them the steps of biblical change. We need to teach them to put off sin and put on righteousness. That takes time. It takes energy. It takes thought. It takes prayer. It takes biblical understanding. That's what we're called to do. We can't be lazy with this. And beloved, we need to be practicing this as

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well, don't we? In fact, Martin Luther called the Christian life a life of repentance, day by day putting off and putting on, turning from sin and turning to righteousness. That's how we need to live, folks, so our lives are bearing witness to the power of the Gospel to transform from the inside out. Now you know how, alright? Let's do it together and pray and ask the Lord for help.

Father, now that our consciences are instructed, our minds our instructed, our consciences are informed, we pray that you would help us by your mercy, by your grace, by your spirit, by your word to put this into practice in our lives.