patience with people who claim the reward without putting in the effort. John has no tolerance for those bad apples masquerading as faithful fruit.

To their credit, the people listening to John take him seriously. They ask: “What then should we do?” (v. 10). They want to know, “How can we show people we care?” John has a ready answer. *Sharing is caring*. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (v. 11). John invites the people to perform ordinary acts of grace. Authentic Christian living begins with sharing what we have. As it should!

*We share because Jesus shared*. Sharing is the whole point of Christmas. God shared Jesus with the world. Jesus marked his life and ministry with acts of sharing and deeds of service. Jesus fed the hungry (Matthew 14:13-21), healed the sick (Matthew 8:16), and spent time with the marginalized (Luke 19:1-10).

*We share like the early church shared*. The apostles appointed deacons to make sure that widows did not go hungry (Acts 6:1-7). Some Christians sold their property to help those in need: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common…There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:32, 34). Sharing was a defining characteristic of the early church. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). No wonder that they earned “the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:47).

*We share because sharing is a biblical mandate*. God commands us to share because God knows that some of us are tighter than a fiddle string. The writer of Hebrews urges us: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (13:16). The apostle Paul advises Timothy to “command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). These are just a few examples; the Bible has plenty to say about sharing.

John’s message was so powerful that even the revenue agents in the crowd got nervous. They wondered what they should do to improve their own produce section. John had an answer ready for them, too: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (v. 14). In other words, “Don’t be greedy. You already have more than you can say grace over; be content with what you have.” John invites all of us to perform ordinary acts of grace. There is nothing wrong with wanting or possessing nice things, unless the need to have them possesses us. Moderation is important.

Here’s an example. In-N-Out Burger is a 60-year-old company with a cult-like following among people who like fresh, delicious hamburgers. (Unfortunately for us, the closest In-N-Out burger restaurant is 855 miles away in Denver, CO!) What is unusual about In-N-Out is that you cannot own a franchise because the owner does not do franchising. Nor has In-N-Out gone public, resisting the allure of corporate greed. Throughout its 60-year history, the simple menu remains unchanged: cheeseburgers, hamburgers, fries (one size only), milkshakes (chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, one size only), and pop.

Pat Lencioni, a pioneer of the organizational health movement, loves the simplicity of In-N-Out Burger: “Imagine the temptations that the executives at In-N-Out have felt over the years to add something new. In addition to wanting to take advantage of trends and fads, they very easily could have decided they were bored offering the same menu. Why not add a chicken sandwich? Or shamrock shakes in March? Or a Mexican pizza-melt? Every other restaurant is adding new items to keep customers interested. Weren’t they worried they’d fall behind?”

In-N-Out focuses on one simple goal: to make “the freshest, most consistent high-quality hamburger in the world.” It avoids the temptation of the “shiny new thing,” about which John the Baptist warned his audience. John knew that greed is not a *money* issue; it is a *heart* issue. “Collect no more than you need,” John told the tax collectors. Following this simple rule, we will go a long way in recovering the joy of simplicity.

There were Roman soldiers in the crowd that day, too; standing on the fringe, keeping an eye on things so the crowd didn’t become an unruly mob. Now, they edged closer. They asked John, “‘And we, what should we do?’ John said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages’” (v. 14). Then as now, most law enforcement officers are good people who risk their lives to ensure public safety; but there are always a few bad apples who behave badly and take advantage of their power. The same was true in Jesus’ day. Some corrupt soldiers offered citizens the equivalent of a protection racket. Here, John invites the soldiers to perform ordinary acts of grace.

John reminds all of us that we should *gladden* the hearts of others, rather than *grind them down*; we ought to bless others rather than oppress them; we have a duty to lift the fallen, rather than kick them when they are down. Christians encourage others. Christians deal in joy. Christians do not extort but exhort. As Christ’s followers we do this by performing small acts of kindness and ordinary acts of grace.

