



The Forerunner to Jesus Christ (Part 2)

Matthew 3:7-12

1. John Rebukes the Religious Leaders (verses 7-10)

2. John Compares His Ministry to the Ministry of the Messiah (verses 11-12)

In our exposition of Matthew, we have encountered John the Baptist, known as the forerunner of Jesus Christ. John's ministry was primarily a ministry of pointing to Jesus as the Messiah. We ought to think of him as a giant billboard along the side of the road, directing our attention to the Messiah.

Last week, we looked at John the Baptist, the **man** (verses 1,3,4). We saw that he came preaching in the wilderness (verse 1), dressed in a garment of camel's hair and sustained on a diet of locusts and wild honey (verse 4). We saw that he was the one of whom Isaiah foretold would be "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!" (verse 3). That was the man: the preacher, who Isaiah prophesied would come.

Further, we looked at his message (verse 2). His **message** was simple, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John's task was to point out the Messiah, who had been born as a king. His kingdom had arrived. The people were to prepare themselves by "repenting." For those who responded by repenting, John baptized them "in" water. It was his baptizing ministry that gave him his name, "John the Baptist." That was his message: repentance.

Finally, last week, we looked at the **response** to John's message. In verses 5 and 6, we saw great revival. Jerusalem, all Judea, and the district around which John preached went out to him. Many were being baptized "as they were confessing their sins." His ministry was effective in bringing many within the Jewish nation to their knees in acknowledgement of their sins and their great need for forgiveness.

In verse 7, we saw great hypocrisy. The Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to him for baptism. John turned to them and rebuked them strongly. He exhorted them to "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (verse 8). These religious leaders were nothing more than external, religious, white-washed tombs, who thought they needed no repentance. They were hypocrites, who wanted to join the action. John really lays into them with his stunning indictment upon them. His comments to them are far from kind. Yet, these religious leaders needed to be rebuked. The response to John's message was mixed: on the one hand, there was great revival, on the other hand, there was great hypocrisy.

Last week, we only started looking at John's accusation against the religious leaders, who came for baptism without repentance. Tonight, I would like to take a fresh run at these verses and look at John's charge against them in its fullness. Let me read the text for us this evening, ...

Matthew 3:7-12

7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

8 "Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance;

9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

10 "And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 "And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now, in this passage, we see that the dividing point is found at the beginning of verse 11, with the words, "As for me." In the first four verses, John is rebuking the Pharisees and Sadducees for coming for baptism without repentance. In the last two verses, John speaks about his own ministry as it relates to the ministry of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. It seems appropriate then, to divide this passage into two sections.

1. John Rebukes the Religious Leaders (verses 7-10)

2. John Compares His Ministry to the Ministry of the Messiah (verses 11-12)

Let's look at our first point.

1. John Rebukes the Religious Leaders (verses 7-10)

He begins his rebuke with a question. It's a question of amazement, really. It's a question, which was meant to stir within the stony hearts of

these Pharisees and Sadducees to convict them of their own motives before the Lord. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" This rebuke would have come as a shock to these Pharisees and Sadducees.

First of all, the religious leaders of the day were highly respected and honored. When Herod had questions about matters pertaining to religion, these were the people who were called (Matt. 2:4). They sat in the seat of Moses, passing judgment upon others (Matt. 23:2). They sat in the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues (Matt. 23:6). They were greeted with respectful greetings in the marketplace (Matt. 23:7). They loved being called, "Rabbi" (Matt. 23:7). They had a reputation for being super-righteous law-keepers. They were the embodiment of the righteous, who would boldly stand in opposition to in-roads of the Roman culture, which was saturated with idolatry and unrighteousness. They possessed great zeal for these things (Phil. 3:6; Rom. 10:2).

In addition to being religiously righteous, they were expecting Elijah and Messiah to come on the scene. They had an expectation that when the forerunner would come, the Messiah would also come and they would finally be delivered from the hands of their enemies. When Zacharias, the high priest, was told that his son, John, would be the forerunner to the Messiah, he prophesied, saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, ... Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES, AND FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US; ... To grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear. ... To guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:68,71,74,79).

