

The Fruit of Repentance

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[0 : 00] Imagine that you're just going about your business, living out your life, doing the best that you can, and you start hearing word from others in your community that there's this guy, and he's out in the middle of nowhere on the sandy beach of Lake Diefenbaker, and he's preaching and doing some rather strange things, dunking people in the lake.

And it's supposedly some kind of religious ritual. A few more days go by, and more people are beginning to talk about him.

A few more days go by, and even more people are talking about him. And then before you know it, people from your own town are making trips out to the lake to see this guy.

And some of them are coming back and saying, ah, it's all a bunch of hogwash. But others are saying that this man's teaching is radical and life-changing.

They're saying, we've never heard anyone like this. Some are even proposing that this man speaks for God. And you nod, and you listen, and you're interested, but are you going to make the trip all the way out to the lake to hear this guy?

[1 : 31] Well, finally, somebody that you know and love dearly comes back from the lake, and it seems as though they really have changed.

They heard this man speak, they were dunked, and now they're pleading with you to make the trip out yourself and hear this man for yourself.

So you pack up your things, you make the trip out to the lake, you finally reach the spot, and to your surprise, there's this huge crowd gathered right there on the beach.

listening to this guy. You push a little closer to hear what people are saying as they go out into the water and say some words and then get dunked.

But then all of a sudden, as you catch the preacher's eye, he looks at you with this piercing gaze and calls out to you, you snake, who warned you to flee from the wrath of God that is coming?

[2 : 45] This is how it was about 2,000 years ago on the shores of the Jordan River in the land of Israel. The preacher's name was John, the son of Zechariah.

And we read from John chapter 3, verse 7, that the crowds were coming out to be baptized by him. And he said to them, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

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.

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.

[3 : 55] So crowds of people were coming out to him in the wilderness and John was calling them snakes. Can you imagine this?

You brood of vipers. And he was telling them that God's wrath is coming. Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Now make no mistake, John is not just some kind of rattle and tumble guy who gets a kick out of insulting people. As we read last Sunday in verse 2, John is a prophet.

The word of God has come to him and with these words he speaks for God. You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath.

In other words, according to God, his wrath is coming. An outpouring of punishment is coming.

[5 : 07] Why? Because people are wicked and corrupt and are deserving of it. They are snakes. John goes on.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And if we go down a little further in verse 9, 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.

God likens the people to trees, specifically fruit trees. It's a very common metaphor in the Bible. And if we are trees, then what comes out of us as we live is the fruit. And it can be either good fruit or bad fruit.

The good fruit would be good deeds, good words, good attitudes and desires. The bad fruit would be sinful deeds, wickedness, evil speech, and selfish and hate filled attitudes and desires.

[6 : 20] And so this imperative produce fruit in keeping with repentance. It's not only a plea but it's kind of a stinging rebuke. He's basically saying what's coming out of you people right now is bad fruit, sin, wickedness, corruption.

He's saying right now your living doesn't say that you have a repentant heart towards God. Your lives don't say that you're truly sorry to God because you keep on living that way deliberately. it's the norm. If you're truly repentant towards him if you've truly had a change of heart towards him then the fruit that's coming out of you the way that you're living should be changing.

And it seems here from the way that John describes things that one of the biggest problems here is a sort of religious hypocrisy. You see this in verse 8.

John says 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.

[7 : 45] The axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down. So what are the people doing? It would seem that they're saying I'm fine with God I'm okay with him things are well between me and him because I'm a child of Abraham.

I'm a descendant of Abraham. And God made that covenant with Abraham and his offspring. I'm descended from Abraham what he promised to Abraham is mine and so I'm good to go.

I'm safe. I can do as I please. I can live as I want. So they were claiming to be people of God. They were claiming to be children of Abraham. And yet the way that they were living was not at all like the God that they were professing to worship.

It was not at all like the man of true faith that Abraham was. John's saying that the fruit that's coming out of you you're living it doesn't match up to your profession of faith.

faith. Look at what your actions and your words and your attitudes are showing. They're showing that you're wicked. So don't even start don't even begin to tell yourself that you're all good with God because of your ancestry.

[9 : 10] Or that somehow you will be spared what you deserve for your sins because you're a descendant of Abraham. God can raise up children to receive the promises he made to Abraham from these stones on the ground says John you need to change your ways.

