

Fruit Worthy of Repentance

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 January 2007

Preacher: Tim Johnson

[0 : 00] Lord Jesus, we do indeed pray that we would now meet you in your word. Holy Spirit, please shine upon the page of the Bible as we look at it together.

Shine upon our hearts and teach us. And not only that, we pray too that you would change us in accordance with your word. Amen. Please be seated. Well, we're looking together this morning at Luke chapter 3.

So if you'd like to open it, it's on page 834. It'd be great if you could follow that along together. We're in our little rundown house in Brunswick.

The best bit of the house really is the backyard where we have four fruit trees. We've got a magnificent lemon tree which provides all of our supply of lemons that we might need.

Not only for us but also for our next door neighbour. It's so big that it hangs over their fence and drops lemons into their yard, which they're very pleased with. We've also got a kumquat tree which is so fruitful that we've had to trawl through recipe book after recipe book trying to find out what you can do with kumquats.

[1 : 11] We've made jars and jars of marmalade. We haven't made lemonade with them. That might be the next task. We've made marmalade. We've pickled them. We've even preserved them in vodka.

And if you've got any other recipes, we'd be happy to take them. Because there's so much fruit that even with all of that, they're still falling off the tree. The other two fruit trees, however, are a little more disappointing.

We've got this sort of plum tree which produces really little fruit every once in a blue moon. And even when it does produce fruit, it really is a race between us and the possums to see who gets to it first.

And the last tree we think is either an orange tree or a grapefruit tree. Now before you kind of call out and kind of start laughing at us for being hopeless gardeners, the reason that we're so uncertain, whether it's an orange tree or a grapefruit tree, is in three years it's never produced any fruit.

I mean it's obviously a citrus tree. It's got the right leaves and all that. But it's never actually produced anything. It just sits there looking dismal. To massive contrast really, we've got these two highly productive trees which are so helpful and useful, giving us all the fruit that we might need.

[2 : 35] And then we've got these other two fruit trees which are basically useless. And one of them even disguises what it is by not even producing any fruit.

Well as we look at Luke chapter 3 this morning, I want us to keep in mind the picture of those two types of trees. And more than that, I want us to assess our own lives and ask ourselves which of those type of trees are we more like?

Are we abundantly bearing fruit for God in keeping with his call to repentance and Christian faith? Or are we more like the more dismal trees that don't produce fruit and you can't even tell what they are?

Well as Rod showed us last week, John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus here in Luke chapter 3. And he does that by calling on people to repent and to be baptised for the forgiveness of sin.

And what we look at this morning from verse 7, we see that John continues this message of repentance by explaining that this repentance must result in the bearing of fruit.

[3 : 50] Now if you're looking for techniques in flattery or soft sell, then I'm afraid John the Baptist isn't your man. Verse 7, You brood of vipers, he says.

He calls people sons of snakes. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? The image evoked is of this fire sweeping through bushland, something that I'm sure we can all imagine given the recent history of fires in this state over the last few weeks.

And as the trees burn, the snakes come rushing out trying to escape and to save themselves. And as this crowd of people comes out to John to be baptised, he says to them that they're like these snakes escaping from the fire.

Now hang on a second. I mean I would have thought it was a fantastic thing that these people were coming out and seeking John's baptism.

I hope when people come for baptism at Holy Trinity and talk to Paul or Megan or Rod or Wayne that they're not greeted with the line, You brood of vipers. Probably not the way to kind of encourage people to come back.

[5 : 03] But that's exactly what John the Baptist says. And it seems a bit odd. If we have a look at the parallel account in Matthew chapter 5 where he's recounting the same incident, it suggests in Matthew that John was specifically targeting the Pharisees and the Sadducees because they were kind of doing the outward show of repentance, but they weren't actually being changed and bearing fruit.

And perhaps it is that Luke's shorthand is missing some of the nuances to exactly who this is directed at. But the fact that here we see John referring to the crowd in general is quite helpful because it helps us to stop dismissing this line and this warning too readily.

Too readily we can sort of say, Oh, well, that's the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They're the bad guys. It's not talking to us. But no, here we see that this is a point that's relevant to all.

