

Bear Fruits in Keeping with Repentance
Luke 3:1-14, 19-20
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Read Luke 3:1-14, 19-20

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction: Practical Advice for Ministry Leaders

Every pastor or ministry leader should read books on how to be effective in their role. “Readers are leaders” and “commit to being a lifelong learner” are slogans we hear a lot, so it’s never a bad idea to get some collected wisdom from some older, more experienced ministry leaders and writers. Here are some ideas I’ve gleaned from just one book called *Every Pastor’s First 180 Days* by Charles Stone. I actually joked about reading this book since my first 180 days were roughly the first 6 months of a global pandemic, so nothing like what anyone would foresee:

- “Before you hit the ground running, it’s important to deal with your hurt, woundedness, and unresolved emotional pain... take specific steps to deal with your emotional baggage.”
- Clarify, negotiate, and respect people’s expectations for yourself.
- “Your health, your family, and your ministry will suffer if you don’t manage stress early on.”
- Let your “key leaders and stakeholders be the first to receive communication before larger groups receive it.”
- “Don’t fixate on trying to make your communication plan perfect. Be careful about spending too much time on it. Keep other important activities at the forefront as well.”
- “Speak with a warm tone... (which) can set the stage for effective communication, whereas a harsh or negative tone can set up resistance in the other person.”
- “Don’t inadvertently convey that change is difficult for others but not for you. Acknowledge your fears. In doing so, you communicate empathy.”
- “Just remember that too much change can break the culture (of the church)... You have to pace yourself and continually assess the tolerance of the organization.”
- “It’s better to under promise and then overperform. Yet don’t set expectations too low, because you may lose the support of some of your high-performing people if they sense you are playing it safe by setting them low.”
- “The church’s bylaws and policies... reveal a lot, but they’ll probably only loosely match reality... learn to read between the lines by observing ‘how things really work around here.’”¹

You get the point. There are some really good things you can think through and do to set yourself up for effective ministry. I went through all of those, not to announce something that I’m going to do or to give you insight into my pastoral method, but to be reminded that there was a very effective minister of the Gospel that I’m pretty sure ignored every single practical piece of advice anyone wanted to give him. If you had handed him a book like that, or a list like that, he probably would have torn it up or thrown it back at you and headed out to do things his way. His name was John, we know him as John the Baptist, and he wasn’t so much a maverick or rebel for the sake of being different. He was unorthodox and counter-cultural because God had called him into that role. John didn’t have office hours, completely neglected his family and his finances, couldn’t have cared less what people thought of him, and never backed down from telling hard truths.

¹ Charles Stone, *Every Pastor’s First 180 Days* (Colorado Springs: Equip, 2019), pp. 27, 29, 31, 34, 43, 48, 53, 60, 69, 97, 120

Israel had not had a prophet speak the words of God to them in 400 years. John, the son of Zachariah, that we read about in chapter 1, would be the first one to break that silence. Dressing and acting like the prophet Elijah, John started what we would call an “open air ministry” that turned into a bit of a revival. His prophetic rebukes included pointing out hypocrisy in the people who came to see him. He called people to repent and to live differently in ways that were shaped by that repentance. But most importantly, he pointed to the great One who would be coming, telling the people that preparing their hearts with repentance was the best way to be ready.

Today’s message is brought to you by the letter C: John 1) Cried out in the wilderness, 2) Confronted the people, 3) Counseled the people, and 4) Clashed with power.

I. John Cried Out in the Wilderness (vv. 1-6)

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.’”

These verses establish the date that John was called into public ministry; I’ve stressed how important it is that Jesus’ life is rooted in historical fact. But these verses also allow us to meet the rulers who will play a part later in Jesus’ life. Luke helpfully introduces us to them here so when they show up later, we’ll know who they are. If you’ve read Shakespeare plays, there always a list of character written at the beginning that you can refer to if you get confused. Tiberius Caesar was the successor to Caesar Augustus, who was the Roman ruler at Jesus’ birth. Tiberius’ reign began in AD 14, so the 15th year of his reign would be AD 29. The other rulers listed are in descending order of power: Pontius Pilate was the governor of a large area, Judea; he will have a pivotal role in Jesus’ trial. Then there are three rulers over smaller areas: Herod Antipus is the first one, the ruler of Galilee. He is the one who features prominently in Jesus and John’s stories. Philip and Lysanias are mentioned in passing, they are essentially equal to Herod, just over different areas. Finally, Annas and Caiaphas are father and son-in-law high priests of the Jews, and will also figure prominently in Jesus’ arrest and conviction. Technically there was only one high priest, Caiaphas, but Annas was still very much involved and powerful.²

Does God’s word go to the rulers, the VIPs, the head religious people? No. It goes to an obscure man who lived alone out in the wilderness. The revival and new movement of God wouldn’t happen inside the system. It would not be started by the leaders of the temple. It would be started from the outside, by a man who had no serious religious credentials, wore camel’s hair, and yelled at people in the desert before dunking them in water.