You need to repent. You need to turn back to God. You need to begin producing in your lives that good fruit that God desires his people to produce.

Fruit that fits with a truly repentant heart. And if you do not change if you do not repent if you do not begin producing that good fruit God will give you what you deserve.

Look at verse 9. 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.

Can you imagine standing there on the shore as John says these words to you and these are God's words. God is ready to cut you down because you are like a fruit tree that isn't producing any good fruit only bad fruit.

[10 : 44] He's saying God is ready to give you what you deserve for your sins. In his perfect justice he is ready to cut you down and throw you into the fire.

And the response of many in the crowds to this was positive. look at the next verse verse 10 what should we do then the crowd asked John answered anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none food should do the same.

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. Teacher what should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to he told them.

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. The people were waiting expectantly and they were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

[12 : 10] So John didn't sugarcoat things one bit. He didn't beat around the bush. He just preached what he heard from God straight. He called the people snakes.

He preached that the wrath of God was coming. He called out that clear inconsistency between what people were claiming to know God and the way that they were living and he told them that if they did not truly repent God would throw them into the fire.

And surprisingly maybe many responded! to this with sincere humility and actually repented.

They humbled themselves. They said John you're right we need to change. They began confessing their sins as we read in the gospel of Mark and they went out into the water and they were getting baptized and they were asking these kinds of humble and sincere questions.

What does this mean for me now? Do I need to quit my job? I'm a tax collector. I'm a soldier. The first thing John mentions in verse 11 is the problem of greed and a lack of compassion.

[13 : 39] The problem of a concern only for one's self. He says anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none. Anyone who has food should do the same.

There's people suffering poor. They lack the necessities of life and many of you have an abundance. You have extra, more than you need and yet you are greedily keeping those things to yourself.

You are selfishly withholding from them when it's in your power to help. even tax collectors came to be baptized.

What should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to, he told them. There's a whole study that you could do here on tax collectors.

It was a very complicated system that they had under Roman rule. The Romans outsourced tax collecting to local agents and those agents were allowed to add their own fees and you combine that with greed and corruption and pretty soon you have these hated individuals going around collecting through extortion using threats and it was really ugly and yet some of these men had a change of heart too.

[15 : 06] They repented. notice John doesn't say you need to quit your job you can't be a tax collector anymore instead they were to bring the fruit of repentance into the job that they had and do what was right collecting only as much as required which would likely have included a reasonable amount for them to live off as well.

Some soldiers came what should we do? John says to them don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely be content with your pay.

There's some debate over what kind of soldiers these were whether Jewish or Roman but whatever the case their military status their equipment and perhaps their strength were often things they would be tempted to use to take advantage of others and again we see that word extort money often motivated by greed here too John doesn't say you got to quit your job serving in the military isn't inherently immoral but as a soldier there are those unique temptations to bully to take by force to plunder don't do that anymore says John be content with your pay one of the things I notice in each of these three examples is just how much greed is in all three of them greed and self interest sometimes greed looks like ignoring the plight of the needy other times it's more obvious it looks like taking advantage of others using your position or your power but in all these cases

John is saying the good fruit that repentance should lead to is compassion generosity sharing with people who are in need kindness towards others contentment with what God has given you even if you're going through challenges and so these are some good questions to ask God in prayer Lord does greed live in my heart what should I do in keeping with repentance are there changes I need to make have I been ignoring the plight of the poor or the needy around me when it's in my power to provide to share with others who are in need have I been prioritizing my family's finances only around what

I want or have I been making choices that serve all of us best the needs that we all have we might have expected that everybody hearing this would just poo poo John like who wants to hear this shut up I am generous all those poor beggars well God helps those who help themselves right I'm not greedy there are lots of people who have more than I do and I'm not being paid what I'm worth that's our natural sinful response and yet surprisingly here again maybe many responded favorably to the words coming through John the people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if

