

Jesus the Baptist (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

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. (Luke 3:7–18)

Expositional Preaching and the Subject of Hell

- A. One of the things I love about preaching expositively through books of the Bible is that it forces me to deal with subjects I otherwise wouldn't—subjects I would avoid; subjects I would gloss over; subjects that God has included in His holy Word for His glory and for the good of His church, no matter what we initially may feel about them.
 - 1. One of those subjects makes an appearance in our text this morning: namely, Hell.
 - a. As we read these verses, I wonder if you could almost feel the heat coming off of them; I wonder if you could almost see the orange glow of them. The flames of Hell have set fire to almost every line of this text.
- B. Some of you, perhaps, already are squirming in your seats. “O no! He's one of these hellfire and brimstone guys. I knew it!” Let me assure you of one thing: I'm going to be as hellfire and brimstone as God is. So when He speaks of it so will your pastor. Verse by verse.

John and Jesus Live in Light of It

- A. Hell is not a reality we like to think on so much. Some churches believe in it but don't teach on it from their pulpits. Other churches deny it outright and simply delete it from their Bibles.
 - 1. But, while many in the church spend their time either ignoring or deleting the reality of Hell, John and Jesus, in one sense at least, live their whole lives in the terrifying light of it.
- B. Indeed, their ministries cannot be rightly understood apart from the wrath of God.
 - 1. John can sum up his whole ministry as warning people "to flee from the wrath to come" (v. 7).
 - 2. Jesus came "to seek and save the lost" He tells us in Luk 19:10.
 - a. But seek and save them from what? From financial woes? From health problems? From sinful habits? From the Devil? None of those answers take us far enough. He came to seek and save us from the wrath of God: "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:9).
- C. It is the wrath of God abiding on men, coming for men—because of His sheer holiness and our utter sinfulness—that is the biggest, most ultimate problem you and I face.
 - 1. John and Jesus know: if you deal with the wrath of God problem, every other problem in your life will be taken care of in due time.
 - a. It is love that constrains them to speak of wrath.

The Outline

- A. I open this way not because Hell is the highest thought of our text this morning. It is not. I open this way because Hell, it seems to me, is the backdrop for all that is discussed.
 - 1. As we move through our text these next two weeks, I will organize my thoughts under four headings: (1) The Coming Wrath (v. 7); (2) The Necessary Fruit (vv. 8-9); (3) The Right Question (vv. 10-14); and (4) The Mighty Christ (vv. 15-18).

(1) The Coming Wrath (v. 7)

No Time to Celebrate

- A. John has been going "into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3). And people are "coming out to be baptized by him" (v. 7a).

1. We would think this would be cause for celebration. When I pastored in San Luis Obispo, we would do an annual baptism on the beach. When the people came forward to enter the waters, it was met with applause. We were stoked to see them coming to the waters.
- B. So what is going on here with John? It seems to me that John, far from being happy about the arrival of these crowds, is almost upset. We'll find out why as we go along.

You Brood of Vipers!

- A. Here's his opening line: **"You brood of vipers!" (v. 7b)**. Literally translated: "You offspring of poisonous snakes!" What do you say to that? "Om...hello to you too?!"
1. John's choice words here are far from flattering. They indicate that this crowd is full of slippery, wicked, and lethal people.
 - a. At this point, we might be thinking: "John, what are you doing? Dial it down man. This isn't a way to fill a church. You're scaring everyone away!" We grant that maybe John is a bit rough around the edges, a little grumpy. He's spent the last few decades of his life living in the wilderness, eating bugs, and wearing camel's hair. I'd be upset too.
- B. But John is not off script in the least here. For countless times, Jesus in discussion with the Jews (especially with the Jewish leaders), will say essentially the exact same thing: **"³³ Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil?" (Mat 12:33-34a)**.
1. This is coming out of Jesus' mouth now. **"You're slippery, you're evil, you're lethal."** This is what John is saying to the people coming to him for baptism.
- C. But there's more beneath these words. Not only are they unflattering and rebuking, they are also theologically charged.
1. They recall the crisis of **Gen 3** and the conflict that was promised in **v. 15** between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. John is saying here: **"Jewish crowds, though you think you are of the woman, of the promise, you are truly of the serpent, of the curse. You are on the wrong side of this cosmic conflict."** **"You offspring of poisonous snakes!"**
 - a. Jesus would not be so discreet in a later conflict He would have with them: **"You are of your father the devil" (Joh 8:44a)**. That's essentially what John is saying here!

