



The Harsh But Good News-Part 2

Being Sure to Move from Creeds to Deeds

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Well, grab your Bibles this morning, please, and let's return to the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Gospel we know that we're doing not comes from that Greek word *euangelion*. *Eu* is the word for good, and *angelion*—we get the word "angel" from that proclamation—message, the good message, the good news. That's how we translate the good news. The Gospel of Luke should be Luke's proclamation of the good news.

And he begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. And when we read the sermons of John the Baptist, it doesn't sound all that good. Matter of fact, we've called it the harsh but good news. And that's because, when it comes to news and the news of the gospel, it is good news, but it is predicated and founded on, and the answer to, the bad news.

Now, we say that often around here, but that's so important in a day and an age where people don't like to hear bad news. We live in a time, according to 2 Timothy 4, where people—they don't want to endure it anymore. Matter of fact, it says that they have itching ears—that's the picture of it; that's the illustration—and they'll gather teachers around themselves that'll tell them what they want to hear, what their passions desire.

And we see that happening all the time. We see churches and pastors and books and everything else written in the name of Christ where there's no bad news at all. There's no offense, there's no concerns, nothing harsh. There's nothing that grates against us, because, you know, they're just telling us the good stuff. Here's the problem: if you tell the good news without the bad news, that good news has no answer, no complement to the problem. It's some kind of answer that really floats around disconnected from the real problem. And therefore we're left with nothing other than some kind of life-improvement program, and we never really catch what God intended to mean with the good news—and we've got trouble.

See, because if the doctor you go to says, "I've got some good news and some bad news," don't say, "Oh, I only want to hear the good news." That wouldn't make any sense, because the good news may be the cure for the bad news. And it may have instructions as to how to cure the bad news. And you may eventually say, "Well, I don't know; I don't want to go to that, and I don't want to be, you know, bothering my schedule with going to the doctor, having that therapy, or doing that medication." Listen, you can't really attach yourself to the goodness of the good news until you recognize the badness of the bad news.



And when John preaches in Luke 3—John the Baptist—he leads with the bad news, which is really no surprise. If you read books like the book of Romans that we took a long time to study here in Sunday morning church, you’ll recognize that Paul does the same thing—chapter after chapter of the bad news—so that we can understand the good news of Jesus Christ solves the problem. And the problem has to do with sin. And no one likes to hear about that. And, more than that, that sin requires God’s just wrath. And that’s a word—you know, we kind of keep that in the pages of the Bible. But you do know what wrath means.

I had someone meet me at the door, say, “When you talk about God being angry, my God’s never angry.” I said, “Have you ever heard of the word God’s wrath? You know that’s a biblical word.” And the word wrath means anger. And God, as a just and holy God, has a just response to sin. And unfortunately, the time of his grace—the time of his putting off the judgment—is only a matter of time, and then God is going to respond.

And in John’s preaching—take a look at it beginning in verse 7—we looked at the description of his ministry last week; this week we get to look at what he actually taught. Here’s what he says. Luke 3:7–14 is all we’ll have time to cover today. But let’s start there in verse 7, where it says he—that is, John the Baptist—said to the crowds. And Matthew, by the way, in his rendition of this, makes it clear that he’s got his eyes fixed on a certain subset in the congregation—not that it didn’t really apply to all of the crowds; it certainly may have in some degree—but the ones that he really wants to focus this harsh introduction to his sermon on is the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And he says this.

They came out to be baptized. They lined up: “Okay, you want to baptize? Is this the thing the prophet of God is doing? We want to be baptized.” And his response here is this: “You brood of vipers.” I’ve taken a lot of preaching courses. Never did they teach you to lead a sermon by calling people snakes, right? It’s just never, never a good way to start the sermon, you wouldn’t think. See, but here’s the deal: John isn’t concerned about winning over people or making sure you don’t offend people or making sure you kind of put out the right kind of intro to get people sucked into this. He’s just concerned about truth.

And he looks at these people lining up to do this religious thing that, of course, we learned—Luke said last week—is all about repentance. It’s a sign of repentance—this baptism of repentance. He’s looking at them saying, “You’re not repentant. I know your lives. I don’t spend all my time out here in the desert; I come into the city every now and then. And I know that you folks that are lined up to be baptized—you’re living like snakes,” which, of course, is the symbol back in the Old Testament of Satan, the adversary. “You brood of”—either—“you sons of snakes,” he says, “who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?”



What does that mean? “You live in sin. You live in a lifestyle completely contrary to all that God has called us to do; you’re going to be punished. You’re coming here to listen to me preach and to get baptized—who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?”

He said, “If you want to avoid that wrath, bear fruits in keeping with repentance.” So you want to be repentant? You want to put on this sign of repentance which John was doing—which was baptism—you’d better have signs of that. You better have some kind of outgrowth of that, some kind of evidence of that repentance. That’s what you’re missing. Your life is like a snake—symbolically, your life is sinful, your life is unethical. You’re here going through the motions of this religious act, but your life is contrary to it. What do you need to do? You need to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

“And don’t begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ And we don’t need to live right because we believe the right things and we’re associated with the right people.” Right? “I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham; it’s no problem for God. Stop with that—stop hiding behind that. Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees.” He started with this image of fruit; now he’s talking about the tree. “And every tree,” verse 9, “that therefore does not bear good fruit—it’s cut down and thrown into the fire. Wrath—fire—tree—fruit. Do you have good fruit?”

And the crowds: “Well, what kind of fruit are you talking about? Do we need to become missionaries or, you know, buy a camel here—an outfit like you—and be a prophet? What are we supposed to do? What should we do?” And John the Baptist answers in verse 11, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.”

