

What Is the Fruit That Befits Repentance?

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes that true repentance is evidenced by a lifestyle of mercy, generosity, and reliance on God's grace rather than human effort or status.

Scripture: Micah 6:8, Luke 3:8, Luke 12:34, Romans 4:16, Galatians 3:7, Hebrews 13:5, 1 John 2:3

Topics: "Repentance And Faith", "Gods Mercy"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of repentance and relying solely on God's mercy for salvation, emphasizing that human distinctives like race or works do not guarantee salvation, but only faith in God's grace. He highlights how repentance leads to a transformed lifestyle, as seen in Luke 3:10-20, where John the Baptist instructs the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers on living in a way that befits repentance. John's exhortations focus on sharing with the needy, being content, and avoiding exploitation, showcasing the fruits of genuine repentance and reliance on God's mercy.

Transcript

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Luke 3:10-20

What we saw from Luke 3:1-9 last week was that John's baptism and his message were both a call to repentance, which means a call for people to stop relying on anything they were by birth or had achieved by their effort, and a turning to rely on the free mercy of God. This came out most clearly in verse 8 where John says to Jews who were prone to rely on their Jewishness, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Some Jews had the mistaken notion that God's promise to be faithful to the seed of Abraham guaranteed their salvation no matter what. But John calls them sons of the devil (vipers, v.7) instead of sons of Abraham and says: Yes God will be faithful to Abraham's seed, but your pride has blinded you to who Abraham's seed really are--they are not every single physical descendant, but are people who, like Abraham, repent and bear the fruits worthy of repentance. God can create people like that out of these stones, and leave you to judgment, and yet still be faithful to His promises.

These words were the seeds of a theology that came to full flower in Paul's letter to the Romans and to the Galatians. Let me just read a few of the key texts. In Romans 4:11,12 Paul argues that the reason God promised a blessing to Abraham and justified him by faith before he was circumcised was this:

The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised (i.e. gentiles) and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (i.e. not all Jews, but only believers)."

Then in Romans 4:16,17 Paul says that the promise to Abraham's seed depends on faith in order that it might rest on grace so that the promise might be sure for all the descendants not only to those of the law (i.e. believing Jews) but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (i.e. believing gentiles), who is father of us all, as it is written, 'I will make you father of many nations.'

Then in Galatians 3:7 Paul says, "So you see it is men of faith who are sons of Abraham," and in verse 29, "If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

So when John warns the crowds not to rely on their Jewishness and says, "God can raise up from these stones sons of Abraham," he meant God's mercy is so pure that he can make out of anybody a son of Abraham. Jewishness is no guarantee and non-Jewishness is no hindrance. The way to forgiveness of sins is open to all, Jew and gentile by the same road--the road of repentance. Which means anybody who turns from trusting in human distinctives and hopes in the free mercy of God alone will be saved from the impending wrath through the forgiveness of their sins.

Evidently John's preaching gets through and the people start repenting, turning afresh to God's mercy rather than their own race or works. Now the question arises how such people live. Is there a distinctive lifestyle that grows out of relying on mercy alone? Let's read Luke 3:10-20.

And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but He who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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 preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut John in prison.

What sort of things does a person who is happily relying on God's free mercy do and not do? Luke gives Theophilus a few examples here from John's preaching. Let's start our examination of these verses with the last paragraph. Verse 18: "So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people." Luke regards John's message as gospel or good news, even though it contained warnings of fiery judgment and numerous commands for a giving lifestyle. I mention this so that we won't be too strict or narrow in our definition of the gospel. John did not yet know as much as we now know about how God would purchase forgiveness of sins through Christ's death, but let's not exclude what He did know about the good news that was breaking into the world already.

1) It is good news when someone wakes you up and says, "Quick the hotel is on fire, but there is still time. I'll show you how to get out." The gospel must always contain a warning of God's wrath: "The chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

2) And what tremendously good news it is that the way to be forgiven our sin and escape God's wrath is just to rest in His free mercy. What terrible news it would be if John came preaching: Jews can be saved, but not gentiles. Or: well-to-do people can be saved, but not poor folk. Or: white people can be saved, but not Indians or black people. Or: you can be saved if on the judgment day your good works outweigh your bad works. All that would be bad news. But for John the way is open for "all flesh" to have the salvation of God (3:6) because no human distinctive whatever is a precondition of God's mercy. His mercy runs ahead of all our efforts and seizes us before we know it. And the good news is: just rest in this mercy and you will be saved.

3) And notice that it is good news to be exhorted to live a certain way. Verse 18: "With many exhortations he preached good news." If we are saved by relying solely on God's mercy why is it such good news to be told things we have to do? Two reasons at least: one is that since there is a kind of fruit that testifies to the health of a tree, we can reassure ourselves that we are a born-again tree by whether we are following these exhortations, that is, bearing good fruit. As 1 John 2:3 says, "And by this we may be sure that we know Him, if we keep his commandments." So the exhortations of Scripture are good news because they help us know if we are born of God. If we fail to meet the test of self-examination they send us flying to the mercy of God for forgiveness and help. The other reason exhortations are good news is that the way of obedience is the way of joy. There is more lasting joy in doing what God says (no matter how hard) than in all the ways of sin. So exhortations are part of the gospel also because they point us along the way of greatest fulfillment and joy in this life and the next.

The next thing I want us to look at is something that surprised me because of its similarity to this morning's text. You recall that in Hebrews 13:4 and 5 the writer gave exhortations about married life and about money. "Let the marriage bed be undefiled for God will judge the immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from the love of money and be content with what you have." It was surprising to me to find John the Baptist focusing in his exhortations on the very same things. In a moment we will look at verses 10-14 in detail, but notice now that all the exhortations there have to do with money or possessions. For example, the last part of verse 14 reads: "Rob no one by violence or false accusation and be content with your wages." It sounds just like Hebrews 13:5: "Don't love money and be content with what you have." And then in verses 19 and 20 Luke tells us that one of the other issues John addressed was marriage. "Herod the tetrarch who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison." Herod was living in an adulterous relationship with his brother's wife and John reproved him for it.

