

In other places, it is:

- Loving your neighbor as yourself
- Caring for the orphan, the widow, and the refugee
- Living with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:16-26)

It seems apparent that John is demanding that those gathered repent and be baptized, that merely being baptized or being Jewish isn't enough. It translates for us today that things like going to church, being baptized, and saying the sinner's prayer isn't enough. What is necessary is bearing fruit worthy of the salvation we have received from Jesus Christ. It is a response to the love and grace given to us that leads us to produce the fruit we discussed above.

Some of us have been "Christian" for so long, and our lives have been initially changed. We have been saved from all sorts of maleficent things. Could it be that now we are guilty of resting on our once-received salvation? Do we fail to continue to live into our salvation by continuing to bear fruit worthy of our repentance?

As we approach our celebration of the birth of Christ at Christmas, John reminds us that we can never rest on God's past actions in us or our past fruit but that we must always bear good fruit. We must have regular practices in our lives whereby we do the abovementioned things. We also need to be continually baptized by the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to bear more fruit.

### Works Cited

I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978).



# BEAR FRUIT

## LUKE 3:7-18

### Catching Up on the Story

The stage has been set for Jesus to appear on the scene as an adult. We have heard about his birth, what people say he is, and what he is to do. It is obvious to those who have read Luke's story that something great and expected will come from Jesus. Before we meet Jesus, however, we meet John, who is called the Baptist. In the words and actions of John, we will get a good idea of what Jesus will do. It seems John is the last of the prophets pointing the way toward Jesus.

If you recall, John is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were old and unable to have children. An angel visits Zechariah while he is working in the Temple and informs him that he will be the father of a special boy. This boy will grow up and help prepare the way for God's salvation to enter the world.

John's birth was a miracle, marking him as a significant character in the story. Luke begins chapter three by giving clues to John's historical and social location. Luke does this in such a way as to make his readers draw a connection between John, what he will do, and what he will say, with the prophets that Israel has seen before. Many of the Old Testament prophetic books begin in a similar fashion. There is no doubt in Luke's mind that John is a prophet who prepares the hearts and minds of God's people for his arrival.

Luke also tells us exactly what John is up to, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." However, we are not told much about the actual nature of John's baptism or how he performed it. This leads us to believe that what Luke (and John) find important about the event is not how it is carried out but rather what happens before, during, and after the event. Baptism was not unknown in John's day; it would have been one of the rituals a gentile would need to go through to convert to Judaism. As such, it was seen as an outward ritual signifying the washing away of sins. Like other similar Jewish ritual washings, the symbolic action would have been deemed ineffective without a corresponding change in inward attitude and external behavior.

(Marshall, 135). Luke connects John and his baptism within the general flow of Old Testament prophecy. He does this by quoting Isaiah 40:3-5. John is the voice crying out from the wilderness, urging people to ensure that things are ready for the coming King. At the heart of the quotation is a desire for the hearts and minds of God's people to be ready for his coming.

### **Luke 3:7-18**

<sup>7</sup> Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?" <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. <sup>9</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire."

<sup>10</sup> The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

<sup>11</sup> He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same."

<sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

<sup>13</sup> He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect."

<sup>14</sup> Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?"

He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

<sup>15</sup> The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. <sup>16</sup> John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>17</sup> The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." <sup>18</sup> With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people (CEB).

6. John's call to produce fruit worthy of repentance is not just for new believers. Those of us who have been Christians for a long time often fail to continue to produce good fruit. Take some time to quietly examine your life. Are you producing good fruit? After you quietly reflect, share your thoughts with the group.

7. What are some of the ways we might produce good fruit as individuals and as a church?

### **So What?**

For Luke and his hearers, John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" is a public rite of washing representing the opportunity for a new start in life, a renewal of things. Luke, however, says that baptism is worthless unless those who receive it "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (v. 8). The change in direction must be validated by changed behavior.

One cannot rest on the fact that one has been "saved," that one was born into a Christian family, or that one has been a Christian his or her whole life or for a long time. What matters is that one responds to the grace and forgiveness received with a change in direction and behavior. One must now produce good fruit (with the help of God's Spirit, of course). What does the production of good fruit look like?

In this current passage, it looks like this:

- Giving of one's surplus to those who do not have
- Not taking more than you deserve
- Not extorting money (or anything) from people of lesser authority

Living with justice and righteousness toward others

many rushing out to be baptized by John?

3. In verse 4, Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3-5. What is that passage about, and why would Luke quote it regarding John?

Obviously, John did not come just to baptize. What role were John and his baptism supposed to play?

4. It's apparent that some in the crowd believed that their salvation was secure because they were Jews and had Abraham as their father. After all, God promised Abraham and his descendants that he would always be faithful to them. How might we have similar attitudes to some of those who were going out to see John?
5. After John warns the crowd, they want to know what to do. John tells them to produce fruit worthy of their repentance. What does that mean? Read verses 11-14 again. What kind of action steps does John tell the crowd to do?