The tax collectors said, “Well, what about us?” They came to be baptized, and they said, “What shall we do, Teacher?” And he said, “Collect no more than you’re authorized to do.” And the soldiers stepped up: “What about us? And we—what shall we do?” And he said, “Don’t extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

Then we get a little interlude here in the narrative about their expectation on John, but we’ll get to that next time. Here we’ve got, though, a very clear and practical calling of John the Baptist in his preaching about people that want to be in with God, but they don’t want to change their behavior—no reform in their lives, no good deeds in their lives. And he’s saying, “Listen, you need to repent; you need to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”



This may be real obvious as he points out the contradiction in verses 7 and 8: you're living like snakes—you're living like sinful people—but you want to come and be baptized. You need to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Now, last week we defined repentance, did we not? We said it's more than changing your mind. Obviously, it involves that; you've got to change your mind if you're gonna turn the other direction and turn from sin and obey God; but that's the essence of it. It's this reorientation away from doing what I want to do and my sinful investments in life, and to obey God. That's what repentance is all about in the Bible. And clearly he spells that out in the practical exhortation he gives the people.

Now, it may be too obvious to say, but if you want to be repentant, you've got to act that way. You've got to live that way. Let's put it down this way, number one on our outline—and I hope that you would take notes this morning just to remember some of the highlights here of this particular text—we need to live like you've turned from sin. We've got to live that way.

Okay, that sounds so obvious. If I'm going to be repentant—which is required; we have to repent; forgiveness is for those who are repentant—then you've got to have a life that looks like you've turned from sin. The sons of snakes didn't look that way.

I know that's obvious, but let me turn you to a passage—you're not far from it—in Luke 6. In Luke 6, Jesus picks up the microphone and he's got some things to say about repentance. Look at how he puts it. Drop all the way down to verse 46. And again, this is so applicable to our day. It's just like their day: they want the status of being repentant; they just don't want to live repentant lives.

How many times we meet someone that says, "Well, I want to be considered a follower of Christ; I'm just not interested in following Christ." And when you say it that way it starts to get real obvious that that's a problem. But we don't get it—even in the terms we use in referring to Christ.

Look at this—verse 46, Luke 6:46: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord'?" You do know what that word means. Lord means boss, the captain, the chief, the helmsman, the one in charge, the pilot—you are the one who calls the shots. "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"

"Well, I guess if you wanted a real answer to that, it's because I want to be in the group. I want to be a part of this." Just like those who lined up to be baptized: "I want to be counted as part of the



good team. I want to be on God's team. I just don't want to change my life. I just don't want to live differently. I'd like to continue with what I like to do." And Jesus says, "That isn't how it works."

I mean, how many people today even say, "I want to be a follower of Christ. I want to be counted a Christian. I want to call God my Lord; I want to call Jesus my Savior." But: "I don't want to live as though he's calling the shots in my life. I just want to make sure I got my ticket to the spiritual Disneyland in the sky so that when I die, I'll be okay. I need insurance. So what do I need to do? Pray a prayer? I'll do that. Walk an aisle? Sure. Baptized? Great. Sign me up. I just don't want my life to be any different."

Keep reading, verse 47. He says, here's the real issue—and it comes down to the practicals of life. Like John goes to the practicals of generosity and ethics at work, he says this: "Whoever comes to me and hears my words and does them"—look at those three things. You come to me, you hear my words, and you do them. There's that last thing—that's the choice that we make. "Am I gonna respond to what he's asked me to do?"

"So I'll show you what he's like. He's like a man building a house, dug deep, laid the foundation on the rock. The flood rose, the stream broke against that house and did not shake it because it was well built." There's something about a life that follows Christ—that actually follows Christ and does what Christ says—that the Bible says that house is okay. Why? Because those works in some way establish the house? No, no, no. They're evidence that we are repentant. And God does something with repentant people: he puts them into a new category. People that are repentant in their heart before God—at the moment of their repentance, even before they have an opportunity to express their repentance—he takes the repentant heart and puts it in a new column. And in that life, the Bible says it's impervious to destruction. I mean, this is eschatological here. You've got to think—this is the coming judgment that John is talking about—you'll be okay.

The problem is verse 49: "The one who hears and does not do them is like the man who built his house on the ground without a foundation." Now look—those two things look the same, just like everybody in line to get baptized in John's ministry: "Oh, this guy looks like that guy," because they're all willing to join the club. But there are some people that don't want to do what God says, and then there are people that are going to do what God says. The difference is: you may not be able to tell while they're standing in line at church, but at the end of the day you'll know, because the man who does not do it is like the man who built his house on the ground without a foundation; "the stream broke against it, and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great."

And remember the theme of John—John's theme was fruit. Now, I know that's an analogy, but it's a helpful one. And it helps us recognize that this is not just pulling yourself up by your bootstraps and trying to, you know, commit yourself to quit smoking. Although that's not a bad example. A lot



of people going around saying, “I’m a follower of Christ,” and just not following Christ. It’s like the guy who sits there with a cigarette in his hand and says, “I quit smoking two years ago.” Well, you didn’t—because there’s no change in your relationship to cigarettes. So you haven’t quit.

“Oh, I did though. I had a real moment that day, and I just decided I’m not going to smoke anymore.” Yeah, but you continue to smoke. See, your deeds contradict your profession. And yet that is certainly a good example of what God does when we are truly and genuinely repentant and we put our lives on the table. He does something to us that changes us.

John wrote a whole book about this in 1 John—not John the Baptist, but John the Apostle—and he says, “Listen, we cannot go on the way we were before because God’s seed abides in us.” Now, there’s the picture again of fruit. There is something that God does in our lives, and very specifically—if we want to get theological about it—it’s the Holy Spirit that comes within us and now guarantees the change in our lives. Now, from our perspective, it may feel like there’s a lot of effort involved in this. But the Bible guarantees that the effort will be successful—not in living a perfect life (you know that), but in living a different life, a changing life, a transformed life—so that if anyone really is in Christ, and they’ve been placed in that new column, if you will, they see the old things start to pass away and the new things come. That’s a testimony, right there.

