

1 Thess 5:16-24**Matthew 3:1-12****Introduction**

I don't know how good you are at gardening. I enjoy it but don't know a great deal about plants. I can recognise the common ones and know how to care for some of them but mostly I rely on books and the labels that many plants come with these days to help me know what they are and how to care for them.

When I moved into my house nearly nine years ago I inherited a garden that had been well planted with all sorts of beautiful plants and shrubs in it that had been let run wild. I wasn't sure what all the plants were and I had to get my mother to help me identify them. There were a couple of apple trees espaliered along a wall. I could tell they were probably apple tree but had no idea what sort they were. The blossom confirmed to me that they were apple trees but it wasn't until the fruit arrived that I could tell they were a pink lady and a cox.

We know something is real by the way it appears and by the fruit it produces. And even if it is an apple tree and it doesn't bear fruit it is no good to us. In the house my mother used to live in we had three apple trees but as they got old and one became diseased it stopped bearing fruit. All it did was to take the moisture and goodness from the soil with nothing to show for it so we had to cut it down.

In the Bible passage that we just had read to us John the Baptist was warning the people he was speaking to that just being called Christians isn't enough - we need to bear fruit as well! (*read v9*) John the Baptist started to speak and teach people shortly before Jesus began his ministry on earth. He was preparing them for Jesus' teaching and showing them where they had failed in the way they were living. They came to confess their sin, the wrong things they had done and he baptised them in the river Jordan as a sign that they had been cleansed and forgiven. It was called a Baptism of Repentance.

The Pharisees and Saducees who were Jewish religious leaders came to watch what was going on. They didn't take part because they didn't think they needed forgiveness. They relied on the fact that they were Jews, descended from Abraham and thought that meant that they automatically had salvation. God had made a covenant with Abraham *read Genesis 17:7&8. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.*" So they thought that as God had promised to be faithful to them they were O.K. It didn't matter

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what they did - but they had forgotten the second part of what God had said *read verse 8*. Keeping their covenant agreement with God meant circumcising their baby boys as a sign that they trusted God and belonged to him. The Jews faithfully did this but gradually the circumcision itself became the most important commitment and it was meaningless.

It is the same with our Baptism. Baptism is a sign of commitment to God a sign that we are sorry for the things we have done and are changing, turning away from them and making a new start. Without the commitment which brings a personal relationship with God our Baptism is no good to us. Many people think that because they go to church they are O.K., because they've been baptised they are O.K because they say they are Christian they are all right. But John the Baptist points out that they are only signs of something deeper and if we really belong to God we must bear the fruit that show we belong to him.

So what are the fruits of repentance?

1 Sorrow

Which doesn't mean that we all need to go around weeping; It doesn't mean just being sorry for the wrong things we do. Sorry is something we say when we bump into someone in the street. Sorrow is recognizing the pain God feels when we turn away from him, when we disobey him and disregard his word to us, the Bible. These days it is easy to take sin lightly. Our society is more easygoing and tolerant than in the past. Almost anything seems acceptable as long as we mind our own business. It is easy to follow the general trend and hang lightly to the truth when it suits us, or steal in small ways at work by using the phone and using supplies for our own uses. Often we can lack respect for others. These are all failure and sin and they hurt God. We need to recognise that and see the pain we are giving him and when we do it leads to

2. A changed life

When we see the things that are wrong in our lives, the things that hurt God and others like laziness, selfishness, dishonesty we will make an effort to change. As we become aware of the things we fail at and try to change them we will find God giving us the strength and help to live in a way that pleases him. Of course it doesn't mean that we never fail or do wrong but it does mean that we are working at changing.

3. There may be things we need to put right.

At this time of year many people are looking back over the past year and thinking about next year and New Year Resolutions where they might try to start again; To give up a way of behaving or to start to do something positive. Sometimes it isn't enough just to make a new start. We may

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need to put things right as well. Sometimes it isn't enough to simply tell God we are sorry and to stop doing things, sometimes we need to make amends. If we know we have hurt someone we need to apologise to them. If we have stolen something we may need to repay it. There is a story of an American airman who during the war, while he was based in England 'borrowed' a bicycle from a village in order to get back to camp. He never took it back. Fifty years later he returned to England and tried to find the owner of the bike so he could repay them. It had stayed on his conscience for all that time. It is never too late to make amends. It isn't always possible but if we can we should.

Another fruit is:

4. Obedience

We need to obey God. We find out what God expects of us as we read his word the Bible. Obedience means keeping the ten commandments and doing the obvious things but it is more than that. It also means living my life with reference to God. Not just going to him for help when times are bad but day by day trying to please him and asking him what he wants of us in the way we live.

There was an American businessman who had had a very tiring day, and he asked his housekeeper, Emily to hold all telephone calls while he had a nap. Shortly afterwards the phone rang. The president was calling from the White House.

"Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson."

"He is sleeping, Mr. President. He said not to disturb him."

"Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him."

"No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you. When the businessman called the President back, he could scarcely control his pleasure. "Tell that woman I want her here in the White House." When we commit our lives to Jesus we need to be clear who it is we are serving.

As we turn around and start again (which is what repentance means) we will also begin to

5. Grow in love

love for God and for others. When we see the sin and failure in our lives we need not despair because the wonderful Good News that Christ brings us is that if we believe that he came to earth to live as a man and die for us on the cross. If we believe that he took the punishment we deserve because he loves each one of us more than we can begin to imagine. As

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we accept the forgiveness he has won for us we begin to know how much he loves us and in response we are more able to love him and to love others. The fruit of repentance is love for God and for others.

In his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

These fruits or signs of repentance come about through the Holy Spirit which God gives us at our Baptism. In the passage just after our Gospel reading we are told that as Jesus came up out of the water after being baptised the Holy Spirit came upon him. In the same way when we are baptised he gives us his spirit. As we confess our failures and turn away from them God fills us with his spirit to help us to live as Christians. What is an outward sign becomes an inward reality in our lives and God says to us - as he said to Jesus: "This is my own dear child with whom I am well pleased".

And finally we will know

5. Joy

The joy of a burden lifted. Every sin we commit is a burden we carry around. And as we turn away from our sins and failures to live in a way that pleases God we find joy. The joy of knowing ourselves free, forgiven, children of God - loved and accepted.

We don't always feel comfortable showing spontaneous expressions of joy and love but God has given us a great gift of new life, a chance to start again and to live as he has called us to, a life that shows obedience to him, that is filled with love and joy and that enables us to walk away from the things that have held us and dragged us down.