Who Warned You to Flee?!

- A. John's next words to them don't get any more inviting: **"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7c)**.

1. The issue here is not that John doesn't want these people to repent and be forgiven of their sin. The issue is that they are still snakes and yet they are coming to be baptized. They're thinking that the religious act alone will somehow cover them. "Let's run some water over our scales and we'll be good."
 - a. No! You're still snakes. You don't get what this baptism is. It is not some magical activity, do it and you're good. It is an external representation of something going on inside you, or it is nothing. If you've still got scales, snake skin, this water won't help you.
- B. It's as if they were coming to the waters saying: "I don't want wrath, but I don't want righteousness either. I want salvation, but I still want to be a snake!"
 1. But this water is for those who are coming to God and saying, "I'm sick of being a snake. I want You, if you'll forgive me. I want to be your child. Forget looking like my Father the Devil, I want to start looking like my Father in heaven."

Not Consumeristic but Covenantal

- A. Allow me to draw out an implication from this for the life and mission of our church. We see here with John something that we just won't find in the church growth books of our day. Crowds are coming and John is not blindly welcoming them. He's calling them out, turning up the heat.
 1. Could we ever dream of saying such things to people professing Christ and wanting to join our church? I hope so, or we'll soon stop being the church.
- B. So many churches have gone the way of the marketplace. They provide the service and you are the consumer, the customer.
 1. But this is so dangerous. Because if you want to keep your customers, how does the saying go? "The customer is always right." If I tell you you're wrong, you'll take your business elsewhere, and that won't be good for my bottom line.
- C. The church must not be consumeristic but covenantal. We are not aiming to fill the pews merely, we are aiming to fill the pews purely. We must learn to walk the line between quantity and quality.
 1. Our hearts must burn for more to know Christ. But we must not water down the person and work of Christ to get there. Better is one who truly comes to know the lord from his heart than 1000 who fill the pews but have no real affection for the Christ of the Bible.
 - a. The tragic irony of it all is that the church can so broaden the way into her sanctuary that she actually turns from the narrow way of the gospel.

- D. May we learn from John the Baptist here and lovingly say the hard word, for God's glory and for the good of His people.

(2) The Necessary Fruit (vv. 8-9)

- A. We continue with John and must ask: Is there any way of knowing the difference between a snake and a son? Is it possible we're even deceiving ourselves like this Jewish crowd? How can we tell?

- 1. John gives us both a reliable guide and an unreliable one.

(1) A Reliable Guide: Fruits

- A. First the reliable guide: "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (v. 8a). As we read earlier in [Mat 12: the tree is known by its fruit \(v. 33\)](#).

- 1. If you want to know whether a tree is good or bad look to it's fruits. We can talk a lot about repenting and believing, but do the fruits hanging from the branches of my life look like the Devil? Or do they look like the Lord? That is the reliable guide to the state of one's soul.

- B. Regarding these fruits that are "corresponding to, or worthy of, repentance" (literal translation), we'll come to find next week in [vv. 10-14](#), that John, and God, have in mind nothing more and nothing less than love for neighbor.

- 1. As John the Apostle puts it in [1 John 3:10](#): "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."

(2) An Unreliable Guide: Ancestry

- A. John then gives us the unreliable guide: "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'" (v. 8b).

- 1. Jews thought that God would ultimately be kind to them because of Abraham's merits even if they had none of their own. John reminds them here that we stand before God as individuals.

- B. This is what the Bible means when it says: "[God shows no partiality](#)" ([Act 10:34](#); [Rom 2:11](#); [Gal 2:6](#)).

- 1. Jews don't have an advantage over Gentiles because they are biological children of Abraham. They must have the faith and bear the fruit of Abraham themselves or they might as well not be children of Abraham.

- a. On the last day, it is not Abraham's faith and fruit that will count for them, but as Paul says in [Rom 14:12](#): "Each of us will give an account of himself to God."

- C. There is an underlying principle that's at work here in these Jews. It's shown up twice now. First in their approach to John's baptism and now in their approach to Abraham.
 - 1. "If I have the externals, who cares about the internals. If I'm washed outside I don't need to be washed inside. If I'm connected to Abraham's faith and fruit I don't need a faith and fruit of my own. I'm good thank you."