### **You Brood of Vipers!**

This section does not need to be understood as taking place at one time and place. It is rather likely that John had many opportunities to baptize people and proclaim to them who he was and for whom he was preparing the way. John had enough popularity and name recognition that people came in waves to be baptized by him.

Verse 7 begins with John announcing to the people what exactly they are to do. As prophets do, John knows the context of his people, what they will say, and the difference between what they think they want and what they need. John knows these people are seeking something—repentance and salvation—and they think it can be found in John's baptism.

Just what they thought they were being saved from differs from what we commonly understand as salvation. While it is true that many were seeking freedom from their sin, the sin of the people was also thought of as having consequences for the nation as a whole: political consequences. For some time leading up to the time of John, Israel had been ruled by the Romans. It was common to think that this Roman occupation was a result of Israel's unfaithfulness, and what was needed was a new Exodus of sorts. If Israel turned and repented, God would bring about liberation from the Romans.

As we look at the passage, it becomes clear that some in the crowd believed that if they merely received the right kind of baptism, they would be saved from the harsh reality in which they already lived. After all, they were children of Abraham, God's chosen people, and God had promised to be faithful to them. Some thought salvation should be secure just because they are God's people. John, however, sees right through this and chastises the crowd. He clearly points out that it is not just the baptism that will bring about their salvation, but their subsequent change of action and attitude.

John introduces a metaphor that Jesus will pick up on and use: bearing good fruit. A tree that should bear a certain kind of fruit but does not is a tree that is not worthy of the ground it is using. John says that if you want this baptism to mean anything, you must begin to bear the fruit of repentance. Repentance without fruit is worthless, it seems!

Then, John sends a very sharp warning: even now, your tree is about to be cut down. If you do not get it together, the ax will strike the trunk, and you'll be cut down and used for firewood. Pressing the "thrown into the fire" image here is unnecessary. John is not making claims about what happens to those who are unrepentant. The fire pit is where you put wood that has been cut down.

### **What Then Should We Do?**

Realizing that John is indeed right, the people respond by asking John, "What then should we do?" In other words, the people are interested in bearing fruit but are not exactly sure how this will happen. What does it look like?

This question, even though it seems so simple and, perhaps, only suitable for those seeking new faith, is for us, too. Remember, John is not speaking to the unconverted here; he is speaking to those deeply familiar with the story of God's working in, through, and for Israel. This question comes from those who are "in," so to speak. Certainly, most of those who will attend your group this week are "in" as well. Let this question speak to them, too.

To the first group, John responds, "Those of you who have two pairs of underwear give it to those who have none. Likewise, if you have food, share it with those in need." John is not saying that just those who have abundance should give -they should- he is saying that even the poorest of the poor have something to give. If you've got more than one pair of underwear and someone needs some, you should give them a pair of yours. For this first group of people, who were perhaps the poorest of the poor, bearing good fruit is taking care of the needs of others.

Luke goes on to tell more of the story, showing that it wasn't just the poor ones that came but even tax collectors and soldiers (probably Jewish men assigned to protect the much hated dishonest tax collectors, or perhaps soldiers in Herod's army).

They asked the same question, "What should we do?" John responds with simple advice that should not seem too burdensome. These tax collectors and soldiers were to be satisfied with what they were paid and were to quit oppressing those from whom they collected taxes. Often, collecting taxes was a contract job that went to the highest bidder. Payment was expected upfront, and it was left to the tax collector to recoup his money from the people. This was often done in harsh and exorbitant ways.

Again, Luke places John within the same vane as all of the Old Testament prophets. John calls God's people to live with justice, righteousness, and faithfulness to their neighbors. The fruit that John calls us to bear is not just morality as we often understand it (a list of don'ts); it's a way of living in relation to those around us who see their dignity and humanity and seek to ensure that others can live abundant lives. Repentance and the baptism that signifies it is not just for purity's sake; it is also always for the sake of the other.

### **One Who is More Powerful**

The people who gathered to hear John and receive his baptism were amazed. Something new yet remarkably familiar is happening through this man. Their hearts begin to stir, and they begin to wonder if John himself might be the one they are expecting. John realizes what they are thinking and puts an end to that kind of talk. He is not the one who is coming. John's baptism is not the end; it is the beginning of what God will do. Indeed, John says, there is one who is coming who is much more powerful and will bring a baptism that will be like nothing you have seen or experienced. It will be a baptism of fire, not water. If water can wash away dirt and filth (symbolizing forgiveness), fire sterilizes (symbolizing the transformation of the human heart). The fire that is coming is the fire of the Holy Spirit. And it is for this purpose that Jesus came: to pour out God's Holy Spirit upon people and thereby change their hearts.

### **Discussion Questions**

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. Who does Luke believe John to be?
2. Luke tells us that John came proclaiming a baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Baptism was a ritual used when someone converted to the Jewish faith and symbolized the washing away of sins. So, John's baptism was not completely unusual, but it was unique. Why were so