

“God’s Highway to the Heart”

(Luke 3:7-17 ~ Part 2)

Introduction

- After years (even decades) of living in the desert, it was time for John the Baptist to announce the beginning of Jesus’ three-year public ministry (Lk.1:80). As God’s appointed forerunner to the Messiah (Lk.1:13-17 [Gabriel]; Lk.1:76-79 [Zechariah]), John was to prepare God’s people to receive God’s Son as their Messiah.

Luke 3:3-6 ~ “And [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As 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. ⁵Every 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, ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

- Repentance is God’s highway to the human heart. It is the spiritual excavation we need to undergo in order to make our hearts ready to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord – straightening that which is crooked, elevating our holiness and obedience, and leveling our pride. Repentance is making the highway to our hearts open and clear for the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- The Greek word translated “*repentance*” (*metanoia*, n.) [or “*repent*” (*metanoō*, vb.)] literally means “to perceive afterwards” (or “to change one’s mind”) but its usage in the New Testament means much more. By simple definition, to repent is to turn from sin and to turn to God. It conveys a radical transformation of obeying God rather than disobeying God; of walking according to God’s will as opposed to against His will; of living a life that is pleasing to God instead of being displeasing to Him.

Without true repentance, a person cannot be saved (see Acts 2:38). This is because a true saving faith involves turning from sin as one turns to the Savior (see Rom.6:1-2, 6, 15; 2Cor.5:17; 1Jn.3:9). As we saw in my last sermon, in addition to John the Baptist, we see that Jesus and the apostles all preached a Gospel message of repentance (see Matt.4:17; Lk.5:32; 13:3, 5; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:20; Rev.2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19).

- In the passage before us this morning (that we began studying last Sunday), we find John the Baptist’s preaching of the need for repentance.

Luke 3:7-17 ~ “[John] 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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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.’ ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’ ¹¹And he answered them, ‘Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.’ ¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ ¹³And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than you are authorized to do.’ ¹⁴Soldiers 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.’ ¹⁵As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.’”

- In this passage we find six marks of true repentance.

True repentance ...

1. Reveals a genuine sorrow for, and hatred of, sin (vs.7)

- The first thing we notice, in this passage, concerning the marks of repentance is that true repentance reveals a genuine sorrow for, and hatred, of sin. An insincere, or a shallow, repentance is no repentance at all. True repentance is not lip-service to God; it is not merely emotional; it is much more than simply feeling sorrow for sin; and it is not a religious attempt to avoid God's discipline/condemnation for sin.

Those who are truly repentant not only hate the consequences of sin, but they (increasingly) hate the very act and essence of sin. While not always perfect, the truly repentant person genuinely grieves both their sinful act (i.e., the fruit of sin) as well as their sinful desires (i.e., the root of sin). They truly desire to renounce their sinful ways and follow the way of the Lord.

- Knowing that many of those who *"came out to be baptized by him"* (vs.7) were not truly repentant – especially *"many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism"* (Matt.3:7) – John publicly renounced their hypocrisy and self-righteousness by saying: *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* (vs.7). By calling them "children [or a family] of snakes", John was likening them to poisonous snakes trying to escape a grassfire.

They were trying to *"flee from the wrath"* (vs.7) of John's baptism to their religious resumé. While they had *"the appearance of godliness"* (2Tim.3:5), they were unrepentant and unsaved. They had no genuine sorrow for or hatred of sin, they merely wanted to appear righteous and avoid God's judgment.

2. Reflects a heartfelt and humble obedience to Christ (vs.8a)

- The root of repentance is a genuine sorrow for and hatred of sin, and the fruit of repentance is a heartfelt and humble obedience to Christ. As we saw last week, the "fruit" of one's life reflects their true nature and allegiance – *"each tree is known by its fruit"* (Lk.6:44). In other words, if Christ is truly in you than Christlikeness will come out of you (Jn.15:1-6).