When John the Baptist initially came on the scene and the Pharisees caught wind of his baptizing work, they certainly would have been curious. Perhaps they were hoping that this would be the time when they would finally be set free from their enemies. As a result of the crowds that were coming to John and the response he was receiving, they felt the need to investigate John's claims. So, according to the gospel of John, they sent scouts to question John the Baptist to understand from him exactly who he was. Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? John simply responded, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:23).

Thus, these super-religious leaders came to John and received this stunning rebuke, ... "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

These religious leaders certainly weren't expecting a rebuke like this. These were the high and respected religious leaders. I would venture to say that the Jews rarely, if ever, spoke this way to these religious leaders. The modern day equivalent to the Pharisees is the Catholic church, with its entire religious system or rules and regulations to make oneself right with God. Who today, goes up to the Pope, (or one of his representatives, the Cardinals), and calls him a terrible name. Even if these religious people today are seen as false and hypocritical, they are often treated with respect today, as the Pharisees of long ago were also.

It must have been a shock to them! John didn't greet them with the usual respectable greetings. He showed no respect to them at all. I believe that John rebukes them, because he understood why they were coming to him. They weren't coming because they felt like they needed to flee from anything themselves. They didn't think that the wrath of God would come upon them. They thought that the wrath of God was coming upon the Romans. They thought that, perhaps, they were finally going to be delivered them from their bondage.

They were coming to see if this was indeed the forerunner. Because if John was the forerunner, certainly, the Jewish leaders would want to join him in the fight against the Roman oppression. They were certainly looking to team up with the forerunner to fight for their cause. But John shocked them by asking, ... "why are you fleeing from the wrath to come?"

I don't believe that they had in mind that God's wrath was coming upon them, and that they needed to flee. They thought themselves to be righteous and that God's wrath certainly wouldn't come upon them. They didn't think that God was angry with them. They thought that God was angry with the oppressive Romans. They didn't think of their own sins and thus, didn't come with repentance. They reasoned correctly in their minds, "if God isn't angry with my sin, there is no need to repent." Their problem was that they didn't realize that God was angry with their sin. They weren't as righteous as they thought themselves to be.

This is the very thing that inhibits many from coming to Jesus Christ -- they think themselves to be good and acceptable in God's sight. People today say, "I haven't murdered anybody. I don't cheat on my wife. I'm basically honest." Like the Pharisees of old, people need to see their sin as an offense before God and cry to God for mercy. But, self-righteous people, like the Pharisees, have no need for repentance, because they have no need to flee from God's wrath, because they have little sin in which to anger God.

But notice one more thing about John's question. It points out the nearness of God's wrath. It is soon and coming, "the wrath to come." God's wrath was wrapped up in the coming of the kingdom of heaven. "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand [i.e. it is near]" (verse 2). The Messiah was quickly coming on the scene. John describes the nearness of God's wrath in verse 10. "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John pictured God's wrath as an axe that was ready to cut down every unfruitful tree.

When you cut down a tree with an axe, you first line it up where you want to strike it. As a baseball player takes a few practice swings before he prepares for the pitch to come, so also the lumberjack lines up his axe where he wants to strike the tree in preparation for beginning to cut it down. John pictures God the lumberjack, ready to chop down the tree. Such is the picture of the nearness of God's wrath upon those who aren't bearing good fruit. When a golfer approaches his ball to address it, it isn't long before the golf ball is disturbed from its present lie and shot toward the hole. Such was the coming wrath of God. Those trees which bore no fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire. Such was the nearness of God's wrath.

This is where God is upon the unbelieving world. We should look at people as walking trees with no fruit. God's axe is ready to cut them down. But God is patient. Waiting for repentance to come with its subsequent fruit.

When these Pharisees and Sadducees had gone out to John, John identified three errors of these religious leaders.

Error #1 - They thought themselves to be good, but they were really wicked (verse 7).

