



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 tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ 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.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,*

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

⁷ 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?”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. 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.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ 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 fire. ¹⁷ 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.”

18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

Some people don't communicate very well. This past week I received an email that was not very complimentary.

Subject: Analysis report
Date: 2018-08-02 10:04
From: Alven <alvenmzdonnell@gmail.com>
To: <office@grace-efca.org>

Hi,

Hope you are doing well.

We came across your website during an industry specific audit and I have to say we weren't very impressed.

After insulting me in the opening paragraph, I'm not likely to buy what they are selling, am I? This was not a good introduction to them. In the same way, your first impressions of John the Baptist may not have been very positive. I'm not sure you'd want John as a dinner date. But then again, he wore a camel hair garment and ate locusts and honey, so he probably wouldn't want to come over anyway. John was blunt. But he had to be blunt because this was deadly serious business. Eternal life hung in the balance. So he cut to the chase. *7 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? 8 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.*

In the parallel passage in Matthew, we are told that John scolded "the Pharisees and Sadducees." That makes sense to pick on the religious leaders, so we can assume that the Pharisees and Sadducees were part of the crowds. But I don't think he was only scolding the religious leaders. Certainly they were not the only ones in the crowd who needed John's rebuke. John was saying that...

1. True repentance does not depend of self-effort or pretense.

Many who were baptized by John were no doubt serious about it. In a few minutes we'll get to those folks, but first, John addressed the pretenders among them.

Now some might say that John was too harsh by calling them a brood of vipers. I love this quote from Martin Luther. "All pastors and ministers ought to have much sympathy for their poor straying sheep, and instruct them in the spirit of meekness. They cannot be straightened out in any other way. Oversharp criticism provokes anger and despair, but no repentance."

As a general rule, this is definitely true. Just as good parenting requires a calm demeanor to have the most impact, so does good shepherding of a church. However, rank hypocrisy needs to be called out for what it is. I think when we read this, we tend to see John as being almost unhinged, like he was a raving lunatic, fresh out of the desert who yelled at everyone who came to him. I

don't think that was true. I think John was a humble man who was obeying God's call on his life. He saw through the pretense of at least some in the crowds, so he called them out.

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. These people were trusting in their Jewishness but not in their Jewish God. It's doubtful that they were even coming to be baptized. We know from the parallel passages that the religious leaders came to question John. In a sense, they held a mock courtroom there by the banks of the Jordan River. They wanted to know if he was the Christ, Elijah or the prophet. They were not there to repent. This was an interrogation. They were relying on their Jewishness, so he attacked their foundation. They were false converts of the worst kind. They were false converts who also possessed immense religious power and they already felt threatened by John's ministry.

This reminds us that anything less than genuine repentance is false repentance. People can tell when you offer an apology that is not genuine, how much more does God see through our pretense. False repentance or false piety is dangerous because...

2. True repentance is baptized by the Holy Spirit and not by fire

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ 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 fire.

There are actually three different baptisms in this passage. There was John's baptism of repentance. It's preparation for the Lord but it's not quite the same as believer's baptism that we practice. It was obviously a water baptism.

And then there are two different baptisms that Jesus would perform—baptism of the Holy Spirit and baptism by fire. Baptism of the Holy Spirit is the same thing as being regenerated. It's a work of the Spirit that "cleanses us from all unrighteousness," to use the language of 1 John 1:9 we used last week. All true believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit at conversion.

But the baptism by fire is pure judgment. John described it in the very next verse.

¹⁷ 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."

Two things are happening here. First, the wheat is separated from the chaff. This is the sheep and the goats, believers and unbelievers. Then, the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire. This is the baptism with fire. This was a dire warning to the pretenders who had gathered around John but it's also the most serious warning to anyone who does not repent. Unquenchable fire is just what it sounds like it is. Lest we think this is just uptight John the Baptist, Jesus himself used almost identical language in Mark 9.

And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' (Mark 9:47-48)

Nothing less than true repentance will save you from the baptism with fire and give you a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

3. True repentance will result in fruits of repentance

In response to the false piety of the religious leaders, John told the crowds to “bear fruits in keeping with repentance.” John Calvin has a very helpful comment on this topic.

As I tried to make very clear, repentance is not a work. You do not have to stop sinning before you get saved but you do need to make a commitment to do so, a commitment to turn away from your sin and turn to God for forgiveness. Remember, repentance literally means a changing of your mind. You are changing your mind in the sense that you decide that your sin is wrong and that turning to Christ is good. So repentance is not a work but if you have genuinely repented, your repentance must result in fruits of repentance.

