

He looked up at me from where he sat... as I walked through the door for our association's board meeting. Mark was a leader in our association... whose ministry was to plant and establish new churches. My church was not new... but Mark wanted to talk to me about something he thought would help us.

Mark's approach to starting a new church was heavily reliant upon the latest marketing techniques... thorough research... business principles... and a plethora of materials from the church growth movement (led by men like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren.)

Mark gave me a list of ten things... to which he said; *"If you do these ten things... I guarantee your church will grow."* ... I looked at Mark and asked: *"Mark, does the Holy Spirit have any say in this?"* ... My thoughts were: *"Yes... our church would possibly grow... simply by employing the human efforts of 'successful churches.' – We can grow without any reliance on the Holy Spirit at all. But is that what we want?"* ... No. I want to be involved in a ministry that demonstrates the power of God – not one that depends on the ingenuity of man!

I am not against trying new things that might help our church grow. We have advertised on Facebook and Instagram... and every month (for the last two years) we have been sending a postcard to everyone who moves to LaPine (which introduces our church.) ... Tomorrow we will (strategically) be at the Trunk or Treat - where children and parents will be – to advertise our AWANA Bible Clubs. ... But we have to be very careful! Our dependence must NOT be on these human efforts. It is to be placed much stronger on the Lord to bring the results that He wants.

Perhaps there is no passage of Scripture that speaks so clear to this... as the passage we come to today. ... We are going to be looking at “the Front Man” for Jesus... (His advance man... Jesus’ marketer... the one who was to go before Him... promote Him... get folks ready by preparing the way.) ... But John the Baptist seems to **IGNORE** all the savvy marketing techniques of our day. We might not consider the strategy for the most significant movement in all history ... to be (at all) competent!

Just imagine someone from our church’s “Build-n-Grow Marketing Committee” coming up to me. (We don’t have one... but try to image that if we did.) “Pastor Jim, here is our church’s new 5-point plan for growth:

1. **Don’t go to where the people are; make them come to you.**
And should they come, don’t provide seating; make them stand. Don’t build a building; meet outside in a hot... remote desert.
2. **Dress unattractively.**
Avoid the latest trends. In fact, look weird on purpose.
3. **Speak offensively.**
Insult your listeners and verbally assault your opponents. Use harsh, condemning words. Call your detractors names, like “snakes” and “hypocrites.”
4. **Rail against high-ranking officials who don’t have integrity.**
Point out their lies and expose their double standards publicly. Turn those who can hurt you into enemies! Don’t soften your words. Expose their sin and call them sinners.
5. **Encourage your followers to follow a worthier leader.**
In fact, admit your utter unworthiness by comparison.

The advance man for the Messiah prepared Christ’s way... **in just this manner.** ... He broke every ministry-building rule... yet (somehow) John the Baptist enjoyed incredible success. The National leaders jailed the forerunner and eventually executed him... but Jesus valued him as a

success. In fact... He called John - *the greatest man ever born of a woman* (Matt. 11:11). ... So (indeed) John was successful.

Today... we are going to examine the ministry of John the Baptist... in the *first* - of a two-part series. Part One is "*Prepare the Way.*" (We will cover this today.) Next week will be part two ("*Get out of the Way!*") Between these two messages... (Prepare the Way... and Get out of the Way)... I hope to discover what made John's ministry so successful... and why **Jesus** called John: "*the greatest man ever born of a woman*"...?

John preached the baptism of repentance. ... He was the last of the prophets. ... He was (actually) an Old Testament character... who simply walked out onto the pages of the New Testament. ... He was picturesque... unshaven... and shaggy... wearing camel's hair clothes. ... He certainly was different in his dress... his diet... and his looks.

(And as I have already mentioned)... He received the same reception that many prophets received—he was put to death.

The most unwelcome message - even today - is the voice of the prophet. The world will not receive a man who contradicts its philosophy of life. ... If you want to be popular... and this is NOW (so very) true of evangelical preachers... you have to sing in unison with the crowd. ... J Vernon McGee (more than 40 years ago) saw that we were headed this way... and wrote:

God have mercy on the pulpit that is nothing in the world but a sounding board for what the congregation is saying. The world does not want to hear the voice of God, especially when that voice speaks of judgment.