John chided the Pharisees and Sadducees (particularly) for their insincere (and therefore false) repentance, and commanded them to *"Bear fruits in keeping with repentance"* (vs.8). While none of us live perfectly righteous lives (Jms.3:2; Rom.7:15), true Christians will not condone or rationalize their sin. Christians, even when they give into temptation and sin, seek to live a godly life in Christ. When they sin, they genuinely confess that sin and truly repent of sin – they do not want an unbroken pattern of sin in their lives (see 1Jn.1:6; 3:4-10).

3. Rejects the saving merit of human works or ancestry (vs.8b)

- Many of the Jews, specifically the Pharisees and Sadducees, believed that they were entitled to salvation because of their lineage to Abraham (i.e., their religious resumé and pedigree). They believed that they, by their race and religious works, had earned God's saving grace. But grace that is earned is not grace at all (Rom.11:6). Furthermore, apart from the saving and sanctifying work of Christ, no one merits salvation. No one is saved by good works, but everyone who is truly saved is saved unto good works (see Eph.1:1-5, 8-10; Tit.3:5; 2Tim.1:9).

John knew that (many of) the Jews self-righteously believed they deserved or earned salvation by either human works or ancestry; or both. So, as a preemptive strike against their claim, John said: *"... 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"* (vs.8; see Jn.1:12-13; 8:39-47). In other words, "Since God made Adam out of the dirt, He can 'children for Abraham' out of stones." For God gives spiritual life to those who are "dead" (Eph.2:1; see Rom.8:7). The truth is, we bring nothing to our salvation other than our need for it (see Rom.3:10-12, 22; Phil.3:9; 2Cor.5:21).

- Salvation has never been through human works or ancestry. Everyone who has ever been saved, and will ever be saved, is saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The Old Testament saints were saved by their faith in the Messiah to come (Rom.4:3; Heb.11), and New Testament saints are saved by their faith in the Messiah who has come.

4. Recognizes God's just and divine wrath (vs.9)

- Fourthly, true repentance recognized God's just and divine wrath. With a graphic illustration, John described the impending wrath of God toward the unrepentant sinner: *"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"* (vs.9). These *"trees"* represent those people who are not truly repentant, and therefore not truly saved. Since they are not producing the fruit *"good fruit"* of Christlikeness (or the fruit of the Spirit; Gal.5:22-23), but instead are producing their fruit of worldliness, they receive God's just and irreversible judgment.

The imagery of explicit and ominous as the whole tree is about to be permanently cut down: *"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"* (vs.9). Both *"the axe"* and *"the fire"* are symbols of God's judgment. The tree is not pruned, it is not watered, it is not nurtured; it is on the brink of everlasting destruction. And the implication here is that God's judgment is imminent, as His axe of judgment is about to fall.

Later in this passage, we see a different imagery with the same interpretation:

Luke 3:17 ~ "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."

- This is intended to be a sobering warning to the unrepentant sinner and the false believer.
- ✓ Illust: One of the more well-known – if not most well-known – American theologians and preachers is Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Conn. He received degrees from Yale University. In 1727, he was ordained and installed as assistant in the church of Solomon Stoddard, his grandfather, at Northhampton, Mass. When Stoddard died in 1729, Edwards became pastor. The religious revival, a part of the Great Awakening, came to his church in 1734. It was during this revival that Jonathan Edwards preached, what is now commonly referred to as, his most famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741). This sermon is a riveting exposition from God's Word concerning God's holy hatred of sin, and just condemnation of the unrepentant sinner (Deut.32:35, *"their foot shall slide in due time"*, KJV). Here is an excerpt of that sermon.

"The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. ...

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. ...

O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in. 'Tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment."

(Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*; July 8, 1741, Enfield; Connecticut).

- Jesus used the same imagery (as John the Baptist) in His preaching on God's wrath on the false believer (i.e., the "carnal" or "nominal" Christian). While they profess to be a Christian, their lives produce the "bad fruit" of worldliness and sin, and not the "good fruit" of true godliness and Christlikeness.

Matt 7:15-20 ~ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."

Matt 7:21-23 ~ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Matt 7:24-27 ~ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

John 15:4-6 ~ "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

- Technically, it is not God's wrath that leads someone to repent. Preaching hell-fire-and-brimstone sermons without any mention of God's love, grace, and mercy – preaching only the "bad news" and not the "Good News" – is not preaching the Gospel. Preaching (proclaiming) only God's holiness and just wrath against sinners leads the sinner to despair, with no hope of salvation.

