

## What Should We Do?

*Salvation comes through Jesus to repentant hearts*

.....**Read Luke 3: 1 - 18** .....

***“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, - <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup>As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. <sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup>And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”” <sup>7</sup>John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup>The axe 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.’ <sup>10</sup>‘What should we do then?’ the crowd asked. <sup>11</sup>John answered, ‘The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.’ <sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘what should we do?’ <sup>13</sup>‘Don’t collect any more than you are required to,’ he told them. <sup>14</sup>Then some soldiers asked him, ‘And what should we do?’ He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.’ <sup>15</sup>The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. <sup>16</sup>John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. <sup>18</sup>And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”*.....**

In reading this segment from Luke, I was immediately struck by the questions asked by those who came to hear John the Baptist speak in the desert. The **‘crowd’** and the **‘tax collectors’** and the **‘soldiers’** heard John’s warning about making themselves ready for **‘God’s salvation.’** They immediately wanted to know, **‘What should we do?’** (verses 10 – 13)

Even though this was taking place at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, before Jesus’ salvation was revealed, John’s instructions still ring true for us today. The need for salvation and the way it is received has not changed since that year in A.D. 28.

Many of us right now are weary of a world infected with the COVID virus and frightened by the violence in our country. Because the world seems so out of whack, many of us are wondering if the **‘coming wrath’** of God is just right around the corner.

While we cannot know when God's Day of Judgment will happen, we can know that it will come, and that Jesus told us that we always need to be ready. He told many parables about watching for his return to earth and the events that his Second Coming will set in motion.

Since Old Testament times, God's people have known that there would be a **Day** when God will judge all the people who have ever lived on the earth. Indeed, the Bible in Revelation does tell us that every single person will one day appear before God's **'great white throne.'** There's no dancing around this truth. John the Baptist certainly didn't, did he?

By what will we be judged? In Revelation 20 we learn that we will **'be judged according to what we have done.'** Until Jesus, all anyone could do was try their best to keep all of God's commandments and hope that their best was **'good enough.'**

We all know how woefully impossible it is to keep every single commandment every minute of every day. We all break them in one way or another. We worship other things more than God. We all **'want'** what others have; we all **'envy.'** We all **'take'** what is not ours. We may not literally **'kill'** someone, but our words and attitudes can certainly have the same effect.

Most of us pray that God will judge us **'on a curve,'** like our teachers would do after a really hard test in school. The truth is that none of us, by our deeds alone, can reach the passing score required by God's holiness.

Realizing this, we also should be asking the same question as all of those people who went out to see John the Baptist, **'What should we do then!?'** If we can't be saved by our good deeds, then what *can* we do?

Revelation goes on to tell us that we *will be saved* if our names are **'written in the book of life.'** We must make sure that our names are in there, because anyone whose name is *not* found written in that book will be **'thrown into the lake of fire.'** How do we make sure that our names are written in that very important book?

God is so wonderful! He has graciously provided a way for us to get our names **'written in the book of life'** and to be **'saved'** from His Judgment. God sent Jesus to us, so that by faith in his salvation, our names could be permanently written in the **'Lamb's Book of Life.'** (Revelation 21:27)

John the Baptist taught that in order to receive salvation we must first **'repent'** and **'receive forgiveness for (our) sins.'** Second, he said that we must **'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.'**

John realized that many who came to receive his **'baptism for the forgiveness of sins,'** were only interested in it as a sort of an **'insurance policy'** to protect them from God's judgment. John called them **'vipers,'** because they were trying to sneak into God's Kingdom without the proper attitude of heart that God's rule demands.

John warned that salvation is not found by claiming it as a right of heritage. John told the Jewish leaders that if they were depending on being automatically qualified for God's Kingdom because Abraham was their ancestor, they were mistaken. John reminded them if their

repentance didn't involve true sorrow for their sin and the desire to change their sinful behavior, that their baptism was meaningless.

Let's pause a moment and think about what John's words mean for us today. There are likely many of us who are trusting that because we were born into a Christian home or are a member of a Christian church that our name is automatically added to God's Book of Life.

