

Turning Points That Change Everything

Luke 3:1-17

Introduction: It does not take long to come up with a list of game-changing, watershed, turning points in history: The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand Francis, leading to a world war, the cure for small pox, Luther's 95 thesis and the Reformation, an attack on Pearl Harbor (which we commemorate today) and on the World Trade towers to name a few. Each of these changed life for all people, and the ripple effects are still felt today. One the most underrated turning points and oft overlooked was Gutenberg's printing press, which put information cheaply into the hands of the common man. The importance and change of this newfound freedom cannot be understated. Imagine a world where only the elite could read, exchange ideas with those outside of a physical local, and no way to communicate on a large scale. We take this all for granted today since information is a fingertip away, but the Gutenberg press lead, in no small part, to the growth of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and was a catalyst for the scientific revolution. This invention, though not gaining wealth for Johannes Gutenberg himself (sorry about that), changed the world as we know it. This is exactly the issue at play as we come to Luke 3.

We come to a section of Luke's narrative that has fast forwarded 18 years since we last saw Jesus. This means that we have very little information about 30 years of Jesus life, as He grew up in relative anonymity and humility. When the time was fulfilled and perfect, Jesus burst on the scene for over 3 years of public ministry, marching everyday closer to the cross, culminating in His death and resurrection. But before His formal ministry began, John had to fulfill what he was put on this earth to do, to be a voice crying out to prepare the way for Jesus. In this section, we simultaneously see a **turning point** in John and Jesus' ministry, but a message of change given to the Jewish people living in this time. Both of these changes would mean nothing would stay the same, and would shape history from then on, and hopefully would change every person's history moving forward.

I. **Turning point in messianic ministry (1-2)**

Luke 3:1-2 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**.

A. **Key players introduced**

Luke gives a very detailed account of the major and minor players who were in power at the time of Jesus' public ministry, and a majority of these would be significant for the next 3+ years of the narrative of Jesus' life.

- **The minor actors**

Tiberius Caesar – The most significant part of Tiberius' inclusion is his role in the specific date of this passage. Tiberius followed Augustus being emperor, and because we know he died on August 19, A.D. 14, we know John's ministry started around A.D. 28/29¹

Phillip the tetrarch – He was one of three sons of Herod the Great given rule over Herod's territory. Phillip ruled in northeast Galilee from 4 B.C. to A.D. 34 and was considered the best of the Herodian rulers.

¹ Tiberius had also become co-regent in A.D 11, which means this date could have been A.D. 26 at the beginning of John's ministry. We also know Jesus was born shortly before the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C, which would mean Jesus was 30 in A.D 26.

Lysanias – Little is known about this ruler of northwest Damascus.

- **The major actors**

Pontius Pilate – After Tiberius, he is the highest ranking Roman official, and was appointed by Tiberius as governor of Judea in A.D. 26 until he was removed from office in A.D. 36. He was known to be proud, weak, and cynical. He will play a key role in the trial of Jesus and His crucifixion.

Herod the tetrarch (Antipas) – He was ruler of Galilee and the one Luke refers to in his narrative. He is the one who took his brother's wife, imprisoned and executed John the Baptist, and played a role in the trial of Jesus.

Annas – He was the High Priest from 6 A.D to 15 A.D and was removed from that position by Valerius Gratus, who preceded Pilate as Governor. He had a great amount of power and influence over the people of Israel, was proud, and knew how to work the system to his own gain. Alfred Edersheim records that the temple had become known as the *Bazaar of Annas* because of the underhanded and unscrupulous dealings of the money changers. It was this system that Jesus twice cleansed in the temple, and which made Jesus no friends among the religious leaders.

Caiaphas - In a shrewd move, Annas figured out how to keep the High Priesthood in the family, and it was handed over to his son-in-law Caiaphas, who was the acting High Priest when Jesus is brought to trial. He held this position for almost 20 years, which meant he was a skilled politician. He held much power over the people and also could put pressure in political ways, as when he leaned on Pilate for a decision in Jesus' trial.

