

Jesus the Baptist (Part 2)

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)

The Most Serious Business in All the Universe!

- A. Christianity is engaged in the most serious business in all the universe!
 - 1. What we do with Jesus here this morning will determine to which side of His winnowing fork we will go: into the fury of His fire, or into the security and bliss of His barn...either way, it's forever!
- B. If you come into a church and the Elders aren't dealing with these weighty, glorious, eternal matters—heaven and hell, grace and wrath, crucifixion and resurrection, repentance and faith, sin and righteousness—you're not in a church, at least not in a healthy one.
 - 1. You can paste Jesus and a few Bible verses onto all sorts of worldly messages—messages that never get to the depths nor the heights of God's glory; messages that never actually bring you to face who God really is, and who you really are, and what Christ has really accomplished.
 - a. I don't want to be another one of those “churches” in this Valley.

- C. John doesn't want us to be another one of those "churches" either. That's why his words have the tone and tenor that they do. "Flee from the wrath to come. Repent and bear fruit...or else!"
- D. This is now the second part to the what I began last week. I gave us 4 headings under which I'm organizing my thoughts.
 - 1. We've looked at the first two: namely, (1) The Coming Wrath (v. 7); and (2) The Necessary Fruit (vv. 8-9). And now we proceed with the third and fourth: (3) The Right Question (vv. 10-14); and (4) The Mighty Christ (vv. 15-18).

(3) The Right Question (vv. 10-14)

What then Shall We Do?

- A. We left off last time with the vivid threat of v. 9 hanging in the air. Some have been shaken awake and are coming forward to ask John what I would consider to be the right question: namely, "What then shall we do?" (v. 10). Have you been there?
 - 1. It's 1 question, but it shows up 3 times in these 5 verses. For it's being asked by 3 distinct groups—"What...shall we do?" (v. 10); "What shall we do?" (v. 12); "What shall we do?" (v. 14).
- B. Allow me to make 3 observations for us at this point:

(1) The Correspondence Between "Bear" and "Do"

- A. The first thing we must note is that this question actually corresponds quite profoundly with the call of v. 8 to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance." For the word translated here "bear" is the very same word that stands in the question of these people translated "do."
 - 1. In other words, these people—hearing the call to bear fruits in keeping with repentance, seeing the necessity of these fruits for passing through the judgment of God—are here asking John: "What then shall we bear?" "What does this kind of fruit look like?"

(2) The Nature of these 3 Groups

- A. The second thing to note is the kinds of people that are coming with this question. Perhaps the most neutral is the first group: "the crowds" (v. 10).
 - 1. But even here we know that these are not Jewish leaders of any sort. For later in Luk 7:30 we read that "the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him [John]." "Repent? Us? What nerve, John! Do you know who you are talking to?"

- a. So these are not the lofty, the important, these are the ordinary, the common, even the lowly.
- B. Isn't this how it is still in our day? Often it is those who are most rich and powerful in this world who are the least interested in coming to Christ. "Why would I come to a Savior? Look at me. I have it all. Tell me, what do I need saving from?!"
 - 1. Meanwhile, it is those who have been brought to the end of themselves, who have come to face their own need and desperate estate, who are ready to grab hold of the Savior's feet.
 - a. In Christ, kings will be made paupers and paupers will be made kings!
- C. And this dynamic continues as we note the next 2 groups that approach John: "tax collectors" (v. 12) and "soldiers" (v. 14). Neither group was well liked in Israel because of the tendencies each had towards abuse of their authority.
 - 1. But it is these kinds of people that are sensing the need to change, the need for a Savior.

(3) The Common Denominator in John's Responses

- A. These 3 groups are coming to John and asking "What shall we bear?" And to each John addresses certain temptations and describes for them what the fruit of repentance might look like:
 - 1. The crowds, tempted to keep their possessions for themselves are told: "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise" (v. 11).
 - 2. The tax collectors, tempted to overtax the people to get more for themselves are told: "Collect no more than you are authorized to do" (v. 13).
 - 3. The soldiers, tempted to use the sword to get more for themselves are told: "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (v. 14b).
- B. Each group is tempted to use what they've been given by God—possessions and professions—for the benefit of themselves alone. And John is saying: "Do you want to bear fruits in keeping with repentance? Use what you've been given by God for the benefit of others."
 - 1. The common denominator that runs underneath all of John's responses here is the second great commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39).