Each of us is gifted by God’s Spirit so that we may produce good fruit. God is not impressed with the stink of moldy fruit left untasted on the shelf. God is offended by religious fruits who look attractive but who are rotten to their core. God is disgusted by uncontrolled greed and sickened by acts of oppression. God is looking for good fruit. God is looking for produce that is fresh, clean, wholesome, and healthy. When God appears, what will God find while walking through our life’s produce section? God hopes to find the fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

To paraphrase C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, “God comes in to take a look, perhaps to make some improvement. At first, perhaps, you can understand what is going on. God is checking to see if the floors are clean, the air conditioning is right, and the flow of mist over the cauliflower is adjusted to the right setting, and so on. You suspected that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But God starts pushing display cases first in one direction, then another, and does so in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is God up to? The explanation is that God is remodeling, rearranging, and restoring the produce section — perhaps the entire store — quite differently from the display you are accustomed to. God is adding a new checkout lane here, stacking extra boxes there, creating designs and island displays you’d never thought of. You thought you were being made into a decent little convenience store, but instead, God is building a glorious megastore and intends to come in and take over management of it himself!”

We have 16 more shopping days until Christmas Day. Perhaps some of those days can be spent taking stock of what is sitting inside our produce sections, what has reached its expiration date and should be discarded, and what might be shared with a neighbor in need. Bear fruit that is worthy: worthy of repentance, worthy of a lifestyle change, and worthy of the world’s attention.

Prayer: Fruitful God, You commissioned us to go and make disciples of all nations. Guide us, by your Spirit, that we may become more effective representatives of your holy Word, showing others the way to You. Help us see the way forward when circumstances become difficult and enable us to discern well and rightly when the way is not apparent, that we may be examples of the goodness of Christ to the world. Inspire us to do more acts of grace in Christ’s name. Amen.

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**The Produce Section**

Sunday, December 8, 2024 [Luke 3:7-18](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+3%3a7-18&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

If you visited our local Walmart recently, you know that there is a massive overhaul of the layout underway. It took me twenty years to know where to find things; now I must start all over again! Many grocery stores are reorganizing their entrances so the first thing you see is a softly lit area with hard wood floors and produce bins filled with colorful polished apples, gleaming purple eggplants, leafy green cabbages, mounds of white onions, and golden honeydew melons. Large barrels overflowing with a variety of nuts, beans, granola, and trail mix entice you in from the perimeter and channel you through the aisles.

Grocery stores are doing this because our palates are becoming more adventurous. According to industry sources, “interest has continued to grow in heirloom and exotic varieties of fruits and vegetables.” This means we are not just shopping for broccoli anymore; we want the unique and lesser-known Romanesco broccoli or the fancy sounding broccolini. We want dragon fruit, blood-red oranges, and watermelon radishes. Who wants to buy a boring white cauliflower when you can get a purple cauliflower, right?

We used to be happy if the grocery store offered several varieties of apples: Granny Smith, Golden Delicious, Red Delicious, Fuji, and Gala. Today, consumers want more options. Among the top 10 best-selling apple varieties in America, you may find Cosmic Crisp, Piñata, RubyFrost, and Opal. These days, produce in the market is driven by the tastes of the consumer.

John the Baptist has a lot to say about what we followers of Jesus are offering a consumer-oriented world in which the customers are getting increasingly bored, picky, disinterested, and even irritated with faith. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance,” John thunders at us in verse 8. If the faith-product we offer is not appealing, we need to produce better fruit, fruit that is *worthy*: worthy of repentance, worthy of a lifestyle change, worthy of our attention.

Grocers tell you that locally sourced fresh foods are what we need. Shoppers are concerned with sustainability issues, and they like the latest artisanal organic trends. But John takes us in other directions. Imagine John shaking a finger in our face, saying, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’” (v. 8). He scolds his Jewish compatriots, saying that they can no longer slough off ethical and moral responsibility by falling back on their “chosen people” status. John’s meaning is clear: we cannot expect to flaunt a brand and get away with it, unless our actions back up our words. John has no