



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Advent 2
December 5, 2021

What Then Shall We Do? **Luke 3:1–20**

¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

⁷ *He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

¹⁰ *And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”*

¹⁵ *As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.*



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It certainly wasn't John's gentle approach that drew people to come and hear him preach. "Every one of you is a snake," he told them. "You're filled to the brim with deadly poison and it will destroy everyone around you." "Don't bother me with your good name and reputation because they don't mean a thing." "You'll be judged just like everyone else. So you'd better start looking like you believe something, because God's watching you. And if He doesn't see what He wants to see in you, you will, without a doubt, feel the sharp axe of His condemnation at your own feet."

How'd you like to hear that from your preacher? It sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it. But did you know that John's brutal preaching was a calculated act of love? He had to tear the people's attention away from themselves so that he could point them toward the Christ who had come to save them. By calling them such things as vipers and dead branches, he was announcing to them that they had nothing to give God in trade for their lives. "Don't even try taking an inventory of your life in search of something to gladden the heart of God! You don't have anything to give Him! Vipers produce only poison, dead branches grow no fruit. If anyone is to be saved, it must be entirely the work of God – God alone!"

And that's how John preached. And, all the while, God was busily working in and through his preaching. Even while a river of fire flowed from John's lips, God was nevertheless calling and gathering "the crowds that came out." This rough preaching was precisely what God had promised through His prophet Malachi, saying, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (Mal. 3:1). Part of this preparation was to get people's eyes off themselves. That's why John so lovingly scolded: "You brood of vipers! Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

And, when he preached that way, a miracle happened. The crowds responded, "What then shall we do?" This is truly a miracle! I can imagine the reaction you'd get from a lot of people if you preached to them the way John did: "Get stuffed, preacher!" "You know what you can do with your fruit!" But, you see, God's Word powerfully and miraculously creates in its hearers a realization that something in them needs to change. The response of John's hearers is evidence that the Word of God, through the rough-and-tumble preaching of John the Baptist, had a miraculous effect on these crowds: it began to create in them repentance and faith.

If God had not miraculously opened their ears and hearts through the power of His Word (Isaiah 32:1-3, 35:3), these people would have remained the way they had been: deaf, cold, stony, and unmoved. But, though they had been deaf and blind, through His Word, God had given them the ability to hear and see (Pro. 20:12).

And, what was the next logical step? God had opened their eyes and ears; now He opened their lips (Ps. 51:15): "What then shall we do?"

Now, we must be careful to note that it wasn't John or his powerful preaching that moved the people to repent; it was God – and God alone – working through His Word (Acts 5:31; 11:18). When the people asked, "What then shall we do?" they were showing that God had begun His work within them. "What then shall we do?" is really the voice of one



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who's been born again by the power of God's Holy Word.

Essentially, the question "What then shall we do?" is a confession of faith. You couldn't ask that question unless God had first begun to create repentance and faith in your heart.

But it is a question that we must all ask. "What then shall we do?" Have you asked it lately? Be careful, though, in what you take that question to mean.

Don't ask this question, for instance, if what you mean by it is, "What then shall we do *to be saved*?" The only thing you can do to be saved is repent and believe the gospel, and anything you do beyond that you can only do because you're *already* saved. You're not saved by anything you've done or ever could do. You're saved by the holy life and innocent suffering and death of Jesus. By faith in Him you are – right now and forevermore – completely and unassailably saved!

And don't think this applies to others but not to you. Luke quotes Isaiah in today's Gospel, saying: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." Beloved, there's no one for whom our Lord Jesus did not die. He is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the *world*" (John 1:29). This includes you. As the Apostle John writes: Jesus is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). Listen, God so earnestly wants you to know and never doubt His salvation that He's poured out the blood of Jesus to forgive every last soul on earth.

And, if the universal blood of Jesus isn't enough for your confidence and joy, God happily gives you more. Just as He gave to those people who went out to hear John, God has also given *you* "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of [your] sins." To put it another way: God has given you a personal connection to Jesus in Holy Baptism, so that you may be doubly sure – and certain beyond any doubt – that the benefit of Jesus' death and resurrection is *yours!*

So, the question "What then shall we do?" has nothing to do with how you *become* saved. That's already done – fully accomplished by God. The question now can be asked in the sense of "What shall I give to the Lord for all His benefits to me?" (Ps. 116:12). In other words, "How shall I now *respond* to this indescribable gift that God has miraculously poured into me through His Word and Sacrament?" God's Word is living and active in us (Heb. 4:12); it has created in us a desire to respond with thankfulness and praise. "What then shall we do?" That's the question asked by the soul that has Jesus as its Savior.

And what sort of answer might you expect? When the crowds asked John, "What then shall we do?" he answered, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

What do all these answers boil down to? Be kind to the people in your life. Serve



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those right in front of you. Treat them well. Be a good mom and a good dad. Be a faithful wife and a caring husband. Conduct your business honestly and avoid taking advantage of others. Be content among your fellow humans.

Now, you could take that the wrong way. When God tells you to be kind and good to the people in your life, you could consider it as law and obligation or demand.

On the other hand, you can count it as a blessing and a gift when God tells you to be kind and good to the people in your life. Think of the people you encounter everyday as gifts to you from God – given to you so that the living and active power of His Word doesn't need to be bottled up inside you (Jer. 20:9). A hot water tank has a pressure release valve. A good pond has an overflow, a dam has a spillway. You have people – those whom God has placed in your life. The people God has gifted to you give His Word a place to go as it does its good work within you.

Remember: God's Word is living and active. It does more than neutralize the viperous poison of your sin. It also produces within you "fruit in keeping with repentance." It motivates you to do something. So the question, "What then shall we do?" really just looks for the fruit produced by the Means of Grace, considers what shape that fruit might take, and then extends that fruit in the direction that God provides – to the *people* that God provides.

"What then shall [you] do?" Thank God for the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Thank God for the fruit He bears in you through His Word. Thank God for the opportunities He gives to live as His child in the world. And then go and live. Be blessed and be a blessing . . . to the glory of God and the eternal benefit of your neighbor. In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen