

Sunday, January 9, 2022 | Reset

Week 2 | Luke 3:1-14 | “New Year, Old Mistakes”

Announcements:

We'll be having Bob's ordination on Sunday, January 30th, 2022. The examination will be on Saturday, January 29th.

Last week, we dove into Jesus' first recorded words on earth. They came after he had been away from Mary and Joseph for nearly a week. Mary took the Lord's absence personally and demanded from him an explanation. Jesus responded by saying, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” Essentially, his words not only explained his location (i.e., Where else would he have been if not at his dad's place?), but they also explained his vocation (i.e., What else would he be doing if not the work of his father?). Likewise, to reset our lives in this new year, we too must **embrace God's plan for our lives and reject all others.**

Today, we forward in Luke's account to John the Baptist. And his preaching will help us answer the question, “What happens when we make the old mistakes in a new year?”

READ: Luke 3:1-14 (ESV)

¹ 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."

Now, why does Luke give us seven different names at the beginning of this chapter? As a faithful historian, he wanted to root the events of chapter 3 in a historical context. Sadly, we do not have the time to go through those names and talk about their impact on the region. But, suffice to say, John the Baptist entered a highly complex socio-political climate. From Caesar in Rome to multiple regional governors in Palestine to religious leaders in Jerusalem, the titular Baptizer had a tall order when it came to proclaiming the good news of the Messiah's imminent arrival.

Essentially, John's ministry had a three-fold approach: baptism, repentance, and forgiveness. Now, it's worth pointing out that John's baptism in Luke 3 is different than the baptisms we do here at Grace Pointe. John's baptism was one of forgiveness; meaning, it was a way by which the Israelites might be forgiven of their sins. This is distinct from our own baptism in that we do not baptize to be forgiven; we get baptized because we are forgiven. Rather than it being a baptism that prepared one for the coming Messiah, as John's was, our baptism celebrates the Messiah who has already come and has already forgiven those who, through faith alone, believe in his name. In this way, it is important to note, John's baptism is inferior to the baptisms which followed the resurrection. In fact, Paul encountered disciples of John during his travels in Acts 19, where he actually had to re-baptize them in the name of Jesus to complete the work that John had started.

Luke not only roots these events in a historical context, but he also roots John's ministry in a scriptural context. After running through those world leaders, Luke immediately turns to an Old Testament passage that literally predicted John's ministry. Specifically, he quotes from Isaiah 40:3-5. John is the "voice of one crying in the wilderness," given that he made his home in desert places during his lifetime. Matthew even tells us that John wore camel's hair and ate

wild honey (cf. Mat. 3:4). He was very much a living, breathing sermon illustration. He used his eccentric lifestyle to highlight his message.

And what was John's message? Luke, quoting from Isaiah 40, tells us that John's purpose was to encourage his listeners to "[Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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....](#)" This is all language that is reminiscent of a coming king. It was often the duty of those in the countryside to literally prepare the roads so that the king could more efficiently and safely arrive at his destination. Meaning, they would shore up roads, so any rough places like potholes or steep inclines would be leveled. Their goal would be to make the streets as level as possible.

As we know from Luke 1:16-17, this was John's purpose. However, rather than become a construction worker who oversaw the building of literal roads, John became a preacher; instead of preparing streets, he prepared **people**. As we already pointed out, He did this by proclaiming a message of baptism, repentance, and forgiveness. And any who accept John's message and make their hearts straight, filled, and humbled before the coming king is given a promise: they will "[see the salvation of God.](#)"

Luke then dives into the meat of John's sermon. He begins by calling his audience a "brood of vipers." Admittedly, not the best way to endear an audience to its speaker, but it is an effective way of shocking them out of their complacency. And he does this to make a stark comparison between who they thought they were (i.e., offspring of Abraham) with who they actually were (i.e., offspring of snakes). What's more, in all likelihood, there's also an implicit accusation that they're the child of the great serpent himself, the devil (cf. Mat. 13:38; Jn. 8:44). You see, the Israelites had a fatal flaw in their theology. They thought that since they were Israelites, they would be exempt from God's judgment. John dispels this faulty reasoning stating that, if God wanted to you, he could take lifeless "[stones](#)" and "[raise up children for Abraham.](#)" Their biological connection to some long-dead ancestor had little bearing on their eternal security. Just as Abraham had to do, every person under the sound of John's preaching had to make a conscious decision to follow God.

After all, the urgency for such a decision was at a level never before seen in the history of Israel. John even says, "[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.](#)" Essentially, John was saying, "Hey! Do you think God's judgement is some far-off thing? Wake up!! The Lord has already fueled his chainsaw and sharpened its teeth. He is ready—like, right now—to rip out, root and stem, any unfruitful tree. God has even kindled a fire and it is hot and ready."

When one considers all the implications of John's words, it's not surprising that many responded to his preaching. Like all good preachers, John led his audience to decide whether or not they would follow God in their specific context. And, interestingly, three different people groups came before the Baptizer to ask about how they might show what John called "fruits of repentance." And for each people group, John gave each a practical response.

i. The public was to act with charity towards their neighbor.

The first to approach John was "the crowds." These represented your average Joes or people who did not hold any power but were simply trying to live out their everyday lives. This faceless crowd typified the general public. And John's advice to them was, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Basically, to summarize John's words, he said, "clothe and feed the needy."

No one person can help everyone. But everyone can at least help one person. John would have the general public gaze at the needs immediately within eyesight and meet those needs. John instructed "every-man" to find someone who didn't have a jacket, and he was to give that person a coat. John told the "every-woman" to locate someone who did not have enough food, and she was to provide them with food.

What does it look like for a community to truly repent before God? What are the so-called "fruits of repentance" for our society? **Be charitable.** "Clothe the naked," John said, "and feed the hungry."