The Wrong Answer?

- A. The Jewish crowd, the tax collectors, the soldiers are all asking John the right question. But now I want to ask: Does John give them the wrong answer? As I read his response here, I realized that it might trouble us for a number of reasons. I'll address 2.

(1) It's Too Legalistic

- A. First, and most importantly in my mind: It's too legalistic. Where is the gospel? I mean, if I'm teaching Evangelism 101, I flunk John at this point. "John, what are doing? You have these people right where you want them. They are asking how they are to be saved. And you point them, it seems to me, to works?! Wrong answer!"
- B. We, good evangelical Christians, want John to respond here like Paul and Silas respond later to the Philippian jailer when he asks: "^{30b} 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' ^{31a} And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...' (Acts 16:30b–31a). We want John to say that.
 - 1. But, interestingly, we must not miss that Paul would later sum up his whole ministry using very similar language to John: "[I] declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance" (Acts 26:20).
- C. So, somehow, the two, faith and fruits, are not contradictory. "Believe in the Lord Jesus" and "Perform deeds in keeping with [your] repentance." These are not two different ways to be saved, they are two aspects of the one salvation that is in Jesus Christ.
 - 1. Genuine repentance and faith in Christ will lead to the full experience of forgiveness, the freedom of a new nature, and a harvest of good fruits.
- D. We must recognize that Luke is not done presenting John's message to us at v. 14. John continues to address the people in vv. 15-17. Though he begins with fruits, he grounds these fruits ultimately in faith. "Look away from me to Him! He is the One who by the Spirit can change the tree and change the fruit!"
 - 1. This is why, when Luke is done presenting John's message to us, he sums it up this way: "So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people" (v. 18). This is not legalism. This is "good news." This is gospel.
- E. So John's emphasis on fruit here is not divorced from Christ but shown to be the effect of a vital union with Him. But by leading with fruit he is highlighting the utter necessity of it.
 - 1. Those who truly come to know the Savior will begin to look more and more like Him. And if we are not looking more and more like Him, it's quite possible we never knew Him.
 - a. Knowing His love for us is what enables us to move out in love for others.

(2) It's Too Ordinary

- A. I imagine another objection to John's answer at this point: It's too ordinary. He's talking about the most mundane of things here. Using your clothes, food, job to bless others.

1. This is the grand effect of coming into relation with the almighty Christ, the One who baptizes in the Spirit? I would have expected something more extraordinary.
 2. This is what's going to get me through the fires of judgment? I would have thought I needed something more extraordinary?
- B. John is essentially calling us to what I call my toddlers to every day: "Chloe, Bella—share your toys." Some of us are reading John's answer and we're thinking: "We're adults John. Don't belittle us. We know this." But isn't that the issue? We know we're supposed to share our toys, and yet it's so hard!
1. People kill each other every day because they refuse to share their toys. Marriages are ripped apart every day because husband and wife refuse to share their toys. Churches split all the time because leaders and members don't know how to share their toys.
 - a. This is not a toddler issue. This is a human nature issue. It's the same baseline self-centeredness whether it be translated into toddler or adult circumstances. And we're going to hell with toys in hand!
- C. Make no mistake: It requires a miracle from almighty God to share your toys.
1. Isn't this where Paul is going with the Corinthians as he moves from [1 Cor 12 to 13](#)? In ch. 12 he's talking about all these spectacular manifestations of the Spirit—tongues, miracles, prophecy. But then he comes out of that discussion with these words: "^{31b} I will show you a still more excellent way" ([1 Cor 12:31](#)). And what way is that? Love!
 - a. You can do all the big, flashy, extraordinary stuff, but if you don't have love...you're fruitless. You've missed the miracle.
 - i. I heard one scholar quoted as saying: "Everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to do the dishes" (Horton). John is saying, doing the dishes changes the world!