It's no accident, I think, that again and again in Scripture the love of money and the abuse of sexual relations are reprov'd, because these are such primal, deeply rooted forces in the human heart that they are the hardest to transform. Yet they must be transformed because they do not befit repentance.

Let's look now at verses 10-14. In verse 8 John says, "Bear fruits that befit repentance," and in verse 10 the crowds asked "What then shall we do?" That is, what are the fruits that befit repentance? We need to keep clear, as we look at these sample exhortations to the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers, that John is giving examples of fruits that befit repentance. That is, he is showing the kind of fruit (or lifestyle) that inevitably grows on the tree of repentance. Genuine repentance is of the nature that it produces these

sorts of attitudes and actions. And keep in mind what repentance is: a turning from reliance on human traits and works to a reliance on God's mercy for our security and joy and hope.

First notice the three groups which Luke refers to. The "multitudes" in verse 10, the "tax collectors" in verse 12 and the "soldiers" in verse 14. Why not mention the fishermen, carpenters, lawyers, etc.? Surely in that "multitude" there were other professions. I can think of two things Luke was doing by choosing these particular groups. First, these three groups were hostile to each other. The "multitudes" were ordinary Jewish people for the most part, but the tax collectors were viewed as greedy Jewish turncoats who used their (already despised) relation with Rome to line their own pockets; and the soldiers probably included gentiles, but in any case they represented the pagan Roman overlords. Here they all are with the same question: "What shall we do?" They are all now on the same ground and they are needy. When a person turns to rely on God's mercy, he can no longer hate his neighbor. It is psychologically impossible to cherish the mercy God has shown to us and at the same time refuse to show it to another. Therefore one of the fruits that befits repentance is growing unity. Repentance penetrates the ramparts that separate classes and races and cliques. Therefore, the church, of all institutions, should be free of cliques of people which are uninviting to outsiders. Mercy makes for merry mingling!

The other thing Luke does by referring to tax collectors and soldiers is get Theophilus' ear. Remember Theophilus, to whom this gospel is written, is probably a ranking Roman official--someone like a powerful soldier or a wealthy tax agent. And Luke seems to be intent on keeping the dangers of power and wealth before Theophilus. In 1:50-53 Mary had said, for example, "God's mercy is on those who fear Him . . . He has put down the powerful from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich He has sent empty away." And now Luke describes what John has to say to the rich tax collectors and powerful soldiers. Now he has Theophilus' attention. So what does change when a tax collector and a soldier stop relying on money and power and prestige and start relying on God's mercy for forgiveness and hope?

Let's list the three exhortations John gives to the three groups. To the multitude (v. 11): "He who has two coats let him share with him who has none; and he who has food let him do likewise." To the tax collectors (v. 13): "Collect no more than is appointed to you." To the soldiers (v. 14): "Don't shake down anybody or extort money by false accusations. Be content with your wages." When you think of all the hundreds of exhortations John could have given (and may have given) and all the exhortations Luke could have recorded, it is astonishing that in all three cases John refers to their possessions: their things and their money. We are going to see it again and again in Luke's gospel (and remember it is part of the good news) that faith in God, reliance on His mercy, hope in His promises changes how we handle our money and our possessions. There is one fundamental reason for that: "Where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). You can tell where a man's heart is resting by the way he handles his money and by the attitude he has toward his possessions. If his heart is resting in the mercy of the all-sufficient God, then he will have the lifestyle John is exhorting here in verses 10-14.

Notice the difference between the word to the crowds on the one hand and to the tax collectors and soldiers on the other. The crowds are told to give away part of what they have: if you have clothing and food and someone you can help doesn't, share it. But the tax collectors and soldiers are told not to take more than what they are supposed to. Be content with what you have. The reason for this difference is probably that when addressing a crowd you don't know what the specific professions represented and the temptations that go with them are; so you aim at the general opportunities for compassion and benevolence where all of us can bear the fruit of sacrificial generosity. But when you are addressing a

specific profession that is notorious for a specific abuse you put your finger right on it and show them that it does not befit repentance.

The temptation was the same for both professions, namely, to use their power to indulge their love of money by exploiting other people. Why is this contrary to humble reliance on the mercy of God? Two reasons: one, hankering after more money reveals an insecurity and discontentment that you don't have if you are stretched out like a little baby in the arms of your Father's mercy. Remember Hebrews 13:5. "Be content with what you have, for I will never leave you nor forsake you." The other reason that exploiting others to get more money is contrary to reliance on God's mercy is because it is unmerciful. If we really trust in God's mercy to save us and help us at all times, then we value mercy, we cherish it. But if you really "love mercy" (Micah 6:8) then you will live mercy. Just as surely as cats have kittens and dogs have puppies, the children of God will have mercy. Mercy with their money.

And so, negatively, the fruit that befits repentance is the refusal to exploit anyone to get more money or things. And, positively, the fruit that befits repentance is the willingness to give of our food and clothing and money to those who have need.

I close with two guidelines for giving. 1) Whenever we renounce anyone's pleas or refuse to meet any need that we see, we must be able to say honestly: I am refusing because of the great love God has for me and because I delight so much in His mercy. 2) Of all our money and possessions we should be able to say: I retain possession of this because of how much worth God is to me. That will require a great deal of thought and prayer and openness to change. Let's work at it together in these next months until we all find that lifestyle which signals to the world that our treasure is in heaven.

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