Now, are we saved by the events of the change and transformation? No. But the reality is our fruit—the expression of our repentance—proves that God has gotten ahold of our lives. As I like to say: God’s done something to you. This isn’t just the decision to become a part of the God team. This is God getting ahold of you.

Now go back up before this paragraph we just read in Luke 6 and look at where Jesus starts this discussion in verse 43, when he says: let’s think about that organic relationship between inward change and outward change. He says, “No good tree bears bad fruit.” Right? Don’t tell me you’re in with God and a new creation in God if the external of your life is no different—it continues to do the wrong things. “Nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit.”

Now, that’s not saying that someone who is not converted can’t occasionally do something that seems very godly and good—just like it means on the other side of the equation that a person that is genuinely converted doesn’t mean they can’t do bad things every now and then. But the difference is a linear projection of one’s life. You have people unconverted, living for themselves; occasionally they may do some altruistic thing that seems out of character—just like for us, as converted people, yeah, we do things that are out of character for Christians and people making a claim to godliness, and we will stumble in sin—but the trajectory of our lives needs to show the reality of our heart. And Jesus says that’s how it works.

Verse 44: “For each tree is known by its fruit.” That’s a great line to highlight right there. I mean, if you want to come down to it—each tree is known by its fruit. Now, there’s not passivity in that, even though God is organically at work in your life. It is not the mentality that seems to be floating around a lot in evangelical churches like ours—that because of the grace of God, we’re free to fail. I don’t—I’m not catching any of that feeling here, are you? I’m saying, prove your salvation. As Jesus said in John 15, he says, “You bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.” He gives the onus and puts it on us to say, “You need to be proving your repentance.” Or as John put it, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.” You claim to be repentant? Let’s see it. Let’s see it work out in your life.

“Each tree is known by its fruit, for figs are not gathered from thornbushes, and grapes aren’t picked from a bramble bush.” Verse 45: “The good person”—right? This is someone who has been changed by God—“out of the good treasure of his heart”—the Bible says in the Old Testament, “a heart of stone will be removed, a heart of flesh will be placed inside of me”—that’s all symbolic for the Spirit of God changing who I am—“produces good.” Comes out of my life; comes out of your life if you’re a Christian. “And the evil person”—the unchanged heart—“out of the evil treasure in his heart produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” You can get down to the language and the conversation and the content of your talk—that proves whether or not you’re converted or not.

You’ve got to live like you’ve turned from sin. That’s how you have to live.

Did we put that up a long time ago? I mean, a little timer period—we gave you the first point? Okay, all right. I know it’s nine. We’re not known for being interactive at nine o’clock. But how can John be so confident that these people lining up to do the religiously right thing were not—you know—that they were sons of snakes?

You don’t have time to go through all this, but it’d be good to jot it down for your homework—and that would be Matthew 23. Now, because Matthew says that John really has in view, at least at the center of his application, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, Jesus spends almost an entire chapter talking about the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the teachers of the law, and how they got up and they said a lot of things that sounded religious, but their lives were a mess. And people could see that.

As a matter of fact, we should look at this real quickly—we’ve got time for this. Matthew 23, if you wouldn’t mind, taking a look at how the contradiction of their profession was very clear to people as they interacted with the Pharisees. They knew that. Now, again, John’s spending most of his time



out in the desert—I get that—but we see from this assessment that clearly he knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees and many in the crowd were not known for living godly lives.

Verse 1, Matthew 23—Jesus speaking—he says to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,” which is a very specific description of where they sat in the synagogue in this little chair where they would read the Torah—they would read the Law of Moses—and comment on it. He says, “So because they’re doing that—reading the Scriptures—do and observe whatever they tell you, but”—underline this—“not the works that they do.” Now, if you’re going to tell that to the rank-and-file Jew who’s hearing Jesus speak—the disciples and the crowds—then the disciples and the crowds knew the Pharisees weren’t known for being particularly good people. Oh, they were religious people, but they weren’t good people. They could notice a distinction between what they preached and what they did.

Matter of fact, that’s the way he puts it next—this is where we get this colloquial phrase in our language: “They preach but they do not practice.” We say, “They don’t practice what they preach.” Jesus said that.

“They tie up heavy burdens on people’s shoulders, and they’re hard to bear; they lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with so much as a finger.” And if you really watched the disciples of the Pharisees—as often the disciples and the crowds did—they’d say, “They are not doing this stuff. They want us to do it, but they don’t do it.”

Drop down to verse 16 to get more specific. If you’re interacting with a Pharisee—matter of fact, maybe doing some work in the Pharisee’s house; you’re labor of some kind—you’ve got to be careful, because those Pharisees aren’t known for being honest. “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it’s nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he’s bound by his oath.’” Now, they knew—they played those kinds of word games to get out of things that they promised. They knew they had their little ways to justify their lying and not being faithful and honest to their word. The crowds knew that; they saw that. They figured out the Pharisees—watch out—you never know about their promises and their oaths. They were known for being dishonest.

Drop down to verse 23 just to add a few more words. They weren’t known for being just, merciful, or faithful. Look at what he says in verse 23: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You tithe mint and dill and cumin”—right? They had their spices, and they would take 10% of it and put it—that was, you know, that was the right thing to do, I suppose, to tithe 10% of what you had—but, I mean, they were making sure everyone knew: “Hey, we went through the entire spice rack, and everything—we’ve 10%—we’ve given it to God.” Now they did that, of course, it says elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, so that they could be seen as righteous by people’s



standards. The problem is they neglect the weightier matters of the law—the things that affect your life, your character, your decision—things like being just, being merciful, being faithful. They weren't really known for that; they were known for, you know, making sure the spice rack was all tithed.