[19 : 05] John might possibly be the Messiah and John overheard their wonderings and he didn't hesitate to declare I'm not the Messiah no but the Messiah is coming verse 16 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 his winnowing fork is

in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire so

John says no I'm not the Messiah one who is greater than me is coming and John begins to whet the appetites of the people by telling them of the greatness of Jesus even before people know who he is and it starts with this series of contrasts first let's notice the contrast in greatness John says essentially you think I'm great no not at all there's somebody about to be here coming who is far more powerful than I in what way he goes on I'm just immersing you in water and it's symbolic but the one who is coming has the power to bring about the spiritual reality that this baptism points to he has the power the authority to actually grant forgiveness and to cleanse you and wash you of your guilt and your sins by the spirit of

God he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit another contrast notice the statement of worthiness that John makes about Jesus here he is so great he is so powerful he is so worthy that I am not even worthy to untie his sandals for him this is one of the lowest acts of service that you could possibly do for a person and John says I'm not even fit to get down on the ground on my face and untie his sandals for him not even worthy to be in his presence it's a statement of true humility but also just how great and worthy Jesus is could it be that John even knows now that his cousin is both the Messiah and the very son of God could it be that

John is quite aware of his own sinful heart and his own need to repent even as he's calling the people to it let's talk about the baptism statements that are made here John says I baptize with water but he will come and will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire we're going to talk about the fire in just a second but let's first talk about what it means to be baptized in or with the Holy Spirit this is a really difficult concept it's a challenging metaphor and there's a lot of discussion among Bible believing Christians as to what does this mean and the difficulty here is going to two things first he just kind of mentions it in passing we're just given a snippet of the preaching we don't have the whole context and second it's a metaphor that we're just not as familiar or comfortable with and so often what we do when we get to a passage like this as

Christians is we look around the Bible at the rest of the stuff that it teaches about the Holy Spirit and how he works in our lives and then some of that we inevitably end up reading back into this statement to try to get an understanding about what it means to be baptized in the Holy Spirit it's kind of that principle of interpreting the unclear statement like this one by the other clear statements that are made elsewhere in the Bible and so if we look to some of those other passages that speak about the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer we discover that there's this initial work that God's Spirit does in us and then there's an ongoing work that he does in us Jesus talked about that initial work that the Spirit does in us with a man named Nicodemus in

[24 : 51] John chapter 3 he told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again of the Spirit that he needed a spiritual rebirth Paul spoke in his letters of God's Spirit regenerating us washing us renewing us Titus chapter 3 verse 5 God God himself actually dwells in us by his Spirit and then there are also a lot of passages that refer to the Spirit's work in our lives using other metaphors we hear about the Spirit coming upon people or overshadowing Mary as we heard a few weeks back the Spirit fills people

God pours his Spirit upon people and then there's all the effects that come about as a result of that that we could look at lots of passages!

for but some of the most significant are giving life making our hearts new and cleansing us from sin so what specifically does John mean when he uses these words he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit one way of looking at this baptism of the Spirit refers to that initial spiritual rebirth and indwelling of the Spirit which happens when a person repents and believes in Jesus and if you kind of follow this line of interpretation John would be saying something to the effect of Jesus will immerse you in the Holy Spirit essentially meaning that he will thoroughly and abundantly pour his spirit out upon you and in you maybe a helpful analogy here could be that of plunging a sponge into water when the sponge comes out it's soaked all the way through the water is inside it and all through it and it's changed from this utterly dry thing into a thoroughly saturated thing and often the most emphasized effect of this kind of take on baptism in the

Holy Spirit is this new spiritual life that we receive another angle of interpretation here is to see this baptism of the Spirit is emphasizing more specifically the washing and cleansing of sin this is one of the ordinary everyday purposes of baptizing something back in those days soak it dip it immerse it plunge it into water why in order to wash it to cleanse it to get the stains out of it to get the dirt out of

it if we kind of follow that line of interpretation John might be saying that you know Jesus will wash you or cleanse you not with water but with the Holy Spirit meaning that he will rid us and purify us of our guilt and sin and corruption by the power of the

Holy Spirit either way both of these things are true they're things that are stated in other places in the scriptures but let's not lose sight of the wonder and beauty of what John is declaring here I mean John is out there in the wilderness and it's water he's washing with water but Jesus is coming and he's going to wash or immerse you with the Holy Spirit of God I mean think about this a man is coming says John who will plunge you or who will wash you in the Holy Spirit of God I mean this gotta be a very special man very powerful I mean who has the power and the authority to send the very Spirit of God himself to work on people the