Many of us also are trusting that by our baptism, our salvation is guaranteed. As Presbyterians in the Reformed Faith, we do believe that in our baptism we are washed from sin.

By the vows made at our baptism, even if they were made for us when we were too young to understand, we are responsible to keep our part of the covenant made in the sacrament. We are personally accountable to abide by God's moral law, Jesus' teachings, and to obey him as Lord over our lives. That means that we listen to and learn from the Holy Spirit who is God's teacher. Throughout our entire lifetime, God's Holy Spirit instructs us how to live honorably and faithfully as God's children.

Our salvation is solely dependent on the saving work Jesus and not at all achieved by our own 'works' or 'deeds.' However, our salvation, if genuine, will *show* in how we live. If we claim to have confessed our sins and have received Jesus' forgiveness of our sin, then it will be evident in our behavior. If the **'fruit'** that comes out of our mouths or from our actions does not show God's character, then we must wonder if our hearts have truly received Jesus' salvation.

For instance, if a person repeatedly takes part in un-Godly behavior, giving no indication of being willing to work with God to improve, their salvation doubtful. Each person must examine his or her own heart, soul, mind and spirit. Are you frequently critical of others or do you forgive easily? Are you humble or prideful? Are you receptive to God's correction and transformation? Just so you know, I include myself in this test. Just this past week God showed me that I too am very much a *'work in progress!'*

Luke summarized John's prophetic mission with a quote from Isaiah 40: ***'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.'*** While this metaphor refers to how an advance party would make sure that the king's route was ready for his travel, it is used here to show how we should prepare our hearts to receive Jesus' salvation.

The **'valleys'** and **'hills'** are **'made low'** through humbling ourselves to the will of God. The **'crooked'** and **'rough paths'** symbolize the sin in our hearts which is cleared away by our sincere repentance.

If repentance is not genuine, then neither is one's salvation. If someone is sorry for their sin merely because of the punishment they receive, or consequences their sin created, that is not true repentance. True repentance includes the desire to correct the sin and to live the kind of life that is pleasing to God.

If a person persists in sinful behavior, counting on God's grace to continually forgive them, then they do not have the attitude that indicates true salvation. Paul must have run up against this many times in his ministry, because in his letter to the Romans, Paul said, ***'Shall we go on***

***sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?' (Romans 6:1-2)***

In Ephesians, Paul had this to say about how those who are saved should live: ***"You were taught, ... to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully ...'In your anger do not sin.'*** ***Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, ... And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*** It sounds a lot like the advice John the Baptist gave, doesn't it?

It takes a lifetime for God to transform our hearts into His own likeness. So, we will not, on this side of Heaven, ever be totally perfect. But, if we have truly received God's gift of salvation, we will always be cooperating with God as He forms His image in us.

When we do something that is not pleasing to God, God will show us. God speaks to us by His Holy Spirit, who comes to live in us when we make Jesus Lord of our lives. When God shows us attitudes and behaviors that do not belong in our hearts, we willingly work with the Holy Spirit to eliminate whatever it is, however painful that process might be.

One of the most wonderful gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to us is the Assurance of our Salvation. The Holy Spirit makes us certain that our salvation is completed and that we *are sealed* to God with an unbreakable bond. We are able to be sure that in life and in death we *do* belong to God and that we *are* citizens of His Kingdom.

Being certain of our salvation, we are able to live confidently, even in the midst of a pandemic, and even through turmoil in our Nation. The Holy Spirit assures us that we can trust that God is in control, even when everyday life seems so fragile.

Salvation brings not only eternal security in the Kingdom of God, but salvation brings us the peace that only God can give. Joined to God through faith in Jesus, we possess the ***'peace that passes understanding'*** which keeps us hopeful even in the midst of turmoil.

I close with a reading from Psalm 62. ***'Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from Him. Truly He is my fortress, I will never be shaken. Trust in Him at all times; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge.'***

Thanks be to God for all of the blessings that flow from His gift of salvation. Amen.