"These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." Fine—tithe; that's the right thing to do. "But where's the justice in your life? Where's the mercy in your life? Where's the faithfulness in your life? You blind guides, you're straining out"—speaking of another little idiom here—"straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel." I mean, you'll do the things like get baptized and align here with John—at least you'll line up to do it.

John, by the way—because of his preaching—a lot of these Pharisees got offended. And as Jesus goes on to say, most of them didn't get baptized by John because they were offended by what he said, because he was pointing out the fact: you're not really wanting to be repentant. You don't really want to be obedient. You just want to check the box of being baptized.

Repentance—turning from sin to God—seems too obvious to state, but if you say you're repentant, then we should be able to ask this question of your life: does it look like you've turned from sin to God in your daily life? Can people see that? Is that obvious? Is it evident?

If you want a positive picture of this—I've just given you a negative one—jot this reference down if you're taking notes: 1 Thessalonians 1. You can just start in verse 1 and go through verse 10. Which I keep saying we have time—we won't have time if I keep reading all these passages to you. But let's read it anyway. 1 Thessalonians 1—wasn't going to turn you there, but let's look at it. That's a lot of negative stuff to think about; let's look at the positive. "Am I living like I've turned from sin to God?"

Paul writes the Thessalonians and says, "Man, you guys are living like that. I can see it; everyone sees it." 1 Thessalonians 1—let's start in verse 2. After the salutation he says, "We give thanks to God always for you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers"—this is 1 Thess 1, now in verse 3—"remembering before our God and Father your work of faith"—we see that in your life—"and labor of love"—that sounds like work—"and steadfastness of hope"—we see all that—"that you have in the Lord Jesus Christ. For we know"—those are two good words to underline; they're confident. Why? Because they were identifying the tree by its fruit—"we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." How do you know that? "Because our gospel came to you not only in word"—you didn't just sit there and listen to it—"but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." You had full conviction that you were not living as you ought, that you needed salvation, that you needed forgiveness, and that conviction and that power transformed your life. You live differently.

“You know”—middle of verse 5—“what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us”—you lived godly lives too—“and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction”—that didn’t stop you from obeying—“and with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia”—just like Paul and Silas and his guys were an example to them—“you started being an example to other people—of all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we have no need to say anything.” We don’t have to say, “Look at these guys—they’re Christians.” Everybody sees it.

“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you and how you”—speaking of repentance; here’s a good word—“how you turned to God from idols to serve” (that was obvious through what—verse 3—works of faith, labor of love, steadfastness of hope), “to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead”—always remembering the bad news—“Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.” That’s the good news of the gospel that changes lives. And it’s evident and obvious.

The Pharisees were the complete opposite of the Thessalonians, who wanted the trappings and the acceptance and all the bells and whistles and badges of being godly. And in reality: “I want to be able to live my life the way I want. If I don’t want to pay you; if I want to say something and go back on it, I want a way out of it. If I don’t want to be merciful or faithful or kind, I just want to do what I want to do. But I want to be accepted by God.” If you’re gonna be repentant, you’ve got to live like you’ve turned from sin.

The problem is, in the bottom of verse 8 in Luke 3, they had an excuse that John the Baptist anticipates, and he says, “Listen, don’t even go there in your thinking. Don’t begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” I know what you’ll say: “I don’t need to do all these good deeds because I’m okay with God.” Why? Because I have an association with Abraham. I’m in the right group here. I have the right heritage, the right—let’s use the word creeds. And so I used it in the subtitle of the sermon: what is a creed? It’s the affirmation of the things that we believe. Because they were children of Abraham, they were growing up in the synagogue, they were reciting the *Shema*. You know that word—the Hebrew word *Shema*, which begins that great sentence in Deuteronomy 6 that they always recited at worship: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” I mean, they had the right creed; they had the right doctrine; they had the right theology; it was all up here in their head. And if you asked them, they would say, “I believe that. I believe that. I believe that.” They had the right creed, and therefore they made justification that it really wasn’t all that important if they had the deeds, because “we understand that my association with God is really all that matters. And look at it—I must have it because I have all the right affirmations about things. I’m a child of Abraham.”



And they unfortunately did not worry about their day of judgment because they looked at their involvement in these things, their mental assent to doctrine, their connection with the people of God, and they said, “We’ll be okay.” And John says, “Don’t think that way. God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now—let me just make it urgent,” he says—“the axe is at the root of the trees. At any moment you can be cut down. And every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit”—that may sound like works-salvation. It’s not. It’s the evidence of a repentant heart; and the repentant heart is the work that God does to save us—“is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

You need to rethink the judgment. You need to rethink your being okay with God. What gives you assurance right now that, if you were to die in a car accident on the way home from church today, what gives you the assurance that you’ll be okay? Don’t go where most evangelicals go, and that is: “Well, I believe all the right things.” The Bible says, “Oh, that’s important. You must believe the right things”—I get that. Do you believe that Christ died for you? Do you believe that he rose from the dead? Do you believe that Christ is the—? That’s good, and that’s great. But the real question that should give you assurance is, “Is there any evidence of that in my life?”

Number two on your outline—let’s put it this way: you shouldn’t hide in a creed without deeds. And there’s a lot of people that do that—not only in the first century but in the 21st century. They hide—and by that they take reliance and assurance—and they say, “I’m going to be okay on the Day of Judgment. I’m not afraid of dying, because I know I’ve got the right creed. I’m associated with the right people. I’m not in the wrong religion; I’m in the right religion. I’ve done these things in the church; I’ve been baptized; I prayed the prayer. I don’t see deeds—but that’s okay, because you’re not saved by works.” I get that. Understand that. Did we not preach that clearly enough last week? We are not saved by our works. But the reality of a life that is saved is that there will come from that life good works. And that’s the emphasis of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it’s the emphasis of John the Baptist.

