

Matthew 3:1-12
Second Sunday in Advent
December 7, 2025

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[John] said to them... "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Jesus' well-known analogy - "a good tree bears good fruit" – echoes John's cry: "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." But, notice, John doesn't say, "Be a good tree." He says, "bear fruit." He doesn't just focus us on the status, but on the fruitbearing, which is to say, the tree's *conduct*, tree's daily life.

If Christians can err by claiming the fruitbearing *causes* the tree to be good, we can also err by claiming the tree's status without ever looking at the fruitbearing. In other words, John points out to us that true repentance not only repents of one's status, but also of one's conduct... thought, word, and deed of daily life.

It's almost *easy* to simply come to the altar of God and say, "I, a poor miserable sinner" and think nothing more of particular sins against God and neighbor, but just "all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you." But your spouse is well aware of your struggle with sloth or empty promises. Your parents are well

aware of your struggle with a disrespectful tongue. Your children are well aware of your struggle with anger. Your sibling is well aware of your struggle with self-righteousness. Your fellow Christian is well aware of your struggle with gossip. And, so is God. You may convince yourself those individual sins don't matter as much as your status as a Christian, but is that an honest assessment of the relationship between fruitbearing and the health of the tree?

It's fascinating how we sinners actually manipulate the call to repentance, and we think that we may safely hide behind the generic term 'sinner' and painlessly – indeed, rather comfortably – confess how poor and rotten we are without even seriously looking in the mirror to examine our sinful deeds and how they actually offend God or actually harm our neighbor.

When John preaches, “Repent,” (which means, “turn around”), is he somehow telling you to turn around from *your status* – from *you as a person* – or is he telling you to turn around from your very specific conduct? When he exhorts you to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance,” is that bearing of fruit as simple as saying, “I’m a sinner. I’ll bear fruit by no longer being a sinner!”? (If it were only that simple!) Or is the fruit-bearing a specific wrestling against specific sins? When John warned the Jews not to try to hide in your status as children of *Abraham*, was he somehow subliminally assuring you that, since you are not a ‘child of Abraham’ but a child of *God* you can hide from the call to repentance? Or, does he say,

“God can raise up for Himself children from stones if you don’t want to take the call to repentance seriously”?

In other words, that voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight” does not have as its goal that all would simply, almost nonchalantly, say, “We’re sinners. The Lord’s paths are made straight by us calling ourselves sinners. I’ll be the mountain that needs to be made low; you be the valley that needs to be raised up. Woe is us. Save us, Lord.” Instead, the Lord’s paths are made straight by us considering how every valley is filled up (meaning, not a ‘type of sinner,’ but the valley is the type of sin... every sin of *omission* – that which is left out, the righteousness is not filled in so that there is a debt, a valley – that valley is corrected by filling it with righteousness and godly thought, word, and deed) and every mountain – again, not a particular *person*, but a particular *sin* – is brought low (meaning, every sin of *commission* – those things you shouldn’t do, but are done – is corrected by ceasing it, repenting of it, and no longer piling up more and more of that transgression, but *leveling* it!).

We ought recognize on this second Sunday in Advent that today, of all Advent Sundays, is the *most* focused on penitential preparation. And, such preparation for the coming Messiah ought include close examination not only of Self, but also of Self’s conduct – thought, word, deed; what I have done, what I have left undone. Not loving God. Not loving neighbor as myself.

Old Adam is always looking for ways to get out of taking responsibility, and – in an odd twist – he will even use our proper doctrine and the confession of the doctrine of *Original Sin* against us, and he will say, “As long as I confess that the ‘whole me’ is sinful, why do I need to bother to wrestle with *particular* sins? I already went above and beyond the particular sin by simply lamenting the whole me!” In truth, Old Adam is simply using the lamentation of the ‘whole me’ as a self-defense mechanism to not have to wrestle with individual sins. And, if it's the *individual* sins that Old Adam most thoroughly enjoys and craves and desires, he will gladly play the part of ‘nodding’ that his status is one of ‘sinner’ to avoid focusing on and confessing the individual thought, word, and deed.

And, when Old Adam stealthily abuses the doctrine of Original Sin as an excuse to never focus on or wrestle with individual sins, he is taking a page out of the Serpent’s playbook, so that John’s condemnation is just: “You brood of vipers!” he sees through the façade and outward show: remember, the Sadducees and Pharisees were using their status as reason they didn’t really need to look inwardly. They could *go through the motions* of repenting only with the *true* goal of ultimately protecting their respected status among the people as the religious righteous of the day!

But that status John challenged by pointing to particular fruitbearing. The Sadducees didn’t even hold to most of the Old Testament nor to the resurrection; their doctrine was ‘bad fruit

enough’! But were the Pharisees – the religious leaders they *claimed* to be – any better?... supposedly safe in their status as children of Abraham and, thus, supposedly above the need for self-examination of daily life conduct under the spotlight of the Ten Commandments.