John calls them a "brood of vipers" -- "a bunch of snakes." Literally, John calls them a "offspring of vipers." Now, this wasn't a compliment. A snake wasn't particularly the most favorable of animals.

- The first time we see a snake in the Bible, it is Satan who comes to tempt Eve (Gen. 3:1-4; Rev. 12:9)
- David describes the wicked as those who "have venom like the venom of a serpent" (Ps. 58:4).
- David also describes violent men as those who "sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of a viper is under their lips" (Ps. 140).
- Solomon speaks of the evil enchantment of wine as bites of the serpent and the stings of the viper (Prov. 23:32).
- Jesus said, "if [a son] shall ask for a fish, [the father] will not give him a snake, will he?" (Matt. 7:10).

I don't think that this imagery would have been lost upon the Pharisees. They certainly wouldn't have understood this to be a compliment. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus uses the exact same words to describe the Pharisees, "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good?" They thought themselves to be good, but they were, in fact, evil. In Matthew 23, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. He described how they did all of the external things, which appeared to be righteous, but then denounced them saying, "you serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?" (Matt. 23:33).

This is the danger of many across our land today. All of us are wicked to the core. We are all conceived into iniquity (Ps. 51:5). We go forth from the womb, speaking lies (Ps. 58:3). We cannot control our tongue (James 3:2). Our thoughts are dreadful. We lack supreme love for God (Matt. 22:37). We lack love for our neighbors (Matt. 22:39). And the Scripture declares that "There is none righteous, not even one. ... There is none who does good, there is not even one" (Rom. 3:10,12).

But today, many do not think themselves to be evil. They think themselves to be good, which leads to the next error of the religious leaders, ...

Error #2 - They bore no fruit, and thus, it showed they were unrepentant (verse 8).

This statement of John certainly would have been a shock to the Pharisees and Sadducees as well. "What do you mean we don't have any fruit?" These were the most righteous and religious of people. These religious leaders would have claimed that they had plenty of fruit. "Just look around John," they would have argued, "we keep the law better than anybody! What kind of fruit are you looking for, John?" John said, "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance."

I believe, primarily, that the fruit John is speaking about here is a brokenness before God and a genuine humility. Like I said last week, "Do you declare God to be just in your own condemnation?" If so, your heart will be broken. If so, you will walk in humility before God and before others. You will realize that you have nothing before Him in which to claim. This is the picture of the people who were coming for baptism. "they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confesses their sins" (verse 6). I believe that they were confessing their sin in general and in particular. I believe that this is primarily the fruit that John was looking for -- genuine humility. Thus, John refused to baptize these self-righteous religious leaders.

Note carefully that it wasn't because they were evil that he refused their baptism. He didn't refuse them because they were a wicked "brood of vipers." It was because they had no repentance. God doesn't call us to be perfect. God simply calls us to agree with Him in our own estimation of ourselves. We simply need to acknowledge our sin. We simply need to agree with God that our actions are wrong. We, like God, need to hate our sin. We, like God, ought not to be content in our sin. We should hate it. We should hate what it does to us. We should long to be free from it. That's the heart of repentance that the Pharisees lacked.

John brought these erring Pharisees back to the main point, "Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (verse 8). John even said, "I baptize you with water for repentance" (Matt. 3:11). But they had no repentance. So John refused baptism. Note that this is our standard for baptism also. When one repents from sin and believes in Jesus, genuine humility and confession of sins will manifest themselves. If not, there is no repentance or faith, which will cause us to refuse baptism for such people.

To these Pharisees, John refused to baptize them. They had no remorse for their sin. They had no hatred of their sin. They will face the very wrath they were fleeing from. As a result, Paul says, "Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5). As John said, "the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (verse 10). "Oh Pharisees! Oh Sadducees! You need to bear fruit, lest you come tumbling down. You have no fruit, because you have no repentance." May God protect Rock Valley Bible Church from falling into this error.

There was a third error of the religious leaders, ...

Error #3 - They were trusting in their heritage (verse 9).