And no one said it better than James, and it would be remiss to preach this sermon if I didn’t take you to James 2 beginning in verse 14 to remind you. You want to talk about creeds without deeds? Here is James attacking this kind of thinking. Now, we’ve got to work through this passage very carefully, because it seems like a contradiction. And even in church history some people have said, “Well, this doesn’t seem to jive very well with the book of Romans,” and so people have said, “I don’t even think it should be in the Bible.” No, no—it perfectly connects and harmonizes with Romans, because unfortunately we see the word “justification” and we start to think that only has one singular meaning in Scripture—and that’s not true.

It’s like the word “sanctification.” Let me give a quick theological word definition here. People often think about sanctification as what takes place after our salvation—and you know what? They’re right. Some people, though, today, in wanting to erase that part, they say, “Well, you know, we do have passages where the word sanctification is used to talk about our being set apart the



moment we put our trust in Christ.” And they’re right. We distinguish those in theology with the words “positional sanctification” and “progressive sanctification.” And the focus of most of what the Bible says about sanctification is on that progressive change of our lives that comes after our justification. But yeah, you’re right—the word “sanctification” is sometimes used for that moment of justification, because really the word means “to be set apart.” That’s what’s happening to my files in heaven. Now, my life and my behavior need to be set apart. “I need to be holy in all my behavior,” Peter says—just like Christ.

Now let’s think about the word “justification.” We’re going to see the word “justification” in this text. And Sunday school graduates say, “Well, wait a minute—there’s a real problem here,” if only you allow in your mind one definition in the New Testament for the word “justification.” The word “justification” is usually used in the book of Romans to describe the moment of my faith in Christ—it makes me right before God. And that’s how we define it. James is going to use the word differently here. Look at how he does.

Let’s start at the beginning of the discussion in verse 14: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?” “Hey, I’m trusting in the right things; I have the right creed; it’s just—I’m not really worried about my deeds because I’m saved by grace, and so, you know, stop with all that legalism and moralism stuff.” The question that James asks is a very, very important one: “Can that faith”—a faith that doesn’t produce any deeds—“can that save him? Is that saving faith?”

He goes right where John the Baptist goes in verse 15: “Let’s think practically about your life. If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says, ‘Hey, man, go in peace; be warmed and filled’”—that’s our evangelical version of “I’ll pray for you,” right? You’ve got a problem; “I’ll pray for you. I don’t want to get involved in that; I don’t want to help you—but I’ll pray for you. That way I get to look godly but not do anything about it”—“and you don’t give them the things that are needed for the body, what good is that?”

“So also”—don’t tell me you love your neighbor if you never are willing to do anything. It’s the same thing with faith: don’t say you love God if there’s no works; don’t say you trust in God and you don’t have works. “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” It’s not real faith—a faith at all. “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

Now, I know what really matters is faith, but the evidence of that—that Jesus keeps harping on; that John the Baptist keeps harping on—you can prove the reality and existence of that faith by just examining the works. “You believe that God is one”—you want to talk about the *Shema*? That’s what the *Shema* said: “The Lord our God is one.” That’s Deuteronomy 6. He says, “You want to



talk about the *Shema* of Israel? You believe that God is one? Hey, that's great—you've checked off the little test, the little true/false test on doctrine; you passed the Scantron test. Guess what? There's no Scantron test at the gates of heaven." That's not how it works.

"You do well; let me tell you this: all the demons will pass the theological test. Even the demons believe"—doesn't mean they're converted. They're not repentant. They're not followers of Christ. "They shudder," because all they've got to look forward to is the wrath of God.

Verse 20: "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?" That, by the way—just reading that by itself—that's a great memory verse right there. "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?"

"Let's go to Abraham." Well, that's where Paul went in Romans 4 to talk about justification being apart from works. But what he does here—different aspect of justification; different kind of justification: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works?" What are we talking about there? What did Jesus continually say? "A tree is known by its fruit." A tree is known by its fruit. A tree demonstrates itself to be either good or bad by its fruit.

Now, how are you justified in heaven? You're justified in heaven by faith in Christ. And before he ever got circumcised in anything else, "he believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now, prove it. His life now proved it, so much so that God said, when he sacrifices Isaac—or almost does—on Mount Moriah, God even says, "Now I see that you love me." Well, wait a minute—didn't you know that? Oh, he didn't know that? But that was his, you know, anthropopathological way—that was his way to say, "As though he were a person, we can see it lived out now." You have in your life evidence of this love that is real, and the relationship that you have with me—which is what he says, verse 21: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works"—well, not in the annals of heaven, but certainly as he played out his life—"when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works,"—he trusted God; he loved God—and because of that you saw his life producing good, faithful works—obedience to God—"and faith was"—here's another word for justification, the way James is using the word—"it was completed by his works." It was shown to be real by its works; there was evidence to be the real, genuine thing because of its works.

"And the Scripture was fulfilled: 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" In what sense was that text fulfilled? Well, it wasn't fulfilled in that it wasn't true—it was just proved to be true; it was evidenced to be true. "And he was called a friend of God."



“So you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Now, think that one through: if you’re justified by works and not by faith alone, what kind of justification are we talking about? That you were evidenced to be a friend of God; that you’re evidenced to be a righteous person; that the reality of your life now displays the concrete examples of what your life actually is—a friend of God, a righteous person—made different by God’s work.

