

Bear Fruit Worthy Of Repentance

Our scripture text for today comes from Luke chapter 3, beginning in verse 7. And here, the ministry of salvation that the Lord Jesus would be bringing to the world has already been set into motion by this very special man, John the Baptist. He is the beginning voice, heralding the soon-coming Messiah, telling everyone that just as it had been prophesied 700 years earlier by the Prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'".

And John was now doing just that, declaring that the "Kingdom of God had come to the earth", and proclaiming to all those crowds of people that the Holy Spirit was drawing out to hear him that a baptism of repentance was necessary for the forgiveness of their sins.

And no, John's message was not a gentle and clever one, as so much of the preaching is in this generation. No, John spoke strong and convicting words from God, telling the people that they must repent, else they would be lost eternally. And not only must they repent of their sins, their repentance must be proven true by their behaviors, here calling each of them to invest themselves in bearing "fruits of righteousness."

Listen, beginning in verse 7,

⁷Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" ¹¹He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

¹²Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you."

¹⁴Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:7-14)

Folks, "Repentance" is defined in the bible dictionary as being, "A sense of deep regret, a changing of the mind, and a turning from sin to God."

With that definition as our guide, and with these words of John the Baptist fresh in our minds, we know then that God is setting before us a very clear understanding that simply feeling regret for the wrong things that we do is not enough, that there is much more that we should be doing about all those sinful behaviors and habits that our sinful nature has within it.

We know that it is God's Holy Spirit who brings those stinging pains of guilt and regret to us. That is one of the very special ministries of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told us about that in John chapter 16, when He said,

⁸ And when he (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. (John 16:8)

The Holy Spirit and His blessed ministry is all a part of God's Covenant of Grace by which He brings changes within our souls to transform us into the Image of the Lord Jesus.

But again, the guilt and the regret that we experience are not just to make us feel badly. They are intended for the very specific purpose of guiding us on to those next steps, steps that speak a loud and clear voice that we truly want to change and to be different.

But for the most of us, such change seems always to be the most difficult barrier to get past. Yes, we do want to rid ourselves of the guilt and shame for our sins, and we want all of the joys and goodness of the salvation that Jesus gives to us. But when faced with the necessity of turning away from some of the sins that have captivated our hearts, and yes, that we have even enjoyed, we often falter.

God gives us a clear example of that kind of captivity in the account of the Rich Young Ruler who came to Jesus one day and asked what he might do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus told him to, "Go and sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, then come and follow Him", immediately, the young man was faced with a dilemma.

It seems that during his lifetime, the man had accumulated great wealth and had attained a high social position. And he had become attached to it all.

Jesus knew the young man's heart. He knew that the man's wealth was a stumbling block to him; and that before any real change could take place in the man's life, he would need to give up his desires for his worldly possessions.

And so, the young man was faced with his dilemma. Yes, He wanted salvation, but He also wanted his wealth and social position.

A question . . . "Were his wealth and social position, in themselves, sinful?" No, not at all! But based on the response we observe here, the man's "love for it all" and his "bondage to it" was sinful. And when Jesus told him to go and sell all that he had and to give his money to the poor, and then come and follow Him, the young man could not do it. Sadly, he turned and walked away from Jesus.

I have no doubt that the young man was very sincere in his desire to be righteous and to follow Jesus. But when he was confronted with the knowledge that following Jesus would cost him the things that he valued and enjoyed most, he weighed his options and decided in favor of his wealth. And yes, he was very sad as he walked away, but folks, worldly sorrow counts for very little. And the sorrow that he felt that day would be only the beginning of his sadness. If that young man did not at some point turn back and follow Jesus, then his sadness would become eternal . . . eternal.

But that is the nature of the choices that Jesus offers to us. We can continue to love and to keep our sin. And listen! We can even actually hate our sin. But if we still choose to keep it, the decision is the same. We have our sin, but we do not have Jesus.

Thankfully, for those of us who give our hearts to Jesus, God will put a stumbling block within our sin that eventually makes it difficult for us to live with it. While yes, our sin is most often enjoyable for a season, there will always come a time when the true nature of a sin will catch up to a person and it will demand its consequences, and we will have to deal with it. In our modern-day culture, high positions and wealth often carry with them demands that are strong upon our souls. Sometimes, those demands lure husbands and wives away from their families. Separation, divorce and fatherless children become the recompense. And those real worthwhile treasures of our lives are then lost forever.

Whatever the sinful entanglements of our lives, and they can be many, money, sex, pornography, drugs (and in these days, prescription drugs), alcohol, anger, bitterness, refusal to forgive another person, whatever the sin may be, if we choose to hold on to it, it will surely exact its penalty from us.

As difficult as it will be for us, God's simple remedy for our dilemma is "repentance", a changing of our mind and heart, and a turning from sin to God.

But here also, we must be very careful. This can be a time of great confusion to us. In our efforts to turn away from our sin, we can get so consumed by that struggle that we neglect the part about turning our hearts to God. And we find ourselves turning away from the one sin, only to get caught up in another.