This whole group not only gives us historical chronology, they represent sinful leadership at every level of culture and society. This provides a stark backdrop for Jesus' public ministry of proclaiming Himself to people who walked in darkness, and to whom the light of the world had come (John 8:12).

B. Key location identified

Out of the wilderness – John started his prophetic ministry out of the wilderness, where he had lived for years before. When you think wilderness, do not think lush mountains that you'd camp at, think Mojave Desert, think arid wasteland, and a place where robbers and thieves went to run from authorities, not a place for respectable prophets. John came on the scene boldly, with a singular message, but he was outside of the corporate mainstream. In other words, God did not raise John up from within the system, but brought him in to challenge those within the system which had been so corrupt, it could not see the truth when it was literally right in front of them. John was unafraid to call out people in high ranking positions, did not care about reputation, but had created a mighty following by the time of Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21).

II. **Turning point in a message given again for the first time (3-6)**

Luke 3:3-6 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, **proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**

A. A message that clearly clarified the gospel

John came by his name honestly. He came to play a role that pointed to Christ and prepared for Jesus' ministry. He shot out like a canon and was snuffed out within a few years, but played his role to perfection. He came beating a consistent drum of the good news (Luke 1:18), the best news for people walking in darkness. But his message was not easy to digest. It might have even seemed harsh to some

hearers (especially if you have a guy who was dressed in burlap and ate bugs). He might have seemed like a novelty to some, but His message was not only brought powerfully, it offered the power to overcome sin and darkness.

Judgment

- **Wrath** – The first thing to note in John’s message is his emphasis on the wrath of God (see Romans 5:9, Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10 for a greater look at the response to God’s wrath). His response to the crowd in Luke 3:7 shows that his message contained a warning about the wrath of God that would come upon the wicked.
- **Fire** – He also gave 2 illustrations about judgment to come: **a tree (v. 9) and wheat (17)**. Each of these was consumed by fire, which was a picture of God’s judgment. The tree that did not produce good fruit was chopped down and thrown into fire, and the chaff that was separated from the wheat was consumed by an unquenchable fire.

What’s the point? John’s message was GOOD NEWS, but it came out of a reality of really terrible news. The news that John started with was the fact that in their sin without the work of the Spirit and the coming Christ, they were destined for God’s justice. God is not vindictive but He is just. The good news of the gospel is ONLY good when we know that we are under His wrath, and deserve to be punished, and that goes for all of us. Without knowledge of God’s wrath of sin we cannot truly give the truth of good news. In fact, if there is no bad news, there is no need for salvation at all, we simply need to tweak and change things on our own, because the power to lasting happiness is within us, and within our grasp (sorry, I just threw up in my mouth a little bit as I typed that)

Hope

- **Baptism** – John’s message may have seemed a bit “fire and brimstone” for some, but it did not stop at judgment but turned the corner in hope. There are a few concepts to clarify in his message. **First**, the baptism he was performing was not Christian baptism as we experience it. We are baptized into Christ’s death and raised again with His life (see Roman 6:1-4) and symbolized by going down into the water. This baptism was not looking back to Jesus’ death since He obviously had not died yet. No, this baptism was for Jewish people who clung to their religious heritage but now recognized their inability to keep God’s Law and needed to repent of their sin. Jews performed baptisms for Gentiles converting to Judaism, and this baptism would have signified the same mindset. **Second**, this baptism did not save (any more than baptism performed this morning save), but was a visual of the change that had already taken place.
- **Repentance** - The baptism performed was one of repentance, a word that is extremely difficult to translate into English. Usually when we think of repentance, we think of being sorry, of feeling some sort of remorse, or even regret over some action. In fact, this is exactly what Judas Iscariot felt in **Matthew 27:3**, where the ESV translates him having *changed his mind* (NASB – felt remorse; KJV – repented). Judas realized he had made a dramatic and appalling mistake by betraying Jesus, and felt bad enough to take his own life. The problem with equating this to repentance is the Greek uses a completely different word for what Judas felt (μεταμελήθεις for those who care), which meant to feel remorse.