John's message was very strong. And it was judgment.

A new day had dawned. The “silent years” were nearly over. God was about to speak again... first through a prophet... and then through His Son. Because of this fact... and because it was so important... Luke carefully dates the event... pinpointing it exactly... by mentioning seven historical figures... when John began his ministry.

Pontius Pilate... whom Luke also mentioned in dating the commencement of John’s ministry... is well known. He was appointed procurator of Judea in A.D. 25. The Jews hated him... and he seemed to delight in antagonizing them.

Caesar Augustus was dead... and his stepson (Tiberius) had replaced him on the throne of the Roman Empire. Tiberius also hated Jews. ... His first procurator of Judea pulled out... and placed in the high priests (time and again)... until he found one (Caiaphas) who would be Rome’s pliable tool.

The two high priests that are mentioned at the beginning of Luke 3 (Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas) were wolves in sheep’s clothing. Although Caiaphas officially held the office... many recognized his father-in-law (Annas) as the true power behind the office. Annas remained the acknowledged head of a vast empire of organized corruption in Jerusalem. Essentially... he was the mafia “Godfather” of the foremost crime family in the capital city. ... “He and his family were well-known for their greed.”

The character of the time could easily be ascertained by the political rulers... but it was **especially shown** by the high priest situation. God’s Word plainly specified that there should only be one high priest in Israel. But here there were two. The reason for this is that Rome decided who

would be the high priest. ... Politics ruled religion. ... That **always** brings corruption.

The Jewish priesthood was in shambles. Rome used this position as a political tool and appointed their own High Priest in the place of the true one. This act corrupted the position of the priesthood as they sought favors from politicians to keep their positions. The corruption would filter down to the people and the worship of the Lord.

You cannot separate John the Baptizer from his times. And the times were **bleak**. ... This list of men in Luke 3:-1-2... reveals the corruption that existed when John the Baptist commenced his ministry. **All five of the rulers listed** were known for their sinfulness. They were oppressive and unmerciful to the people under their authority. They were also immoral and bloodthirsty.

This was the situation in the land of Israel. The corruption... perversion... and wickedness burned in the soul of John the Baptist. The godliness of this man... and his anger toward the wickedness that was common place... spurred him to cry out against it. ... He could no longer contain himself. He had to speak up... and under God's leading... direction... and time... he **did** speak.

Luke amasses all of this weight of historical evidence to document the **sudden appearance** of John with his rousing cry: "**Repent!**" — an emperor... a governor... three tetrarchs... and two high priests — all to introduce the man who was... (by all outward appearances)... just a backwoods... desert preacher. ... But what a man! And what a preacher! And what a message!

Luke 3:1-2

As Luke (the careful historian) prepares us for John's dramatic appearance... he names no less than seven historical figures... to establish the date – and (very importantly) the context of John's ministry. They establish a dark political ambience. All the civil names given here evoke wickedness and intrigue: Tiberius—Pilate—Herod—Philip—Lysanias. The religious names—Annas and Caiaphas—similarly project a degenerate priesthood.

It was against this backdrop of political and religious darkness that “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.” ... So John strode full-blown onto the Jewish landscape... dressed in calculated radical prophetic garb... long flowing hair... and a robe of camel's hair... girded about with a leather thong. ... The mere appearance of John in the desert was a call to repentance. ... After four hundred years of divine silence... “*the word of God came to John. REPENT!*”

What is repentance? Let me tell you what it is not. ... It is more than just being sorry for one's sin. ... Many like to limit repentance to just feeling sorry for one' sin. ... They do not like the idea of an all-out forsaking of sin (making NO provision for it.) They want the benefits of repentance but not the responsibilities of it. ... Without true repentance... a person will struggle with spiritual defeat and not see the change and transformation that Christ can give him/her.

“Change” is the meaning of repentance. Repentance has two sides which involve turning away from sin and turning toward the Lord Jesus Christ. ... To be truly repentant... we must do both. ... We can't just say we believe in the Lord... and then live any way we want to live. ... Many try

to do this today and wonder why they have no power or joy in their Christian life.

