

YOU TOO MUST CHANGE

Luke 3:1–20

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My first title of this message was more contemporary—“You Too Can Change.” I don’t think that would be John the Baptist’s title. So we X’ed out the word “can,” and put in its place the word “must.” Because not only we *can* change, we *must* change. You too must change.

I’ve taken some liberties with the text today. I’m going to read from a translation you’ve never heard before because it is my own. In order to appreciate better what Luke is telling us about John, I’ve decided to put this text within a modern context and, rather than simply translating word for word, to try to get an idea by translating concept for concept, so listen to this translation: “In the fourth year of the presidency of Ronald Reagan, Tom Bradley mayor of Los Angeles, during the apostasy of the World and National Council of Churches, the Word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, out in the desert region beyond San Bernardino. He went through the desolate places of San Bernardino and Riverside counties, preaching a baptism of conversion for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the Book of Isaiah, the prophet, the voice of one calling aloud in the desert, ‘Prepare the freeway for the Lord. Straighten out the winding parts. Fill in the potholes and cracks and even out all the bumps. The crooked road must become straight, and the rough highways smooth. And the whole earth will see God’s salvation.’ John said to the crowds walking out from Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego, to be baptized by him, ‘You slithering snakes. Who warned you to flee from the coming fire of judgment? Produce deeds, not words, that show genuine repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We are secure because we are Americans and rich ones at that.” For I tell you that being American has nothing at all to do with being a child of God. God can turn stones into

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children if He wanted. God already has the blade of His buzz-saw laid against the tree root of your life. He is going to cut down every tree that has no evidence of His indwelling life and throw it into the fire.’ ‘What then should we do?’ the crowd asked. John answered, ‘If you are well-clothed and fed then find people to give food and clothing to. Just keep for yourself the minimum you need.’ Management people also came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘What should we do?’ ‘Don’t pad your expense accounts,’ he told them. ‘Bill your employer for your legitimate work expenses only.’ Then some politicians came and asked Him, ‘What should we do?’ He replied, ‘Quit taking bribes and start running a truthful campaign without spreading smears or lies about your opponents. Be content with your pay and don’t use your political office to make sweetheart deals.’ The Southern California people were waiting expectantly and wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them, ‘I baptize you with water. But one more powerful and important than I will come, so great that I am not worthy even to carry out His trash. He has a large magnet in His hand to gather His people to Himself. He is going to throw everyone else into an unquenchable fire.’ With many other words, John encouraged the people to repent and announced the good news to them. But when John rebuked some big-named, so-called gospel ministers, singers, and authors for their sexual immoralities, divorcing their wives and marrying their adulteresses, plus other acts of high living and deceitful financial management of kingdom money, they blacklisted John from their churches, religious programs, and book publishers, isolating him from disturbing their earthly empires.”

That’s John. Very clear-cut. Very blunt and very, very unvarnished. But he drew people. He was a most unusual man out there in the Jordan River wilderness area. People were walking 30, 40, 50, 60 miles just to hear him preach. Just to be baptized. He wasn’t even doing miracles. He

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couldn't even hand out handbills that said, "Go to the Jordan, where miracles and signs and wonders are occurring." For no other motivation than to hear him preach God's truth and be baptized by him, people came those many, many miles to see, hear, and be influenced by a man to whom God's words came.

As we look at this passage in Luke today, I want us to look at how Luke sets John forth in four relationships: John's relationship to history, John's relationship to his day, John's relationship to Jesus, and John's relationship to us.

I. I spoke of his relationship to history in the first verse.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1, NIV). Luke is concerned to show us as an historian that the person's name, the emperor, the governor, the three tetrarchs, and the two high priests are simply bit players on God's stage of history. All of them have impressive stationery. John has none. All of them have impressive offices and titles. John has none. But from God's point of view, they're all bit players. And their simple function in history is to introduce the introducer of Jesus. God is always at work, scrambling the kingdoms of men; calling things important that we call unimportant, and calling things inconsequential that we call consequential.