John's speaking to the crowd. It must be heeded by all and no one can ignore it. And John's key points in verse 8. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Bear fruit worthy of repentance. He says, If you want to be baptized by me, then there must be genuine repentance. You need to turn away from sin.

[6 : 19] You need to turn to God. And you need to produce good fruit. There's got to be change. There's got to be real change that people can see. Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

You see, that's the only valid response to God in the face of his imminent judgment. In verse 7, we see there that John has referred to the wrath to come, which seems to be a reference to the day of the Lord when judgment comes.

It's exactly what's promised in the last chapter of the Old Testament in Malachi chapter 4. We read there, See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.

The day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. So there we have the warning of judgment. But also in that same chapter, we see that God is going to send someone before that day, John the Baptist.

So we read down in verse 5 of Malachi 4, Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

[7 : 40] God's judgment on sin is coming and a response is required. And John says what that response is, Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

In fact, the nearness of God's judgment is also stressed in verse 9, if you have a look at it there, back in Luke chapter 3, verse 9. Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

The axe is in position, it's ready to go. And notice what the criterion for judgment is. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire.

Well, picture again those trees in our backyard. Two of them are obviously fruitful and abundant, visibly doing what they're supposed to do.

But the other two are barren and useless. They're just taking up space. They're not doing what fruit trees are supposed to do. And it's the same with our lives.

[8 : 48] It's one thing to say, I'm a Christian. It's one thing to read through the prayer of confession together in church each week.

But the question is, does it result in real, visible change in the way that we live? Again, the only valid response to the imminent judgment of God is fruitful repentance.

Turn away from sin, turn to God, and bear fruit. Now, some of you might say, well, surely there's got to be some other way.

Surely that's not the only answer. No. No. Have a look how quickly John cuts off any attempted avoidance and excuses in verse 8.

Do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our ancestor. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Before they can even vocalize some sort of alternative approach, John cuts it off.

[9 : 53] He says to them, look, just relying on your Jewish ancestry is not enough. If God wanted to, he could even raise up children for Abraham from stones.

He's that powerful. No, the only appropriate response is fruitful repentance. And then in verse 10, a miracle of God occurs.

And the crowds asked him, what then should we do? Now, that is a miracle. You see, the people have heard God's word spoken through John and they actually respond to it.

That is a miraculous work of God because it is only God's power that can make people hear his word and respond to it. They say, what should we do?

It's exactly the same thing that happens in Acts chapter 2, verse 37, when Peter is preaching at Pentecost. He's explained about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[10 : 57] And we read there that the people were cut to the heart and they cry out, what should we do? They hear God's word and they want to do something about it.

They want to know how to change. So John goes on to explain in concrete terms what fruitful repentance looks like. Verse 11, whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none and whoever has food must do likewise.

You notice that this is not vague, wishy-washy advice. He doesn't command them to evoke warm, fuzzy feelings to their fellow human being. No, he says, you need to actually do something concrete and real and practical.

Take your spare clothing and give it to someone who doesn't have any. Take your food and share it with someone who is hungry. In fact, he gets even more specific as other individuals pipe up in verses 12 through to 14.

He gives them specific advice depending on their circumstances. So the tax collectors are told to carry out their work fairly and to only collect what they're entitled to do, to do their job properly.

[12 : 07] Soldiers are told not to misuse their power, to extort money from people either by physically threatening them or by falsely accusing people.

And instead, they're supposed to be content with what they're earning. He doesn't tell either group to go and quit their jobs. He tells them to change the way they do their job, change the way they live in a real and concrete way.

That is repentance. That is fruitful repentance. That is turning away from wrong living, turning away from sin and turning back to God, living His way, showing concrete changes in behaviour.

My prayer for all of us this morning is that we will respond to God's word in exactly the same way that the crowd has. And we will say to God, what should I do?

You see, the reality is that all of us have areas of sin in our lives and the only genuinely Christian response to sin is repentance.

[13 : 12] The only genuinely Christian response to sin is repentance. Why do I say that? Well, you see, sin is diametrically opposed to God.

They're like east and west. To turn and face sin is to turn our back on God. To embrace sin is to deny God.