Conversely, preaching only the "good news" (i.e., God's love, mercy, and grace) without the "bad news" (God's holiness, justice, and wrath) leads the sin to a false salvation.

Rom 2:4 ~ "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness [*chrēstotēs*; or goodness] and forbearance [*anochē*] and patience [*makrothymia*], not knowing that God's kindness [*chrēstos* or goodness] is meant to lead you to repentance [*metanoia*]?"

2 Peter 3:7-9 ~ "But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. ⁸But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient [*makrothymeō*] toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance [*metanoia*]."

- A true presentation of the Gospel proclaims both our need for a Savior, and the Savior Jesus Christ. As we will see, John did not merely preach on the wrath of God. He also led people to receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

John 1:29 ~ "The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

John 1:35-36 ~ "The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!'"

5. Results in a complete and radical transformation of life (vs.10-14)

➤ The fifth mark of true repentance is that it results in a complete and radical transformation of life. The person who is truly repentant can't live as they once lived because they are no longer the person they once were! John was calling for a complete and radical transformation of life. To be repentant means the end of you, and the beginning of Christ in you. This internal conversion expresses itself in an external transformation. A person cannot be truly transformed on the inside without it being seen on the outside.

✓ Illust: Please note that every Christian's testimony is equally powerful, effective, and beautiful.

Unfortunately, many Christians believe that the "more sinful" a person was before they became a Christian the more powerful their testimony. This is simply not true, and it is a very dangerous (even heretical, self-righteous) notion. For it falsely presumes that a "less sinful" person does not need a Savior (God's saving grace) as much as a "more sinful" person. The truth is, apart from Christ, every person is equally deserving of God's wrath and condemnation, and absolutely no one is deserving of God's grace. Your Christian testimony is how God saved you by His grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

If you have been saved by Jesus Christ you have an awesome testimony – a testimony that needs to be shared as evidence of God's saving and sanctifying grace! No matter how sinful (or immoral) your pre-Christian life, every true believer can (and must) share how Christ has radically transformed them. For without Christ every person is destined to God's eternal and just condemnation in hell (no matter how moral, ethical, or religious they are apart from Him). When a person comes to Christ, everything essential changes – they have a new destiny, they have a new purpose, they have new affections, they have new desires, they have new ambitions, they have a new heart and mind – and they now, for the very first time, can actually live in a way that is pleasing and righteous to God (Rom.8:6-8). Don't believe for a second that your Christian testimony is something insignificant or unimportant – it is the story of how Jesus Christ saved and transformed your life!

➤ If we are truly in Christ, and Christ in us, then our lives will reflect we claim to be in Christ, and Christ in us, then we should live like it.

Ezek 36:25-28 ~ "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and *cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*. ²⁸You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

2 Cor 5:17 ~ "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Rom 6:1-2, 15 ~ "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ... ¹⁵What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"

➤ One of the best biblical examples of partial obedience (which is disobedience), and of false repentance, is found in the story of king Saul. In 1 Samuel 15 we read that God commanded Samuel to anoint Saul as king of Israel, and for Samuel to give Saul these instructions:

1 Sam 15:2-3 ~ "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. ³Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

God gave Saul and the Israelites victory over the Amalekites, but Saul refused to totally destroy them as God had commanded.

1 Sam 15:7-9 ~ “And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. ⁸And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.”

Motivated by pride, and compelled by greed, Saul kept the best possessions for himself, and he spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites, as a trophy of his victory in war. With no remorse for his sins against God, Saul woke up the next morning to build a monument for himself (vs.12). Samuel confronted Saul at Gilgal to inform him that, because of his unrepentant sin, his reign as king had come to an end (vs.10, 26).

Saul lied ...

1 Sam 15:13-14 ~ “And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, ‘Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord.’ ¹⁴And Samuel said, ‘What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?’”

Saul rationalized ...

1 Sam 15:15 ~ “Saul said, ‘They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.’”

Saul blamed ...