If anything plagues the church across our land today, it is this error of trusting in our heritage. In verse 9, John will anticipate their objection. John said, "Do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (verse 9).

John knew that these Pharisees would object to His rebuke. These religious leaders would seek to claim their physical relationship to Abraham as reason that they were blessed in God's sight. Their understanding of the Bible was good. These religious leaders knew well that God had promised to bless Abraham and his descendants. They knew that Genesis 17 had said to Abraham, "I will establish My covenant

between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7).

John even agreed that the children of Abraham indeed were those who would be blessed greatly in God's sight. Notice that he didn't cast off a relationship to Abraham in his reply. He said, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." John's objections weren't over the blessing to the children of Abraham. In this he was agreed. John's objections were over the **identity** of the children. In this they disagreed. The religious leaders thought that their own physical heritage merited God's blessing: "We have Abraham for our father." But **their problem is that they falsely identified who the true sons of Abraham were.**

Paul addressed this same issue in Romans 9. In the first five verses of Romans 9, Paul is lamenting over the lostness of the nation of Israel. Though to them "belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises ..." (Rom. 9:4), they are still lost in their sins. "But," beginning at verse 6, "it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; (7) neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but **"THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED"** [a quote from Gen. 21:12] (8) That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants" (Rom. 9:6-8).

In other words, Paul is arguing that even back in Genesis, it wasn't the actual physical descendants of Abraham who will be blessed. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. But the promise didn't go to Ishmael, it went through Isaac. So, as verse 6 says, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." As verse 8 says, "the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."

In other words, heritage, though it be directly from the line of Abraham himself, doesn't necessarily mean that you are a child of the promise. The true sons of Abraham are the sons of the promise. In Romans 2, Paul says the same thing in a little bit different way. Paul writes, "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter" (Rom. 2:28-29). In other words, just because you are born of Israel and circumcised externally, according to the commandment of the Law, doesn't entitle you to be called a genuine "Jew," because "he is a Jew who is one inwardly."

This carries through to the church today. I don't care if you were baptized into the church. I don't care if you take communion in the church. I don't care if you have won all kinds of attendance records. It is the inward repentance toward God that ultimately matters. There are many people today, who would trust their heritage when it comes to their relationship with God. They trust that their parents were Christians. They trust that they were baptized as a little baby into the church. They trust that they have attended a certain church in a certain denomination their whole life. Their trust is wrong.

I can't tell you how many people I have spoken with who have said that have always been "Lutheran" or "Presbyterian" or "Methodist" or some other Christian denomination as if that makes them right with God. With these sorts of people, I have frequently asked them, "So, when did you become a Christian? How is that you came to trust in Jesus." More often than not, they get this inquisitive look on their face, as if to say, "Didn't I just tell you that I'm a Lutheran? What are you talking about, 'becoming a Christian'? I was born into the Christian religion and I have always been a Lutheran (or Presbyterian or Methodist or ...). Often, it tells me that they have placed their trust in the wrong place. They have placed their trust in their heritage, rather than in the mercy of God to be gracious to forgive a repentant sinner.

In the end, God won't look down upon our Christian heritage and say that was good enough. Will it bring blessings? Yes! Paul even speaks about "the advantage of the Jew" in the next verse (Romans 3:1). Paul says that the advantage is "great in every respect." There are blessings to being life-long members of churches and denominations. Furthermore, there is an amazing difference in those who grow up in church and those who do not. But one's Christian heritage doesn't mean that repentance has come into one's heart. In the end, God will look for fruit, which comes from repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, these are the errors for which John Rebukes the Religious Leaders (verses 7-10).

Error #1 - They thought themselves to be good, but they were really wicked (verse 7).

Error #2 - They bore no fruit, and thus, were unrepentant (verse 8).

Error #3 - They were trusting in their heritage (verse 9).

Let's look now at how ...

2. John Compares His Ministry to the Ministry of the Messiah (verses 11-12)

John will give us three characteristics of Jesus' ministry. In each of these characteristics, he will contrast his own ministry. The ministry of Jesus will be exalted. The ministry of John will be shown to be, in comparison, nothing.

