

## Oh, to Have a Friend Like John!

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What makes someone a friend? Is it someone you spend time with? Share your secrets with? Have everything in common with? There are even “levels” to friendship. Acquaintances, friends, great friends, best friends, even BFFs (best friends forever.) But what truly makes someone your “best” friend?

I’ve come to appreciate something about the group of people that I would call my “best friends.” They’re not afraid to say the truth, even if it may sting a little. In our gospel lesson for today, we see that John the Baptist is the best friend a person could have. Oh, that we all had a friend like John! He didn’t hold back from preaching the truth about sin, but he also tells us the good news about Jesus.

### I. A FRIEND WHO DOESN’T HOLD BACK

The Jews realized that what John was saying must be important. They came out from the city to see this man in the wilderness, to hear what he had to say, and even to be baptized. We’re not told how often these people came to see them, or exactly who might have been in the crowd. It didn’t matter. John cuts to the chase.

**John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"** Among this crowd that came out to John, there were Pharisees. He doesn’t call them “friends” or “brothers and sisters.” **You brood of vipers!** These vipers were dangerous, and deadly. The Pharisees rejection of Jesus was far deadlier than the poison of any snake! These men had great influence, and many followers. Because they rejected Jesus, many of their followers also did likewise.

**Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?** Nobody had told them that rejecting Jesus was sinful, and that God’s judgment was coming. Did they simply follow the other crowds coming to John? Was their conscience nagging them in the back of their minds? This **coming wrath** that John speaks of has a close connection to him calling the Jews vipers. In his day, and it still is sometimes done today, a farmer would burn the stubble in their fields that was left behind after a harvest to prepare the field for the next planting season. As the fire moved through the field, nests of vipers and other snakes were driven out of their homes, only to be consumed by the fire. There was very little warning for them, and so few snakes escaped that fire. They knew exactly what John was telling them. John made clear to them what they had not know before. God’s judgment was coming, and because the people had rejected Jesus they faced destruction as well.

Before the people could come up with excuses, John shows them that their “escape route” could not save them. He tells them, **And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.** The Jews believed that they were saved simply because they claimed to be a physical descendant of Abraham. That doesn’t matter in God’s eyes. He could make descendants of Abraham from stones if he wanted to!

Now we might say that we’re nothing like those Pharisees, but we’re also guilty of rejecting Jesus. How is that possible? We all believe in Jesus, so how could we reject him!? Well, if we don’t like a portion of Scripture, and chose to ignore it, that’s rejecting Jesus. When we want to tell God we know better than him, in our sinful pride we reject Jesus. In reality, every sin is a rejection of Jesus, because we take that sin, and make it our God, breaking the first commandment.

Like the Jews, what excuses do we come up with? How do we try to convince ourselves that we have an escape route from the **coming wrath**? We might say, “What I’ve done isn’t that bad,” or “I’m a child of God. I can get away can get away with sin. I don’t need to keep all the commandments all the time.” John’s words to the Jews show us that faith in God is more than just “lip-service.” It’s more than just saying it. Faith produces fruit, good fruit.

It’s **fruit in keeping with repentance.** What exactly is repentance? Well in our reading from last week, we heard that repentance is a change of heart. It’s a 180 degree turn from a life of sin back to God. John’s words here add on to this picture. Repentance is more than just saying “I’m sorry” to someone when we have wronged them. It’s also a change in our actions as well.

We can call this change in action the “fruit” of repentance. Trees produce fruit. Faith in Jesus produces repentance. Repentance produces actions according to God’s will. But, like the old Wendy’s commercial,

where's the fruit? We are still sinners, and we all make mistakes each and every day. We don't always produce this **fruit in keeping with repentance**. We're guilty of these same sins that John condemned the Jews of in his day. Pride, greed, works-righteousness...

And what is the result of this failure to produce this fruit? Well John says that **the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire**. John isn't just using picture language to scare the people into doing the right thing. The ax is there. This is urgent. This ax isn't only for those outside of the church. It's for us as well.

God is patient, but his patience does not last forever. He wants all people to be saved. He wants all to learn about Jesus and believe in him. So God sent us a friend like John, who doesn't leave us fleeing the flames without hope. Today, on "Gaudate" Sunday, that is certainly something to rejoice about! Our friend must first use the law to show us our sin, and to lead us to sorrow. Only then does he follow it up with the powerful message of the gospel! Our "best friend" John tells us the good news, and that is certainly something that we can rejoice in!

## II. A FRIEND WHO TELLS YOU THE GOOD NEWS

Hear again a portion of today's text. **The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.**

Jesus is the Messiah. He is coming! Rejoice! He lived a perfect life, so perfect that..., always producing the good fruit that God demands of us. He took our sins, and put them on his shoulders, carrying them just like he carried his own cross up to Golgotha. He took the "ax" that was meant for us. He endured God's wrath, so that we might escape the eternal flames of hell. By his wounds, our sinful, rebellious hearts are healed.

How have we been healed? Well, Jesus gives us this gift of faith and forgiveness through baptism. It's a happy coincidence that we just so happen to have a baptism today on the Sunday that this reading comes up. What better opportunity is there to remind ourselves what baptism is, and the blessings that it gives to us!

John preached a baptism of repentance. He pointed to Jesus, the Lamb of God, the one who would take away the sin of the world. This baptism that John preached and performed is the very same baptism that we practice today! Baptism creates that faith in Jesus, washes our sins away. Faith in Jesus changes our hearts from sinful rebellion to love for God, and that is what leads to the fruit of repentance.

What a friend John was to point us all to Jesus. Unfortunately, the people he preached to mistook his identity for someone else. **The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.** The people thought John was Jesus. His powerful message of repentance may have reminded them of many of the promises that had been made about the coming Messiah. But John points them to the truth, to the one whose sandals John was not fit to tie. John keeps the focus on Jesus. We have our identity, everything that defines us and drives our words and actions, in Christ. We want to avoid becoming too focused on things like who performed a baptism, or how amazing a sermon was. Christ is the Savior. He is the focus of our whole lives!

Through our baptism, God grants us faith that focuses on the salvation that we have in Christ. Because we have this certainty in our salvation, the natural question that flows from this is, "What next? How can I give thanks to God?" Or in the words of the Jews, "**What should we do then?**" John gives several specific examples of what the fruit of repentance looks like. Giving a tunic to someone without one when you have two. Not being greedy, or blackmailing anyone, but showing God's love to their neighbor.

These things may seem obvious, but what about us? Jesus fixes our eyes on him. He reminds us of our forgiveness through our baptism. Through Word and Sacrament, we are given the strength we need to fight sin and the devil! So when we sin against our neighbor, it's more than just saying "I'm sorry." There's also a change in our hearts and in our actions. We ask them for forgiveness, and then do all we can to keep from making the same mistakes and strive to serve them in love. Through our baptism, through the faith that Jesus created through it, God strengthens us to keep bearing these good gifts of faith.

Our good friend John shows us that we have much to rejoice about. He points us to our VBF. Very Best friend, our Savior Jesus. We rejoice in our Savior, who took the ax that was meant for us. We rejoice in our baptism, as it is a daily reminder of the forgiveness of our sins, and that we are a part of God's family of believers. Rejoice and live in your baptism, and by your baptism as you produce the good fruits of your faith in Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.