At least some in the crowd listening to John understood this. They started asking the right question. ¹⁰ *And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?”*

First of all, this is always the right question to ask. I realize they are technically asking John but in reality, they are asking the Lord. What then shall we do? Most often, the answer to that question is clearly spelled out in Scripture. If you’re asking whether or not you should move in with your boyfriend or girlfriend, you should not even have to ask the question. Actually, most of the time, the problem is that we don’t even ask this question. What then shall we do? Each morning when our feet hit the ground as we slip out of bed, the question on our lips should be, “What then shall we do?”

The crowds asked this question, the tax collectors asked this question and even the Roman soldiers asked this question. Amazingly, the answers that John gave were all remarkably similar. As I read them again, see if you can pick out a common theme.

¹¹ *And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.”* ¹² *Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”* ¹³ *And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”* ¹⁴ *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.”*

Do you see a common theme? The common thread in every answer relates to money and possessions. The crowds were to share their clothes and food. Tax collectors were to be honest and soldiers were not to extort money and to be content with their wages. Do you see, all of them related to money and possessions? It makes sense that John told the tax collectors something to do with their profession. It is well known that this is how tax collectors made so much money. They would collect more than what was owed by the people and pocket the rest. Zaccheus became incredibly wealthy by doing this. John went after that sin of greed because that’s how the tax collectors could show they were serious about repentance. Zaccheus told Jesus, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” That was major repentance on his part.

So it makes sense that John went after the scummy part of being a tax collector, but John could have told the soldiers anything at all. He could have told them to obey their superiors. There are many sins Roman soldiers would need to show fruits of repentance but he went after their sins related to money. The same goes for the crowds. John could have mentioned any number of a myriad of sins but he chose clothing and food.

What is the significance of this common thread? One thing it shows for certain is how money and possessions lay hold of our hearts. Obviously these are not the only sins that need repentance, but they are common to every man and woman. Money and possessions are at the core of our lives and existence. Some people will extort and lie and do whatever it takes to get more money and possessions but most of us just let it quietly rule our lives. If we don't have enough of it, we worry and fret or else we become workaholics to get more of it. If we have enough, we are poor stewards of it and don't share freely and give generously. Again, this is far from the only sin that we have or that the crowds gathered around John had, but it's fascinating that this is the only one he mentioned. It is so pervasive that it was not just one example of what it means to bear fruits of repentance, but it was the only example that John used.

But did you also notice how practical the examples are. They are very specific and action oriented. The actions flowing from repentance were specific to the sin. If collecting more taxes than is authorized is wrong, words would not be enough. You can't just say "I'm sorry" and you're off the hook. You've got to do something about it. And that something is always related to the sin itself. This is why Zaccheus gave away so much of his money. He didn't only want to stop doing the bad he had done. He wanted to make restitution toward everyone he had cheated. I honestly think that Zaccheus would have been bankrupt by the time he fulfilled that pledge. But I don't think he cared. Because he had Jesus, he was willing to give up everything else.

Here's another key observation. To whom were these three groups of people expressing repentance? There's no mention of God here, is there? When they asked the question, What shall we do? John did not tell them to get down on their knees and ask God for forgiveness. But he did tell them to make things right in their relationships. Asking God for forgiveness is implied, for sure. All sin is ultimately against God but most of our sins also offend others. Fruits of repentance will usually be aimed at making peace with another person.

This is why the 7 A's of Confession from Peacemaker's Ministry is so incredibly helpful.

1. Address everyone involved (All those whom you affected)
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
3. Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
4. Acknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)
5. Accept the consequences (Such as making restitution)
6. Alter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)
7. Ask for forgiveness

Here's another helpful resource from Jeff Vandersteldt, the root to fruit exercise from his book, Gospel Fluency. All of our actions are like fruit hanging from a tree. From John 15 we know we are to bear good fruit and from Luke 3 we know that genuine repentance is to bear fruit. But we

need a good way to evaluate that fruit. So here's the first question—and you'll see that they are numbered from 4 to 1.

4. How should I live?

What is hanging on the fruit of my life? (Thoughts, words and actions)
 This is similar to question that the crowds asked John, isn't it? "What shall we do?" In this question, we are looking at our fruit, as it says in parentheses, our thoughts, words and actions. I'm going to take one issue and use these four questions to flesh out this process. Let's say that your fruit is worry and anxiety. This is the step of awareness. It's the obvious or sometime not so obvious fruit in your life. So worry is hanging off of your tree.

