

Luke 3:7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹The 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."

¹⁰"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" ¹³"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

¹⁴Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

Dear Friends in Christ,

PUTTING YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR HEART IS

So, what if you visited a church one Sunday – you hadn't been much in the habit of going to church, but just in the last month you felt like you needed to get something right with God – and as you come through the door to God's house for the first time in a long time this guy, who might just be the pastor, looks you in the eye and says, "You snake in the grass. Who told you to come to church?" You wouldn't even blink your eyes, you'd be out the door. Last time you'd ever be seen in that church, probably any church.

After 9/11, church attendance spiked. Many Christians were hopeful that that national tragedy had waken people to realities, realities deeper than the bottom lines of their 401k's or paying their month's rent, depending on their tax bracket. Many of us hoped, *not* that more people would admit that we Christians were right, but that more people would start searching for and maybe stumble across the greatest treasure of all, Jesus their Savior.

And so we welcomed these seekers with open arms. Pastors and members were excited because the church was fuller, and we hoped heaven was getting fuller! No one called them snakes in the grass. Oh, we welcomed them with open arms! What hopes!

Where Is Your Heart?

It was a farce. In a very short time church attendance was exactly where it had been in August 2001. Undoubtedly, a few first came to know their Savior in those weeks. But the vast majority came for the same reasons that animated those crowding around John the Baptist, and John knew it. He knew that many had a religious feeling in their bellies, but not true religion in their hearts. They were looking for the easy answers that wouldn't cost them anything beyond a day-trip to the Jordan River. So he confronted them, "***You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee God's wrath?!***"

John didn't speak like that because he hated these people. Quite the opposite. He loved them. He spoke like a doctor warning his patient, "How much longer are you going to smoke those cancer sticks?" "How much longer are you going to eat that food that spikes your blood sugar?" "Do you want to die of a heart attack while your kids are still in middle school?" John loves these people. We hear tough love in his warning, "***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.***" When you die, that's it. I want to see you in heaven. Listen! Repent. Please!

This reading from the third chapter of Luke is usually tied to a much bigger subject. This reading is usually read a couple weeks before Christmas, which is where it belongs. This reading gets us ready for the arrival of the Christ-child. Usually the message is, “Jesus is coming. Get ready.”

But today we harness this text to a different task, a smaller task, but an important task: the Seventh Commandment. “You shall not steal.”

As John looked at these people, he saw people who claimed that they repented, that they wanted forgiveness. They were confused. They didn’t really want forgiveness. They wanted permission! They wanted a little religion, and once they had bared their souls and gotten whatever it was off their chests, they would go back to life as usual. So John warns them, **“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”**

And some of them listened. Oh, let me tell you, I have felt it, you have felt it. You talk about God and what God wants and so often people don’t listen. They walk away, they argue, they rationalize, they promise and don’t deliver. Maybe that was a little bit of where John was at when he called these people snakes. And you get so used to people brushing off God’s word that you are overwhelmed when you hear someone ask what they asked John: **“What should we do?”** Thank you, God! Thank you, God, for people who listen, who turn. Thank you for softening their hearts. Thank you for saving them from hell.

These people now knew forgiveness. They realized that they couldn’t go back to business as usual. They ask, **“What should we do?”** And John stops warning and he starts encouraging. Remember that.

Avoiding Money Sins

It has been said by someone – some say it was Charles Wesley, others say it was Martin Luther (I don’t really know) – it has been said, “The last thing to be converted is a man’s wallet.” John the Baptist didn’t agree. He started with the wallet! They asked, **“What should we do?”** and John starts straight-away talking about money and possessions. He starts with the Seventh Commandment. He says that a child of God redeemed by the blood of Jesus is going to show it in the way he or she handles worldly wealth. This is **“fruit in keeping with repentance.”**

If you really belong to God, wealth and possessions are no longer measure of life. It’s not about the house, the landscaping, the clothes, the vehicle, the phone. Wealth is a servant, not a master; money is the tool, not the goal.

Unlike me, John doesn’t talk in generalities. He gets concrete. “Hey, you. You tax collectors, **Don’t collect any more than you are required to.**” He hits them in the pocketbook! Tax collectors loved money, at all other costs. They were so notoriously fraudulent that tax collectors were not even allowed to testify in Jewish courts. But John didn’t tell them to stop being tax collectors. He told them to be honest tax collectors.