Characteristic #1 - Messiah is Greater (verse 11a).

Listen to verse 11, "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals."

In that day, it was the business of the lowest of servants to remove the sandals from another. Think about the job around your house that is about the lowest in your mind -- the one that you would choose for your servant to do, rather than yourself. Perhaps it is washing the toilet or taking out the garbage or changing a diaper or scrubbing the floor or vacuuming the carpet or weeding the garden or ... In your own mind, pick the lowest and worst job you can imagine. This was taking off the sandals of your master. His feet would certainly be dirty from walking outside. His feet would be smelly as well. To take off his sandals, you would need to humble yourself and get down on all fours before him. Furthermore, your nose would find itself right next to his smelly, dirty feet.

When John compared himself to the Lord Jesus, he said that this was too honorable a task for him to do. John would have considered it an honor to do such lowly work, because Jesus was so great. Remember, John was just a finger pointing to the Messiah. When his work finished, he would disappear from the scene altogether. Once chapter 3 is finished, we see John in jail in chapter 11 and killed in chapter 14. John said it best, "[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Such was John's humility, but more importantly, such was Jesus' greatness!

Let's look at the 2nd characteristic ...

Characteristic #2 - Messiah's Work is Greater (verse 11b).

Look further in verse 11, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Notice that in this verse there are three baptisms in these verses: (1) John's baptism in water; (2) Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit; and (3) Jesus' baptism with fire.

John again puts his work low and Jesus' work high. He said, I baptize you with water for repentance. John's baptism wasn't anything supernatural. It wasn't anything that he forced or caused. He identified the repentance of others with this outward symbol of cleansing. But look what Jesus will do! Jesus will baptize in the Holy Spirit.

Notice two technical points. (1) the preposition in most translations, "with" is really the Greek word, en (en), which is best translated, "in." Just as John's baptism was "in" water (i.e. you were immersed), so also will Jesus baptize you "in" the Holy Spirit. (2) Jesus is the one baptizing. Nowhere in the Scripture does it speak of the Holy Spirit doing the baptizing. The Holy Spirit is the agent of the baptism. As John used water to baptize, so Jesus will use the Holy Spirit to baptize.

Now, you ask, "what does it mean, 'to be baptized in the Holy Spirit'?"

The best place to understand this is in Acts 1:5. Jesus had been with the disciples, teaching them over a period of 40 days (Acts 1:3). He told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit, which the Father had promised. Then, he said, in verse 5, "For John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." This came initially on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:4, it says, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance." This came also a few years later, when Peter preached at the household of the gentile, Cornelius, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message" (Acts 10:44).

I want you to notice, however, that Peter commented later upon what happened at Pentecost and to Cornelius and his household. In effect, Peter said that these verses fulfilled the promise of both Jesus and John. He said, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them [Cornelius and his household], just as He did upon us at the beginning [i.e. in Acts 2:4]. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Peter attributed this miraculous filling of the Holy Spirit with the Jews at Pentecost and with the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius. For the first time ever, Jesus was immersing (i.e. baptizing) people in the Holy Spirit.

But, I believe that the baptism of the Spirit goes even further than these initial miraculous events in the life of the church. I believe that the baptism of the Spirit extends to the entire ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks in Romans 8 about how the Holy Spirit dwells in believers (verses 9, 11). In 1 Corinthians 12:13, we are told that "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we are all made to drink of one Spirit." This is all a manifestation of the promise Jesus gave in his upper room discourse in John 13-17. Jesus spoke of Him leaving so that the Holy Spirit could come and help the church.

We live today in an era when the Holy Spirit indwells us and helps us and empowers us in our lives. Paul says that it is "by the Spirit" that we "put to death the deeds of the body" (Rom. 8:13). The work of the Spirit saturates the life of the church today. Other scripture says that God "has given us of His Spirit" (1 John 4:13). "The Spirit of God indwells you" (1 Cor. 3:16). "God has sent forth His Spirit in our hearts" (Gal. 4:6).

