

Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" in *Matthew 5-7* is perhaps the most complete explanation in the New Testament of Christian values; ethical standards; how we're to act in our relationships; how we're to approach our spirituality; our attitude toward money; anger; and many other things. Simply, followers of Christ are to be different from the rest of the world, different from both the religious and the irreligious because we seek to live as Jesus taught. Unfortunately, followers of Christ sometimes don't appear different than those who profess no faith at all.

A church board member, not one of ours, was driving home one afternoon when he got stuck in a heavy traffic jam. Even though traffic was at a standstill, the driver behind him kept honking and honking. In the tension of the moment, the board member finally snapped and got out of his car, walked to the car behind him and punched the driver in the face. Walking back to his car, he passed by his own bumper and saw his bumper-sticker that read, "Honk if you love Jesus!"

Last week we heard about John the Baptist coming on the scene as a voice crying out in the wilderness telling people to repent. Perhaps John was crying out not just in the sense of using a loud voice. Perhaps he was crying because of the pain, injustice, greed, and violence people experienced and inflicted on one another. There are times when crying seems like the only appropriate response to humanity's inhumanity. John's preaching may sound harsh, jarring and challenging particularly as an approach to the Christmas season. **However, his preaching of repentance is a direct response to human behavior that ignores the appropriate attitude we're to have towards our neighbor, which is love, respect, compassion, and generosity.** Unique to Luke's account of John the Baptist's ministry is the response of the crowds (see *Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; John 1:19-28*). Listen to *Luke 3:7-18*, "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, '**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.** Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now **the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**' And the crowds asked him, '**What then should we do?**' In reply he said to them, '**Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.**' Even **tax collectors** came to be baptized, and they asked him, '**Teacher, what should we do?**' He said to them, '**Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.**' **Soldiers** also asked him, '**And we, what should we do?**' He said to them, '**Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.**'

"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but **one who is more powerful than I is coming**; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he

will burn with unquenchable fire.’ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed **the good news to the people.**”

Many preachers open their sermons with a prayer, a scripture, an illustration, or a humorous story that illuminates the theme. Most teachers of preaching would not encourage a pastor to begin a sermon by calling the people who are gathered to listen to them names, but that’s what John does. “You brood of vipers!” You bloodsuckers! You bunch of snakes! What this is meant to evoke in his hearers, I’m not sure, but in Genesis the snake is a deceiver and a liar who attacks the character of God, and Adam and Eve’s sense of identity. The snake appeals to their ego and pride and leads them down a path away from their Creator. Maybe John is hinting that he sees who they are, even if they are deceived about themselves. John goes on, asking why they’re even listening to him and who they think they are. John’s answer is they are, “nothing special.” John’s approach—at least his introduction—was, no doubt, effective; though I’m not sure I’d recommend it to young preachers. I don’t know how you all would respond if I began a sermon by calling you names.

Anyway, one thing is certain in John’s case: his audience knew where they stood with the preacher. John asks them a pointed question: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” This sounds a little like God’s question to Adam and Eve after they were deceived by the snake, “Who told you that you were naked?” John’s question is rhetorical, and emphasizes both the accusation (You vipers!) and John’s challenge (**Bear fruits worthy of repentance!**). John then tells them that their ethnic and religious heritage, based on Abraham is meaningless, if their lives don’t reflect Abraham’s faith. His message is clear. Don’t assume that because you have a religious heritage, you belong to God’s people. God can create a new people from stones. We let ourselves off the hook too easily if we think this is merely a historical remark, John’s message needs to be heard today by baptized Christians as well. It’s as shocking as if a preacher today were to say, “Don’t presume to say, ‘We’re baptized!’ Show your faith by your actions, or get ready for the ax.” John addresses this threat not to individuals, but to the group as a whole. Later in *Luke 6:43-45*, Jesus uses this imagery to connect one’s actions to the state of one’s heart: “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. **The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.**”

The tree, fruit and ax imagery appears again in *Luke 13:6-9* in Jesus’ parable about the unproductive fig tree that is given a good dose of fertilizer and another year to live. But if it doesn’t bear fruit after one more year then what? The ax. **With these stark images both John and Jesus warn God’s people against complacency.** If the community that identifies itself as God’s own people doesn’t bear the fruit that God desires, **God is always capable of beginning again with people who are willing to listen and obey.**

Let’s be clear why this is important. One of the central elements of the Old Testament covenant is the generational promise, which begins with Abraham, continues with Isaac and