Luke 3:3

Baptism was **not** something new in John's day. Gentiles who had been converted to the Jewish religion... were required to be baptized. The Jews regarded all Gentiles as being unclean... and therefore subjected them to baptism when they were won over to Judaism. They needed to be washed of the uncleanness of being a gentile... and to humbly renounce their "gentileness."

How humbling it was for a Jew to submit to John's baptism. John was baptizing **JEW**S! This was highly UNUSUAL. (Jews saw themselves as "clean.") ... But the meaning of John's baptism was an admission that the Jew who was being baptized had forsaken God's covenant... and needed to approach God... as if... for the first time. ... By submitting to John's baptism... they were essentially admitting they were no better than Gentiles... and needed a fresh start with God. (It was a hard message that even the "children of Abraham" were filthy and for John to call **them** to openly acknowledge this.)

Before we move on... let's acknowledge something very important. ...

There was no power in John's baptism. ... Even the 1st Century Jewish historian (Josephus) understood this... as he explained regarding John and his baptism:

He was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not

employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior.

There is also no suggestion here in Luke 3... that repentance is a human work that earns for us the forgiveness of God. ... John's ministry was (simply) preaching (being full of the Holy Spirit) - with such effect that multitudes visibly fell under conviction... resulting in many repenting of their sins and then asking for John's baptism.

BUT (and please hear me carefully) !!! ... It is important for us to see the close connection between **repentance** and **forgiveness**... because while no amount of repentance can ever earn (for us) forgiveness in the sight of God... without repentance... no soul will ever be saved. ... (LISTEN!) Repentance is the telltale mark of the grace of God at work in our lives. Saving faith and true repentance are **always** found together. Saved souls are repentant souls.

This truth has an immensely practical implication: if you think you are saved but do not have a repentant spirit... you are perhaps not saved at all. If there are sins of which you refuse to repent... and in fact (if truth be known) you are becoming more and more comfortable with... it is possible that you are not a child of God. (I am **not** referring to a person who is struggling with sin... and often losing - but really desires victory. ... I am referring to anyone who has no desire to repent.)

Luke 3:4-6

He was like the herald who went before the royal procession to make sure the roads were ready for the king. ... (Spiritually speaking) the nation of Israel was living in a "wilderness" of unbelief... and the roads to spiritual

reality were twisted and in disrepair. ... The corruption of the high priesthood and the legalistic hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees had weakened the nation spiritually. ... The people desperately needed to hear a voice from God... and John was that faithful voice.

In John's day... before a king took a trip and arrive at a certain town or city... messengers would tell those cities that the king was planning to visit. They were to prepare the roads for him. ... The arrival of a king was called a *parousia*. ... A number of elements were involved in the preparation for the king's arrival.

1. *Taxes would be imposed to present the king a golden crown.*
2. *Coins would be struck to remember the arrival of the king.*
3. *Roads were prepared. Holes were patched and smoothed. Obstacles like boulders and fallen trees were removed.*
4. *Petitions were presented to governors and "wrongs" were righted.*

(Similarly) John told his listeners to prepare and make their lives ready... so they would be receptive to the Lord... Who was about to arrive on the scene. ... The great highway John was building was one of *repentance*. The Baptist was saying: "*Mend **not** your roads - but your lives.*"

To put it in terms of American geography... repentance removes the obstacles... flattens the Sierras... and fills in the Death Valleys in our lives... so that Christ has full access. ... Repentance invites the fullness of God.

By preparing their hearts... they would see and experience the Lord's salvation in their lives. ... John's message is relevant today.

Luke 3:7

Addressing your audience as a *family of snakes* is not an advisable way to begin a sermon. ... Asking them “*why are you here anyway?*” isn’t a proper way to draw an audience in to hear what you are about to say. ... But John wasn’t interested in preaching a soft message or in tickling ears. ... (Simply said)... John was *weird!* ... Any man who preached like this... lived in the desert... wore funny clothes... and lived on grasshoppers and wild honey was just plain *strange*. ... Jesus did *not* have a polished advance man with a thousand dollar suit... and a two-hundred dollar haircut. (God often uses weird people.)

