

If someone asked you, “Why are you a Christian?” What would you say? To know the love of God? To be forgiven for my sins? To be a better person? To go to heaven? Those are all valid answers, some more than others. But have you ever wondered, “Why does God want me to be a Christian?” The answer is not, “He wants to make my life miserable by telling me I can’t do all the things I enjoy doing”! No, that is not why God wants you to be a Christian! God wants you to be a Christian so that you will bear fruit in your life and thereby give witness to his awesomeness.

This morning we’re going to begin a series on bearing fruit in our lives and what this might mean for our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 3:7-10

When (John the Baptist) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Last week’s Bible passage concerning Christ’s baptism required some explanation of the backstory for a better grasp of its meaning. This passage requires the same.

The picture that Matthew paints for us in his Gospel is that thousands of people had come to John the Baptist to hear his message. As he preached, they were convicted in their hearts for their sins. In response, John offered them baptism as a symbol of their recommitment to God.

Among the people who came to hear John were the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees. They stuck out like a sore thumb. Their robes and sashes and hats with filigree contrasted sharply with the wool garments of the

working folk. And this is where the story takes a turn which raises some questions. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came forward for the baptism, John yelled at them, **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”**

What’s going on? Apparently, John knew something about these guys that’s not in the story. In fact, everyone who first read this story in the 1st century knew what was happening without having to be told. Ourselves, we would be entirely bewildered if we didn’t know how this story finally ends with Christ’s false imprisonment and crucifixion at the hands of these religious men.

As it turns out, the recorded history of the Pharisees and Sadducees is thin, but perhaps what we do know is enough. For instance, the Pharisees were famous for their mastery of the Bible, about how to interpret it and how to apply it to daily life. They were responsible for building the synagogues where a heavy emphasis was placed on knowing and understanding the Word of God. And we do know that the Sadducees were an aristocratic class which was in charge of the temple in Jerusalem. The center piece of their devotion was the mastery of free will. Good luck with that.

So what did John see when these men came to him at the River Jordan for baptism? He saw men who boasted that they knew God’s will, and that they had fulfilled it, or as I like to think of it, they had completed God’s checklist.

Have you ever gone to the store, filled up your basket, gone to the checkout counter, and paid for your stuff, all the while knowing that you had forgotten something? You get home and unpack your bags, and then you realize, “I forgot the ice cream! How could I forget the ice cream?!” And your life is ruined, and you have to go back to the store for ice cream.

Next time, you take your checklist, and you don’t forget the ice cream.

That’s exactly what the Pharisees and Sadducees did: They brought their God-checklists to John’s baptism; they wanted to checkoff the “get baptized by radical Jewish preacher” box. They weren’t sure about his guy, but just in case. They wanted to do all the right stuff that would make God happy. The Pharisees were bound to the written and oral law of God, and the Sadducees were bound to the

mastery of their will power. That's a lot of bondage. But John wasn't talking about checklists, was he? He was preaching repentance for sins!

But there was the covenant: The religious leaders read God's covenant like we might read the Bill of Rights, you know, I can say what I want, and I can shoot you if you don't like it, or something like that.

As John read the hearts of these men, he preached, **“And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (v.9).**

First, he ticked them off with this **“brood of vipers”** stuff, but then they really got mad when he called into question their relationship with Abraham. He was removing the foundation on which they had built their entire belief system.

Obedience to God's law guaranteed the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham in their own lives. They believed that if they obeyed everything God commanded them to do, then they would be the recipients of God's promises to Abraham. But as they did this, they had removed God's love and mercy from the equation of salvation.

But John was preaching something else; he was preaching that God was going to pour down his wrath on everyone who did not say I'm sorry for my sins.

And this is where this all comes together: The Pharisee and Sadducees didn't think they needed to repent because they had checked all the boxes on God's checklist; they were doing just fine, thank you very much.