“In the same way, was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works?” Now we’ve gone a long way from Abraham, the leader of the Jewish people. Now we’re talking about a prostitute in Jericho. Think this one through. He says, “It doesn’t matter who you are; the reality of whether or not you are right with God—the reality of whether or not you are counted righteous before God—is by the way people see your life played out.” Rahab—not known for her righteousness before this event that took place—“She was justified by her works when she received the messengers”—the Jewish messengers—“and sent them out another way,” at risk of her own life.

“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.” “Rahab, don’t tell me you’re for me and for the God of Israel unless you show by your life the reality of that profession.”

Now, there’s a lot of people making professions that they’re followers of Christ, and their lives are a contradiction. We meet people all the time, right? Talk to people about Christ. I go and share my faith with people, and a lot of times you get this: “Hey, I’m a Christian; I’m good with God.” And I always ask this—I mean, not that this is the end-all question—but I often say, “Well, tell me about your pastor and where you go to church.” And I’d say—I don’t know—two times out of three, four times out of five: “I don’t go to church.”

Now, think that one through just a second. How important is that in the Bible? How required is that in the Bible? What does the Bible say about the command of God to not forsake the assembling of yourselves together? The whole structure of the church—built and put together so that every Christian would have a pastor and a church to assemble with—I mean, that’s required. Now, when I ask the question, “Are you right with God?” they say, “Yes.” And then I say, “Well, let me just ask you where you go to church.” “I don’t go to church.”

I can ask the question that Jesus asked in Luke 6:46: “Why do you call him ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what he says?” How can you say that you’re a follower of God and you don’t follow God? See, as moms used to say to kids around the world: your actions speak louder than your words. And a lot of people think, “I’m okay because one day I’m going to go before God and say, ‘I believed all the right things.’” Don’t hide in a creed without deeds.



Two passages that you should at least write down that I want you to look up at some point this week. One would be John 8:31–34. You can put next to that: here’s another situation where the Jews said to Jesus, “We’re okay because we have Abraham as our father.” And he says, “Listen, you’re missing the point. You’re enslaved to sin.” And because of the sin that’s so obvious in your life, don’t tell me about your associations making you okay with God. You have no hope of being reconciled to God unless there’s evidence in your life that God exists and indwells your life. And that will be seen, obviously, by the way in which you live your life.

One more is Isaiah 1. We’ll make this a homework assignment, which I think I did put on the back—at least part of the passage I put on the back of the worksheet there in the discussion questions. But I think one of the things I also hear is people saying, “Well, I do go to church, and I do have a pastor, and I have been baptized, and I do all these things.” And they rely not just on their creed but on their association with a church. Then they look a lot more like the people Jesus said will stand before him on that day in Matthew 7 and say, “Lord, Lord, did we not do all these things?” And he’ll say, “Depart from me. I never knew you, you who practice lawlessness.”

What’s the point? Oh, you may go to church. And you may think somehow, like some people have taught, that these kinds of good works at church cancel out the bad works Monday through Friday. “So just make sure you continue to do those righteous activities.” That’s the whole way the book of Isaiah starts. That’s the whole point of the beginning of the book of Isaiah: you guys think your religious activities in some way allow you a pass for the rest of the week. I mean, we’ve even created theologies that have these things called penance so that if you do something wrong you can make it up—right? You can have something to pay it back. And the Bible makes it really clear: that’s not how this works. The Bible expects us, as followers of Christ, to live out in obedience to Christ our love for Christ and our faith in Christ—to evidence our repentance. Isaiah 1 is a great case study in people that are hiding behind their church activities—their worship, their fellowship, their singing of songs, their memorization of verses, their record of baptisms and church membership or whatever it might be. Don’t hide in a creed without deeds. It’s all about seeing the work of God’s change in your life.

Well, verses 10–14 in Luke 3—they’re asking, “Well, what kind of changes are we talking about?” I referenced this when we first read it, but it’s not, you know, just a silly way to read the text. If people think about what are the good godly works you should do, I think most people’s minds go to religious activities. And I may have been extreme in saying, “Well, come join the prophet here and go to seminary and be a preacher like me in the desert,” but, I mean, people—if I say, “You know, you need to do more good works,” most of us think: Bible, prayer, evangelism. We think those things; we think of those religious kinds of things. Now, I’m not saying those things are wrong—those are obviously things we should do. But that’s not where John goes, and neither is it where James went, when it came to what is evidence of real faith—and in John’s case, what is evidence of real repentance.



He doesn't say, "Become a missionary." What does he say? Verse 10—they say, "What shall we do?"—that's what the crowds asked him—and he says this. He starts with an example: "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." He speaks just like James does—and maybe James is writing the way he did because of John the Baptist's preaching—but the point is: you better be a generous person.

Number three—let's put the point, and then we can put a few subpoints perhaps: we need to prove our repentance all week long. This is not just saying, "I'm going to go to church and really pay attention during the preaching and sing all the songs and make sure I'm involved in something on a Wednesday night and I get a small group; I'll do the church things." Now that's important, and you should. But what the focus of Scripture is, when it comes to "Am I proving my repentance? Is there real faith that produces works?" they go to the Monday-through-Friday life. They start looking at your daily life. What does your daily life look like?

Let me put it this way: because if I were to really ask, "Are you proving your repentance? Is there evidence of fruit in your life?" I really don't want to ask your small-group Bible study leader. I don't want to ask your home fellowship group. I really want to ask the person you're taking through Partners. That's really not the person I should be asking. The Bible is always going to lead us to: what are you like at work? "Let me ask your manager, your boss, your coworkers. What are you like as a neighbor? Let me ask your neighbors that are really close to your house—they get to hear what's going on there sometime. Let me talk to the people that you hang out with in that circle—that thing that your kids are a part of, or that athletic group." Let me ask the people you live daily life with.