The word John used for repentance literally is the word that means “change of mind” (metanoia). This goes far beyond feeling bad in **3 significant ways** in describing what repentance really is:

Change of mind – Repentance means we begin to think differently about the object that we offended as well as ourselves. Being sorry means we are concerned about us. Repentance recognizes we have offended a holy God. The change in mind means we no longer rationalize or justify sin, but turn from deception to truth.

Change of desire – Not only turning in our thinking, the word also carries the connotation of a change in desire² or feelings. Repentance means what it changed in us is how we feel about sin and where we fulfill our desires. Repentance means we have a growing hatred against sin and desire to obey Christ

Change of action – As John will point out in the passage, all of this leads us to LIVE DIFFERENTLY as a result of a change of thinking and desire. This means that repentance brings a complete change of who we are, how we think, and frees us up to act.

A few things to keep in mind:

Repentance exists where true faith does – Repentance and faith are uniquely tied together

Neither of these is a work or addition to salvation by God’s work alone – We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) and even our belief is not a work produced by us, but by God’s grace alone.

Only God can produce repentance in us – God convicts us through the Holy Spirit, and He is the one to grant us repentance (Acts 3:26; 5:31, 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25)

Though repentance is a necessary turn, it continues to grow in our life with Christ, as does our faith – Each time we sin, we declare that we do not truly believe, even though we believed Christ at the point of salvation. This means that as we grow in our faith, we also grow in our desire to repent, to turn from any and all sin, and yield ourselves to the Lord.

- **Forgiveness of sins**

This is where we find the delight of the good news, the fact that in repentance and faith we find forgiveness of sin. This means that the penalty of sin is paid for, meaning God’s wrath is satisfied, the power of sin is broken, and we are accepted by God. This is the hope of every sinner. And our sins of the past are not the only ones forgiven, but all of sins committed today and tomorrow. We no longer strive for perfectionism or vain attempts to find acceptance through our own effort, but find rest and peace in the final work of Jesus on the cross. That is what John paved the way for.

B. A pathway cleared for the coming of Jesus

Role of the forerunner – preparation for a coming king – The picture of the prophecy from Isaiah 40:3-5 was that of a herald running before a coming king clearing a wide swath, straight, without pot hole, clearing out any trash along the way, so that the king could drive straight and smooth into the palace.

Salvation for ALL – Luke makes sure to add that all flesh, not just Abraham’s sons, would be able to see this salvation. John cleared the way for all of mankind to repent of their sin and embrace Jesus.

III. Turning point in light of reality of the gospel (7-17)

² Kittel, *TDNT*, p. 976

Luke 3:7-9 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."

A. False Responses that lead to judgment

Now, the main action of the story comes from John's interaction with the crowds that were coming to him in the Jordan River to be baptized. He interacted with 2 main groups: **those that were coming illegitimately, and those who honestly repented.** Huge lessons are learned from each group.

The first group that John called out was identified as "the crowd", but Matthew 3 identifies the main portion of this group to be the Pharisee's and Sadducee's, the religious leaders of the day. Its interesting that this group would come down to see John at all, but if religion is built on political and social protocol, maintaining power and control would necessitate seeing what the crowds were flocking to. John called this group out as a **brood of vipers.** The two-fold implication is that of a bunch of snakes scurrying away from a fire they heard was coming over the mountains, and identified them with the father of all serpents, Satan himself (John 8:44; Matt. 3:7; 12:34, 23:33). This was a direct message that decried their action as fake, inauthentic, and false. He recognized that they were doing this for ritualistic purposes, but had no change of mind (repentance). **What did John id in them that is also true false repentance today?**