1 Sam 15:20-21 ~ “And Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. ²¹But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal.’”

Saul’s false repentance (wanting only to escape the consequences of his sin) ...

1 Sam 15:24-26, 30 ~ “Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. ²⁵Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the Lord.’ ...

³⁰Then he said, ‘I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God.’”

After Samuel confronted Saul for his sin and informed him that his reign was over (vs.23-28), Saul begged that God might reconsider...but He would not. Then Samuel called for Agag.

1 Sam 15:32-33 ~ “Then Samuel said, ‘Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites.’ And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, ‘Surely the bitterness of death is past.’ ³³And Samuel said, ‘As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.’ And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.”

Although Agag playfully wanted Samuel to justify and dismiss his sins, Samuel was not amused. Sin most often comes to us playfully – promising us pleasure and no pain. But we must not mistake the rattle of sin to be a child’s play toy, for it is nothing less than the rattle of a deadly snake. Samuel did to Agag what Saul should have done in the first place: he obeyed the command of the Lord by executing Agag for the good of God’s people and for the glory of God. Agag and the Amalekites are a perfect illustration of the pervasive evils of sin, and the drastic actions that Christians must take in order to kill sin in their lives. God commands us to hack our sin to pieces.

➤ The crowds who listened to John the Baptist's message, and his exchange with the Pharisees and Sadducees, obviously understood his teaching on the complete and radical transformation that repentance brings. John's preaching of true repentance, apart from humans works or ancestry, and God's just and divine wrath against sin, caused the people to wonder what they must do to be saved. In fact, group after group asked John the same question. First, it was "*the crowds*" who asked: "*What then shall we do?*" (vs.10; *tis oun poieō*). Second, it was "*tax collectors*" who asked: "*What shall we do?*" (vs.12; *tis poieō*). Then, it was "*soldiers*" who asked: "*What shall we do?*" (vs.14; *tis poieō*).

Acts 2:37-38 ~ "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' [*tis poieō*]" ³⁸And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

➤ In the context, and throughout the Bible, it is clear that John was not teaching a works-based salvation. He was not saying, "If you do these things, you can earn your salvation." Rather, he was saying, "If you are truly saved, you will do these things." Again, the Christian's life should be the character and commands of Christ (see Lk.6:46). As application to his sermon, John gave a few examples of what this looks like.

In general, to "*the crowds*" (vs.10), John said: "*Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise*" (vs.22). The overarching principle here is that Christians should be unselfish, kind, and generous. They should obey the command to "*love your neighbor*" as an expression of their love for Christ (see Lev.19:18; Matt.22:39; 25:31-46; Lk.10:27; Rom.13:9-10). This is contrary to our human nature, but reflect the heart of Jesus Christ.

Luke 10:29-37 ~ "But he [the lawyer], desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

³⁰Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?' ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' And Jesus said to him, 'You go, and do likewise.'"

➤ More specifically, to "*[t]ax collectors*" (vs.12), John said: "*Collect no more than you are authorized to do*" (vs.13). Tax collectors were often despised by the Jews because they were collected taxes (from the Jews) for Rome. To make matters worse, out of greed and selfishness, tax collectors abused their authority and exploited the Jews by collecting more than they were authorized to do (e.g., bribes, extortion, profiteering). John exhorted the Christian tax collectors to only collect what "*authorized*" (vs.13; *diatassō*; instructed) to collect, and no more (see Eph.4:28)

Luke 19:1-10 ~ "[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. ²And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.' ⁶So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷And when they saw it, they all grumbled, 'He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.' ⁸And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.' ⁹And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'"

Again, selflessness, kindness, and generosity are contrary to our human (sinful) nature, but they reflect the heart and commands of Christ – and therefore, every true follower of Christ.

- To the “[s]oldiers” (vs.14) John gave the following instruction: *“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages”* (vs.14). Similar to the tax collectors, and to everyone’s human (sinful) nature, the soldiers were prone to abuse their authority for selfish gain (bribes, “protection fees”). The soldiers would falsely accuse, intimidate, and violently assault people for money. John simply stated that Christian soldiers should not behave in such an ungodly and sinful way. Rather, Christians are to be known for compassion, humility, kindness, goodness, and love.