And let me ask the first question—if you're going to make some subpoints here: are you a generous person? I mean, that's really where he goes. And to be perhaps a little bit more focused on the theology of it all—do I love people that God calls me to love more than I love money—more than I love my stuff? Am I willing to part with something that I can benefit from—my money, my food, my tunic? Am I willing to let that go because of my love for people? And God is saying, "Listen, if you seek first the kingdom and you love God, he's going to direct you to love people. And if you see a brother or sister in need, and you have the means to help that person, and you say instead, 'I'll pray for you,' and you don't show generosity toward that person—don't tell me you're a repentant person. Because if God gets ahold of your life, you start recognizing the priorities are not your money. It's the people in this life that will either go to heaven or hell—the people, particularly, if you use James' words, brothers and sisters—people that Christ has died for. Are you ready to give up some of the things in your life to help the people around you?" That's a sign of repentance.

Tunic, by the way, is a T-shirt, if you will; it's the undergarment under the cloak. And he's saying this: you see somebody that's really lacking the necessities. Right now in a day—we're, you know, in our culture and the way we live—I mean, most people asking you for stuff are scam artists, I recognize. But you know what it is, don't you—to be faced with the conviction in your heart that



you've got somebody in front of you that really has a need, and you see it's a bona fide, genuine need. And you know you have what it takes to meet that need; it's just that it would really challenge your priority grid. You need to ask yourself in that moment, "Am I showing my life as turned from sin and obeying God? Is there evidence of my repentance in this?" Look for signs of generosity.

Next, he goes to the tax collectors. They said, "Hey, we're here to be baptized; what should we do?" And he says in verse 13, "Collect no more than you're authorized to do." Now, this is hard to understand—the way they did it then, which didn't have as many checks and balances as we have now with the IRS. Although we still feel like they're ripping us off, right? Sorry—don't get me started.

In those days—if you've seen at least three flannelgraph Sunday school lessons—you understand the tax collectors were the hated group of people in the first century. Hated—because they were seen as turncoats, because the Romans hired the local Jewish people to collect taxes from their kin, their brotherhood, their ethnic nation. And the way they did that—and there's conflicting reports and different ways this was done. Some were the ultimate taxes of land and personhood, and then there were tolls and all these other things. But take this, for instance—this is one of the ways historically they did it: you would have a certain segment of your community, and you would be authorized by the Roman government to collect taxes from them on whatever it might be—let's just say it's a commerce tax. And let's say you wanted to collect tax from the Mission Viejo mall, and you wanted to collect tax from the strip mall over here in Aliso Viejo, and you wanted to collect tax from the Laguna Hills Mall. And so you had to go to the Roman government and buy that right to collect taxes. And let's think about that. There was a table that allowed the Romans to figure out what it would cost you to earn or buy that right. And so let's say you've got the Mission Viejo mall—okay? That's a pretty nice place. They figure out how many merchants there are, how much money they make; they figure out, "Okay, here's what it's going to cost you—it's going to cost you \$17,000 to collect taxes from all the merchants there." So you write them a check, and you say, "Here's your 17,000." Now, they hand you the badge, if you will—the documents. Now you march off, and now you go and collect taxes.

Can you see any room for, you know, some funny business in this little thing? You've got the badge to collect taxes. You can go in there, and you can decide whatever you want. You can say, "Well, you know what—you owe this, and you owe that." You can make the rules up as you go—and they did. And because of that margin that they were able to put on top of the taxes that they paid to have the right to collect those taxes, there were all kinds of selfish, underhanded things that were going on in the tax code. And the Jews—people—knew that. They hated that.

And if you've traveled enough, there are some countries where you go and there is a tax and a toll for everything. It sounds like I'm talking about America. But it's worse in some places, where you know that this is being made up on the spot. Have you been there before? You know—"You're making this up right now. There ain't no way there's a table for this or a chart for this, and I'm



having to pay you here at the airport in this funny third-world country in this thing; and just to get through here I've got to pay you stuff." I've been there. And that's the kind of thing that made these people hate them. It's one thing when it's someone else from another country, but these people were doing this to their own people—they hated the tax collectors.

Now, the thing that you might expect from a revolutionary preacher who's only concerned about Israel and hates Rome—he'd say, "Hey, tax collectors, you need to quit your job and tell Rome to go hang it, and you need to be faithful to Israel." This is not about revolutionary talk. This is about obedience to God. And under the rightful authority—which apparently he's conceding—of the Roman government, he simply says, "You want to be a repentant person at work? Collect no more than you're authorized to do." Verse 13 says, "You stick to the tables. And you're able now—even though you could—you could leverage this to make more money here—don't be selfish; don't be materialistic; don't be greedy. Do your job and collect only what you're authorized to collect."

That's a temptation. Now, I don't know in your work, you know, what the loopholes are at your work, or how you can cut corners and make an extra buck unethically. But let's call this one—if we're gonna put some subpoints down here—let's call it an ethical work ethic. Whatever the rules are at work—do you keep them? I mean, it can be—I don't know where you can cut corners on sick days or, you know, calling in sick, or vacation days, or the way you work out a contract, or the way you pad things on the construction site. I don't know what it is for you. But however you could take your work, cut the corners, not keep the rules, not do it right—you could somehow go around what the official way to do it is and make a few extra bucks. The Bible says your repentant life will be proved in your workplace by how you do that. You cut corners there—you live an unethical life in your workplace—where's your repentance? John says that's where you'll prove your repentance.

You need to prove your repentance all week long. When it comes to your work, you better have an ethical work ethic. We often think about a biblical work ethic as working hard—oh, it is that—but it's also making sure we keep the rules and the laws and the ordinances under which we live in our workplace.