By setting this story in history, Luke is reminding us, once again, that he is not telling a story like Luke Skywalker and the Jedi Knights, a story that happened in a far away, long ago land and time. God's story takes place in human history: in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. What we don't know is exactly how Luke dated the beginning of Tiberius' reign, because it's possible to date it two different dates—when he became a co-regent with Caesar Augustus or when he began to rule solely on his own. The dating, therefore, would lead us to conclude that John's ministry either commenced in 26 A.D. or as late as 29 A.D. Luke reminds

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us that there were two high priests at the time. Actually, from a strictly technical point of view, only one person could serve as high priest, but Annas had been high priest between the years 7-14 A.D. and then, in succession, he'd had five sons that he'd bought the office for. Now his son-in-law, Caiaphas, sat in that chair.

There had been no real high priest for almost two hundred years, because the line of Aaron had come to an end in 163 B.C. So for two hundred years, everybody that sat in the high priest chair was a pretender. And there has never been a legitimate high priest in Israel from 163 B.C. The high priesthood was over. The people who were sitting in it were apostates. They owed their office to their political influence and their wealth. Jesus is going to end all of that. He's going to serve, Himself, as the high priest, albeit of another order, the order of Melchizedek.

John, unlike his father who was a priest, comes in the role of a prophet, breaking the silence of four centuries. And in the wilderness near Jericho, where God's people first entered Canaan, out in the desert, again in that very spot, God is raising up an army to be captained by the new Joshua—Jesus—who will bring His people to the forever Canaan, the forever Promised Land.

John's out there saying, "Get ready! He's getting ready to do it!"

That's kind of John's relationship to history.

II. John's relationship to his day is also interesting to look at.

Much of what happened in John's day happens again in our day. History tends to be repetitive in terms of the basic themes that are always being worked out in cultures. They just have different names. In John's day, people, by and large, were divided into four different groups:

A. One group was just south of John, in the area to the north of the Dead Sea. The Qumran community, the Essene community. Their idea was, "God is through with the temple, He's through with the priesthood, He's through with animal sacrifices. The whole system is corrupt.

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It's been fouled up. Let's get out of it. Let's get away from it. Let's come out into the desert and get ready for God to deliver us. God doesn't need anybody to help Him deliver us. When He's good and ready, He'll do it. Let's get out into the desert, get away from the contamination of other people and be here, a pure and holy community." I call them the withdrawal front. There are people today who think that way, "If we could just get away to a little commune somewhere in Oregon and get safe from the contamination of Southern California and get spiritual. Then we'll be all right." The withdrawal front. If we could just get away from it all. The Essenes had that idea.

B. The Zealots were on the opposite end of the spectrum. They said, "God isn't going to do anything until He sees we're serious. So, what we need to do is have a gospel of liberation. Kill a commie for Jesus' sake!" The Zealots were people who carried dangers under their robes and would assassinate political enemies. They said, "We take action. Get a gun and form that revolution! God isn't going to do it. He's waiting for you to be the revolutionary." They were firebrand revolutionaries. You see them all over the world today announcing a gospel of liberation. Many times it's, "Kill a capitalist for Jesus!" They were part of the matrix of that day.

C. The Sadducees were saying, "It's the best of all worlds. Things have never been better. We've got money in our bank account, we have a secure retirement plan, and things are just great. We know that the Romans are in charge, but that doesn't bother us at all, because we've found a way to make a profit even off of them. So, nobody mess up the system, please! It's just too good for us. Everything's fine. Leave it alone."

D. Then, there were the Pharisees. They said, "We can't go out like the Essenes and we can't take up arms like the Zealots. Certainly, what the Sadducees are doing isn't God's way. Let's just stay and try to be pure and separate and holy and let our dress and our externals show that at

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least we are different.” The problem with their differences is, it didn’t reach inside. It just went to the outside. There are people, today, that think that by living with a lot of rules and negatives and don’ts, they can somehow be different. But if the spirit isn’t changed, the rules don’t mean anything.

So John came to the Withdrawal Faction, to the Freedom Fighters, to the Corroborationists, to the Separatists—all of these groups. John came with a different emphasis, an emphasis upon personal repentance and baptism. Ethnicity was not enough. Get baptized just like the Gentiles. That’s what the Gentiles have to do when they want to get into the faith. They have to be baptized. You’re no better than the Gentiles. Be baptized. Get washing for your sins. Begin to practice justice and mercy.