“Hey, you. You soldiers, **Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.**” The soldiers had might on their side, and in a day before democratic process and free speech, soldiers were nearly unaccountable for all but the worst crimes. John tells them, “Keep on being soldiers, but be concerned about justice, but a servant of the people.”

Today’s Old Testament reading spoke right in line with John. In Deuteronomy 25 it said, **“Do not have two differing weights in your bag—one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house—one large, one small.”** Every businessman is tempted to put honesty below the bottom line, to get as much as possible at someone else’s expense. The book of Proverbs puts it more sarcastically, (and for this one you have to close your eyes and imagine yourself in an open-air market), **“The buyer says, ‘It’s no good, it’s no good!’; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.”** Don’t we all love a bargain! Even as the seller almost cries about how little she got for grandma’s dresser?

Money temptations exist in their own flavors, no matter what our line of work. There was a young man, college age, who had a job cleaning floors. Surely he didn't have much for money temptations, right? He worked for a company cleaning supermarket floors at night when the stores were closed. He was an honest young man, but very few of his co-workers were. In the day before ever-present security cameras, his co-workers would grab candy bars mopping the check-out lanes, or fruit from the produce section. It bothered him, but he ignored them. After a couple years, however, he realized that the petty theft of his co-workers was starting to affect his thinking. He left the job. He didn't want to be led into sin.

A doctor in a practice was continually told to maximize revenue. The directives were, "Do not do multiple treatments in a single visit. If they need an immunization, don't do it while they are in for an eye injury. Set up another appointment. Bill each separately. Bring in the money." Was it legal? Yes. Was it God-pleasing? Could anything be farther from God-pleasing than living at the expense and inconvenience of people in their weakest moments? The doctor found another practice.

Sometimes we can stay and do our duty. Sometimes not. Steer clear of the temptation that apparently started Judas on his road to perdition.

Putting Money in Its Place

But more than avoiding temptation, John counseled people in a positive direction. Each commandment not only prohibits us from doing certain things, each commandment encourages us, as children of God, to do positive good. Luther's catechism summarizes the Bible's teachings, as our Catechism students will memorize in a couple months, "We should fear and love God that we do not take our neighbor's money or property or get it by dishonest dealing, but help him to improve and protect his property and business."

John told people, "***The man with two tunics should share with him who has none.***" What's a tunic? In that time, people would generally, instead of three layers of clothing, have two. We kind of divide our garments into three layers: undergarments, daily clothing, and outerwear like jackets. In the ancient world, they basically had two layers. A heavier outer garment was called a cloak. This is what the disciples put on the donkey's back when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The tunic was the undergarment: not really underwear, you could still wear a tunic in public. John said that if you had two of these, you should help someone else out by giving your extra one away. If you have extra food, do the same.

The full meaning of the Seventh Commandment tells us that life is not for us to live for ourselves, it is about others. When we hear "You shall not steal," we think, "That's right. Keep your hands off my stuff. God protects my private property." And I guess he does. But the commandments never were about us.

What did Jesus say when asked about the commandments? He said, "God's commandments can be summed up in these two sentences. 'Love God,' and 'Love your neighbor.'" You see what Jesus said there? The commandments aren't about us, but about our neighbor. The Ten Commandments are not a 14th century B.C. bill of rights, but a summary of responsibilities. The Seventh Commandment is about protecting property and possessions. Not mine, but everyone else's, and using my property for the good of others!

Which is what our Epistle readings were all about. Those four Bible passages outline our responsibilities with our wealth: "*God loves the cheerful giver.*" "*If anyone does not provide for his immediate family he has denied the faith.*" "*If anyone has no pity on his brother, how can the love of God be in him.*" "*If you owe taxes, pay taxes.*" Church, family, neighbors, taxes.

This is "***fruit in keeping with repentance.***" How you handle God's gift of possessions says a lot about your faith. As redeemed people we stop being pre-eminently concerned about our prosperity,

and we get concerned about other people.

It isn't about tax collectors and soldiers who are given to greed and extortion, it's about each of us who should regularly come to our Savior Jesus and ask him, "What should we do?" It isn't about people who win the lottery. It's about people who have to have an extra shirt in the shirt drawer.

In it all remember this: *"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."* (2 Corinthians 8:9) When you have sat and thought about that for a couple minutes, God's Holy Spirit will lead you to know what it means to **Put Your Money Where Your Heart Is**. Amen.