Verse 14: "The soldiers also asked him, 'And what shall we do?'" Now, the soldiers here—now, some commentaries work hard to say, "Well, these must have been Jewish soldiers under the Herodian subset of authorities in Judea." There's nothing in the text that says this, other than they want to say, "Well, the gospel was supposed to come to the Jews first and then the Greeks, and I can't imagine Greeks here." I don't know. It was the soldiers. These could be Roman soldiers; these could be Jewish Herodian police. We're not sure who it is. The word is broad enough to cover them both. But whatever it is—the people that carried the big spears and the big swords.



Now, in our country, thankfully—though there's abuse, obviously, in any law enforcement in any country—I mean, we're living in a country that's much better off than a lot of countries. Let's go back—you travelers that have your passport book stamped with all these weird countries: you've been in countries, have you not, when the cops roll up, you're scared, because you think, even as a law-abiding person, "They're not on my side." They carry the guns and can really do with me whatever they want, and a lot of times they leverage that for money. We don't have to go very far to another country to experience that. On the roads, you can see that. On the radio, it's scary when the federal police show up—oh, there I went. The other stories in this room—they're not about this.

Now, here's the deal: the Bible says, "Hey—Roman soldiers or Herodian Jewish police—do not," middle of verse 14, "extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations." Stop leveraging your authority at work in a way to get ahead or make a buck. To take some points here, I'll put it this way—make it as broad as we can to be faithful to the text: not abusing your authority. Not abusing your authority. You've got authority at work; you've got authority in your everyday life. It could be as a parent—you'd be raising children as a mom; you've got authority there. Do you abuse it? Are you a bully? Are you fair? Are you kind? Do you in some way leverage your position in a way that's selfish? The Bible says that real repentance will be played out in that sphere of your life.

And lastly—I'll disconnect this because it certainly overarches everything—the last line of verse 14: "And be content with your wages." Let's just think of that word contentment for a second. If you really are repentant, and as Jesus likes to say, seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things that everybody else is rushing after—God will take care of that. Stop worrying like all the Gentiles, he says, who rush after all these things. Would you just put my agenda first? Let me take care of that, which is going to mean—as Paul often said in 1 Timothy 6, for instance—you will be content with what you have. You will be content. Put it this way—letter D, if you're taking those kinds of notes here, subpoints: content with what God provides.

Now, he says that specifically to the soldiers, but certainly that applies to the tax collectors and to the general crowd there. Now you may say, "Well, I'm pretty generous. I guess I have an ethical work ethic. I don't break the rules at work, and I don't abuse my authority." This can be convicting for everybody in the room. Think about the contented heart that the Bible is always asking for. The law of God—going back to the ten on the mountain, on Mount Horeb—the Ten Commandments. What was the tenth commandment? "Do not"—what?—"covet." Don't covet. That's a matter of your heart being unsettled. It really is measured by things like: do you begrudge people that have more than you and don't seem to work as hard or be as smart as you are—but you—get mad because they get ahead? What's your heart? Are you a complainer? Do you look at your wages? Do you look at your situation? Do you go often—maybe even before just God, or in your own heart—or maybe you start saying it to your friends—that it's just not fair; it's not right? What's your heart?

The Bible says a real repentant life—if you're going to prove it all week long—you're going to start to see a whole lot less complaining, a whole lot less begrudging successful people, and you will be



content with your wages and everything else God allots to your life. I'm not saying we don't pray when we get sick and when things hurt; we don't ask God for relief. But when it comes to our lot in life, a godly, repentant heart proves it by the way we act in response to what God gives us.

Prove your repentance all week long.

Now, there's much more to this sermon than what we have here. Has to be. How long would it take—no matter how we went past this; all the way into the chapter—and we looked at every word that John is recorded as saying, and you were to preach it at a rate that's, you know, a little slower than your pastor preaches—which I tried to do in my study—how long would every word of John here take? I read it slowly—slower than I preach—and it took me 1 minute and 7 seconds.

Now, before you start saying, "I want that pastor to be my pastor; his sermons are a minute long," you've got to know there was a lot more to this than what we see. But you get the idea. And that is: sin is a problem; you need to turn from it. The whole point of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins means that real Christians who are forgiven—they live a different kind of life—a kind of life that doesn't hide in a creed without deeds. It recognizes that deeds are an expression of the creed that I hold. And that my Christianity isn't lived out on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings—it's seen every day in my life. My coworkers, my wife, my children, my neighbors can attest to the fact that, you know, though I'm not perfect, the reality of the trajectory of my life is that I'm doing things differently than the rest of the world—because Christ is my King and God is the captain of my life. That should be obvious.

Now, fill in the blanks for the rest of your life. You know, we've got a good start here on what repentance looks like. But just a quick warning as we wrap this up. A lot of people think, "Well, that's great—I'll see my Christian life turn into a whole new thing." We get excited about godliness and growth and sanctification. And the temptation is to start to think that all of that does something to get me right with God. We made this super clear last week; let me end with making it clear one more time.

If you lived a real godly, repentant life from this Sunday morning to the end of your life—until we do your funeral—my question would be: would that merit your salvation? Would that earn any place for you in the acceptance before God? Never. Never.

It's kind of like getting on an airplane and flying to Hawaii. Let's think of that for a second. If you're a compliant, obedient passenger—does that get you to Hawaii? Well, I guess in a sense it doesn't get me, you know, thrown out the back cargo door or something. No, but the reality is this:



is it doing anything to fuel or propel the plane? No, of course not. It's the right thing to do, but the plane is getting you there. You don't really want to drive this illustration to real Christianity: you didn't buy the ticket; you didn't build the plane; you didn't pay for the gas in it. You're just riding in this thing that Christ has done for us. Now, he's calling you to live as a compliant, obedient passenger. That's the right thing to do, and it proves that you are the right person called by God on this thing that's going to get us to heaven. But it doesn't earn; it doesn't do it. What does that? The life, death, and resurrection of Christ.