

## Bearing Fruit and Burning the Chaff

While there are many preachable topics that can have stand-alone sermons developed around, today I would like to focus in on a couple of these topics. John the Baptist's main preaching theme is that people should repent of their sins. In fact, Matthew records that this first message of John the Baptist in his Gospel account. The reason for repenting is that the kingdom of heaven has come near. In order to understand John the Baptist's later words about 'bearing fruit of repentance' we must first understand what repentance is. For many centuries, the understanding of John the Baptist's call to "repent for the kingdom of heaven is near" was understood as 'do penance for the kingdom of heaven is near'. While the words 'repent' and 'penance' come from the same root in Greek, they do have different implications. 'Doing penance' gives the implication that you are doing a punishment for what you have done wrong. You may be sorry for what you have done and you may be seeking forgiveness, but it doesn't mean that you will necessarily stop, or that you even want to stop doing, that bad behavior. However, 'repenting' indicates that you are actually changing your ways and have a new orientation in your life. Religiously speaking, repenting means turning back to God & following God's ways, seeking to do God's will for us. This is consistent with the Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and the others who had called the people to give up their evil ways and return to following God's ways. True repentance is giving up the ways of selfish living, having the individual as the center of the universe, the center of attention, that all things are done for the benefit of the individual. It is then turning to something totally different; it is turning around, back to God.

This idea can be seen as being on a journey. While the traveler may think that they are heading in the right direction, there comes a time when they realize that they have taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way and they seek to return to their original route. Unfortunately, instead of directly returning to the original route, we take other routes that sometimes seems like it might be a shortcut but actually takes us even further away from God. God, being of a loving nature, does not limit how many times we can wander off looking for that 'right path' trying to make it on our own.

The story of "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens is a good example of this kind of true repentance. Ebenezer Scrooge undergoes a conversion after he is shown how his life of selfish living ends at a forgotten gravestone. Scrooge lived for himself, kept to himself, only thought of himself. Scrooge had no use for others unless it was for his benefit. But that all changed after he saw his life in retrospect, seeing how a selfish, inward-turned life leads to an isolated, lonely death. This transformation led him to look outwardly towards others, seeing the hurt, pain and hardship that he caused. Responding to this repentance, this turning around, he starts with those whom he knows, the Cratchits, providing a Christmas feast the likes of which they had never known and then provided for Tiny Tim's health care. In short, Scrooge's heart is opened to love, an outward giving love that puts others first. It doesn't take too many theological gymnastics to equate this love to God. Many of the authors of the New Testament writings, especially John, make this point that God is love. So, when we live in love, we live in God, we have turned to God and focus on what God wants.

This is a main theme of many of the Christmas stories and movies that we see at this time of year. A person's life is transformed and they start to show love to others, for the sake of others. Their actions then 'bear fruit worthy of

repentance,' their eyes are opened up to the life of loving, a life of giving. So to bear fruit worthy of repentance is to do those things that God wants us to do for others. As we hear in the Old Testament we are to care for the orphan, the widow, the poor and the alien among us, or as the prophet Micah tells us: "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" True repentance is putting God and God's wants first before our own desires.

This brings us to the last part of John the Baptist's message that Matthew tells us - the part about judging and burning. John the Baptist uses an agrarian analogy of what the judgement of the Messiah will be like. Traditionally, it had been understood that the wheat are all the believers, all of 'us,' while the chaff are all the bad people, all the non-believers, all those who don't live our definition of the Christian life. This traditional viewpoint has an 'us versus them' mentality where the 'us' are the good and the 'them' are the bad.

However, there is another perspective from which we can hear this verse and gain a little different perspective on what Jesus will be doing. In this different perspective we don't use the traditional viewpoint and think of the wheat as a collection of all people, but see each stalk of wheat as an individual. Then what Jesus will be doing is essentially separating all those things that are of no value to us at the time of judgement. The different parts of the wheat plant are necessary and useful during the life cycle of the plant, but at harvest time, this purpose and usefulness only gets in the way of the useful seed. Jesus separates us from all those things that we have that are no longer useful or all those 'bad' things from us and gets rid of them completely and permanently, leaving only the good behind.

Hearing this text from this perspective hints at the belief that we cannot obtain true repentance on our own, that it will be a work of God, of the Messiah, of

Jesus that gives us this total repentance, this total, permanent turning to God. This baptism, this immersion that Jesus will 'perform' on us will be a total and complete change of our self to be the being that God created us to be in the first place. Our 'earthly' baptism then recognizes that God has put a claim on our lives, a life that God has declared as being good and worthy of redemption. A redemption that is given to us through Jesus Christ. As Christians, we believe that Jesus will come a second time, bringing judgement to the world and fully establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. As a corollary to that, we can use the language of baptism for this time of judgement where we will be purified just as the seed is purified of all the now useless stuff of the wheat plant.

In just a short while, Sage will be having this claim put on her through the sacrament of Baptism. We will pray that the Holy Spirit give her gifts, gifts which we heard from the reading from Isaiah 11, gifts that will help her to look outward towards others, gifts that bear the fruit worthy of repentance, gifts that help her to do what God will want her to do as she journeys through life.

As we continue to prepare for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, may we live lives that bear fruit worthy of repentance using the gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit at our baptism - fruit that is worthy of giving back to our King.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: [https://youtu.be/MTeSWNg\\_M0o](https://youtu.be/MTeSWNg_M0o)

Service: <https://youtu.be/wGy4phvieMs>