

## **Lesson 6: Bear Fruits Worthy of Repentance**

### **Matthew 3:7-12**

**Memory Verse:** “Then He said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men’” (Matt. 4:19).

**Text:** <sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, <sup>9</sup> "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. <sup>10</sup> "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> "His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

### **Monday**

In his biography of Andrew Jackson, Marquis James tells us of a Sunday morning in 1818 when Jackson, a general at that point in time, traveled from his home, the Hermitage, into downtown Nashville to attend a church conference. The famous circuit riding preacher, Peter Cartwright was to speak that day.

The pastor of the church had invited Cartwright with some misgivings because the evangelist was unpredictable. However, interest had been high, and it seemed that everyone in Nashville had come to church that Sunday to see the eccentric Cartwright. His text was, “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?”

Cartwright had just read his text and had paused to let the words sink in when General Jackson entered the church and slowly walked down the aisle. Every seat was taken, and he stood for a moment leaning against a pillar. Peter Cartwright felt a tug at the tail of his coat. “General Jackson has come in!” the Nashville pastor whispered excitedly. “General Jackson has come in!”

The whisper was audible to most of the church. Cartwright’s jaw tightened, and he gave the pastor a look of scorn. “Who is General Jackson?” Cartwright suddenly thundered. “If he does not repent and have his soul converted, God will damn his soul to hell as quickly as any other unconverted pagan.”

After the sermon, Cartwright was advised by several people to leave town immediately because Jackson was known for his fiery temper and his deadly duels. Cartwright shrugged them off and remained. Far from being angry, however, Jackson waited outside to meet Cartwright, invited the evangelist to dinner, and asked him to stay and continue preaching at the church next to the

Hermitage so he could hear more. Because of these events and what followed, we have hope that Andrew Jackson did indeed repent of his sin and receive Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

A very similar scene is played out in our text for this week. We see the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming out to hear John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness. Peter Cartwright in his address to Jackson and the congregation that day in 1818 was faithful to the example of John the Baptist and to the example of Jesus Christ in that he did not kowtow to Jackson because of his status and prestige. Instead, he loved the Lord and loved the man by addressing the greatest need of his whole life, the need for repentance leading to salvation. And this, Beloved, is not just the need of the Andrew Jacksons and other notorious sinners of the world, it is the need of every single soul, including yours and mine.

For all of us have stood in danger of the wrath of God. We have all stood under the threat of His judgment. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” and “the wages of sin is death.” And yet, God has stayed His hand of judgment for a time, allowing an opportunity to repent and turn from sin. As the prophet Jonah says, “I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness. One who relents from doing harm” (Jon. 4:2).

Last week we saw in verses 1-6 of chapter 3, four principles regarding repentance: 1) Repentance is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven; 2) Repentance readies the heart for the King’s rule; 3) Repentance involves the specific confession of sins; and, 4) Repentance acknowledges unworthiness and dies to self. The text continues this week with it’s focus on repentance, and speaks to us about the relationship between repentance and the judgment of God on sin.

But before we dive into our discussion, consider these words from the theologian Eric Sauer. He says of repentance. “[It is]... a threefold action. In the understanding, it means knowledge of sin; in the feelings it means pain and grief over that sin; in the heart and mind, it means a change of mind, desire and purpose.” Repentance, therefore, involves both your understanding and your emotions, and it results in a thoroughgoing change from the inside out. Thus the words of Paul, “For godly sorrow produces repentance....For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication!” (2 Cor. 7:10-11a).

Repentance means to turn from an old way of life with yourself on the throne of your heart pursuing sin in actions and affections to a new way of life with God on the throne in both your actions and affections. It is not just a matter of moral reform. It is a matter of earnest desire. Repentance and faith describe the same turning. Repentance is what you turn from. Faith is what you turn to in love, the Lord Jesus Christ.

When conviction comes knocking at your door, do you welcome it and earnestly long for a change, or does it simply make you angry? When was the last time you felt convicted of sin? How did you respond? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Tuesday

In our text for this week, we see three aspects of the relationship between repentance and the judgment of God. The first one is this:

**1. Repentance allows one to escape God's wrath (v. 7).** That is, genuine repentance, repentance that is true, allows one to escape the coming judgment of God. Verse seven says, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.'"