To love sin is to hate God. The only properly Christian response to sin is repentance. Because repentance is about turning away from sin and turning back to God.

living his way in concrete, real terms and bearing fruit for him. So are we like the people who heard John speak and call out to God, what shall I do?

Are we willing this morning to say to God, what should I do? Shine the spotlight of your Holy Spirit into my life and show me what needs to change. Show me what I need to turn away from to turn back to you and make real changes in my life.

[14 : 30] Do you need to repent of your use of money? Do you need to repent of your attitude to relationships or to sex?

Do you need to repent of the way that you speak? Do you need to repent of the way that you drive your car? Repentance is about all of the areas of our life where sin creeps in and we need to change all of those things in practical terms to live God's way.

As John the Baptist shows so clearly in this passage, repentance involves real, concrete, observable changes. So what are the changes that you need to make? What are the changes that I need to make as we hear God's word this morning? Well, John's preaching certainly has an impact but it does cause people to jump to a bit of a wrong conclusion as we see in verse 15.

You see, they start wondering whether John himself might be the Messiah, the great king that God had promised to send. But we see that John is very quick to cut off that wrong thinking.

[15:44] As we've seen over the last few weeks, John's entire ministry is about pointing people away from himself and pointing them to Jesus.

So here too, he gives three reasons why he is not the Messiah. He gives three reasons pointing away from himself to Jesus. Firstly, the Messiah will be stronger than John is.

Verse 16, One who is more powerful than I is coming, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

He states explicitly that the Messiah is more powerful than he is. And then in quite shocking terms, he explains just how much greater he is. I am not even worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

Now, untying someone's sandals with all of the dust and the dirt and the grime of the road was so demeaning that even Jewish slaves weren't expected to untie people's sandals.

[16:49] And yet John is saying that the Messiah is so great, so far superior to him that it's beyond him, it's too much of an honour to untie his sandals.

That's how great, how much greater than John the Messiah is. Secondly, he says that the Messiah offers a better baptism than he does. Again in verse 16, I baptise with water, he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now that's a pretty impressive difference. As Rod was saying to us last week, it is only God who gives the Holy Spirit. And John is saying that the Messiah will baptise people with the Holy Spirit. He'll pour out and immerse people in the Holy Spirit. That's how superior he is to John. But what should we make of the end of verse 16?

If you see it there, it says, he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. What do those last two words, and fire, mean? There's a variety of views on that.

[17:55] Some say that since that Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came, it came in the form of fire, that perhaps it's just a way of referring to the Holy Spirit. That's what's in mind. But I'm not sure that's right because in this passage we see that fire is used in relation to judgment and so the context seems to suggest differently.

And so following those lines, some other people suggest that there's actually two baptisms in mind here. The penitent receive the Holy Spirit and those who persist in sin receive the fire of judgment. Although that's not quite right either because it doesn't quite fit the wording of the verse, does it? Because there really is just one baptism referred to here rather than two separate baptisms. So more likely what is being talked about here is that we have a single baptism that has the effect of purging and dividing people.

The Messiah offers the Holy Spirit to all people but not all people receive it. It's an offer that necessarily divides people. And we see that even more clearly in verses 17 to 18 where John gives the third reason why the Messiah supersedes him.

You see, he's greater than John because he also has the authority to judge. We have in those verses 17 and 18 the image of a farmer with his winnowing fork throwing the grain up in the air so that the heavier grain falls to the ground and the lighter chaff is blown away, set aside to be burned.

[19:30] But the grain is saved and put away in the barn. Only the Messiah has this authority to judge, to separate people into these two camps.

John has been warning people about the judgment to come. He's been saying to people, you need to do something because this judgment is coming. But he is not the one who has the authority to judge. So notice that at every point John is pointing away from himself and pointing to Jesus.

He is stronger. He offers a better baptism than I do. He is the one who will judge. It is not about John. He is the messenger, the signpost, the one who points to Jesus.

And his message is that Jesus is the one who is all important and people must be ready for him. It's a great reminder for us this morning of the absolute primacy of Jesus that he is all important.

John had no doubts about pointing to Jesus, Jesus, Jesus in all that he did. And yet increasingly in our churches there's a temptation to downplay the significance of Jesus.

[20 : 44] In a world where there are numerous religions, we can be a bit embarrassed about emphasising Jesus, think that that might cause a tension and conflict and so want to avoid it.