- **Trusting in works** – This group was the cream of the religious crop. They prayed, kept the Sabbath, gave to the poor, kept the Law externally, and observed the religious feasts. However, all of this was simply trusting in their own goodness, their own worthiness for salvation. They did not need Jesus, they needed themselves. This type of thinking is hypocritical, merely outward, and only ritualistic, looking good to people but detested by God (Isa. 29:13).
- **Trusting in heritage** – They trusted the fact that they were children of Abraham, their upbringing and heritage. John said that was foolish since God could easily make stones into sons and replace them (you have to see the caustic irony in that statement). God was the Father of Jewish people (John 8:33, 39), but this did not save them. We have this same dilemma today as some trust in their upbringing in a church, what they learned, experienced, or did as a means or assurance of salvation. But without true repentance and fruit produced, these trees would be cut down and thrown in the fire.
- **Desire to add Jesus – and change nothing** – The final mark of false repentance is the desire to add Jesus (He's popular, loving, great), but not to have Jesus radically change us, but to have Jesus as a good luck charm, a cosmic butler in my time of need. They were willing to jump through any hoop, except to be changed from their path of destruction.

B. True Responses that lead to changed lives

Luke 3:10-14 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."

True repentance leads to a changed mindset, newfound desires, and an ability to live a radical life in all the seemingly ordinary parts

There were three groups that asked the all important question: **what then shall we do?** The answer was as simple as it was shocking. The three groups were the crowd (which at least contained the Pharisees and Sadducees in part), **tax collectors** (who were hated and despised because they stole money from the people through use of political position and power), and **soldiers** (who abused their power by extorting money from common people through military and positional might). What we might have expected was something radical, something that looked like "selling everything, changing professions, and following the coming Messiah." Yet what was given leaves us with a clear view of the change that comes in repentance.

What does repentance look like?

- **Love of others replacing self love** - The call to the crowd was to share the necessities of life (a tunic was worn everyday, kind of like a less intimate kind of underwear, and food) was to be shared with those possessing none. **Does this mean kindness to the poor saves?** Not at all. But those who have turned from their sin to God in Christ have a newfound love for others. This love shows itself in practical ways. Notice this did not say give away all your tunics and all your food - it is not a call for believers to starve and run naked through the streets. But love of God compels us to love others - not for acceptance, but because we are already accepted.
- **Contentment replacing lust for material gain** - To the tax collectors, who notoriously leveraged their position to steal from people (and EVERYONE KNEW IT, but could do nothing about it) they were to simply do their job with integrity. This was not a call to revolt against the government or the system, but simply to do their job the way it was intended. In doing so, they would be radically counter-cultural, would stand out, and would even be threatening to those they worked with. There is no specific amount given - yet a great picture of repentance of a tax collector is seen in **Luke 19** with Zacchaeus. His response in faith in Jesus meant he restored 4 fold to anyone he defrauded, and gave half his goods to the poor. **Was this required for repentance?** Not at all, but a repentant heart no longer looks for the **path of least resistance nor the minimal requirements**, but makes much of the One who saved him.
- **Proper responsibility replacing abuse of power** - To the soldiers, who held nearly unlimited power with the people (try messing with a soldier and see what happened), the call was similar. They were to stop abusing their power though abusing the people, and learn to be content with what they had. **Does this mean contentment brings on repentance?** Not at all, but a repentant person will be content and will turn from selfishness to selflessness, and a selfless person is not striving for his own material, but is content with his joy in Christ.

Why is this so important? This illustrates that all of life is a result of our belief or disbelief in the good news of the gospel. What is the solution to racial divide? Repentance. What is the solution to injustice? Repentance. What is the solution to the abuses of authority and power? Repentance. What is the solution to my disgruntled marriage? Repentance. John did not call these to cut and run, but to radically move back into their lives and live a life of repentant *love, humility, sacrifice, and contentment*. **Would this make like difficult?** *Absolutely.* **Would this make like joyful?** *Without question.* **Is this way of living hopeless.** *Never, unless Jesus was wrong about the whole resurrection thing.*

Questions to ponder:

- Read **Luke 13:1-5** - What were the people trying to get Jesus to say or engage in terms of politics and culture. How does His response color how we should respond?
- Repentance at the point of salvation means repentance will continue in our process of becoming more like Jesus. What are areas that we misunderstand about repentance? What are areas that we need to repent of in our life?
- What would be different about our marriages, friendships, jobs, and outlook on life if we lived lives of repentance?