

He Delights in Showing Clemency 2025  
Micah 7:7, 18-20 Luke 3:15-18, 21-22

I was talking about grace and Communion with my mother one time,  
and she told me a story about my older brother, about when he  
was old enough to join the church and allowed to take Communion.  
But our pastor's stark warning against taking Communion unworthily,  
and knowing that sometimes he did sin, so terrified my brother,  
that he was afraid to participate in celebrating the sacrament.

When my mother mentioned that concern to our pastor,  
he replied, "Good, that's probably a good thing."

His perspective was very much in line with John the Baptist,  
who, with severe language called out demanding repentance,  
warning that the coming Messiah meant harsh judgement, vs. 16-17

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is  
in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary;  
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

That phrase, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire",  
is often taken as a direct reference to burning forever in hell.

In response to the fear and dread of that harsh divine judgment,  
John preached repentance, of changing one's direction in life,  
turning away from human sin, corruption and moral complacency.

In his most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God",  
the Puritan preacher, Johnathan Edwards described it this way,  
that the unfaithful and ungodly are actually dangling  
by a very narrow thread over the pits of fiery hell,  
certainly, a most terrifying image.

But continuing with the Luke passage, we read in the next verse, vs. 18,

So, with many other exhortations, **he proclaimed the good news** to the people.

My confusion is that the way John describes the coming of the Messiah,  
makes me wonder, so how and where is there Good News in that?

And how can I really be certain and sure  
that I am among the wheat to be gathered,  
and not of the chaff about to be burned?

There is a Biblical Institute just outside the city of Jerusalem,  
and their mission is to teach and provide physical examples-models  
of how things mentioned in Scripture would have really looked,  
such as a sheepfold, a wine press & setting of the Last Supper.

When I read this Luke passage,  
I am reminded of their demonstration of a threshing floor.  
It was a paved circle of flat stones, a round and very smooth floor  
about 40 feet across with a lip or barrier running along the edge.

The harvested grain was first spread out across the threshing floor.  
Next, a man would stand on the threshing sled,  
which was made up of several boards fastened together  
with sharp stones pounded into place underneath the sled.

Then a mule would drag the threshing sled with a man standing on it  
around and around the threshing floor  
which would crush and break open the heads of grain.

Then taking advantage of the afternoon prevailing winds,  
with a large wooden pitch fork, a winnowing fork,  
the crushed wheat would be tossed upward into the wind.

The waste or chaff would be blown away  
and the heavier grain would fall back onto the floor.

The grain would be swept and gathered into bags  
so it could be used, which was the whole point.

The primary goal of winnowing or separating the grain from the chaff,  
was not to destroy or burn the chaff,  
but it's to save the wheat, to preserve the grain to be useful.

Many interpret this passage as judgement and separation,  
the beloved children of God from those who are not.

But Luke was written primarily to gentile Christians.

It is specifically addressed to Theophilus  
which in the Greek means, "lover of God",  
so, a message of harsh judgement may not be a good fit.

I believe there is a deeper and more gracious message  
than separating the good from those destined for hell.

I see this text as more about transformation and healing,  
repentance as the process of removing the chaff  
so that the wheat can be used as intended,  
all of which is far more consistent with the life & ministry of Jesus.

We know that all during his life, his teaching and ministry,  
that Jesus never rejected or burned any sinners as chaff,  
but that he ate with them, he healed and welcomed them,  
and ever asked the Father to forgive the men crucifying him.

Jesus is the Good News in a way that John had not proclaimed.

Jesus does not match the harsh Messiah that John described.

However, Jesus does match the Messiah that Micah described, vs. 18-19

*Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression  
of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because*

he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Do you see that it's not that God has gone soft on sin,  
but that God deals with sin by healing the sinner?,  
and that through the Holy Spirit present and guiding us  
to change, draw near and make more faithful decisions.

In our world, and the way our culture decides and operates,  
successful winners are celebrated and those who fail are rejected.

**The good news is that the Lord our God does not operate that way.**

God never rejects us, even when damaged, broken or mistaken,  
nor does Jesus set us aside when we struggle, mess up or fail.

The Lord does not reject the vulnerable, the broken or damaged,  
and our God will never cast us aside as worthless or useless.

The Lord God doesn't reject those folks who have issues and problems,  
or those who are still struggling and wounded, or difficult,  
or those who don't have it all together & figured out right now.

**Jesus doesn't even replace those who fail to live up to expectations.**

The call to repent is to free us from our past and the road we are on,  
to release us from the tyranny of a graceless conscience,  
by paving the way for us to live anew, so to begin again,  
by walking with God in a real & growing relationship.

