

## FRUIT OF FOREVER FAITH

### Luke 3:2b-3a, 7-14

(CSB) "God's word came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>7</sup> He then said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'<sup>8</sup> Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't start saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones!<sup>9</sup> Even now the ax is already at the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'<sup>10</sup> 'What then should we do?' the crowds were asking him.<sup>11</sup> He replied to them, 'The one who has two shirts must share with someone who has none, and the one who has food must do the same.'<sup>12</sup> Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'<sup>13</sup> He told them, 'Don't collect any more than what you have been authorized.'<sup>14</sup> Some soldiers also questioned him: 'What should we do?' He said to them, 'Don't take money from anyone by force or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'"

## INTRODUCTION

Let's start off with a few good news/bad news jokes. One day a man went skydiving. When he jumped from the plane there was good and bad news. The Good News: He had a parachute. The Bad News: It didn't open. The Good News: There was a haystack down below. The Bad News: There was a pitchfork in the haystack. The Good News: He missed the pitchfork. The Bad News: He missed the haystack. A man went to a doctor for the first time in years to get a physical. After the doctor examined him, he told the man he had some bad news and some good news: The Bad News: He had cancer. The Good News: He also had Alzheimer's. The man replied, 'Well, at least I don't have cancer.' And then there's the one of the Dr. whose patient is an avid golfer. They were both members of the same church. The Dr. tells her, 'I've got some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that our Pastor is convinced there are beautiful golf courses in Heaven. The bad news is that you have a tee time next Tuesday morning.'

The Greek word translated "gospel" in the New Testament literally means "good news." The "good news" of the Gospel is that our lives don't have to be ruined by the power of destructive habits in this life because **Jesus Christ** can set us free from the power of sin when He lives and reigns within our hearts. The "good news" of the Gospel is that we don't have to face judgment when we die for all the ways we have violated our Creator's moral laws because **Jesus Christ** took upon Himself the penalties of our wrongs and was executed in our place. Christ's sacrifice of Himself for us authorizes God to offer to forgive our sins and adopt us eternally into His Heavenly family if we put our faith in what **Jesus** alone can do for us and are willing to surrender control of our lives into His hands. As **John 3:16** (NIV) promises, "For God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." This is God's good news to us. **Luke 3:18** (NASB) reveals John included the "good news" in his preaching: "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." But John's preaching first amplified the crucial condition of repentance for anyone seeking to benefit by the Gospel. In other words, we have to believe the "bad news"—that unless we abandon our sinful ways God's judgment will surely condemn us—before we are candidates to receive the blessings of God's "good news." This morning we will examine The Fire of God's Fury and The Fruit of Forever Faith.

## I. THE FIRE OF GOD'S FURY

**Vs. 2-3:** "God's word came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John did not offer "baptism" to gain "forgiveness of sins." He commanded their baptism as an outward act to symbolize an inward repentance upon which their "forgiveness of sins" depended. The Greek word for "repentance" combines the ideas of "time" and "a change of thinking." New Testament "repentance" means "to perceive the need

to amend one's former ways; to make a change for the better." One day a mother went into her six-year-old son's room to put away his clean laundry. His room was a mess, barely an hour after they'd worked together straightening up everything. "Johnny," she told her son, "I want you to tell Jesus right now how sorry you are for what you've done to your room." Johnny prayed, "Dear Jesus, I'm so sorry I made such a mess in my room today"; then he added, "But I sure had fun doing it!" If we are sorry for the "mess" our misdeeds cause but we have no true remorse over our actions themselves, we merely regret our past. A drunk driver who fails to negotiate a curve and plows a car into house may truly regret the damage to the house and the trauma to the family. But unless this driver takes steps to change the behavior that led to this mess, there is no true repentance. Repentance involves not only sorrow over our past; repentance includes a change of heart over our actions so our future will be different; so our past mistakes won't be repeated. Some change only when they are forced to do so. They're like the guy who was always in trouble with the law. After being released yet again from jail, he went to confession and told the priest, "I'm changing my ways, father." The priest said, "Have you finally seen the light, my son?" "No father. I have felt the heat."

**Vss. 7-8a:** "He then said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'<sup>8</sup> Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance." By referring "to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him" as a "Brood of vipers!" John literally called them, "sons of snakes." He compared them to snakes hiding in a field that are driven into a stream by the threat of fire. John warns them real repentance is much more than a desire to flee Hellfire. Participation in a religious rite like baptism is not what God seeks but evidence of lives changed as fruit of their repentance.

**Vs. 8b:** "And don't start saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" This negative command is better expressed as, "Do not even begin to say to yourselves." Despite Israel being God's chosen nation to whom He revealed His laws, John confronted Jews with a reality even more true of us as Gentiles: On an individual level, the best religious pedigree counts for nothing in securing anyone against God's judgment. We do not become God's children by family or national inheritance but by personal repentance.