And so some churches prefer to talk more vaguely about God and to treat Jesus just as a wise man or a great teacher or an upright example. But that's not the Jesus that John is preaching.

John preaches a mighty Messiah, a powerful Messiah, someone who pours out the Holy Spirit and the one who will ultimately judge. That's a big picture of Jesus.

And we need to remind ourselves and ask ourselves this morning, is that in accord with our picture of Jesus too? I hope that it is. But if it isn't, then you need to ask yourself, are you selling Jesus short?

Do you need to broaden and enlarge your picture in line with John's preaching? And as a church too, we need to think about and make sure that Jesus is not watered down or downplayed in any part of our ministry, but given his rightful place as the powerful Messiah, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and the one who will ultimately judge each one of us.

[22 : 08] Jesus. So if we wanted to summarize John's message in this passage, I think you can do it in two points. Firstly, he calls people to fruitful repentance.

He tells people that they need to turn away from sin, turn back to God and bear fruit, have real change. Secondly, he points people to the Messiah, to Jesus.

Not me, he says, Jesus. He's the one that people need to pay attention to. John is preparing the way for people to put their trust in Jesus. So he has two points, really.

Repent, believe in Jesus. Repent and believe in Jesus. And that really is the message of the Bible.

Repent and believe in Jesus. What is it that Jesus says when he bursts on the scene in Mark 1, verse 15? The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.

[23 : 11] Repent and believe in the good news. And in Acts chapter 2 that we were speaking about earlier, when the people are cut to the heart and they cry out to Peter, what should we do?

What is it that Peter says? Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Repent and believe. So as the forerunner to Jesus, John is preparing the way and his message is the message of the Bible.

Repent and believe in Jesus. Well, it's a simple message, isn't it? But that doesn't mean that it's necessarily a popular message. In fact, as we see in our passage, Herod is so offended by it that he tries to get rid of John by locking him up.

Verse 19, But Herod the ruler who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

[24 : 27] You see, John's call to fruitful repentance, to make real change in line with what God wants, isn't very popular with Herod. He doesn't like the fact that John is calling him to change his adulterous relationship.

It's an area of sin that he's called to turn away from, and his response is not actually to change as he hears God's word through John, but to get angry at the messenger and to try and do away with him by locking him up.

Indeed, eventually he does away with him by killing him rather than heeding the call to repentance. A message that calls on people to make real, concrete, genuine change is not going to be popular, because it means stopping doing things that we want to do, and instead starting doing the things that God wants us to do.

And Herod's response is mirrored throughout the world, as people ignore the call to repent and believe in Jesus. But as we read on, we see that Herod's verdict on these matters is not the final word.

He might be able to lock up John, but there is a more powerful voice to be heard, and that is God's voice. So have a look at his verdict in verses 21 and 22.

[25 : 49] Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was open, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

What God thinks is consistent with John the Baptist's preaching. John has been calling on people to repent and pointing them to Jesus.

And here we see that God too points to Jesus, and he says this is the one that you need to pay attention to. He says, you are my son.

He says, I am pleased with you. And you see, that is the verdict that matters, not Herod's. Herod might have tried to lock John away and silence him, but ultimately what matters is God's verdict, and whether our verdict is in accord with God's verdict.

So as we hear God's word this morning, calling on us to repent and to believe in Jesus, how will we respond?

[27 : 08] Will we make genuine, concrete changes in accord with God's word? will we be a visible example in the way that we live so that others can see it?

Will we be like abundant fruit trees bearing fruit for God, living his way so that everyone may see?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your powerful word that we've heard as John the Baptist spoke it.

We pray that we would respond as the crowd did respond, that we would hear your word and that we would call on you to ask what we need to change in our lives.

Father, help us to turn away from those areas of sin in our life. Help us to turn back to you and to live the way that you want us to live. Help us to put our trust in Jesus and we thank you that he does indeed baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And we thank you that the Holy Spirit in our lives enables us to make these real changes in our life in accord with your word. So we pray that your spirit would work powerfully in each one of our lives to help us to live for you each day.

[28 : 28] And we pray in the name of the powerful Jesus. Amen.