

**LUKE 3:7–18.** (EHV)

So John kept saying to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance! Do not even think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ because I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.” The crowds began to ask him, “What should we do then?” He answered them, “Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized. They said, “Teacher, what should we do?” To them he said, “Collect no more than what you were authorized to.” Soldiers were also asking him, “And what should we do?” He told them, “Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages.” The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.

One of the grapevines along the parsonage fence didn’t do well this year. I tried trimming it shorter, thinking that maybe if the nutrients in the vine didn’t have to go as far, it would help the vine produce. It didn’t work. So I’m going to wait one more year to see...what? To see if it produces fruit. And if it doesn’t? Then it will be time to cut it down and put it on my wood pile for the campfire. A dead vine isn’t worth much.

It’s been a long-standing criticism of Lutheranism that Lutherans only talk about sin and grace, about sin and salvation, and that they never talk about Christian living. When we talk about repentance, we talk about our sinfulness and about turning to Jesus for forgiveness and that’s it. We’re not practical enough—so the criticism goes.

On the one hand, I would argue in response that focusing on grace, salvation, and forgiveness in a world of sinners destined for death is about as practical as it gets. But on the other hand, this criticism just isn’t true. The Bible also talks about the fruits of faith, the fruits of repentance—John the Baptist talks about them here—so we do too. We talk about the fruits of repentance because if they aren’t there, then for all our talk repentance isn’t really there. If fruits of repentance aren’t there, then we are spiritually dead and only fit for God’s burn pile.

John the Baptist preached, “Produce fruits in keeping with repentance.” Let’s consider those fruits this morning—how we produce them and what they are.

**1. How to Produce Them**

Let’s first consider how to produce the fruits of repentance. In order for there to be an apple tree, there needs to be a genuine, living apple tree. If there is a genuine, living apple tree, it

will produce apples. So too, in order for there to be fruits of repentance, there needs to be genuine repentance.

In order to have repentance, you need to have the law and the gospel. John preaches some strong law to the crowds to prepare their hearts for the gospel and to work true repentance: “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance! Do not even think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ because I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Notice that God doesn’t just expect any fruit. He expects good fruit. Some of the people coming out to be baptized by John were coming because everyone else was coming. They were coming because it was good for their public image. They weren’t coming because they thought they had sins they needed to repent of. They weren’t coming because they thought they were in need of saving. They weren’t coming because they feared the ultimate Judge. They thought they were already going to heaven because they were descendants of Abraham.

But John tells them that if God just wanted some external claim or label you can slap on yourself, no matter how legitimate that claim might be, he could put that label on stones. We’re good at doing the same still today, right? “I’m a third generation pastor!” “I’m a fourth generation member of the same church!” “I’m a councilman *or* Sunday School teacher *or* usher!” “I’m an active, contributing member of the community!” Well and good, but what’s inside? Citing things like these are like thinking that God would be happy with a bowl of imitation apples that look just like real apples. But God doesn’t want fake fruit. He wants real fruit, good fruit. “His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

But we don’t just need the law to have real repentance. We also need the gospel. We aren’t told much of John’s gospel message here. We’re just told: “With many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.” But we heard some of that gospel message last week. We heard that he was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We heard him say, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth. And all flesh will see the salvation of God.” He told the people the Lord himself was coming to succeed where they had failed and to pay for all their wrongdoing, to win them salvation.

It’s because of this law and gospel message that John didn’t take the initiative in telling the people what sort of fruit to produce. They came to him. They asked him: “Teacher, what should we do?” “And what should we do?” In other words, genuine, good fruits of repentance are a voluntary willing response to the law and to the gospel. They are not something that parents or pastors or fellow Christians have to force out of you. If you don’t want to do all that is right, then you’re still just imitation fruit, just empty chaff.

The fruits of repentance come from genuine repentance—genuine fear of God’s judgment and sorrow over sin, and genuine trust in God’s Son for the forgiveness of all our sins and eternal salvation.

## 2. What They Are

Okay, so we know how to produce the fruits of repentance, but what are the fruits? We know that the fruit of an apple tree is apples. The fruit of a grapevine is grapes. But what are the fruits of repentance?