John was saying, “Be forgiven!” A temple sacrificial system isn’t doing it at all. If people were getting their sins forgiven through the temple sacrificial system, they wouldn’t have been going out to hear John. I once preached a sermon, years ago, I called “The Jordan River Protest Movement;” because John was protesting against liturgy, without salvation. You can kill all the lambs in the world but it’s meaningless if something real didn’t happen in that moment. John was saying, “God’s raising up a new sacrificial system. Behold the Lamb of God. Get ready for the forgiveness that He has to offer.” John was saying, “The Messiah is coming. Get your hearts ready.”

So he uses the language of Isaiah 40 to describe the practice of the day, when an important potentate would take a trip. His servants would go out to ready the roads so his chariot could travel without being bumped along by the rocks and the potholes. Isaiah’s exalted poetic language says, “Every valley shall be exalted and every high place brought low.” A simple

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metaphor to describe, “Let the ditches be filled up and let the bumps be laid even. Get ready in the human heart the way of the Lord.”

During the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in Westminster Abby, when the entire congregation had been seated, suddenly, quite unexpectedly, a squad of cleaners appeared with brushes and vacuum cleaners and proceeded to go down sweeping the carpets, so they would be absolutely clean for the coming of the queen.

That’s what John is saying: the King is coming. Mend not your roads, but your lives. John is also saying, “Out there, in the wilderness, the day of wrath is at hand. Judgment is coming. Snakes, when there’s a fire, begin to slither off to escape it. The day of wrath is approaching. He, the Messiah, will baptize with the Spirit and He will baptize with fire.” Every trained rabbi and informed Jewish theologian knew that the Day of the Lord consisted of an age of grace for His people which would be the coming of the Spirit and an age of judgment and a fire upon those who had resisted the will of God. John, like most of the prophets, sees these two things as mountain peaks, without understanding a valley of time will occur between the first coming of Christ, when He brings the Spirit, and the second coming, when He comes with fire.

John says, “The time of fire is coming. Make ready your heart.” And because John feared God more than man, he stood up to Herod. That was John’s relationship to his day.

III. His relationship to Jesus involves the fact that He never focused on their being relatives.

That brought no special privilege. He knew that Jesus would be more powerful than he. That was his message—one comes mightier than I. Jesus would be more powerful and, unlike John, He would do miracles. He would have a following far vaster than John, and his effect would be far

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greater than John's. For John's baptism was only external, it was only with water, but Jesus would baptize in the Spirit. John could only call for change but Jesus could bring the change. John had with this a sense of unworthiness. "I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie the latches of His sandals." In Jewish life, a rabbi might have servants and assistants that would do many things for him, but one thing that any rabbi would refuse to have done for him would be for his aid or a servant to untie the latches of his shoes. That was a personal matter. It was personal because the feet collected the dirt of life. It was personal because, if you've ever been in Egypt, you will understand, with open latrines and the like, how that becomes an area of the body most in need in the evening of washing and cleansing. So John said, "I'm not even worthy to do something so menial as to untie the latches of His sandals." That's why I translated it, "I am not worthy to carry out the trash." Because that's something most of us do on our own, unless we have families and we've got children who do that for us. John had this beautiful sense of unworthiness.

A sense of unworthiness, if misplaced, can be very damaging to wholesome living. We have a self-concept that sees ourselves as nothing and incapable of anything—"You're just a dumb and stupid, incapable person"—that is very damaging. We all know that. But when we have an unworthiness that is properly understood, it is a greatly freeing thing. It produces gratitude in our life, and John very much knew who he was. But he also had this tremendous humility when he thought of his relationship to the Son of God.

That's John's relationship to history, to his day, to Jesus, just a brief sketch.

IV. We want to look, for a moment, at John's relationship to us.

The message of Scripture is never complete until it has touched us. When we look at John, when John is preaching out there in the wilderness, we could come to an immediate conclusion that his

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preaching for us is incomplete. It is incomplete because it does not carry the ideal with it of what Jesus is going to do for us. He is going to do things for us that we could never do for ourselves.

He's going to put us through grace in our standing with God.

