

## **“Fruitful Joy”**

Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

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The last verse we read from the Luke passage said that after speaking **“many other exhortations,”** many warnings of what was to happen to those who did not **“bear good fruit,”** then **“he** (John the Baptist) **proclaimed the good news to the people.”** ‘Bad news,’ if you will, followed by ‘good news.’ This dichotomy of ‘good news, bad news’ reminded me of the popular genre of JOKES that follow this pattern. While many of them are not appropriate for this setting

😊, here are a few that are much more suitable to our context.

Good news: The Session loved the job description the pastor wrote.

Bad news: They were so inspired that they formed a search committee to  
find someone capable of filling the position.

Good News: Mrs. Jones loved the preacher’s sermon.

Bad News: Mrs Jones also loves Beavis & Butthead and TX Chainsaw Mscre

Good News: Church attendance rose dramatically last month.

Bad news: The pastor was on vacation.

Good News: The elders want to send the minister to visit the Holy Land.

Bad News: They are stalling until the next war.

Now while these scenarios are intended to make us chuckle, John was certainly NOT joking. There were many countrymen of his who felt that their Jewish heritage alone was enough to save them. Many in high positions would use their authority to take advantage of those with meager means. He wanted people to take seriously the judgement to come, in which the useless chaff would be burned up, while the healthy wheat gathered up into the storehouses... that agrarian metaphor for PEOPLE. People who, if they did not bear the ‘good fruit’ of branch that grew out of the TRUE ‘Vine,’ they would, like dead plants, be cut down and thrown into the fire of eternal separation from the Master Gardener. Having gotten their attention with the ‘bad news’ of the consequences that God’s ‘chosen’ would suffer for ‘choosing’ their own way, John then would share with them the GOOD news of how to choose a better way. THE way...truth and life. Jesus, the true Messiah. Who shows the way to bear fruit worthy of turning away from sinful ways to His perfect will for our lives.

John's words to them apply to us as well. It is not our family heritage that will save us. We too should take seriously the judgment to come. We too must be mindful of the ways we have failed to follow Jesus, our true Lord and Savior. The One who is the Good News for all that is Bad news in our lives. Who helps us to trade our sorrows for his comfort... who wants us to live in **"Fruitful Joy."**

In order to bear this 'fruitful joy,' we ask that same question that John's crowds did: **"What then should we do?"** His response could be characterized in those same 3 letters we looked at last week... J.O.Y. That if we are to display the 'fruitful JOY' God wants for our lives, it will be by prioritizing our attention in three priorities: **Jesus... Others... Yourself.**

The 'good news' of our JOY must begin with the 'Good News' Himself, >> **JESUS.** Our mindset should be the same as JB: that the **"One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals."** (Luke 3:16) (Hmmm... 3:16? There IS something special about those numbers).

The overarching priority that the love of God... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... we are to have 'down in our hearts' is the 'tie that binds' both Old and New Testament together. The first command God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai in >>Exodus 20 is pretty clear (**KNOW?**): **"You shall have no other gods before me."** (v. 3) When asked what is the most important commandment of God, Jesus tells >> His New Testament followers, **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."** (Mt. 22:37) Many of you KNOW these verses pretty well in your head. How are you doing at living them out...?

Read something interesting about this verse this week. In the Jewish tradition in which the young man Jesus grew up in, if one wished to enter into ministry, there were no seminaries, no online religious classes, no YouTube tutorials. In Rabbinic school, the teacher was not paid by the student for his instruction... at least not in monetary substance. But rather, by performing SERVICES for the Teacher. While I'm not sure just what all such 'services' would be, I guess they might include helping around the house, maybe going to so shopping, or perhaps doing some laundry. But to 'untie the sandals' of a man's dirty, smelly feet? THAT would be considered much too menial. But not by John. NOTHING would be beneath him when it came to serving his Lord.

So too should it be with us. As we to share in the joy of fruitful ministry, we learn from our 'Rabboni,' our Teacher, Jesus. One whom we could never adequately compensate except with the gift of our very lives. The Jesus who is more powerful than anyone on this earth we are not worthy to untie his sandal; and nothing we do for Jesus is beneath us.

Which brings us to the 'O' in our fruitful JOY of serving Jesus. Serving **OTHERS!** When asked by the people, "**What should we do?**" in order 'to bear good fruit,' John first replied that "**Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.**" (Luke 3:11) In the same way that the first one related to Biblical commands to love God, this one relates to the manner in which we live out that second command Jesus spoke of, which was relative to the first: "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**" (Mark 12:31) And as I said with the first one, I would also ask you to ask yourself, 'How am I doing with that whole 'love my neighbor' thing?