[29 : 40] Spirit of the Lord the Spirit of Yahweh what man can go to work in a person's life by that the one coming after me he can he will says John all right now the fire part he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire here again there's a couple different interpretations Some see this fire as being positive and various explanations are given some suggest that it's a purifying fire that cleanses us from sin some see this baptism with fire as being part of that work that the Spirit does when he first comes in to live in a believer burning away the impurities others point to the manner in which the

Spirit came on the day of Pentecost there was that appearance of the Spirit descending upon them and it looked like tongues of fire coming to rest on them but a good number of others recognized that fire is not usually a positive thing in the Bible there's a couple passages where it has a painful cleansing!

and purifying effect but more often than not it refers to judgment and that's what I think John means to say here there's a sort of parallelism in the context here he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire 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 notice how that second parallel metaphor seems to mirror and explain the first in both cases there are two outcomes some are put into the Holy Spirit and others are put into fire the wheat is gathered into the barn but the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire I think if we read this in context it's not a positive baptism with fire this being plunged into the fire is an illusion it's a reference to what

Jesus would later say about hell in other words there are two baptisms that Jesus will do by his great power one plunges believers into life and cleanses by the Holy Spirit and the other plunges those who reject Jesus and refuse to repent into the unquenchable fire of hell and everlasting punishment and Jesus himself will be active in this process his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor uses the metaphor of a farmer who's working on his harvest this is before the days of combines this is before the days of John Deere and Case way back in these days everything was done manually the winnowing fork was like a hand tool almost like a pitch fork that a farmer used and basically the idea was that they would use it to scoop up a mixture of grain and straw and chaff and then they would in an open and breezy area they would throw it up into the air and the wind would kind of blow out the lighter stuff the straw and the chaff and the heavier kernels of grain would just fall back down to the ground separating the two separating the good from the bad or the worthless so

John says that the one coming after him has power he's already poised to clear his threshing floor there's going to be a great separation the wheat here represents those who repent and are forgiven it represents those who are reconciled to God those who are to be gathered to be with him as sons of his everlasting kingdom and the chaff represents those who refuse to repent it represents the wicked unquenchable fire and again Jesus is going to say more about this and even more explicitly than this a fire that will not be quenched that burns forever eternal punishment is what we all deserve for our many sins against our all glorious holy

[35 : 09] God verse 18 and with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them notice the mixture exhortation and good news proclamation side by side repent the wrath of God is coming the powerful one who is coming after me will clear his threshing floor he will plunge you into unquenchable fire but side by side along with that God is merciful he desires to forgive you he wants to wash you he wants to cleanse you by his holy spirit he wants to gather you to himself there's this solemn sober warning but there's also this sweet and gracious invitation coming from

God to us through John do you hear God speaking to your heart through these words these are not just words that God spoke to them back then these are the same words God would have for us today as hard as that is to hear you are all snakes sinners my wrath is coming the axe is at the root of the trees I will cut you down but I would rather you repent I would rather you turn to me and come to me and confess your sins to me I will forgive you I will wash you clean I will cleanse you of all of that by my Holy Spirit through the one who is coming I would rather you change and begin to produce the good fruit that

I made you to I would rather you be among the good grain that I gather into my barn at the end than the worthless chaff which must be burned it's a hard message which came through John but sometimes we need the hard and straight truth sometimes we need to be confronted even rebuked called out because of wrong things that we have done God's desire and wish is not for us to perish but for us to repent and to be saved that's why he sent Jesus his own dear son into our world one who will later on in this story take the punishment that we deserve upon himself die on the cross to atone for us so that we could be justly pardoned and forgiven fully so I want to ask you have you repented have you confessed your sins to

God have you received this life and renewal! and washing and cleansing of the spirit that John was foretelling nothing matters more than this in life this should be our top priority because someday Jesus will return and he will clear his threshing floor let's pray father in heaven I know that these words are not easy but they're your words and we trust that they have a good purpose and work to do in each of our lives and so

I pray that you would help us to see how they apply to each one of us what are those things Lord that we need to repent of whether we know you or do not God what is that good fruit you long to produce through us and most importantly have we repented have we come to you and have we been washed and cleansed by you I pray that that would be the reality of everyone in this room go to work in our hearts we pray amen