When a new highway is built, they have to level all the land that the road will run through. So, when Delaware built 301, they had to clear the land beforehand. Since Delaware is so flat, I’m sure that wasn’t as much work as it would be in, for example, Highway 81 that runs through the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia. In the ancient world, when a king or ruler visited a city, there was a similar

² Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), pp. 56-57.

straightening of the road that he would ride in on. The city prepared for the king to come by making sure he didn't have a rocky, uneven ride into town. It wouldn't work very well for the king's horse to twist his leg or for the king's caravan to tip over, so the road was smoothed out. It was a way to honor him, to invite him in.

I don't think that when John said, "*prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight,*" that he was saying literally that Jesus will need straight roads wherever He goes. The way of the Lord's salvation is in people's lives and hearts. This is a call to prepare your life and heart to receive the Savior, to honor Him and invite Him in. Preparing our hearts must include repenting of our sins and seeking forgiveness. We don't make ourselves sinless, that is never a realistic goal in the Christian life. But we can turn from our sins and turn our hearts in a new direction, setting our affections on new loves.

John's message was confrontational at times, as we see in the next three verses,

II. John Confronted the People (vv. 7-9)

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."

President Andrew Jackson visited a Methodist church during his time in office, and the pastor of the church, Peter Cartwright, was warned not to say anything out of line. When he got up to preach, he began his remarks with "I understand Andrew Jackson is here. I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to hell if he doesn't repent."³ John the Baptist would have appreciated Peter Cartwright's preaching style. It was a lot like his own! John starts his speech calling the people a brood of vipers. Wow, how did he attract big crowds with that message and tone? You'd think he'd want to thank them for coming out to the desert – "Hey, you people are the smart ones who have realized that I've got some good things to tell you, thanks for coming to see me." But John wasn't much of a flatterer. And sometimes you don't need someone to sugarcoat the truth, you need to hear it straight.

Calling them a brood of vipers is a picture of fire spreading through a grassy area, and out come all the snakes that have been making their home there. But they are just fleeing to save themselves. John says: "That's you. You sense that the fires of judgement are coming and you know that you want to avoid them. But you're not trying to change. You're just as vicious and dangerous as before. Repentance should change you."

When you repent of your sins, John said, there should be noticeable differences, he calls it fruit that gets produced. What fruit is produced? Start with the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness - those are the qualities/characteristics you'll develop. But there are very specific fruits that happen when your repentance is genuine. Let's think of some examples:

-Let's say that you've struggled with telling the truth in the past, but you don't like being thought of as a liar. You can speak in generalities, don't commit to saying things falsely outright, so that when someone accuses them of being a liar, you can protest your innocence and say, "You have no proof." So, yes, you will avoid the consequences of being a liar, but your heart has not changed a lot. That is the "fleeing viper" way of change, but not really changing. Someone who is truly

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 115.

convicted and repentant realizes that they need to stop lying and instead embrace the truth. They will apologize to people when they lied to them in the past. They will admit when they are tempted to lie going forward, and ask people to keep them accountable to tell the truth, no matter the consequences. And they will cherish the truth. That is repentance that bears fruit.

-Someone who has been a racist in the past who just doesn't want to be accused of being a racist anymore will simply try to change their language and not act in ways that people could accuse them of being intolerant of other races. Again, good enough for a "fleeing viper." But when someone's heart is truly changed and they have repented of racism, they will go far beyond just refraining from saying or doing racist things; they will actually try to befriend people of other nationalities. They will attempt to learn how other cultures live and think, and attempt to rectify their past thinking and apologize to people that they have hurt or offended. Repentance always bears fruit, I hope you see the distinction. Every specific sin will bear different fruit in specific ways.

John goes on to talk about how the Jewish people are not automatically exempt from repenting and living obedient lives just because they are part of the Hebrew nation. They are not automatically in right standing with God because of their birth. Just because they are descendants of Abraham doesn't mean they get to do whatever they want. We've been studying this idea in the Men's Bible Study in Romans chapter 2, where Paul says that "*no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly... but a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter*" (vv. 28-29). There's a very real sense that Jesus is going to bring a new Israel. Those who do not believe in Him will be left behind, that's John's picture of the axe cutting down the trees that don't bear good fruit. And God will raise up people to be His new Israel, the church, made up of all the nations.

In the next five verses, John went from confronting the people to counseling them:

III. John Counseled the People (vv. 10-14)

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."

