

True joy comes through repentance.

Text: Luke 3:7-18 for 12/16/2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with 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. 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." ¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" ¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. ¹⁴ 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."

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Joy: it can be a feeling of great pleasure or delight. Joy is often felt when a person is successful at something, or when something positive happens in a person's life. John the Baptist was sent ahead of Jesus to usher in the joy of the coming Savior. So how did John do that? We hear John saying to the people who came to him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath" (v. 7)? That certainly doesn't sound very joyful. John's words seem like they are working to bring about the opposite of joy. And the Baptist's words are not just for the self-righteous Pharisees and Sadducees. Luke tells us that John said these things "to the crowds coming out" to him (v. 7). John called the entire crowd a "brood of vipers." He says they are a bunch of snakes.

We know John the Baptist was a prophet, someone who was sent to speak God's word. So, is this how God brings joy to his people? In a way it is. This is where God starts the process of bringing joy to his people. And as God speaks through John the Baptist, he also speaks to us so that we can come to know and understand that ...

Theme: True joy comes through repentance.

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare people for the coming Christ. That preparation involved leading people to repentance. What does it mean to repent? Is repentance simply saying we are sorry for our sins? Is it shedding one little tear to show our sorrow over our sin? No. The Greek word we translate "repentance" literally means a change in the way a person thinks which then changes the way a person acts. When we read or hear of how God is acting in our lives, so he can give us eternal life, that good news about God's saving grace changes how we think about sin. We begin to see sin as the death trap that it is. We begin to see how sin is killing us eternally. We come to know how God worked to save us from that eternal death. That change in the way we think changes the way we act. That change of mind causes us to turn away from sin; to separate from those things that lead us into sin, and to turn to God for his help and forgiveness. That is repentance. It is a change that causes action, and that action is producing fruits of faith.

So, how are John's words leading people to repentance? John focuses on two sins that the people had fallen into. He says, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit

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in keeping with 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” (vs. 7-9). The people thought they had figured out how avoid God's wrath and keep on sinning. John addresses the two sinful ways the people thought they could avoid God's wrath. First, they thought empty religious ceremonies would help. As long as the people went through all the right religious motions – worship, praying, bringing sacrifices, even going to John to be baptized – they thought that was all that was needed to avoid God's wrath and keep on sinning. Others were sinning by thinking that all that mattered was their ancestors. They were decendants of Abraham, and Abraham was right with God, so they must be right with God since they are a part of Abraham's blood line, so they could keep on sinning. But John the Baptist's words makes it clear: neither your religious acts, nor your family connection to someone faithful will amount to anything on the Day of Wrath. What matters is a sincere and living faith that is producing fruit.

The people were foolishly pursuing two completely opposite kinds of joy: the joy of salvation versus the “joy” of satisfying the sinful nature. But life doesn't work that way. You cannot enjoy good health and enjoy eating all the junk food you want. To persue the one automatically excludes the other. You cannot be excellent at something, let's say playing a musical instrument, and enjoy unending amounts of leisure time. To be excellent at something you must *sacrifice* leisure time to develop that skill. If a person believes they can have the joy of heaven by some outward show of religiosity, all the while pursing the joys of the sinful flesh, that person simply proves they are filled with the poison of a viper.

How often have we fallen into the same trap? Do we ever use the one hour that we sit in church as an excuse to sin the other 167 hours of the week? Do we think that the 1 or 2% of our income that we return to the Lord will somehow negate the clear materialism that's evident in how we spend the other 98% of our income? Do we come to church and take the Lord's Supper to soothe our consciences knowing full well we intend to go right back to those same sins? If we take an honest look at our religious life, how much of that life is spent desperately wanting forgiveness for our sins so we can have eternal life, and how much of that life is spent wanting to know our sins are forgiven so we can continue to comit them? If there is any of that viper's poison in us then we need to seriously consider John's words when he says, “**The ax is already at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire**” (v. 9). There is no joy in hell.

If we want true joy, eternal joy, we have to first acknowledge the seriousness of our sins. A repentant heart feels sorrow over sin. Not the sorrow of being caught in a sin, but the sorrow of recognizing we have offended our holy, and Almighty Creator. It is the sorrow of knowing we have made ourselves worthy of damnation. That's a healthy sorrow, because if we do not acknowledge the seriousness of our sin, how can we possibly have true joy? How can you have joy when you are dragging around the burden of sin's guilt?

So how do we find this greater, lasting joy? For that, we need to focus on the One who is infinitely greater and more powerful than our sin. The Almighty Son of God was born into this world to save us from the poison of sin that courses through our veins. Christ's life was filled with the perfect fruit of love and good deeds. Jesus never once failed at displaying the fruit of God's love

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in his life. And when the ax of God's wrath was placed at the root of our so often fruitless lives, Jesus stepped in and said, "No Father, not them, take me instead." On the cross we see the ax of God's holy justice swinging directly at Jesus. In Jesus' words, "**Why have you forsaken me**" (Matthew 27:46) we hear him being "thrown into the fire" of God's wrath. God's perfect Son suffered hell to pay for all those times we chose the "joy" of sin, all the while thinking we could avoid God's wrath by what we do or who we are. The fruitful tree was cut down. The fruitless trees were spared. But that tree of Christ that looked so dead on Good Friday came back to life more glorious than before. In Jesus' resurrection we find joy! The joy of knowing all our sins are forgiven. The joy of knowing that God loved us so much that he willingly gave up his greatest treasure to rescue us from the wrath we deserved. We can enjoy a new life of faith in Christ now, and we can look forward to the eternal life of joy Jesus promised to all who believe in him.

Through his gospel God fills us with that new life of faith. That living faith produces the fruit of repentance. As we turn from sin to live for God we are moved by God's love to ask the same question the crowd asked, "**What should we do**" (v. 10)? Notice where John points the people. John said, "**The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.**" Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "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**" (vs. 11-14). John doesn't tell the people to hide themselves away from the world. Instead, John encourages the people to shine their light of faith where God has placed them. He tells them to share the blessings God has given them. He encourages them to do honest and faithful work and be content with what God is giving them.

With these very words God is encouraging us to do the same. Where has God placed you at this time in your life? What role has God given you, and how can you best carry out that role to God's glory? Are you a child, a student, an employee, or a caregiver? Then do the tasks that are set before you with the skills that God has given you. Take care of those things without grumbling or complaining, doing them as if you are working for your Lord. Are you a parent, an employer, or a volunteer? Then show kindness and mercy to those who are under you and to those who serve with you. Look at the blessings God has poured out into your life. How can you use those blessings to show love to others as God has shown his love to you? As John the Baptist said, share with others who do not have, out of the abundance God has given you. In carrying out these simple fruits of faith we will find joy.

But that joy started with repentance. True joy comes through repentance. That repentance starts with God's word showing us the seriousness of our sins. Then, through his word, God shows us all he did to pay for our sins. When we hear and understand how Christ rescued us from the wrath of God's eternal punishment, our hearts are moved by God's love to turn away from sin and turn to his forgiveness. In this new life of faith we are filled with the joy of God's salvation. That joy overflows in our lives, flowing out of hearts filled with God's love. The love that our gracious Father shows us also flows out in our lives. That love produces in us the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All these things Christ works in us as he continues to work for us. Jesus daily guides and directs our lives, guiding us with his word to that place where we will have eternal joy. Amen.