**Vs. 9:** "Even now the ax is already at the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." The Greek word translated "already" comes first in this sentence to stress God's decisive judgment is nearer than people think. There's a legend of a man walk along a beach who found an old lamp. When he rubbed it a genie appeared who told him he had one wish. Immediately the man asked for a copy of the stock market page from a newspaper printed *one year later*. Suddenly the newspaper page was in his hands and the genie disappeared. He greedily scanned the columns to decide what to invest in by knowing ahead of time what profitable stocks he could buy. Oh, the thoughts that raced through his mind of the exciting things he could do with the great wealth that would be his just one year from that day! But when he turned to look at the back of this page, he noticed an obituary column. His dreams evaporated in an instant when he saw his name at the top of the list! **Jesus'** words recorded in **Matthew 16:26** (ESV) would have become alarmingly relevant: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

**Jesus** gives an even more horrifying warning found in **Mark 9:43-48** (NIV): "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.<sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.<sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,<sup>48</sup> where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched" [**Isaiah 66:24**]." God gives us clear warning of a fiery, everlasting ruin beyond the grave awaiting all who reject His offer of peace and forgiveness. The terrifying aspects of Hell magnify God's holy fury toward ungodly actions; Hell's reality magnifies the serious consequences of living in defiance of God's character and will. We enjoy jokes about Hell but those in Hell know no hope or joy. A young lady came home from a date

looking rather sad. She told her mother, "Arthur proposed to me an hour ago." "Then why are you so sad?" her mother asked. "Because he also told me he's an atheist. Mom, he doesn't even believe there's a hell." Her mother replied, "Marry him anyway. Between the two of us, we'll show him how wrong he is."

## II. THE FRUIT OF FOREVER FAITH

The more we realize how much we deface God's image in us by a self-centered disregard of His moral laws, and how much we cost others, the more we will cry out for God to save us from sin's consequences and from ourselves. Beth Moore, whose insights into applying Christ's teachings to every aspect of our lives have blessed and inspired millions, comments, "I was a mess before the Savior set me free. Abundant life was not mine until I let the Healer set me free, not just from hell itself but from myself." In **vss. 10-14**, John gives us guidelines on how to "produce fruit consistent with repentance" that will give us assurance we are displaying the Fruit of Forever Faith that will preserve us from the Fire of God's Fury.

**Vs. 10:** "What then should we do?" the crowds were asking him." Luke identifies three groups who took seriously John's warnings of God's "coming wrath" and that "every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." They all recognized John's command, "Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance," could not be satisfied by mere words or participation in religious customs. A group of Christian laymen engaged in missionary work approached a small village near an Amish settlement. They asked an Amish farmer, "Brother, are you a Christian?" The farmer thought for a moment and then said, "Wait here just a few minutes." He went into his barn, wrote down a list of names on a tablet, and handed it to the team leader. "Here is a list of people who know me best," the farmer said. "Please ask them if I am a Christian." He knew the best evidence of Forever Faith is the Fruit of a Christlike life.

**Vs. 11:** "He replied to them, 'The one who has two shirts must share with someone who has none, and the one who has food must do the same.'" The "shirt" is the "tunic" (ESV) then worn as an undergarment by both sexes, of which most people had several. "Food" is a general term for "what's eaten" to keep us alive. For the general public, the fruit of repentance was a spirit of *generosity* – the willingness to share with those in need in times of crises, like poverty induced by a health failure or catastrophe. John did not have in mind socialism or communism giving others with less than us the right to claim from us what they need. God-inspired generosity is displayed by our voluntary *altruism*, our unselfish concern for the welfare of others that fulfills the command, "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (**Leviticus 19:18**, NASB). John's words convict us we can dishonor the Lord by acts of *omission*, the good we are too insensitive or greedy to perform toward others; not just by acts of *commission* like John identifies in the next two groups.

**Vs. 12:** "Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'" There's a joke that the Devil once challenged Saint Peter to a baseball game. "How can you win, Satan?" Peter asked, "Most of the famous ballplayers are up here." "How can I lose?" answered Satan. "Most of the umpires are down here." These "tax collectors" were even more despised than the worst umpires. They received no pay from the Roman government for doing a job most people detested. Their "pay" was what was left over after passing along to Rome the set amount they were required to collect. Jewish "tax collectors" were also deemed traitors for collaborating with the enemy. Due to the risks to which they exposed themselves, tax collectors often thought they had the "right" to gouge the people for all they could get from them during the few years most held this job. But God did not give them this "right." In **vs. 13**, John told them to display "the fruit consistent with repentance" by their *honesty*: "'Don't collect any more than what you have been authorized"; what is fair and reasonable in God's eyes.

**Vs. 14:** "Some soldiers also questioned him: 'What should we do?' He said to them, 'Don't take money from anyone by force or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'" In modern English, John told these soldiers, "Don't shake people down." They often took advantage of their authority and military might to pad their pay by cruel and dishonest means. John commanded them to display "the fruit consistent with

repentance" by their *humility*. They should not promote their own importance and demand others serve them to their advantage. They should protect the disadvantaged and serve others as important to God.

## CONCLUSION

Many years ago in a small European village, two brothers were convicted of stealing sheep. The brutal punishment of that day had them branded on the forehead with the letters "S T," which stood for "sheep thief." One of the brothers, unable to bear the stigma, tried to lose himself in a foreign land. But people would invariably ask him about the letters on his brow and what they meant. He kept wandering from land to land, seeking in vain to escape his guilt. He died full of bitterness and was buried in a forgotten grave.

But the other brother did not go away from his home. After he repented of his misdeed and gave his heart to Christ, he told himself: "I can't run away from the fact that I stole sheep, so here I will remain until I win back the respect of my neighbors and myself." As the years passed, he established a reputation for Christlike generosity, honesty, and humility. One day a stranger in the town saw an old man with the letters "S T" branded on his forehead. He asked a native what they signified. After some thought, the villager said: "It all happened a great while ago, and I have forgotten the particulars; but I think the letters are an abbreviation of 'Saint.'"

The Fruit of our Forever Faith in **Jesus Christ** enables us not only to be forgiven of the sorrows and wrongs of being a sinner, but empowers us to experience the joys and the righteousness of being a saint!