John's message is a message of deeds. If you've got more than you know what to do with, give it away. So that you're stripped to the minimum and the poor have something. If you're cheating other people, then quit cheating them and treat them honestly in your relationships. His message was a message of good deeds. Therefore, His message is, in a sense, incomplete; because it needs Christ to bring it to completion and it needs Christ to help us do the good deeds. But our error would be to think of salvation as totally devoid of real change. John didn't make that error. To be saved is to be thoroughgoing converted, to be changed.

I heard a sermon by Dr. Vernon Grounds a number of years ago, during the height of the campus disturbances in America in the 60s, in which he gave four points to John the Baptist about the call for change.

A. He said, "We have a certain sector of society that says, 'The answer is to Learn, Baby Learn!' They're the educators. They say, if you could only learn, get more information [the whole idea being a lot of the courses on sex education in our schools], if you just learn more, you'll be a moral person." Learn, baby, learn. They're the educators.

B. Then there are the capitalists that say, "The real need is Earn, Baby, Earn! People are wicked because they don't have enough money. So earn, baby, earn! You earn enough, you get some money in the bank, and you'll be ok."

C. The campus radicals are saying, "Burn, Baby, Burn! Tear the whole thing down and start again. The whole thing stinks. Burn it down. Burn, baby, burn!"

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D. The Christian message is not “Learn, Baby, Learn!” It’s not “Earn, Baby, Earn!” It’s not “Burn, Baby, Burn!” It’s “Turn, Baby, Turn!”

That’s what John is saying to us. That’s what Jesus was saying when He began His ministry—
“Turn. Repent. Change.”

If you’re anything like me, you probably find it’s a lot easier to envision other people making changes than yourself. Think of a person close to you for a moment—a husband, a wife, a child, a parent, a roommate—think about three or four changes you’d like to see them make that would make your life a whole lot easier. If other people would just change! I found it a whole lot easier for me to envision the changes I want members of the family to make than to envision changes I need to make myself. It’s difficult for us to make changes. It’s difficult, because we’re creatures of habit and we’re captive to our ideas and to our routines.

I saw a great illustration of it this week in the paper when I read of the death of Sylvan Goldman. He died in Oklahoma City last Sunday, he was eighty-six years of age. You probably don’t know him or have never heard of him. He left an estate of two hundred million dollars. You know how he made his money? He’s the guy who invented the shopping carts that you wheel around in the grocery stores. The article in the newspaper said that back in 1937, one June day, he was in his grocery store (he owned a little grocery store in Oklahoma City). He was kind of sitting back. It was a dull day and wasn’t getting many customers and he was trying to think how to fill the aisles with customers. He saw two folding chairs there and he began to envision the idea of putting some kind of wire basket cage between the two folding chairs and pushing it around. He got a guy to help him and they invented it. Then he put out an advertisement in the newspaper and the advertisement said something like this, “Can you imagine winding your way through a spacious food market without having to carry a cumbersome shopping basket on your arm?” He

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thought everybody would want to do that, would come out, would want to change their grocery habits, come out and get his cart and wheel it around. Nobody responded to the ad. So he put out another ad that said, “The reaction last week to this new invention was Wow!” He said, “I told a deliberate lie. People still didn’t come. I tried to interest other stores in my basket but nobody would buy it.” So he said, “I finally wound up hiring a bunch of young men and women to spend all day wheeling baskets up and down the aisles of my store pretending like they were shopping.” “And finally,” he said, “the idea caught on.”

I thought, if it’s that hard to get people to change their habits of grocery shopping, can you imagine how hard it is to change in the areas of life where you really need to change? Like being grumpy!

Change. How do you change? There are some excellent things that flow out of Luke’s account of John’s ministry, that give us some steps to change.

Change takes place when our heart gets touched by the Word of God.

He points out specific areas of our life that the Lord wants changed. You can read a lot of books on change that needs to take place in life, but there’s no more effective change that can take place than the change the Spirit of God puts upon our heart. That’s why we come to a gospel meeting such as this. We want to place ourselves under the influence of God’s Word and let Him speak to us and stir up the need for change, if it exists, within our life. Specific changes.

One of my favorite stories is the story David Reed tells about a logging community up in Oregon. This minister had gone to take the parish there. He found the people friendly and welcoming toward him. One day, he was out in the woods, by a riverbank, and noticed that some of his parishioners were cutting the ends off the logs that were designed to float downstream to the logging mill. He recognized what they were doing. In that area of the country, it was

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customary that the person who owned the timber would notch their initials or their logo into the end of the log and that would tell the mill when they received the log whose account to credit.