So, when John speaks about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, I believe that primarily he was probably talking about the initial outpouring of God's Spirit upon His people: to indwell them and empower them. But I also believe that he alludes to the entire work of the Spirit in the life of the church: to sanctify and purify the church.

This baptism is a sovereign baptism. Remember, the point is that Jesus' work is greater than that of John the Baptist's work. Anybody can dunk a person in water. Anybody can stand in a baptistery, and say a few nice religious things and get the other person all wet. But let me ask you, can you dunk a person in the Holy Spirit? You can get a person wet, but can you fill a person with the Holy Spirit? Of course not. Such work is the sovereign pleasure of God to perform. This is the point of John the Baptist.

Messiah is Greater. Messiah's Work is Greater. Also, ...

Characteristic #3 - Messiah's Judgment is Greater (verse 12).

We have a third baptism we haven't yet looked at. It is the baptism in fire! (verse 11). I believe that this alludes to the judging work of Jesus Christ, as verse 10 and 12 outlines. Notice that in each of these verses, the mention of fire is mentioned in the context of final judgment. I believe that verse 11 is communicating the same thing. Verse 12 reads, "And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

The picture here is that of a farmer, who has been gathering his produce from the field. He has threshed the wheat stalks, but now needs to divide the wheat from the chaff. He does this using his winnowing fork. He throws this mixture in the air. The lighter chaff will blow away in the wind. He will take his wheat into the barn. But the chaff, he will take and "burn up ... with unquenchable fire."

Jesus' judgment is greater than John, because he judges with finality and with eternity and with certainty. John could only make a judgment of character. John could only discern whether a man possessed the fruits of repentance or not and simply make a declaration about them by choosing to baptize them or not. But Jesus takes this to another level. He will gather the wheat into the barn. He will burn the chaff with fire.

Jesus often used this imagery to describe his judgment at the end of the age. In Matthew, chapter 13, when Jesus was describing what he would do with the tares which grew up like the wheat, he said, "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 13:41-42). Later on, Jesus described his judgment as that of bringing in fish of every kind in a big net. The good fish were separated from the bad fish. Jesus said, "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the **furnace of fire**; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 13:49-50).

In judgment, Jesus will separate the good from the bad. The good will be delivered into the barn. The bad will be burned. The good will be delivered on account of their genuine repentance. The bad by their lack of fruit. Verse 12 gives us a most terrifying picture of what will happen to those who are unrepentant. The figure that John gives is indeed a picture, just as the winnowing fork, the threshing floor, and the barn are all pictures. But it pictures **an awful reality: forever burning, but never being consumed**.

Hell is eternal torment. Hell is eternal burning. Hell is real. It isn't a myth, which angry preachers have invented to achieve their ends of scaring people into repentance. Hell is very real. No language can express its awfulness! No mind can comprehend its torment. I simply press it before you -- it is a place of unquenchable fire, forever burning, but never being consumed!

Hell is a place of no hope. Suppose the earth were sand, rather than land and sea. Suppose further, that every 1,000 years a bird would come to the earth and carry away one grain of sand. Suppose further that the suffering in hell would last as long as the earth had any sand. This would make the suffering tolerable, for there would be hope to an end. But, alas, there is no hope when the fire forever burns and is never consumed (Summarization of Thomas Watson's thoughts found on page 137 of The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations).

"The coming of God's reign either demands repentance or brings judgment" (D. A. Carson, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8, p. 103).

As we close, let us look at Luke 13:6-9. "And He [began] telling this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, [fine;] but if not, cut it down.'"

Such is the picture of the patience of God. God doesn't simply put the axe at the root of the tree and start hacking away. God is patient, waiting for the fruit of repentance to come. For Israel, God was patient. For three years, Jesus walked among His own people, calling on them to repent. But the day came, when Jesus wept for the hardness of Jerusalem.

For us, God has been patient. Perhaps God is right now being patient with you. I call you today to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, the only One who can save us from the wrath to come!

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