Of course, we have plenty of opportunities to demonstrate that love of neighbor. Particularly those two specific ones JB (John the Baptist) mentions: 'coats' and 'food.' Perhaps you have already cleaned out your closet of those gently-used coats you never wear. Maybe you made a donation to Abraham's Tent's recent food drive, or to the Welsh Food Pantry, or another feeding ministry.

But I would also ask you to give thought to how you are keeping someone 'warm' in an *emotional* sense... those who feel the 'cold' of loneliness, or rejection, or loss of close relationships. OR, how you are being called to feed someone *spiritually*. Someone you know, right now, is in need of prayer. Someone you know needs to know the HOPE and PEACE and JOY of Advent... someone who is just not feeling it right now. Someone you know does NOT have a relationship with that Christ whose birth 'some' of us are 'preparing' to celebrate.

And while I know that serving others in these ways can be a daunting task, especially for us 'frozen chosen,' but there are other ways to serve that are much simpler. Like... TUTORING! As many of you know, we are now getting back to being in BOTH Oak Park Elementary and Fairview Elementary. And believe me, they are EXCITED to have us back! And while I know that we have a lot of our 'returning starters' back, there is STILL plenty of room on our 'roster.' This is SUCH an awesome opportunity to be in a place where the 'rubber' of our faith 'meets the road.'

By 'warming up' to some beautiful young people (including their faithful, loving teachers), you can help 'feed' those who are 'starving'. Not just for knowledge out of a book, but starving to know that someone **cares**. Tutoring is just one example of how we can truly experience "fruitful joy."

And finally, the last way to experience the JOY of this season... all throughout the year... is to care for **YOURSELF**. John said to ***"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you... Do not extort money by threats or false accusation... be satisfied."*** (Luke 3:13-14) Perhaps, in one word, be "HONEST."

Now, knowing most of you as I do, I don't think this to be a 'shady' group who does not deal honestly in their business affairs. But I think that there are ways that we are also called to be 'honest' with others besides financially. We must be honest with others, and with ourselves, in those human relationships. To foster environments in which we can communicate openly, candidly, kindly with one another. For when we fail to be honest with others, to be 'up front' with friends and associates, it can lead to big problems.

As most all of you know, I am very involved with the local church coalition, "SWLA Responds." (And speaking of 'service' from the previous 'section,' you will be hearing a lot about opportunities for different type of service in the first 6 months of 2022. In March "Praying Pelicans," which some of you may be familiar with, will be sending a good sized group, and in June, the Menonites will be represented by approximately **1000** volunteers! And there are ways that our small fellowship can have a BIG impact!) Anyway, as many of you also know, our group was 'spawned' by the efforts of our 'parent company,' "Houston Responds." Well, as often happens, there was some growing pains that we experienced in our efforts to become more autonomous. And some of that 'pain' arose out of actions by our friends in Houston that were interpreted in a negative way. Finally, after a few months of 'festering wounds,' a small group of 2 leaders from each group had an open, candid, HONEST conversation. And guess what... with the air cleared, and some misconceptions corrected, we are now ready to once again move forward in growing as an organization. We will actually be having a Mission & Vision meeting TOMORROW with some of both leadership! It reminds us that when we resolve 'failures to

communicate'... by living out that difficult Biblical principle to *"speak the truth in love"*... our relationships are much more likely to produce a **"Fruitful Joy."**

As you and I seek to fulfill JB's admonition to 'bear good fruit,' let us do so with 'JOY'. Putting Jesus first, Others second, and Yourself third. Let us not dwell on all of the 'bad news' of the penalty we pay for disobeying God... but rather the 'Good News' of the One who saves us from that penalty: Jesus Christ. The 'Good News' is that God loves you. Loves you enough to send His Son to save you from death. The Bad News? That not everybody believes that. And so, it is up to us to bear witness to that truth...with a **Fruitful JOY...**

**Charge/Bene: Along the 'JOY' theme for today, one of the song recommendations was "He Has Made Me Glad." While I'm sure that Charlie is SO disappointed that we didn't sing it, you may know the lyrics:**

*"I will enter his gates with thanksgiving on my heart, enter his courts with praise.*

*I will say this is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice for he has made me glad.*

**God has indeed made us Glad; for God will send us a Savior who will teach us how to live HOPE-fully, PEACE-fully, JOY-fully. Rejoice people of God, for such is God's great love for us. This IS the 'day the Lord has made...let us rejoice and be glad in it.' As you go forth to 'GLADLY' share the Good News of Jesus Christ, know that you do NOT do it alone...**