

## Matthew 3:1-12

Are you one of those rare individuals who performs well under extreme pressure? For most of us, we can get the job done if we have plenty of time and no one is hovering over us watching our every move.

Now the way John the Baptist puts it in our text, this is exactly what God is doing. *“The axe is laid to the root of the trees,”* he says, *“Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* How’s that for pressure? If trees had eyes and legs, they would surely run when seeing the man coming with axe in hand. And if they had mouths, they would cry, *“Wait! Don’t swing your axe yet! Give me more time and I’ll bear good fruit.”*

But it doesn’t work that way, and it didn’t work that way. God gave His people plenty of time. He sent prophet after prophet calling them to repentance. The good fruit never came. And not because they weren’t trying. Bad trees cannot bear good fruit, pressure or no pressure, and no matter how much time is given. But good trees bear good fruit, without the pressure of the Law, and always in the time that God gives.

So am I a good tree or a bad tree? If we ask ourselves this question, we need to be careful in how we arrive at an answer. A bad tree will look at his own fruit and compare it with the fruit he sees on other trees. A good tree does not look at his fruit, but fixes his eyes on Jesus.

You know His parable of the sheep and the goats. The sheep, in the Judgment, were not aware of the good works they did in life. The goats were very much aware, for their eyes were not on Christ in life, as were the eyes of the sheep, but on the things they were doing.

We discussed him two weeks ago, but he’s worth mentioning here. The thief on the cross was focused on things in life day after day, year after year. But as he was dying, his eyes and ears were fixed upon Jesus. By God’s grace, this man was a sheep and a good tree, although you never would have guessed it until the last hours of his life.

Those coming out to be baptized by John in the Jordan River were not saying, *“I’m a good tree; look at my good fruits.”* We’re told that they came out *“confessing their sins.”* Good trees are sinful trees. John does not only call bad trees to repentance. He calls all to repent. There is no distinction. *“All have sinned,”* Scripture declares, *“and have fallen short of the glory of God.”* You have sinned. I have sinned. Repentance is not something we do in church. It’s a daily return to our baptism, putting to death the Old Adam in us that the new man might arise and live within us.

You can’t always tell a good tree from a bad tree by the amount and magnitude of the sin. This is how the world operates. If we operate this way, Satan will convince us that we are bad trees because of all the sin in our life.

My friends, Psalm 1 tells you who you are. *“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners; but his delight is in the law of the Lord...he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water.”*

Isn't this you? Your baptism firmly plants you in Christ within the streams of living water. Rooted in Christ Jesus as you are, it is impossible for you not to produce good fruits in your life, for the Holy Spirit is at work in you.

Oh you do see the man with axe in hand. And as a good tree, bearing fruits of repentance, you confess that you truly do deserve to have that axe put to you. But with your eyes on Jesus, and your ears on His words, you rejoice in the glorious truth that that axe is not put against you at all. It was put to Jesus. He carried His tree up to Calvary. And there He was cut down and thrown into the fire.

The pressure was all on Him, and so it's not on you. God is not hovering over you with axe in hand ready to swing away. He forgives you. Purely out of mercy, He forgives each one of you, good tree or bad tree. The amount and magnitude of sin in your life does not make any difference. Jesus was cut down for it all. It's all forgiven. You are all forgiven.

Believing this, you will bear good fruit as a good tree rooted in Christ. Oh you'll sin, too. But not because you want to. Because you're weak, as am I. But you know God forgives you in Christ.

And here He is on the altar for you and for the forgiveness of your sins. No pressure here. No hovering. No threats. No axe. And no fire. Only grace and mercy. Only forgiveness for you.

The good fruits will be in your life, therefore. Faith does them spontaneously out of love for God. No need to look for your fruits. God sees them even though you do not. Just keep looking at Jesus. And you will because you are a good tree. Amen.