Example: Providing Christmas during the pandemic the last two years.

ii. The politician was to act with equity towards their neighbor.

The second group to approach John was the "tax collectors." And, given the fact they were representatives of the Roman government, it's helpful for us to think of them as politicians for reasons that'll become apparent.

Now, time does not allow me to fully express to you how truly despised this group of people was. This is why I called them "politicians" in my main point to hopefully convey how hated tax collectors were at this time. And, admittedly, a lot of why they were so despised had to do with how messed up the Roman taxation system was. But, suffice to say, it is hard to find a person or vocation that was more cursed and condemned in first-century Jewish thought than that of the tax collector. Not only did synagogues excommunicate any Jew who took on this job, but many first-century Jewish writers also likened tax collectors to gamblers, Sabbath-breakers, robbers,

and, even, murderers.¹ Once we understand this, we can see how pointing out that someone, like Jesus, ate with “tax collectors and sinners” would’ve been a severe accusation meant to demean, defame, and discredit that person (cf. Mat. 9:10-13).

John's advice to them about how they might bring forth "fruits of repentance" tells of how corrupt their taxation process was. He tells them not to “collect” any “more than” they were “authorized to do.” In other words, don’t double-dip!

Considering that Rome delegated taxes to the highest bidder, it’s no wonder that many tax collectors took more than their fair share. Say, for instance, that Rome required the tax collector to take \$25 for every \$100 from each person in a region. Generally speaking, the tax collector would take \$40 for every \$100 from each person. The extra \$15 would not only go to pay for the military force needed to take such a sum from the average person but should the tax collector play his cards right, any extra money left over after he paid Rome and his enforcers would go straight into his own pocket. It doesn’t take a lot of thinking to see why the office of tax collector was both lucrative and loathed.

Hence, what does it look like for a politician to truly repent before God? What are the so-called “fruits of repentance” for the tax collector? ***Be equitable***. Taxes are necessary to civilization. But the official shouldn’t equate political gains with financial gains. The best government is the one that takes what it needs only. No more. No less.

Example: In 2015, the median household income was nearly \$60K.² Between the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of government, the median household income was nearly \$220K, almost four times as much as the average citizen.³ It seems working for the US government is as lucrative as working for the Roman government.

iii. **The police were to act with civility towards their neighbor.**

The third and last group to approach John were some "soldiers." These would’ve been military men who would’ve made their livelihood serving the Roman government. For this reason, it’s helpful for us to think of them as officers of the law, i.e., police. Although, it’s worth pointing out that it's likely these so-called “soldiers” may have also been very ones hired to protect the

¹ Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 311-312.

² Proctor, Bernadette D., Jessica L. Semoga, Melissa A. Kollar, “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015,” September 13, 2016, *The United States Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.html>, [accessed, January 7, 2022].

³ General Editors, “Salaries,” January 2015, *The U.S. House of Representative Press Gallery*, <https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/salaries>, [accessed, January 7, 2022].

tax collectors just mentioned. Either way, like the general public and the politicians before them, these police officers ask John what it looks like for them to repent. He responds by saying, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

This advice is akin to the guidance John gave the politicians in that he wanted these police to act equitably with their fellow citizens. Like the tax collectors, he wanted them to stop using their power for their own gains. However, the difference between the two situations was that the tax collectors’ actions were legal; whereas, the soldier’s actions were illegal. Even at this time, using force to extort money from one’s neighbor wasn’t okay. What’s more, it seems they also used some form of perjury as John tells them to stop using “false accusations.”

Hence, what does it look like for a policeman to truly repent before God? What are the so-called “fruits of repentance” for the soldier? *Be civil*. As officers of the law, John wanted the military to treat their own citizens legally. Do not abuse your power to hurt your fellow neighbor in the process, just so that you might better your own station.

Example: I tried searching “examples of a corrupt military,” and Google just laughed at me. So, I'm going to trust that you see how applicable John's words are, even today.

SO, WHAT’S THE TAKEAWAY?

Notice, with everything John said, he never once advised extremism.⁴ John does not call the crowd to be like him, living in the wilderness, eating bugs, and wearing camel's fur. He doesn't call the tax collectors to completely stop collecting taxes. And he doesn't call the soldiers to take up arms against the Roman government. Nowhere do we see John telling the people to adopt a lifestyle of asceticism, separatism, or terrorism. Instead, the thread which ties all three responses together is that of behavioral change at the lowest common denominator: neighbor to neighbor.

Repentance without the fruits of repentance isn’t really repentance. A change of behavior is evidence of a changed heart (cf. Mat. 7:24-26; Lu. 3:7-14; 1 Jn. 2:3-4).

But how does this apply to our series? Odds are, many new year’s resolutions have already fallen by the wayside. But just because you’ve “fallen off the wagon” doesn’t mean you are destined for failure. Repent. Right now. Start again. After all, repentance is the only way to salvage a fresh start. Proverbs 24:16 says, “a righteous man falls seven times and rises again.” If you still have breath, there is still time to change.

⁴ Bock (1994), p. 315.

Video Description

Reset | Week 2 | “New Year, Old Mistakes”

TEXT: Luke 3:1-14

Today, we forward in Luke’s account to that of John the Baptist. And his preaching will help us answer the question, “What happens when we make the old mistakes in a new year?” After all, statistics tell us that many new year’s resolutions have already fallen by the wayside. So, what are we to do when it seems that nothing has changed in our life? Just because you’ve “fallen off the wagon” doesn’t mean you are destined for failure. Repent. Right now. Start again. After all, repentance is the only way to salvage a fresh start. Proverbs 24:16 says, "a righteous man falls seven times and rises again." If you still have breath, there is still time to change.

Pastor’s manuscript can be found here: