

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

JOHN PREPARED THE WAY FOR THE LORD WITH MANY LESSONS

Gospel – Luke 7

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.

Oh, the joy of giving in its season. There is so much joy in giving, isn't there? ***Many say that giving puts meaning into our lives.*** “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile,” said Albert Einstein. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote, “The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity.”

These are all beautiful sayings and motivational aspirations. The people who said them did and wrote so much to affect the world. We would be calloused if we didn't want to follow them and be like them.

But if that were the whole message of Christianity, it would really be quite Pharisaical. It wouldn't be any different than any other religion and it really wouldn't deal with our biggest problems. This Christmas, let's aim higher. Let's find the true meaning of life in wondering ...

Where To Find Heaven This Christmas

- 1. Not exactly in our giving*
- 2. But completely in Christ's coming*

I. Not exactly in our giving

John the Baptist was a powerful preacher leading up to the time of Jesus' ministry. He was there to prepare the way for the Lord. He was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Jesus would later give His opinion of John the Baptist. John was more than a prophet, Jesus would say in Matthew 11. Of all those born of women, none were greater than John.

John was also ready to point people to lives of giving. People were coming out to him in droves, and they were seeking direction, asking what they should do. He told them to share food and clothing. This sounds like what we want to do around the holidays. We have things to give. We don't want anyone to miss out on the celebration. And we know it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Not only that, but the people coming out were from all walks of life. To tax collectors or soldiers, the normal Jewish answer would have been to not be a tax collector or a soldier. But John does not say to go home and give up their callings in those areas. Instead, John would have them be just and merciful and fair and honest. We would also agree that, this time of year, we might take a closer, more honest look at our lives and resolve not to cheat or abuse our positions in life.

Even so, that was not John's chief message. That is not the full message that prepares the way.

John didn't just want the people to be better. That was the message the Pharisees were preaching, that they must be in the community and be more giving and be more honest. They were preaching fruits without a tree beneath them or a branch of faith to connect them. Fruits are not really fruity unless they grow from a firm branch on a sturdy trunk. That message of fruits, when fruits alone are preached, is cutting the legs off of salvation. It only seems to carry deep meaning, but fruits without repentance are really only surface-level.

- *Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*
- *No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the Law.*
- *The Law says, "Do this!" and it is never done.*

John spared no words for those teachers and followers of his day. He called them a brood of vipers. With that kind of language, it's hard not to think of the original fruit on the tree and the snake who brought sin and suffering into the world, where no one is righteous, not even one.

So heaven is not exactly in our giving. Many people out there would disagree. They say words like "heaven" but don't believe that it's a literal place. They believe it's our current state and what we make of it. If we give enough, maybe we have achieved heavenly bliss, they may say. To the contrary, we know in Scripture that heaven is a place and not a state of achievement by our works.

If that's the case, why did John preach fruits? John didn't just emphasize fruits. Instead, **John emphasized fruits in keeping with repentance.** Repentance, this age-old thing many people in our time or any other really want to suggest. Repentance means a change of heart and mind, being truly contrite (sorrowful) over our sins. It means we cry up out of the depths of where our own sins sank us. It means we must face the stark reality of our errors, not so we can make up for them with more stale fruit.

Still God would not have the sinner die. Therefore **repentance also means humble faith in the Christ.** Bearing fruits of repentance means good works of giving with trust in Jesus Christ. *Without faith, it is impossible to please God.*

Jerry Parr was a secret service agent for Ronald Reagan in 1981. He helped save the president's life during John Hinckley, Jr.'s assassination attempt on Reagan that year. Parr pushed Reagan into the limousine just in time, or the bullet would have likely struck his head. The beautiful part is the reason

Jerry Parr was in the Secret Service at all. When he was 9 years old, his father took little Jerry to see the film Code of the Secret Service. The star of that 1939 film was Ronald Reagan. If you think about it, without everything Ronald Reagan had not done in his former life as a film star, Jerry Parr would not have been there to protect Ronald Reagan.

So Jesus Christ, too, if He had not done everything for our salvation by dying and rising, makes our works meaningful. And we too, if our fruits of faith and love are to be meaningful to God, must know Him by faith. That means we must first know Jesus Christ and what He has done for us. That is where heaven is found, not exactly in our works, but ...

II. *But completely in Christ's coming*

To that point, John did not let the people make him into the Christ. John explained that One more powerful than he was to come, and John had no place even in the vicinity of the Christ. He did not have any right to stoop down and do the lowliest of tasks, untie Jesus Christ's sandals.

We might wonder where heaven might be in all that John does preach? It sounds a bit like judgment, that the mightier One would come with his winnowing fork to cast the chaff, or the shells and leftovers of the wheat, into the fire.

But notice that John does speak about heaven, and he uses a unique comparison. ***Heaven is where the wheat is gathered, into the garner or barn.*** The fruitful believers in this comparison are the wheat. The barn is the place where God brings them. So it is in the coming of that Mighty One, the Christ-child, where we understand heaven will be. Heaven comes with the Greater One to come.

- *For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the Law, Romans 3:28.*
- *Now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify, Romans 3:21.*

This does not mean that the babe in Bethlehem brought heaven on earth. At Christ's first coming, the manger where the baby was born, the feeding-trough in a barn, was no comfortable heaven. But it comes mighty close, because from the lowliest of places would the Christ-child grow up and atone for sin. From that place, God would reconcile sinners who didn't know what to do with their sin. From the barn of Christ's first coming would dawn the One to suffer for sin. From the barn of His first coming would start the life of the man of sorrows. From the barn of His first coming would be found the same body and blood offered in Holy Communion. The government would be on those little shoulders from the barn, and the punishment that brought us peace would be upon this barn baby.

This is important, because ***we look also to His second coming.*** He will come to gather His people, to rejoice over them and bring the daughter of Zion into His heavenly garner, the place where God brings the good fruit that lasts. This Mighty One will leave behind all those who bore fruit without repentance, works without faith, and stale stalks that had only good appearances for a season.

So raise the valleys of your evil and level off the mountains of sin. Remember that John's message wasn't just good fruits or good works, but good works in keeping with repentance. Remember that John was there to forgive the people's sins in the name of the Mightier One. Our sins of faithless fruit have been forgiven, too. Each good fruit of the believer's giving is done with sorrow over sin and faith in the Son of God.

After all, God loves you. ***God wanted you.*** God chose you. God wanted to spend eternity with you. He delights in you. He rejoices and sings over you. Only a life lived for others did Jesus consider worthwhile. He considered the sole meaning of His life to serve humanity. He asked a persistent and urgent question, what am I going to do for these sinners? He answered that question, and His answer

is found in the barn of His birth, on the cross of His death, and in a garden of first fruits ... the empty tomb.

In Jesus' name, Amen.