- D. We can do this, can we not? "I've got the externals, leave me alone about the internals. I prayed a prayer when I was seven; I walked the aisle at a Billy Graham crusade; I go to church every Sunday, I put in my time; I read my Bible every morning; I don't curse, lie or steal. I've got the externals. I'm good thank you." But does God have our hearts?!
 - 1. None of these things are inherently bad. Neither is being a child of Abraham. But when our confidence rests on these external things to the neglect of the internal realities of our hearts before God, we are in danger of proving to be nothing more than bathing serpents.

Sticks and Stones

- A. John goes on to give them the basis for what he just said about Abraham: "For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (v. 8c).

- B. This is at once a blow to the elitist pride of the Israelites and a tribute to God's sovereign grace.
 - 1. On the one hand, John is saying: "Not only does your ancestry make you no better than the Gentile nations around you, it makes you no better than these stones beneath your feet."
 - 2. But, on the other hand, it is a reminder of how God did graciously raise up children for Abraham.
 - a. In Abraham and Sarah, God took a man and woman with bodies and wombs as good as dead and from them made for Himself a nation, Israel. In many ways Israel was the dead stone that God raised up for Himself to be a son. They owe their very existence to His sovereign grace.
 - i. But they forgot this. They thought His grace made them not only special among the nations (which is true) but superior to the nations (which is a grave error). They got cocky, and they missed the point: "I chose Abraham and Israel for the sake of the nations, not in spite of the nations!"

- C. And John is hinting here, I think, that God is getting ready to work the miracle again, at an even deeper level.

1. In the New Covenant He's going to take hearts of stone, from among the Jews and the Gentiles, and circumcise them with His Holy Spirit, so that stone-dead sinners could be made true children of Abraham: "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring" (Gal 3:29a).

The Severity and the Kindness

- A. John closes his exhortation here with an ominous threat: "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" (v. 9).
 1. With the words "Even now..." John alerts the crowd of the imminence of God's coming judgment. With the vivid imagery of an "axe" and "fire", John alerts the crowd to the dreadful nature of God's coming judgment.
 - a. But, if this is all we observe in these words, then we are mistaken. For there is mercy here!
- B. This warning is actually a sign not only of God's holiness and severity, but of His patience and kindness. John is not the one swinging the axe but the one warning about it. God doesn't want to swing it. That's the point!
 1. As we read last week: "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek 33:11).
- C. I'm reminded of the parable Jesus tells later in Luk 13:6-9: "⁶A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"
 1. "I don't want to give up on this tree. I would have no pleasure in chopping it down. But O how I would rejoice if should start to bear fruit. Give me another year!"

What Then Shall We Do?

- A. At this point, John's audience can sense both "the kindness and the severity of God" (Rom 11:22). And perhaps we do as well. And the burning question then is: "Okay, if wrath is coming, and fruit is necessary, 'What then shall we do?'" (v. 10).
 1. Now, John's immediate answer in vv. 10-14 takes us into something we don't have time to address this week. I'm going to take us straight to the bottom line as we close.

- B. Certainly John is calling us to bear good fruits, but He is not calling us to such things through the law or through our own strength. He calls us to such things through the Person and work of the Messiah.
1. We must never think that we can divorce repentance and this bearing of fruit from the forgiveness of sins and intimate union with Christ. This is precisely what John will not allow. His whole mission is to prepare the way of the Lord, to point people to the Lord.
 - a. And this becomes all the more plain as we keep reading in our text: “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” (vv. 15-16).
 - i. “Don’t confuse me for anyone important. I exist to direct you to Him! He is where repentance takes you. He is where forgiveness of sins is found. He is the way to bear true and lasting fruit. The baptism in water was just the means of preparing you for the One who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
- C. Do you want to know what that means? It means He, by virtue of His death for our sin, resurrection for our justification, and ascension for our assurance, He was granted by His Father to pour out His Spirit upon His people.
1. And in so doing He takes serpents and stones and makes of them sons and daughters for His Father! He changes the tree! He changes the tree! Because He changes the heart. And we start loving others like we have been loved by Him.
- D. Bearing fruit does not begin with the flexing of our muscles, it begins with the bending of our knees, coming to Jesus...not just on the day of our conversion, but every day thereafter! In this way, and in this way only, shall we bear fruits worthy of repentance.