Fruits Worthy of Repentance (Luke 3:7-14)

Series: Luke: An Orderly Account - Dr. Randy White

I. The Coming Lord Calls for a Prepared People (vv. 7-9)

A. The Warning Reaches Those Coming for Baptism

1. John addresses the multitude coming to be baptized. The wilderness messenger who announces God's salvation also warns of "the wrath to come." Preparing for the Lord includes hearing what His coming means for those who resist Him.
2. "O generation of vipers" is a searching description of the people before him. Their arrival at the Jordan brings them within hearing of God's word; John now confronts the condition that makes repentance necessary.
3. His question, "who hath warned you to flee," gives the warning urgency. The danger lies ahead, and the present opportunity is to receive God's message. Malachi likewise joins the promised messenger with the searching question of who can stand when the Lord appears (Malachi 3:1-2).

B. Repentance Must Bear Its Appropriate Fruit

1. "Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance." Therefore connects the command with the warning. Worthy means fitting or corresponding: the conduct John requires must agree with the repentance his baptism proclaims.
2. John has been preaching "the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Luke 3:3). His ministry calls Israel to turn to God in preparation for Messiah, and the following questions show what that response requires in ordinary life.
3. Gabriel had announced a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:17). John's concern reaches beyond a gathering at the river into the life of the people who will meet the coming One.

C. Abraham's Children Must Hear Abraham's God

1. John anticipates their inward appeal: "We have Abraham to our father." Their ancestry is a real part of Israel's history; the God who gave Abraham the promise now addresses Abraham's descendants through His messenger.
2. God's ability to raise children to Abraham from these stones places the continuance of His purpose in His own hands. His power sustains the promise, and His word calls the present generation to respond.
3. The axe is already laid at the root. John's picture brings judgment close to the whole tree: "every tree" is measured by its fruit. The unfruitful tree is hewn down and cast into the fire. The image gives the warning its severity: the coming judgment demands a present response. The repeated therefore ties this judgment to the fruit God requires.

II. A Prepared People Sees the Neighbor's Need (vv. 10-11)

A. The Warning Becomes a Personal Question

1. "What shall we do then?" The people take up the implication of John's command. The question moves from the fruit he requires to the conduct of the hearers who have come for baptism.
2. John answers in terms they can understand and act upon: coats and meat, clothing and food. The response to God's prophetic message reaches possessions already in their hands and needs already before their eyes.
3. His answer gives substance to "fruits worthy of repentance." A changed response to God is to show itself in the way a person treats someone who lacks the necessities of life.

B. Possession Brings an Opportunity to Share

1. The person with two coats is to impart to the person with none. John places the one who has alongside the one who lacks; the other's need makes an immediate claim upon the hearer's generosity.
2. "He that hath meat, let him do likewise." Meat here means food. John's second example extends the same principle from clothing to nourishment: what sustains one's own life can also serve another's need.
3. Israel's law had already commanded an open hand toward the poor brother (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). John's answer belongs within that revealed duty. Preparation for Israel's Messiah includes taking God's concern for the needy seriously.

III. A Prepared People Uses Position Faithfully (vv. 12-14)

A. The Publican Must Honor What Is Appointed

1. The publicans, tax collectors, also come to be baptized and ask, "Master, what shall we do?" Their particular work comes under the same call to repentance that addresses the multitude.
2. "Exact no more than that which is appointed you." Their authority to collect has a defined measure. Taking beyond that measure turns an assigned responsibility into an opportunity for personal gain.
3. John's answer makes honest dealing a concrete expression of repentance. The person who handles another's payment is accountable for the amount he requires, as surely as the person with two coats is accountable for his response to need.

B. The Soldier Must Govern His Use of Power

1. The soldiers ask the question a third time. John names three concerns: violence, false accusation, and contentment with wages. Their strength and position bring particular responsibilities toward those within their reach.
2. "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely." Physical intimidation and a dishonest charge both put another person at the mercy of the one exercising power. John's command requires restraint and truthfulness.
3. "Be content with your wages" reaches the desire behind abuse of position. Receiving one's appointed pay with contentment belongs alongside treating others justly; satisfaction with provision bears upon the use of power.

C. God's Word Defines the Response He Requires

1. The repeated question receives answers suited to each hearer's situation. Sharing, honest collection, and restrained power give recognizable form to the fruit John calls for as Israel prepares for Messiah.
2. John's command belongs to that prophetic preparation. Paul's later instruction to the Body of Christ grounds salvation in God's grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), then describes believers as created in Christ Jesus unto good works (v. 10).
3. In each setting God's own word establishes the response. Here the warning, the call to repentance, and the practical answers belong together: the people preparing to receive the Lord must hear Him in the daily affairs of life.