When we pull into the church parking lot on a Sunday morning, maybe we think, “I made it again, God. I hope you're happy.” Maybe that's on our God-checklist. Or maybe we think, I was nice to that rude checker at Ralph's; that should count for something. Or maybe, I put an extra five dollars in the plate, or I read my Bible, or I prayed—or whatever we might think God wants us to do—I did this thing, I did that thing, and I checked another box on my God-checklist, and now maybe God is happy with me.

All we want is a little love, and we are quite certain that if we do something nice for the Lord, he'll bless us, or at least we won't go to hell.

But what did John say to the Pharisees and Sadducees? He said, **“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (v.8). “Repentance”**: Being sorry for our sins precedes everything else. The religious authorities did not acknowledge their sinfulness, for they had checked all the boxes! They couldn't see it. They had denied their need for God's mercy. After all, who needs mercy if you're doing everything you're supposed to be doing? They were hopelessly optimistic about their ability to fulfill the law of God. As a result, they didn't worship God, they worshipped themselves.

This is a man-centered faith. There's no need to repent because I'm killing it with the God-checklist, and the Lord is very pleased with me.

But an optimistic, man-centered faith does not lead to fruit, which is the fruit of the Spirit, which is **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23)**. These things are not present in the heart of a person who thinks too highly of himself.

In summary, if we don't repent, we can't receive God's Spirit. And if we don't receive the Spirit, we don't bear the fruit of the Spirit.

Indeed, if I'm obsessed with me all the time, how can I notice let alone care about the needs of my brothers and sisters? That's why John knew the Pharisees and Sadducees had not repented. They did not take care of the people whom the Lord had entrusted to them.

They treated the people worse than they treated their own animals. Later they would show their crassness when they preferred to stone an adulteress rather than forgive her, that they would prefer to obey the laws they had made up about Sabbath-observance rather than heal a man who was lame.

John said to them, **“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (v.10)**. **“Produce good fruit”**: First we need to repent, for it is only in humility, it is only when we open our hearts to the Lord and ask for forgiveness that he sends upon

us his Spirit and brings forth fruit, the fruit which blossoms in our relationships, in our acts of service for one another.

Our checklists are worthless; throw them away. We are entirely dependent on grace, God's undeserved favor. And we receive this grace, this graciousness, when we confess our sins. That's the whole point. If we could do all the stuff God demanded of us, we wouldn't need grace! But when we confess that we need it, that we have gone astray, that we have become self-sufficient and proud, then God pours down upon us his mercy—we are forgiven and made whole and filled with the Holy Spirit.

I've always believed this, but before my divorce I hadn't tucked it into my heart. I thought that I was on the winning team, that if I did my part, then God would do his part. The only problem with that equation however, was that I'm not very good with God's new math. I wasn't receiving enough love, to be loving enough. I wasn't receiving enough grace, to be gracious enough. I wasn't receiving enough forgiveness, to be forgiving enough.

But when I hit rock bottom in my relationship with the Lord, when I felt utterly abandoned by him, it was then that I realized I had gotten it all backwards. He hadn't left me. Rather, I had ignored him. Not intentionally. I know Scripture. I've devoted myself to serving the church for nearly 40-years. But I hadn't taken hold of God's grace in my heart, as my life support system, as the oxygen that I breathe.

And I repented. It was during that time of contrition for my haphazard way of receiving God's grace that I recognized how he had graciously preserved me with his love. To God be the glory.

Earlier, John preached, **“Repent! For the reign of heaven stands near!” (3:2)**. God is awesome, and holy, and pure. We are not worthy to stand in his presence; we are not worthy to live in his heaven. But by his grace, we are. He blessed us with the seed of faith in our baptisms, and he feeds us this morning at his altar. Let us confess our sins and give thanks for the Lord's graciousness to forgive those sins. As we open our hearts to this grace, the Spirit of Christ will bring forth much fruit in our walk with God and with one another.

This week let us meditate on the awesomeness of God's love for us, how he has forgiven us for everything, made us new, made us whole by grace through faith. Let's throw away our checklists!

This week let us give thanks for the fruit of the Spirit, which the Lord brings alive in this new life he's blessed us with that we might be useful instruments in his kingdom.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.