**Repentance is what makes us capable  
of receiving God's grace and blessings into our lives.**

In Christ, wrath becomes mercy and judgement become healing & hope.

Now that is not the image of God that I grew up hearing in sermons.

Since God is omniscient and knows everything that I'd ever done,  
I'd always assumed God must be terribly disappointed with me  
because I'm far less faithful and obedient than I should be.

But clearly from God's perspective, God's intention and purpose,

**there is way more to our worthiness as those created by God,  
than just our successes, our wins, accomplishments & victories,  
or any of the other ways the world determines our value & worth.**

The ministry of Jesus was always about reaching out with God's grace  
toward the lost and outcast, and to those this world would reject,  
such as unworthy lepers, the lame, the blind & tax collectors.

The Good News is that God never, not ever abandons or gives up on us,  
**and that's the wonderful message of grace that Jesus proclaimed.**

The Gospel of Luke describes Jesus coming as had been long promised  
into a cruel and violent world with a message of hope and promise,  
a new vision of God's cleansing, healing and saving purpose  
with power and truth that can overcome defeat and despair.

All four of the gospels make it a point, to talk about John the Baptist  
by the Jordan river preparing the way for the coming of Christ.

The baptism practiced by John was about personal repentance,  
a symbol, a visible sign of repenting and the washing away of sin,

**but with Jesus, baptism will take on a new meaning.**

Jesus redefines the baptism of repentance as practiced by John.

Jesus was sinless, the only one who ever fully obeyed the Lord God.

So, he had no need for repentance or any cleansing by baptism.

Yes, John's ministry was a baptism of repentance and cleansing,

but with Jesus, baptism became something more about grace,

a sign of God's love, invitation, and redeeming purpose.

What that means, is that Jesus submitted to baptism in obedience,

embracing his future, the Father's plan and purpose for sending him,

and it was commissioning Jesus to begin his public ministry.

In baptism, Jesus began the work that he completed on the cross,

as a sign that the coming kingdom of God was arriving and present,

a journey and process for the redemption of humankind.

When we as Christians are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ,

it is a sign of God's love and grace, healing and saving purpose,

so that in Christ, we are the beloved children of the Lord,

and our beginning to live & grow into that relationship,

**not because of what we've done, but by what God has done for us.**

**For Presbyterians,**

**baptism is a window through which the grace of God is revealed,**

as through that grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit,

we can live useful, and meaningful, and faithful lives,

**something like the bags of wheat gathered at the threshing floor,**

**gathered and ready to be useful as intended.**

The text isn't about God coming to judge & punish us, but to save us,  
and through that grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
we can live useful, and meaningful, and faithful lives  
that proclaim God's endless love, grace and compassion,  
and reflect that light into this world's darkness.

The message we are called by God to live, to reflect and make known,  
and the wonderful truth that Christians are called to proclaim,  
is that God loves us, and continues to love us & shows grace  
regardless of our sins, or our mistakes or failures.

In a world and culture  
that tells us we're nobodies whose lives don't really matter,  
our baptism is a wonderful sign of God's declaration  
that we are God's children filled with the Holy Spirit.

Through Jesus, baptism has now been given a new purpose and meaning,  
as a sign that God loves us enough to become one with us, vs. 21-22  
... and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven  
was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.  
And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well  
pleased."

The phrase, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove,  
looks ahead to when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples  
as tongues of fire giving them power to speak at Pentecost.  
**The baptism of Jesus looks ahead to the ministry & mission of the Church.**

Through his baptism, Jesus began the work of hope and salvation,  
as a sign of God declaring to us that **we are** God's children,  
that **we are** the beloved, with whom God is also well pleased,

**not because of what we've done, but by what God has done for us.**

The baptism of Jesus is a statement and our reminder  
that wherever we go, whatever we do or is done to us,  
God continues to love us, to welcome us and hold onto us.

In our harsh & angry world, and our damaged - destructive culture  
that tells us we're nobodies whose lives don't really matter,  
our worship and the sacraments of both baptism and Communion  
point as signs toward God's declaration and assurance  
that we are indeed God's very precious children,  
blessed by grace and filled with the Holy Spirit...

... just as we read in Psalm 103:8-10,

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. **He does not deal with us according to our sins**, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, **so great is his steadfast love...**

And that the same grace that is signified by baptism & Communion,  
the powerful, unfathomable, wonderful mystery of God's love,  
of God's healing and saving grace through which God claims us  
and empowers us with the Spirit to do as the Lord requires of us...

... so, the question is, what does it mean and how should we respond  
to the gracious truth **that God chose to love and bless each of us?**

**and is it not that we freely extend grace, just as we have received?**