Recall, the words of caution from Jesus in Matthew 12 where He said

⁴³"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. ⁴⁴Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds *it* empty, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first. (Matthew 12:43-45)

Folks, merely turning away from sin is not enough. Yes, we may be "clean" for a season, but unless we replace that empty vacuum left from that sin, then surely, it or some other sin like it will come right back in, seven times worse. In modern-day language, that is called recidivism, and it is so very common, falling back, over and over again.

The "turning" that is such an integral part of repentance is a turning away from sin . . . to Christ. Unless you and I are willing to do that, then we will surely only continue to fall back into sin over and over again, and each time in a worse condition.

Remember, that sin is not just some bad thing that we accidentally stumble over. Sin is a clever and unrelenting predator who continually stalks us and desires to control us. Just as God told Cain when Cain was about to go out and murder his brother, God said, Cain "sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you and to control you, but you must master it".

That is the choice that stands before each of us every moment. Sin entangles us and it wants to control us. It is like the thief in John chapter 10. Its very nature is

to “steal, to kill, and to destroy”, but the message from these scriptures today is that we must master it. We must make the choice to repent and to turn, even flee, from sin, and to turn to Christ and to the path He has laid out for us to follow.

The words that John the Baptist spoke to the people on this particular occasion were words intended to cause the people to take several steps in their repentance. First, to examine their hearts, and to see how their conduct and behavior were an affront to the holiness of God, secondly, to turn their hearts away from their sins to Christ, then thirdly, to walk in ways that were completely different from the ways they had been walking, to walk in ways of purity and righteousness.

Jesus, the Messiah, would be coming to these same people very shortly. And He would be speaking words of salvation. John's message was a message of preparation, a kind of plowshare that would up-turn and prepare the hearts of the people to hear and to receive the salvation that Jesus would offer to them.

John's words were not the simple or clever thoughts of a man, but they were instead words with a special power within them, words that could penetrate a lifetime of hardened habits and behaviors.

Recall again, that John's words held within them the power of the Holy Spirit. And those words were,

12 . . . living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

God's words were John's special powerful instrument as he called out for the men and women to repent and turn from their sin.

And notice here also, that John was not sent to minister to only certain groups of people. He ministered to them all, Jews and Gentiles, wealthy and poor, tax collectors and soldiers. We must remember that God calls all men and women to Himself. He does not desire that any should perish.

And as He warned the Jews, their bloodlines of being Jews did not earn them any special place within the salvation of God. No, our bloodlines, our heritage, or as with many of us, our family attendance at church every Sunday, does not earn us any special favors from God. While faithful church attendance is a right

and excellent thing to do, it cannot earn our salvation. Only the blood of Christ can bring salvation to our souls.

And notice here also that John did not try to measure his words carefully, as we are told to do in this generation. Today, we are told that “hellfire and brimstone” messages are too harsh and that such messages will only alienate those who listen.

We are told to be tolerant of all people and tolerant of their behavior so that we might cleverly draw them in and convince them that they ought to follow Jesus.

We are told to preach messages of love and consolation, else we might injure their tender souls. Seldom in today’s religious culture are harsh words like the ones spoken here by John allowed to be preached, words telling the people to “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand”.

But John was obviously not constrained by the foolishness that controls our generation. He immediately, without concern for their feelings, confronted the people with their sin. He called out to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Folks, John the Baptist was given over to the power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit knew that these people were desirous of being saved, but were still held captive by their sin. And the Holy Spirit knew that it would take a strong message of conviction to shake them out of their self-righteousness.

John called out to the people to repent and to turn from their sinful ways. And as happens when the Holy Spirit is at work in men’s hearts, they responded and said, “We do repent, but what should we now do?” And John told them that it was not enough to just be sorry for their sins, but they must also then begin to show forth the changes that had taken place within their souls by “bearing fruits, fruits of righteousness.

Recall also that Jesus would later say to His disciples,

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. (John 15:4-5)

And here, John told them to exchange their sinful habits and sinful behaviors for fruits of righteousness, to show forth “fruits worthy of repentance” by sharing

food and clothing with those in need. Tax collectors should collect only the proper amounts. Soldiers should stop intimidating people and should be content with their pay.

And folks, it is the same for you and me. Each of us has sins much like the sins of these people of John's day. Yes, our sins are in a different setting, but they are still sins and they need to be dealt with.

And you and I need to understand that we are no better than the "brood of vipers" that stood before John that day. We need to carefully examine ourselves and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the sins that have embedded themselves within our lives. And then we need to turn from those sins and instead, do our own works of righteousness, worthy of repentance.

One last thought before we close. Recall in our recent study of the Book of James that over and over again God made it clear to us that simply believing in Jesus is not enough. There, God told us that belief that manifested itself in "saving faith" was a belief that brought about "works of righteousness" within our daily behaviors, and that "faith without those works is dead".

That is also God's message to us here in these words about repentance. If we have truly repented of our sins, then our repentance will evidence itself by changes in our behaviors, as John the Baptist tells us here, by our doing "works of righteousness that are worthy of repentance."

So then, as we go back into our homes and into our workplaces this next week, won't you covenant with me, that you will pray as the Psalmist prayed there in Psalm 139, where he said . . .

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

²⁴ And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)

And then folks, begin earnestly asking the Lord, "What should I do to show forth "fruits worthy of repentance?"