

REPENTANCE - KNOWING WHY AND KNOWING HOW - Both Are Important - Part four - Sunday, September 6th, 2012, 6:30 p.m.

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OBSTACLES TO REPENTANCE IN RELIGIOUS PEOPLE (Part 2)

Luke 3:3-9 - "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."

Last Sunday we zeroed in on the particular twisting of repentance by the religious leaders and John's particularly explosive condemnation of it. To long for the spiritual appearance of a repentant heart while not drawing near to God on the interior sanctuary of the heart of numbing to any hope of drawing near to God. John will have no part of that kind of religious show. Tonight we'll continue in the same text.

2) JOHN'S CAUTION ABOUT GROWING CARELESS IN THE DISCIPLINE OF REPENTANCE

Luke 3:9 - "*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."

That word **“now”** is important. John probably found it hard to gasp the huge **time lag** between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. But somehow, in some way, the **axe head of judgment** was coming against the roots of the unrepentant right **now**.

It's hard to twist these words into something less serious than they sound. John says there is a process that's already in motion in many lives. John is the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said John came to **prepare the way** for His gospel of light and grace.

Central to the ongoing **fruitfulness** of grace in the human heart was the maintenance of a responsive, repentant heart. This is the logic of ongoing repentance and the unfolding fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit in a life. **That's** what we're studying in this series.

These words about the **axe-head** of judgment were spoken to the religious experts in the crowd. Of all those being baptized, they could miss the most grace and experience the sternest judgment. In fact, John says, **the axe-head of judgment was already biting into their root system**. But they probably didn't **see** it. And they probably didn't **understand** what they were doing to themselves.

This judgment wasn't the loveless act of a vindictive God. God's truth always does one of two things to the repentant. It always **cuts down** in judgment, or it **prunes** in fruitfulness and grace - **John 15:1-2** - **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. [2] Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”**

Listen to these telling words from **Frederick Dale Bruner's** great commentary on

Matthew as he comments on these same verses:

“John believes that God is a God who judges evil living. All persons are like trees: Those bearing fruit are pruned; those not bearing good fruit are thrown into the fire and burned. When it has become almost axiomatic in our churches to say that ‘God is love and will not condemn anyone,’ John stands in sharp contradiction. We need to listen to John. Today we are in grave danger of losing half the Biblical freight: the justice, holiness, and moral seriousness of God. When this dimension of the holiness and justice of the character of God is lost, the gospel sinks, and the ‘love of God’ turns insipid, and the people of God become saltless.”

“And so, in the very opening pages of the new covenant, the message of John the Baptist precedes the message and work of Jesus Christ in order to keep Christ’s saving grace from being misunderstood as indulgence, and His free pardon of sin from being misunderstood as free license to sin. Everything God does in and for us in Christ is done so that we might be personally righteous. God the judge is a God our time desperately needs.”

The call to ongoing repentance and the call to walk in ongoing grace are the **same call**. The holy wrath of God is what makes the **gospel** so necessary and **grace** so amazing. By neglecting the words of John the Baptist we have made the modern gospel a very tame, boring thing. People feel they can live without it.

3) **A FINAL WORD ON HOW TO KEEP REPENTANCE A LIVING EXPERIENCE RATHER THEN A DEAD RITUAL**

Hebrews 4:12 - “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and

of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Underscore that word **“living”** - **“For the Word of God is *living* and active, sharper than any two-edged sword....”** Like the **axe-head** John described, the sharp sword of the Word is what cuts away at the roots of our lives. It cuts deeply into what makes our lives tick. Other influences touch the **surface** of our lives (fashion, politics, tastes, even education). But the Word cuts into our roots with a terribly sharp edge - a **living** edge.

John’s words about the axe are so right. God’s Word always deals with the **roots** of our lives. That is, it always cuts into and exposes **what we are becoming** and **where we are eternally going**. That’s what roots are all about. The roots of any plant or tree determine the **future** of that organism. They’re unseen, but direction setting and life or death dealing. **That’s** what God’s Word and the voice of the Spirit are dealing with in our hearts!

I want to be one who, rather than being judged and cut down (as John warned the Pharisees), is **pruned and shaped unto greater and greater fruitfulness** by the cutting edge of the Word as it leads into deeper and sustained repentance.

But the pruning of the heart is different from the pruning of a shrub or bush. The plant is totally **passive** in the pruning process. Not so with our lives. Our lives are only pruned unto fruitfulness to the extent that we follow the Spirit of Jesus with ongoing, immediate, full-blooded **repentance**. We must all **yield** to the Gardener’s touch.

So John wants to talk to our church today. He wants to caution - perhaps in a more raw fashion than we’re used to hearing - against allowing anything - including the outward trappings of religion - to plug up our hearts to His tender, grace filled voice.