As already mentioned... John’s preaching brought a vast response as multitudes came out to the Jordan Valley for baptism. ... John was surely gratified by this... but he was *not* entirely pleased. ... He sensed that some were *insincere*... and some were even *hardened hypocrites*. ... Some had simply come to see the show. ... Some were religious groupies who just wanted to be part of the scene. ... Some (who were more calculating) had undergone baptism... so their friends would think well of them... or perhaps so business connections would be cemented.

It is *no different* today... some people attend evangelical churches... “*receive Christ*”... and are baptized... but do not live repentant lives. ... There were many people that came to John to be baptized... so they could escape God’s judgment... but they were not repentant - just religious. ... John the Baptist offered a stern rebuke for these folks. ... The Lord is more concerned about our reformation than religious rituals. This is why John told them to bring fruits worthy of repentance.

Luke 3:8-9

John's preaching was laced with practical exhortation... demands for a belief that behaved... and warnings that the King was coming and that the kingdom was at hand! ... Was the nation ready? ... If not... the ax was already lying at the root of the tree. ... If they rejected the ministry of the messenger and of the Messiah... judgment would follow. ... (We know how it all turned out. We now know that the menacing ax did fall and that God's displeasure has pursued the Jews for the past two thousand years. God has raised up "stones" (us gentiles) to worship Him.

John attempted to drive his eschatological warning home with a chilling vision: "*The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*" ... The image of a tree without fruit is a picture of uselessness... and fruit growers don't keep worthless trees. ... So... the gleaming blade of a sharpened ax lies on the ground beside the root of those whose lives have no good fruit. The judgment that is about to fall... is anything but superficial. It means radical severance and destruction.

What a terrible warning this is to those who have only a facade of belief... a pretense of repentance... and goodness. ... (Sadly) it is all too easy to fool pastors or family members or friends. ... One thing is for sure (though) — no one can fool God!

(And) Thank God... John's prophetic heart was not controlled by a desire for popularity. ... He was free from the fear of offending others. Such directness is not in vogue today. ... Rather... many of God's people seldom mention sin... refrain from anything even remotely condemning... and speak in a roundabout way. ... The approved method today is to flatter

unconverted people... to preach on sins that are not characteristically theirs. ... But God's Word points us to a different path:

Luke 6:26 (ESV)

²⁶ *“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.*

John's eschatological charge indeed chilled some souls. They realized they had not truly repented. John said (in effect) *“Don't come to me for baptism thinking that's how you will escape God's wrath; you can find safety only through repentance. Repentance is the proof. ... They saw they had no authentic Spirit-derived fruit. They saw that their thoughts... their desires... their actions had no roots in the faith they professed with their lips. Convicted of their failings... the crowd asked, “What should we do then?”*

Luke 3:10-14

It is significant that all three sections of advice have to do with money and material possessions. ... Private citizens are to share with others... tax collectors are not to take more than is proper... and soldiers are not to extort money.

The Holy Spirit through John is telling us that *the way we hold on to money and material things in relationship to others*... is a good indicator of the authenticity and health of our spiritual lives. ... Therefore... we must understand that high among the observable fruit that is “in keeping with repentance” is a giving / generous spirit.

John instructs these private citizens to deal with the issue of their selfishness and self-centeredness. He encourages them to have compassion for others and be generous in meeting people's needs.

These instructions brought them to a point of decision. They would either invest their lives in others or remain focused on themselves. When people who have been self-centered begin to have compassion on others and concerned about their needs... then you have a good indication they have made some changes in their lives. They have repented of their self-centeredness.

Let me ask some questions here (and then we'll be through.)

Are we generous with our possessions? Do we share our homes, our cars, our clothing, our food with others—joyfully? Or are we loath to share? Do we always push for more and then grasp it tightly?

Do we enjoy giving to family, friends, and, more significantly, those in need?

Do we give regularly and sacrificially to the Lord? If you are a Christian but do not give regularly to the Lord, if you are tight, if you find it difficult to give to God, you are in spiritual trouble.

To everyone (not just wealthy Christians)... the **fruit of repentance** is unselfishness. ... The human heart is given to selfishness... but a repentant heart will resist the urge to hoard... will share excess with others... and will trust that the Lord will provide for tomorrow.

If you really want to have joy in your life... repent!