(1) Your redemption, brothers and sisters, works out by the kitchen sink!
- D. Isn't this awesome for those of us who feel like we can't do anything meaningful for God with our lives because we're too tied down with kids, or work, or whatever.
1. John is saying: "You want fruit that will pass through the fire? You want to live a life that means something? Say hi to your neighbor as you pass by and bring a meal over to her when she's sick. Dress your kids and wipe their bottoms. Go to the office and don't use your position to exalt yourself over others, use it to bless others. And do your work with dignity."

- a. Love in the mundane is the miraculous! Love in the ordinary is the extraordinary!

(4) The Mighty Christ (vv. 15-18)

I Am Not Worthy

- A. The crowds, hearing the authority and the passion with which John speaks, start to talk amongst themselves: “As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ” (v. 15).
 - 1. What temptation for John is this?! Isn’t this every preacher’s dream? To gain a following? Isn’t this what you want in your work? In your ministry? People notice, people acknowledge, people praise. Everyone’s whispering: “I think John might be the Christ...”
- B. The words slither towards his heart like a snake. But he will not have it! He sets his heel to the head of it: “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.” (v. 16a).
 - 1. “I have not forgotten my purpose. I exist to point to Him. I am not even worthy to be His slave. Don’t get distracted with me when the Christ is now here!”
 - a. O for more of this kind of saint in the church of God!

The Holy Spirit and Fire

- A. And here is why John is jealous that we see not him this morning but Jesus: “I baptize you with water...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 16).
- B. Let me focus your attention on that word “fire.” While there is some confusion as to how we should understand it, I think it provides for us a key that further unlocks our discussion at hand.
 - 1. Some see John as referring to 2 separate baptisms here, 1 of blessing and 1 of destruction. Some will get from the Messiah the Holy Spirit, and others will get fire.
 - a. This interpretation has the immediate context to support it in a certain sense. For I’m pretty sure the fires of vv. 9 and 17 are not fires you want any part of. They are the fires of judgment.
 - 2. But there is another interpretation of this that has, it seems to me, much more going for it. This interpretation sees only 1 baptism in view here and the Holy Spirit and fire are just different ways of coming at the same positive reality.
 - a. The fires of destruction that consume those in vv. 9 and 17 become here in v. 16, for those who receive the Christ, fires of blessing.

C. Consider the discussion in Malachi that stands behind our text here in Luke: “^{1a} Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me [Who’s this? John]. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple [Who’s this? Jesus]...² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.⁵ Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:1–5).

1. Do you see it? The Messiah is bringing a fire that will consume some (v. 5), but that same fire will refine others (vv. 2b-4). And their offerings will then finally be “pleasing to the Lord” (v. 4).

a. In other words: There will finally be good fruit on the tree!

D. The image of fire reappears in 4:1-2, and the same dynamic is at work: “¹ For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

1. It’s the same fire coming, but for some it will be like a burning oven, while for others it will be like a morning sun. For some this fire will be their destruction. For others it will be their healing!

a. In other words: As the sun aids the tree in its production of fruit, so the Christ will baptize you with the Spirit and fire that you might bear good fruit!

The Baptism of Christ

A. Returning to our text, I don’t want us to be in the fires of vv. 9 and 17. I want us to be in the fire of v. 16. The fire that doesn’t destroy but blesses, that doesn’t consume but refines.

1. But how do we get there? Answer: Come to Christ. What you do with Christ makes all the difference in the kind of fire you receive from Him!

B. You see Christ will talk about His own baptism later in Luk 12:49-50: “⁴⁹ I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”

1. He’s referring here to His death on a cross as a baptism, a going under, it would seem, into fire. It’s as if Christ sees the fire of God’s holy wrath coming for the world, and He is throwing Himself into the flames for our sake!

- C. And now the fires come to the world from God through Him.
1. For those that reject Him, it's v. 17: "His [Jesus'!] 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."
 2. For those that accept Him, it's v. 16: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."
 - a. This perhaps is why in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit is first poured out by the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, Luke describes it like this: "² Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ^{4a} And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2–4a).
 - i. The "Holy Spirit" and "fire". There's this external emblem (fire) signifying what the Spirit is doing inside of them (purifying, refining, making fruitful).
- D. The fire that should have consumed us, consumed Him, so that now, when the fire comes to us through Him, we are not consumed, we are refined. Do you want to bear fruit for God? Come and by faith embrace the Christ!