But he noticed some of his parishioners, including a couple of his deacons, were out there sawing off that tell-tell notch and putting their own on the log. He thought, “What kind of a congregation have I got myself into?” So the next Sunday, he came to the pulpit with a mighty text, “Thou shalt not steal.” And he preached on it with all his heart. When he was done and took his place at the outside door to shake hands with the people, everybody came by and said to him, “Pastor, that was a marvelous sermon,” including the deacons that were out there sawing off the ends of the logs. They said, “That was just marvelous, pastor.” He thought to himself, “What possibly went wrong?” So he went back to his text. The next week, he had the answer. He stood up and he said, “My text today is ‘Thou shalt not saw the ends off thy neighbor’s logs.’”

That’s how specific the Holy Spirit wants to get with our life. Obviously, I won’t try a litany of change that would need to take place in an audience like this. You could get a grocery list of change that needs to take place in our life. But the true changes are the changes the Spirit of God lays His finger upon.

Then John’s people do more than get their hearts touched by the Word of God. They physically take action. They respond to the message by walking the 30 or 40 or 50 or 60 miles. And when people say, “Where are you going for a couple of days?” they would have to say, “We’re going out to hear John.” They were talking a physical step that others could observe.

Something I’ve realized as I’ve gotten older—I didn’t understand this when I was younger—I’ve realized how important it is when people make a commitment to Jesus Christ that they demonstrate that commitment by doing something physical, even if it’s walking down an aisle in a Billy Graham crusade. It’s a recognition, from the Christian point of view, that we’re not just

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spirit and mind. We're also body. And the body needs to be out there, leading and guiding and representing where the Spirit and the mind are going. Physically, John's people that were changing were taking action.

Another thing they were doing was going on to public record that they were changing. They were being baptized by him. They were going public with what had happened. I think that, when you look at change, we never really effectively change in our life when we reach a secret determination. We need to let other people know about it.

John's people were not saying, "I promise to be good for the rest of my life. I'll never do anything wrong again." That's not the kind of Pollyanna change we're talking about. We're talking about having a disposition that wants thoroughly to seek after God's heart and be a changing person, after His likeness, metamorphosing all of our life, being transformed into His likeness. A commitment to change—going on public record.

Maybe you need to make that kind of a decision today. Maybe it's been a long time since you've said to your husband or to your wife, "I love you." And the reason why it's been a long time is you're not sure you have the same commitment to that relationship as some time ago. Somehow, you need to go on record as being committed verbally to your marriage. Maybe you need to go on record as being verbally committed to a particular course of action within your family, or a particular set of circumstances, the Spirit of God is asking for you to change, going on record. Then the last thing out of this passage: We must let God do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

We cannot forgive our own sins, so John is out there, in the wilderness, saying, "Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins," knowing full well that only God can cleanse us, only God can give us grace and help us. Out there, in the wilderness, John was proclaiming that the Lord would fill us

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with His Spirit. That is, that when Messiah would come, He would put His nature and personality within us. Only Jesus can do that. Only He can give us His personality.

Let your heart get touched by God's Word. Physically take action. Go on record as changing. Let God do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, each of us, when we're honest before You, recognize there are areas in our life where not only do we need to change but we must change. Areas in our relationship with You, areas in our relationship with family, areas in our relationship with self. Lord, there are friends here that need to change that attitude toward themselves. An attitude which has them cast down and feeling worthless. And, Lord, through Your Word You come and remind us that we cannot call anyone worthless for whom Christ died; that we're of infinite worth and value to You. We pray for the healing of homes and the healing of marriages within this body that need to change. We recognize, Lord, that change is difficult and it is filled with struggle and even hurt. But You will take our hand through every change we need to make. And You will develop in us Your own character and likeness. We pray for the healing of lives and the healing of homes. Show us, Lord, in relation to our families... how to change, what to change. Then, Lord, in our relationship with You, we pray to be delivered from a concept of spirituality which is in word only. Help us, Lord, to change in ways that allow us to think and to act and to speak in ways that Jesus Himself would speak and act and think. Change what needs to be changed and give us the power to do it. We ask in Your name. Amen.