Jacob, and is extended through them to all of their descendants (see *Exodus 3:6*; *Jeremiah 33:26*). But John says this promise is meaningless, apart from repentance. Claiming the promise of Abraham without the faith of Abraham doesn't work. The claim that John makes about the descendants of Abraham is striking; he redefines what it means to be a child of Abraham, including now all who believe, regardless of their ethnicity or race. John doesn't reject Abraham's ethnic descendants out of hand or absolutely, but he is saying that **all are called to repent; all are to believe; and all are to bear fruits worthy of repentance.**

John's message is not simply a call to belief or trust. John challenges his hearers to right relationships not just with God, but with their neighbors as well. When we lose the human connection that we have to other people as children of God that is when individuals become capable of doing horrendous things. Those of us who are heartbroken over the tragedies that happen every week can thank God we still feel our common humanity and connection with other human beings. Following John's dramatic opening, the crowds respond to his preaching. The nature of that response is given only in Luke's Gospel. The "crowds" as a whole, then even the tax collectors specifically, and finally the soldiers each ask, **"What should we do?"**

John responds to this question by offering specific actions that demonstrate **"fruits worthy of repentance."** To the crowds as a whole, John says: **"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."** Then, two groups—tax collectors and soldiers—ask the same question. Notice that both groups worked for the occupying Roman government, keeping order in the name of the emperor Tiberius (who ruled 14-37 CE). To the tax collectors, who were often guilty of adding extra taxation on the top of regional and Roman taxes, John says: stop stealing from your neighbors. And to the soldiers John says, no more using your power to strike fear and take advantage of simple citizens. No hoarding, no skimming, no threats, no extortion. To state it simply, John is saying, **share, play fair, don't be a bully.** That sounds like what we should learn in pre-school or kindergarten, but obviously a lot of people don't. There are far too many adults who don't know how to share, play fair, and not act like a bully. What John is telling people to do really isn't that hard and doesn't require them to quit their jobs or move to a monastery. **He's making the point that there are opportunities to do God's will, to do good for others, to be God's people, all around us right where we are in the course of our every day life.** More surprising than the content of John's ethical instruction is **his audience.** They are at best, the riff raff; poor crowds with little to offer; despised tax collectors who profit from the oppression of their countrymen; mercenary soldiers known for extorting the vulnerable. Yet they are not excluded from John's attention or the possibility of **"bearing fruits worthy of repentance."**

John's action-oriented fruits of repentance have to do with caring for our neighbors and treating them with respect. Repentance here is not just or even primarily about faith and sin; rather it's about how we are living out love of our neighbor. It's how we conduct our lives. The question which John's preaching encourages us all to ask today as we get ready to celebrate the birth of Christ is still: **"What should we do?" What are the fruits of repentance, we might bear? Christ wants those gifts more than gold, frankincense, and myrrh.** Bearing the fruits of repentance begins with us as taking an honest look at our lives

and asking God to help us change what we need to change. There are things we are doing that we may need to stop—like the tax collectors and soldiers. There may be things we need to start doing—like those in the crowd were urged to share their clothes and food with those who had less than they did. We need to figure that out and start doing it.

The final section of John's proclamation in the wilderness (*Luke 3:15-17*) depicts him doing exactly what he advised the tax collectors and soldiers to do. He shows that he knows his role, and he refuses to push beyond the bounds of the authority he's been given: when the people wonder whether John himself is the promised Messiah (*3:15*), he responds by emphasizing his subordination to the one who is coming (*3:16*), and the ultimate authority that one will wield (*3:17*). **John the Baptist embodies his own advice; he is content with what he has received.**

John's message may seem old to some of us, but it's more contemporary and relevant than we may realize. I listened to a TED talk this past week by Erez Yoeli, a research associate at MIT's Sloan School of Management. His talk was about "How to Motivate People to Do Good for Others" and two of his three points are seen in today's passage about John the Baptist. If you want to **motivate people to do good for others**, his last two points were you have to **Eliminate Excuses and Communicate Expectations**. John certainly does that! **What should we do? We should bear fruits worthy of repentance.** We should do so because God wants us to; because it's better for us and for everyone, for our nation and the world. **"Share. Be fair. Don't bully."** It may not sound heroic, but it's something we all can do. It's something that anyone can do.

Etienne de Grellet answered the question "What Should We Do?" in a way John would have liked. "I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why do you think John was such a popular figure and preacher? Would you have found his approach and language appealing or a turn off? Why?
2. How does John's message to the people (*3:7-14*) illustrate the kind of repentance he is calling for?
3. What does John say about the need for and the outcome of repentance?
4. How does John differentiate himself from Christ?
5. Can you identify anyone who has been a "John the Baptist" in your life—someone who showed you the way, led you to Christ, or gave you a dose of tough love about the direction of your life? How do you feel about that person?
6. What would John say you could do specifically to show genuine repentance and Christian love? What action will you take this week to "produce fruits worthy of repentance?"