

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Psalm 85

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Luke 3:8  
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## FRUITS THAT BEFIT REPENTANCE

Review last week's lesson, Luke 3:1-6. John (the Baptist) preached "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"<sup>1</sup> He fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*"

This "cry in the wilderness" is at once a command as well as a statement. It is a *command* because all believers are to prepare for the Lord's coming. We must prepare our hearts, first in *repentance*, bringing down mountains of pride and selfishness that get in his way. Then we must straighten out our crooked lives and make the rough ways smooth, and open the way for Christ to come and live in our hearts and minds. And yet it is also a *statement* because these are not things we do all by ourselves. They are things God does when we surrender our lives to him and agree to cooperate with him in what he is doing (Phil 2:12-13).

It is the same with John's preaching in today's lesson. The "fruits that befit repentance" – sharing your property, being fair in business, etc. – are not things we do by ourselves; they are things we *allow God to do in us* through the life of his Son. It is hard to view ourselves this way at first. In the words of C. S. Lewis<sup>2</sup>,

"We begin by thinking it is like two men working together, so that you could say, "He did this bit and I did that." But this way of thinking breaks down. God is not like that. He is inside you as well as outside: even if we could understand who did what, I do not think human language could properly express it."

The best Bible verse expressing this idea is, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Gal 2:20). It is important for us to understand here that this is not just a way of being modest and giving God credit. It is the *truth* – the way things really work in the lives of Christians.

Luke 3:7-9. *He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits that befit 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 to Abraham. <sup>9</sup>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."*

- *Multitudes that came out to be baptized by him* (v.7). News only traveled by word of mouth in those days, yet *multitudes* came. There was something in the air – a spirit among the people that convinced men that God was coming into the world – an urging in the conscience to turn from sin – a vision of a better life.
- "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (v.7) John viewed everyone, especially the scribes and Pharisees who came to him, as having sinned and led unrighteous lives. Most people today do not take such a dim view of humanity, but John did, and John was speaking for God.

Most Americans today do not believe in "the wrath to come." But John was a unique person at a unique time in history, and at that time, people *did* believe in the wrath to come, and were afraid for themselves and their families. "They were superstitious," people would say today.

Jesus himself spoke this same way against the Pharisees. Review Matt 12:34-37, and Matt 23:29-33,

<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (III.12, *Faith*), p.116

“... *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?*” When your only choices are eternal life and eternal wrath, stern warnings are appropriate regardless of the consequences.

Luke 3:10-14. *And the multitudes asked him, “What then shall we do?”* <sup>11</sup>*And he answered them, “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”* <sup>12</sup>*Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”* <sup>13</sup>*And he said to them, “Collect no more than is appointed you.”* <sup>14</sup>*Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?”* *And he said to them, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”*

- “*What then shall we do?*” Men still ask this. “How do I prepare the way for Christ?” John’s advice was to “*bear fruits that befit repentance*” (v.8), and he went on to explain what he meant. Three things are evident:

First, the name fits. The actions in v.11-14 fit with repentance and a spirit of kindness and humility. They are not the product of a proud heart, or of one who says, “I have no need to repent.”

Second, the advice is practical. The man with an extra coat should share it with one who needs a coat. He really only needs one coat for himself. Nor are the tax collectors and the soldiers asked to quit their professions – only to be more considerate of the needs of others in their daily work.

Third, when men began to put John’s preaching into practice, the main beneficiaries were the poor. The poor are always most vulnerable to the effects of greed and cruelty on the part of men in power. Jesus said, “*You always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them*” (Mark 14:7). Wherever you relieve poverty and suffering, you open the way for Christ to come into your heart.

- “*He who has two coats, let him share ...*” (v.11-14). Discuss how taking John’s advice amounts to giving up three aspects of a worldly life:

(1) Self-indulgence. Americans are rich in material goods. We have all we need, but not all we want. To open the way for Christ, you are called to consider the welfare of someone besides yourself. So don’t buy a lot of clothes and things you will hardly ever use. Give to the poor instead. The Bible says, “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*” (Phil 2:4).

(2) Accumulation of wealth. The *tax collectors* exemplified man’s urge to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. They would add to the Roman tax and skim the extra for themselves. In the natural man, the concept of “wealthy enough” does not exist. We are fascinated by wealth. We always want more. And yet Jesus said, “*What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*” (Mark 8:36)

(3) Domination. John’s advice to the *soldiers* in v.14 has always been a big order for a young man with a weapon in a conquered country – to keep from taking advantage of the weak and defenseless. Any time we are in a position to dominate or control others, the temptation is to do so. But when we resist it, we begin to notice the difference between being *obeyed* and being *liked* and *appreciated* by others, as Jesus was.

Luke 3:15-18. *As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ,* <sup>16</sup>*John answered them all, “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* <sup>17</sup>*His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

<sup>18</sup>*So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.*

- *All men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ* (v.15). Somehow the Jews knew the centuries of waiting were over. The day of Messiah was at hand. John could be the one, they thought. But John never let them believe this. “*He who is mightier than I is coming,*” he said in v.16.

- “*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” The baptism of John brought *cleansing* from sin for many, but the baptism of Jesus brings *purification*, and with it, admission into the life of God. The latter is a real miracle that produces new and different life in each person who receives Christ, repenting and seeking forgiveness. It is a baptism that not only *requires* the fruits that befit repentance, as John’s baptism did, but also *produces* these in the believer. And it is a baptism that separates wheat from chaff, so that each has a separate, eternal destiny. Let us pray during this Christmas season that men will heed the *good news* John preached to the people and receive God’s most precious gift, the life of his Son Jesus.