If we’re not careful, you and I fall into the same trap. The blessed status that *is*, by God’s grace, truly yours – “beloved, we are God’s children now”, the apostle says – we can hold to that status *incorrectly*, as reason to believe ourselves above the need to focus on the particulars, of bearing fruit in keeping with repentance.

So, John spells it out rather plainly: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

If that sounds terrifying, it should! All you need to do is look at the ‘fruit’ of your daily life conduct, and you can see quite plainly that you *deserve* to be cut down and thrown into the fire. Status means nothing *IF* it is to be measured – not just observed, evidenced, but *measured* – by our merits and righteous deeds!

But, if there’s gospel in this law-heavy text, it is found in that word “fruit.” Bear *fruit* in keeping with repentance.

Now, bearing fruit is *not* the gospel; that would be works-righteousness. And no man is saved by his work. But, *that* we have fruit to bear *is* the result of the Gospel. It is the *result* of the Christ coming... for, as our Old Testament reading points out, it is *only* the Christ from Whom good fruit comes. From Isaiah: “There shall come

forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse (no life left!, not from the stump of Jesse or the whole line of Adam, no life left!), and a branch from his roots (that shoot of new life, that shoot out of the stump of death... that one shoot is Christ, that *branch* is Christ)... so that Isaiah says of Christ, “a branch from [Jesse’s] roots shall bear fruit.” Yes, as John the evangelist says, “In Him was life and that life was the light of men.” The Messiah has life in Him, life to bear fruit, life that is evident because – as Isaiah says – the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him... just as, at Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon and remained upon Him. And, doesn’t the same Jesus have authority to give us that Holy Spirit of *His* baptism in *our* baptism, just as the forerunner John said Jesus would: “He who is coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” There’s the Gospel!

Indeed, isn’t Jesus’ baptism of *you* with the Holy Spirit the great result of Christ’s first coming (as we heard last week and recently in our Galatians study)... so that Christ was born of woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive adoption as sons and, if sons, then the Holy Spirit has been poured into our heart... So, the individual’s baptism with the Holy Spirit (as Paul’s letter to Titus calls it, “the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom [God] poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Lord”)... that baptism is the express result of the Gospel individually applied to you, the express goal of Christ’s

first coming, the express benefit of Christ's cross, lived out in the daily conduct of the baptismal life. And, in that baptismal life, what do we hear but that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Notice, it doesn't just say, the fruit of the Spirit is a generic New Adam, but it points to the particulars that wrestle against sin. But, without the Holy Spirit, the *works of the flesh* (St Paul says) "are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these." Notice, Paul doesn't simply say, "without the Spirit, generic Old Adam!" But he points, just as the forerunner, to the specific sins, the specific works of the flesh, to be wrestled against by the specific fruits of the Spirit.

And, of course, those works of darkness are to be burned away like chaff, and we will see that even the most glorious, most praised, works of the flesh add no merit, no righteousness, no foundation, nothing to build on toward salvation. And, who will do that burning away of the façade of good works, but the One who (John says) will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (looking forward to the Second Coming). Doesn't Jesus himself summarize all this in the Upper Room, when he says,

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away

like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.”

Christ himself can speak of the branches being gathered, being thrown into the fire, being burned because He himself is the one who will do it!, just as the forerunner prepared the way in our text:

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Those are not images of the First Coming, or even the weekly coming, but of the Second Coming. Yes, even John, the forerunner of the Christ’s *first* coming, had one eye on Christ’s *first* coming and one eye on Christ’s *second* coming. And, if we want to be delivered in that second coming, so that we may straighten up and lift our heads (as Jesus recently encouraged us), our certainty rests not with our works of the flesh, but with His singular gift to us of the salvation of His sacrificial cross, poured out on us individually in the baptism of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the baptismal *life* of which rejoices in producing the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit flowing from the branch of Life who once in history came forth from Jesse’s stump of death.

So then, to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (as John the Baptist calls it) is, in a nutshell, the baptismal life. Live the baptismal life... which is to say, Why be so offended that you would be called to repentance when that is opportunity to examine your *particular* sins,

repent of them, and bear the fruit of Christ and His Spirit? Why be offended by such exercise in the baptismal life? Is it because you are worried about status? But the children of God have Christ, hide in the righteous substitution of Christ, and – safe in Christ, safe in His status – we rejoice in being gifted His Holy Spirit and a share in bearing fruit.

John was no preacher of fire and brimstone. He was the preacher of the baptismal life of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Of course, who will repent when he is trying to protect the façade of a self-earned status? But, who will *not* repent when he desires, as the baptized, to bear fruit and live with faith in God and fervent love toward one another? And, who will not *freely* and *gladly* repent when he knows he may live with a clear conscience because Christ Jesus has redeemed you from your sins, ransomed you from death and the devil, and granted you the joyous life of bearing fruit in keeping with repentance.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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