In short, the fruits of repentance are thoughts, words, and actions that please God, works that are in harmony with his will. If your mother tells you to dry the dishes, and you refuse, and she calls you to repentance with her voice and maybe with a spanking, and you apologize and she forgives you, the fruit of repentance is obviously to go and dry the dishes. That's what will please her. That's in harmony with her will. Same with God.

But that doesn't really answer the question, does it? What are the thoughts, words, and actions that please God? What works are in harmony with his will?

Some people asked John exactly that. And the answers John gave them are not necessarily what you would expect. Tax collectors asked John, "Teacher, what should we do?"

These men had lived a life of greed, cheating people out of their hard-earned money to make themselves rich. There are a lot of people claiming the United Healthcare CEO who was recently shot in cold blood was that same kind of man. And if you had asked his murderer before he murdered him, "If this man is sorry for what he's done, what should he do now?", he apparently would have said, "There's nothing he can do now. He needs to pay for what he has done with his life." Now we don't expect John the Baptist to say that to these tax collectors—"You just need to die"—but we probably expect him to prescribe some sort of huge demonstration: Sell all you have, except maybe the barest essentials, and give the proceeds to the poor and spend the rest of your life volunteering and giving back to the community, rather than taking from it. Or maybe we would expect him to prescribe what the tax collector Zacchaeus eventually did voluntarily: Give half of your possessions to the poor, and if you have cheated anybody out of anything, pay them back four times the amount.

But no, nothing like that. Just this: "Collect no more than what you were authorized to."

And some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" Soldiers were not just the battle-wagers but also the law enforcers for the Roman government, especially in far-flung territories like Judea. And still today, not so much in our country but especially in other countries, law enforcement officials can and do make life miserable for people and extort bribes or other money from them through threats or false accusations. In this case, it sounds like Roman soldiers often did this because they thought they weren't getting paid enough by the Roman government. So we might expect John to tell them: You've gone around extorting money and making people's lives miserable. Now it's time for you to be superheroes. Go around and find people in trouble and rescue them. Or maybe even: Find a different profession, rather than one where you could be called upon to kill or to execute.

But no, nothing like that. Just this: "Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages."

Basically John is telling the people, "Do the jobs God has given you faithfully."

Still today, even in Christian circles, because modern technology has shrunk the world and made us aware of everything going on everywhere, we think that real fruits of repentance, real Christian works, involve going on a mission trip to dig wells in Africa or to give food, water, and clothes to refugees in this or that country. In the meantime, what about our parents? What

about our children? What about our spouse? What about our teachers? What about our fellow church members? What about our community? What about the jobs and relationships and connections God has already given us? We're nailing those? No room for improvement there?

The late Mother Theresa may not have had the greatest grasp on the gospel—or maybe she did, I honestly don't know much about her—but she got it exactly right when she said, “Do you want to change the world? Go home and love your family.” Do you want to bear the fruits of repentance? Consider the callings and vocations God has already given you right now, and do them faithfully. If you can share food or clothing with those in need around you, do so. If the people in your life are in need of encouragement, encourage them. If they are in need of correction, correct them humbly. If your kids need help with their homework, help them. If they need more of your time and attention, give it to them. If your wife needs to be told you love her, tell her. And of course, if you're stealing time or money from your employer, stop it. If you're abusing a position of authority for selfish gain, stop it. If you're cheating on your spouse, with a real human being or via pictures on the internet, stop it. If you're drowning yourself in your work so that you don't have time for the priorities of God's word and church and your family, stop it. If your life is me-focused instead of Jesus-focused and other-focused, stop it.

Go back to the law and to the gospel. See your sin. See your Savior. See your sins forgiven by your Savior in your baptism. See the power over sin and the devil God gave you there. Take up the peace and the joy and the strength he has given you and put it to work. Produce fruits in keeping with the repentance God has graciously given you.

One final note: If Jesus is coming to judge, that's first of all a call to repentance for us. But once we have recognized and confessed our sins and found joy and peace in the gospel, the fact that Jesus is coming to judge is also a call to bear another fruit of repentance—to continue to live in joy and peace in the face of the evils and persecutions of others. You don't need to get all riled up by what this or that person is doing. Jesus is coming to judge. He'll take care of it. He'll bring to justice. He'll make the wrongs right. All will be well. You go home and love your family and do your jobs faithfully, to the glory of your Savior, who took on human flesh to faithfully serve you and to make sure that one day you go to your true home—heaven. Amen.