The next question is:

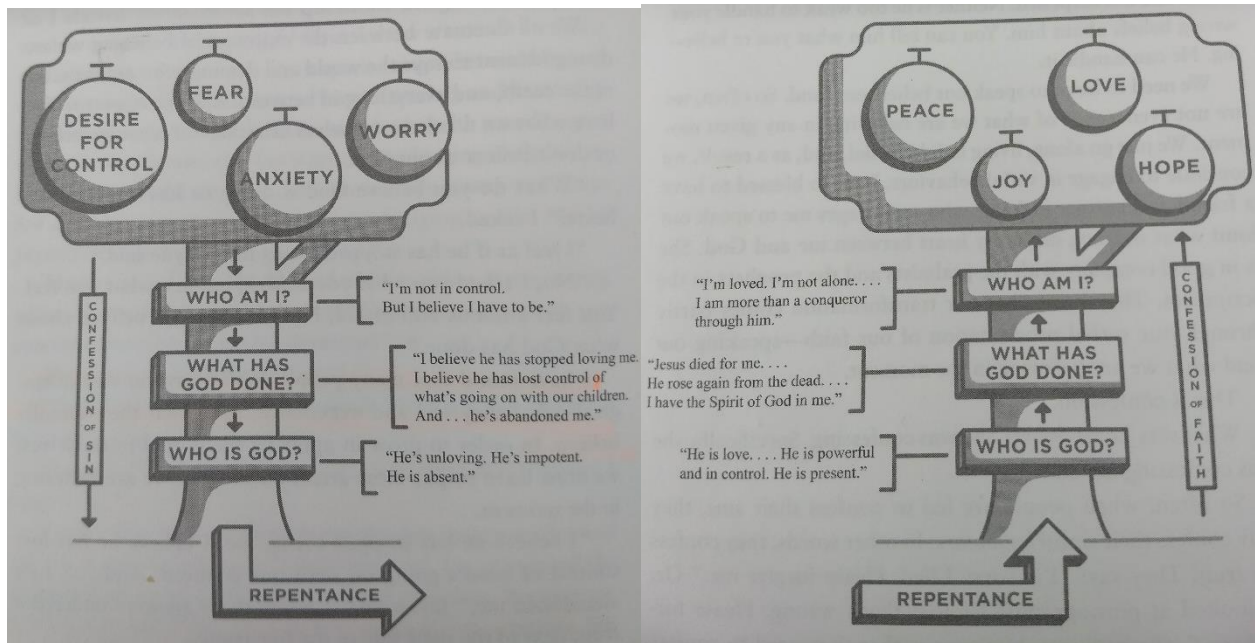
3. Who am I?

What do my thoughts, words and actions reveal that I'm believing about my identity?
 All worry has at its core, some level of wanting to be in control. So you're likely to be believing something like this. "I'm not in control, but I believe I have to be."

2. What has God done (in and through Jesus)?

What does my belief about my identity say about the work of God?
 If you are honest, if you continue to dig deeper into your beliefs, you are feeling some of this. "I believe he has stopped loving me. I believe he has lost control of what's going on with our children. And...he's abandoned me."

Now these feelings may not be palpable to you. They may not be in the forefront of your mind, but again, if you are honest, these beliefs will be present at some level. Logically, they have to be there. Otherwise, you would not feel worried or anxious.



1. Who is God?

What does my belief about the work of God say about his character?
If you follow this path to its natural conclusion, you end up with something like this at your core belief about God. “he’s unloving. He’s impotent. He is absent.”

When you verbalize these beliefs, they are shocking to us. We would never formally state these as our beliefs but in a practical sense, we are atheists. We really do not believe what we say we believe.

Once you have identified the core of your—what you now know to be false beliefs—you can repent of them. Change your mind about them. Call them out for what they are. Fundamentally, almost all of our struggles are related to unbelief—or a small belief.

So the next step is to work back through the same four questions but this time, don’t insert what you think or feel but rather insert what the Scriptures say is true. This becomes a process of renewing your mind and heart.

1. Who is God?

He is love. He is powerful and in control.

2. What has God done?

Jesus died for me
I have the Spirit of God in me

3. Who am I?

I’m loved. I’m not alone.

4. How should I live?

If all of these other things are true, then the fruit that will start to be produced in my life will be things like joy, hope and peace instead of worry, fear and anxiety.

When you look at the Christian life in this way, you begin to realize that we don’t merely need to repent of the so-called “big sin” but that we truly do need to repent and believe daily.

Rich Maurer
August 5, 2018