

“What Then Should We Do” Luke 3: 7-18

So, John the Baptist comes out of the wilderness, the Forerunner of the Messiah, a prophet sent from God, and when he gets to the Jordan River, he preaches. What does he preach about? Repentance. Not just feeling sorry for what we’ve done, or how we’ve spent our lives, but also we must **bear fruit** worthy of repentance. We have to give evidence that we are sorry and have turned our lives from selfishness and self-centeredness to serving God first and foremost.

John makes the point that we cannot count on our pedigree to earn us salvation. The Jews cannot claim Abraham as their father, and that should be good enough. No, because God could turn the stones around the river into children of Abraham.

What do we point to when we are trying to justify things we have done, and know we should not have done? How do we justify our sins before God? One popular answer is that God will understand. We’re only human. He knows that, and will forgive the occasional transgression. He’ll forgive even the habitual transgression, because He’s such a swell guy. I suggest people with that response read the Bible. Not just the OT with its occasional image of a genocidal maniac God, but the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5-7. Certain behavior is clearly expected for those of us who claim to follow the Christ. We know what that behavior looks like, and we know when we stomp all over God’s expectations of us. So does God.

Another popular justification for our sinful behavior is that we are church members. We attend and we give. We’re active, so that should cover us in those instances when our human nature gets the best of us. I think John would point out that God could raise up church members from the nearest rocks. Church membership is no substitute for repentance.

John even uses the image of an ax resting at the root of the tree, us being the tree, just waiting for Judgment Day when God will take it and start chopping down the trees that refused to bear good fruit, fruit worthy of repentance.

John’s crowds were convinced. And they asked him, “What then should we do?” Obviously they know they have to **do something**. John has taken away all their excuses. If they want to avoid the ax, they need to make some changes, and they really don’t know what they have to do.

So, John tells them. And, I was surprised how much these acts that bear good fruit involve money and property:

If you have 2 coats, give one to someone who needs it.

Tax collectors should not collect more taxes than they are entitled to by the law. No extortion, no cheating, no oppressing their poor neighbors just because they can.

When the soldiers asked what to do, John told them not to extort money from the people “by threats and false accusations.” They were to be satisfied with their salary and not supplement it by force.

Look at these three examples. They all involve wealth somehow. If you have more than you need, give some away. And not just a little, but half, in this example. And if you are in a position of power and are able to line your pockets at the expense of people without power, don't do it. Be honest. Be fair. Be just. Don't steal. Pretty simple stuff. Funny how all the ways he encourages people to repent have something to do with wealth – either getting it by immoral means, or sharing what you have. That is **all** he suggests. Is this just a coincidence, or is our relationship with money that important to our spiritual lives?

The last example he gives is about power, and it's not a suggestion, it's a personal admission. The crowd obviously thinks he has some authority. They are starting to wonder if he might be the Messiah. He could have taken that level of expectation they had, and used it for his own aggrandizement. But he doesn't. John tells them he is not the Messiah, but the Messiah is coming soon.

And this Messiah will come, ready to separate the good from the bad, the repentant from the ones with the good excuses. And with this, we fully recognize that John is preparing the way for Christ to come into the world preaching and teaching. He is helping us understand that we have a part in our own salvation, the part of being ready to receive the love of Christ into our hearts.

And, he's clear that we can't accept that love deeply if our hearts are filled with self-serving ideas that will lead to self-serving actions. We worship Christ or we worship self. One or the other. Remember when Jesus said we cannot serve God and mammon, God and wealth? We need to make a choice: do we place our faith in God or do we place our faith in everything the world teaches us?

We have to serve **SOMEBODY**. It may be the eternal and omnipotent God through Jesus Christ, or it may be ourselves, our own desires and appetites and prejudices and limited knowledge/perspective. If we are honest with ourselves, I think the choice is pretty clear. God is bigger and stronger and smarter and wiser and more loving/forgiving than the best of us could ever hope to be. In this season of preparation, let's make an even greater effort than we have, to serve Him.

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Dec 13, 2009