

Luke 3:7-18

⁷So 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? ⁸Therefore 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. ⁹Even 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.”

¹⁰The crowds began to ask him, “What should we do then?”

¹¹He answered them, “Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same.”

¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized. They said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³To them he said, “Collect no more than what you were authorized to.”

¹⁴Soldiers 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.”

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John could be the Christ. ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.”

¹⁸Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people.

What Should We Do?

I.

To some degree they must have known what they were getting into. A new personality had exploded onto the scene, and they had gone to see him for themselves. Some might have even called him a volatile personality. He dressed in crazy clothing and ate weird foods. He had developed a reputation and a name. People knew him as John the Baptist. It was said that his message was harsh. He preached, as we heard in last week’s Gospel: “A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3, EHV).

Still, crowds of people went to see him.

Despondent. Perhaps that’s how many of them felt, especially a couple of groups Luke singles out in his account.

Tax collectors were one group. They were at the bottom end of the approval scale in Jewish society.

Perhaps many had become tax collectors simply by backing into the job. They needed something to put food on the table and pay the rent. The equivalent of working the fast-food drive through window just wasn’t going cut it, so they bounced from job to job until they ended up collecting taxes.

Tax collectors had the reputation of extorting from the tax-paying citizens of the day. They had the ability to demand more than what was owed and simply pocket the extra. Since everyone already looked at the tax collector with suspicion, many backed right into living down to the reputation of the whole group. By doing so, a person could not just make a living, but a *good* living—even rising to the comfort level of what many called “rich.”

Another group Luke singles out is soldiers. Soldiers weren’t *in* Jewish society. They lived and worked there in Judea, but they were seen as—and treated as—outsiders. They looked different, and they probably talked differently than the Jews they interacted with every day.

The two groups probably don't seem to have much in common—maybe not *anything* in common. They might have had a common attitude—both might have felt unfulfilled.

Maybe you can relate. Many find themselves in dead-end jobs, just to put a roof over their head and food on the table. Even if you aren't in a dead-end job, you might feel as if you have no choice to continue in a profession you never saw yourself in. Others might be like the tax collectors or soldiers in another way—when people see you coming, they get defensive or suspicious; they avoid you.

“Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance!...⁹Even 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” (Luke 3:8-9, EHV). John's message cuts not just the unfulfilled, but everyone. You don't have to be in a dead-end job, or be seen by others as a pariah, to realize that you have done things that are less than honorable.

The ax is ready to strike.

“Tax collectors also came to be baptized. They said, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’¹³To them he said, ‘Collect no more than what you were authorized to.’¹⁴Soldiers 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’” (Luke 3:12-14, EHV).

“Confession has two parts,” says Martin Luther in his Small Catechism. “The one is that we confess our sins.” The tax collectors and soldiers recognized that something was wrong in their lives; something was missing. “What should we do?” they wondered. They didn't want to live like they had been any longer.

II.

It wasn't just those two groups of people who went out to see and hear John the Baptist. There were *crowds* of people—many people. Matthew says that it was the Pharisees and Sadducees that prompted John's words: “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?⁸Therefore 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” (Luke 3:7-8, EHV).

John singled out the smug and self-confident; people who had a lot of pride. Back then it was people who made a big deal of tracing their family heritage through the generations of Judaism. They weren't just smug in their heritage, they were smug in their own strict adherence to the Laws of Moses. They worked diligently to keep all of the ceremonial law, and ridiculed those that didn't seem to be as righteous as themselves.

Their overpowering pride blocked the true condition of their hearts. They were actually dead in their sin. Diligence in following religious rules as the rabbis had instructed them and pride in their heritage had become their gods. Ironically, care in following their religion had caused them to reject the true God.

That might sound eerily familiar. Christians often look for validation. It might be the particular place of worship you have chosen, or that you haven't committed crimes against society. You are such a good Christian that you can say all the right words and sing the songs in the worship service, not to mention making your offering to the church. You help out the congregation in all kinds of ways.

God said through Isaiah: “These people approach me with their words, and they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is nothing but commandments taught by men” (Isaiah 29:13, EHV). The word Pharisee lives on in our vocabulary, even today. The dictionary defines a pharisee as a self-righteous person. Attending church just for show, or thoughtless repetition of the words in the service without focusing on what God intends us to receive in our worship is exactly what Isaiah was talking about.

“The crowds began to ask him, ‘What should we do then?’¹¹He answered them, ‘Whoever has

two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same” (Luke 3:10-11, EHV).

Like the tax collectors and the soldiers, some of the smug understood they weren’t really without sin. They understood that John was saying that coming from the right family line wasn’t enough. What John said was that they should put their religious faith into action.

III.

John’s instruction was powerful. “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Christ” (Luke 3:15, EHV). What should we do? Both the smug and the despondent could see that John’s explanation about putting faith into action didn’t actually deal with the sin problem. Active faith is a *response*, not something that actually takes care of the underlying sin. They needed the One God had promised throughout the Old Testament. Might John fit the bill?

“No,” John had to tell them. “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. ¹⁷His 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” (Luke 3:16-17, EHV).

John pictures Jesus as both Judge and Savior. Jesus as the thresher separates the wheat from the chaff. That’s a picture of Jesus as Judge. But even then, the strongest image is as our Savior. He removes the chaff for the express purpose of gathering in the wheat.

Jesus knew about your pride and smugness, yet he came for you anyway. He willingly suffered and died for you. He knew about your despondence, whether that of being in a dead-end job, or the despondence you feel when oppressed by your sin and guilt. He paid for that, too.

In fact, Jesus paid for those sins for everyone. The chaff are those who have rejected Jesus’ payment for *their* sins of smugness and despondence.

IV.

Did you ever wonder about the people who trekked out to the wilderness to see John the Baptist? Why did they go? They wanted answers to the question: What should we do?

When it comes to earning salvation, nothing. The smug and the despondent had come to John for baptism. Remember what we heard a few minutes ago from last week’s Gospel? John was preaching: “A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3, EHV). They came for repentance and forgiveness. John pointed ahead to the work Jesus would finish on the cross.

“What should we do?” really was a question about how they could put that faith into action. John had answered their question even before they had gotten around to asking it: “Produce fruits in keeping with repentance!” (Luke 3:8, EHV). Repentance means a change of mind. Advent is a penitential season—a time in which we change our minds. We focus on God and what he has done in sending us the gift of the Savior.

Some think repentance is connected with sorrow. John teaches us that it leads to joy. Joy to the world, because the Father loved us enough to send his Son to earth to be our Savior. Jesus loves us, too, and willingly gave himself so that we will one day share the joys of heaven.

So, what should we do as a response of faith? Many things. Help those in need. Be honest and forthright in your job, no matter what it is, or what people might think of you. No matter where you find yourself in life, live a God-pleasing life. Most important of all, share the joy of the Savior with others. Amen.