The people in the crowd were listening and convinced, so they asked John for clarification: "What should we do?" And his most basic advice is that they should share the things that they have with others. Then John gave specific groups advice, and what's interesting is that these two groups would have been greatly resented by most Jews of that day. Both the tax collectors and soldiers represented Rome's dominion over the land and their rule over the people. Tax collectors not only collected money for a government that many Jewish people resented, but they often over-collected to fill their own pockets. The soldiers were brutally efficient in carrying out the government's orders, and would have been eyed with suspicion everywhere they went around Judea and Galilee. You can just hear the local Jews who had come out to hear John preach: "Why are tax collectors and soldiers here? They don't belong here, we don't want them." But John does not send them away or rebuke them for their occupations or their loyalty to Rome. He simply asks them to work honestly: tax collectors should not over-collect, and soldiers should not extort money.

There are two application here: one is doing your job with integrity and the second is prioritizing giving over taking. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this in one of his speeches:

"Whatever your life's work is, do it well. A man should do his job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better. If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep

streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.'"⁴

We should all work to the glory of God, because fulfilling our vocations truly does honor Him.

Sharing with others is evidence that you are content with what you have, that you are not so insecure that you hold onto every last penny. It's also evidence that you value other people and are willing to sacrifice some of your own comfort and security for them to thrive. Accept the wages that you are given for your honest labor and be content with it. Don't try to dishonestly gain more; in fact, the opposite – give away some. That is how Kingdom citizens live and act. *Let me go from preaching to meddling*: How's your attitude towards money and possessions? Are you desperate to get and keep as much money as you can, even willing to get it using illegal or unethical ways? Do you overcharge your clients, cheat on your taxes, refuse to give to the church, or find other ways that dishonor the Lord when dealing with money? John would get in your face and say, "Stop! Repent and learn how to live within your means!" Of course, we all need money to live, and there is nothing wrong with getting a job and making money. In fact, that's one of the most important things about being an adult. But work hard, and then be so grateful with what God's given you that you are willing to share your abundance with others.

The crowd seemed to appreciate John's teaching, but not everyone responded to John positively. Let's jump down to verses 19 and 20 to see

IV. John Clashed with Power (vv. 19-20)

¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Luke implies that Herod Antipas was a notorious sinner, with a long list of evil things on his record. You see, Herod fell in love with, and married, his half-brother, Philip's wife, Herodias, and divorced his first wife. His first wife happened to be the daughter of King Aretas, which started a war that Herod lost. In addition to being Herod's brother's wife, Herodias was also the daughter of another of Herod's brothers, making her also a niece.⁵ So this was adultery, betrayal, and some degree of incest. Then he added one more evil deed: locking up John in prison in response to John's rebuke of this terrible marriage.

Luke did not record Herod's beheading of John, but Matthew and Mark did. I'll read Mark 6:21-29:

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter

⁴ From "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," found in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume III: Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956*, University of California Press, 1997.

⁵ Michael Card, *Mark: The Gospel of Passion* (Downers Grove:IVP, 2012), p. 86.

and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb."

This is a very stark reminder that serving God does not always have a happy ending in this life. Of course, John went straight to heaven and has been, and will continue, experiencing the glory of eternity with God. But God didn't reward him with a cushy retirement package after all of those hard years in the desert. God allowed John's enemies to imprison him and then end his life merely because they did not like his message. Of course, John wouldn't be the only one whose life was ended because people didn't like his message. His cousin, that son of Joseph and Mary, would anger the leaders of the Jerusalem synagogue so much that they would convince the Romans to arrest Him, try Him, and give Him the death sentence. Jesus would rebuke the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders, on so many topics, and would point them to the new ways of God, so they decided He had to be silenced for good. They didn't take Jesus' head like what happened to John; no, they tortured Him and made Him hang on a cross for hours until His body gave out. John's death was sad, but it did not achieve anything for anyone else. Jesus' death was a tragedy, but it was the instrument of God's salvation for His people. God used Jesus as the spotless, sacrificial Lamb, slain on our behalf to take away our sins. Our sins were placed on His body and He paid the penalty for them so they would not count against us.

Conclusion:

But the salvation that Jesus achieved by dying on the cross is only available for those who repent of their sin and embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior. If you have never repented of your sins, you don't really understand the Gospel and you are not right with God. I don't mean that you have to repent of every specific sin, and that if you forgot that you gossiped one time or forgot to repent of your lustful thoughts or lashing out in anger, that sin is unforgiven. I mean that you have come to realize that in your natural state, you are a helpless, hopeless sinner who is in rebellion to God, which separates you from Him. Your sin condemns you. You must look at your sin and realize that it is poison, that it is "cosmic treason" as R.C. Sproul used to call it. We break the Ten Commandments and the moral requirements of God constantly in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. When we realize how offensive our sin is to a holy God and realize that He offers forgiveness to those who come to Him in humility, then we repent freely and build a highway for the Lord to work in our hearts. *"A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* -Psalm 51:17b. In Acts 3:19-20, Peter told the crowd, *"Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."*

Benediction

Psalm 121:7-8 - *"The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."*