Rom 13:9-10 ~ “For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” (see Phil.2:3-5; 1Tim.6:6-11; Heb.13:5)

- Again, the biblical teaching is not “Do these things in order to be saved” but “If you are truly saved, you will be doing these things.” This is the fruit of those who are truly repentant.

James 2:17 ~ “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

James 2:26 ~ “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

6. Reveres Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord (vs.15-17)

- The sixth mark of true repentance is that it reveres Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. This point culminates all the previous points. The power and effectiveness of John’s preaching and teaching caused people to wonder if he was indeed the Christ. *“As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ”* (vs.15).

In his humility and faithfulness, John made it clear that he was not the Christ but the one who has been called to announce the coming of the Christ. *“John answered them all, saying, ‘I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie’”* (vs.16). Untying another person’s sandals was a reference to the most menial, even demeaning, task (see Matt.3:11-12; Mk.1:7-8; Jn.1:26). In using this expression, John was stating that Christ is so far above him – so much greater than him – that he was not even elevated to a position of a slave. This was not false humility from John, nor was it mere hyperbole. John knew that Jesus Christ is the (incarnate) Son of God, and that Christ was infinitely greater/stronger – *“mightier”* (vs.16; *ischyros*) – in every way.

John 3:30 ~ “[Christ] must increase, but I must decrease.”

- Not only was Jesus Himself superior to John, but Jesus’ ministry was also superior to John’s ministry. To show this, John gave the following comparison: *“... ‘I baptize you with water ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire’”* (vs.16). There are many interpretations concerning what John meant (concerning the baptisms of water, the Holy Spirit, and fire). Here I think the following maxim applies: “Oftentimes, the plain point in the main point.”

The comparison John made was that his ministry was physical and Jesus’ ministry was spiritual. John could not affect spiritual change in a person’s life. He could preach a message of repentance, and baptize them in water, but he could not save the sinner. The same, of course, is true for us today.

Jesus’ ministry was (infinitely) greater than John’s because Jesus affects a person’s spiritual and eternal destiny – by giving *“the Holy Spirit”* to those who are saved, or the *“fire”* of judgment to those who are not. Jesus Christ is the preeminent one (Col.1:18), and He alone is the Judge (Jn.5:22, 27).

➤ This passage ends with another graphic description of God's judgment against the sinner: *"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"* (vs.17). A "winnowing fork" is a wooden pitchfork that was used to separate the wheat (grain) from the chaff (i.e., the loose outer covering, or husk, of the wheat that was inedible). In the winnowing process, the wheat was tossed into the air (with the winnowing fork) allowing the wind to separate the grain from the husk. The grain would be gathered, and the chaff would oftentimes be burned. In this analogy, the wheat are repentant believers, and the chaff are unrepentant sinners (Ps.1:4; Jer.15:5-7; see Matt.13:24-30).

The reference to the chaff being burned *"with unquenchable fire"* (vs.17) is a clear reference to the eternal judgment of hell for the unrepentant sinner (see Matt.3:12; Mk.9:43). We must not miss, however, who is operating the "winnowing fork" (vs.17). It is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate son of God: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand"* (vs.17).

John 5:22-24 ~ "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (see Matt.28:18)

John 5:26-27 ~ "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man."

Rev 19:11-16 ~ "Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords."

➤ Those who are truly repentant revere Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord!

Conclusion

➤ In studying this passage in God's Word, we all must be confronted with the same question: "Am I truly repentant?"

1. Does my life reveal a genuine sorrow for, and hatred of, sin (vs.7)?
2. Does my life reflect a heartfelt and humble obedience to Christ (vs.8a)?
3. Do I reject the saving merit of human works or ancestry (vs.8b)?
4. Do I recognize God's just and divine wrath (vs.9)?
5. Has my repentance resulted in a complete and radical transformation of life (vs.10-14)?
6. Do I revere Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord (vs.15-17)?

➤ If not, the time to repent is now. For none of us know when Christ will return, and none of us know how long we will live.

Matt 4:17 ~ "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

2 Cor 6:1-2 ~ "Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."