I wrote a paper on the wrath of God in seminary with significant linguistic study. I won't bore you with the details, but I will say this: To define God's wrath scripturally, according to the actual words and their meanings, we would define wrath as follows: **The wrath of God is His abiding and intense hatred of sin that moves Him to take eternal vengeance on His enemies with the understanding that all unbelievers are by definition at enmity with God and are in fact God's enemies regardless of their own personal feelings or perceptions.**

That is a comprehensive definition based on dozens of Scriptures. And the simple fact, beloved, is that wrath is coming. It is imminent, as John the Baptist says, "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees." Judgment was imminent for the people John was preaching to and judgment is imminent for each one of us. The Scripture says that it is appointed once for a man to die and then the judgment. That means that at any given time you are only one heartbeat away from facing the judgment of God. You may think that you have years, or you may in fact only have minutes, but regardless it is coming and it is imminent.

So John looks up and he sees the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming to his baptism and he cries out, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." There are many lessons in that statement for us. There is the lesson that a mere outward show of religion does not put one in right standing before God. There is the lesson that the respect of men and prestige, even religious prestige, in this life is no true indicator of what God thinks. There is the lesson that we should speak the truth honestly, regardless of how hard it is to do so. But I want to draw out the lesson that is so clearly implied in John's words, repentance is the means of escaping God's wrath.

The pharisees were the religious leaders for the common people of that day. Many of them were common tradesmen and merchants, people that you meet on the street and in the local synagogue. Their doctrine was full of legalism. They believed that salvation was obtained by working your way to God and they were extremely self-righteous. Their spirituality, however, was entirely external, consisting of the meticulous observance of a multitude of religious rituals and laws that

they and other religious leaders had developed over several centuries as supplements to the law of Moses. These were known collectively as the “tradition of the elders.”

The Sadducees were the opposite of the Pharisees in many ways. They tended to be the rationalists of their day. They were a sect that arose among the priestly aristocracy, but they cared little for religion. They denied most things supernatural; they denied the resurrection of the dead; they denied the afterlife; they denied the existence of angels. They denied and explained away the majority of the word of God. The Sadducees were wealthy collaborators with the Roman government and much fewer in number than the pharisees.

We have people in the same groups virtually every place that you might go today. We have legalists, who think that religion is all about works and human effort, and that the key to getting to heaven and a right relationship with God is being a basically good law-abiding person. And we have rationalists, who don't have much use for religion, who explain away the things of God, ignore the Scripture, exalt their reason above it, or at best use God as a tool to get something they want out of life: more business, wealth, respect from others, etc., but don't really care about heartfelt love or devotion to Him.

And both groups John lumps into a single category, calling them a “brood of vipers,” or “offspring of vipers.” Though they were far apart religiously, they were both spawn of the Devil and demons, he says. They were vipers, whose doctrine was full of deadly poison and would kill anyone that took it into his life. In spite of their differences, the pharisees and Sadducees had the exact same need, the need of genuine repentance. So John says in verse 8, “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

We don't know exactly why they came out to John. There were undoubtedly several motives. Some were no doubt curious. Several wanted to question him and find out who he was and what he said about himself. We see that in the other gospel accounts. Perhaps some of them thought that John the Baptist might really be a prophet, and they wanted to engage in another pretense, another sham of religious devotion, just in case. Some probably came out angry and jealous. Whatever the reason, John's reaction demonstrates that they were not sincere and he was not willing to baptize them.

True repentance delivers one from the wrath of God, but superficial and insincere professions or acts of faith do not. They tend only to harden a person against genuine belief and give a false sense of security. John the Baptist did not want to be a party to that, and his indictment must have deeply stung those false religious leaders, who considered themselves to be enlightened. He characterized them as self-deceived deceivers and purveyors of darkness rather than light. May we not be works-oriented legalists or man-centered rationalists, but humble faith-oriented people, recognizing our own sinfulness, turning from it in true repentance and clinging to the promises of God.

Was it necessary for John the Baptist to speak so harshly to the scribes and Pharisees? If so,

why, and is that consistent with love? \_\_\_\_\_  
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How would John's words have impacted the Jewish people around him that day? What truths should it have communicated to them? \_\_\_\_\_  
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Who are the Pharisees and Sadducees of our own day? How would you recognize them? \_\_\_\_\_  
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### Wednesday

We saw that yesterday that repentance allows one to escape the wrath of God. There is a second aspect I want you to see. It is this:

**2. Repentance is proven by its fruit (vv. 8-10).** Did you know that the basis of God's judgment on your life will be your actions, your conduct. This is everywhere in the Bible. You say, "But I thought the basis of my right standing before God, my justification, was faith in Jesus Christ, not works?" Yes, that is right. That's what the Bible tells us. But the Bible also tells us that faith, if it is true, will bear spiritual fruit in your life. Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits." Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**" (Eph. 2:8-9 emphasis added).

James writes, "Faith, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). In other words, it's not living, it's not real. John writes, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). In other words, our actions toward our fellow men are indicators of our true attitude and relationship with God. We could look at a host of other texts, but the point is that true repentance is evidenced by the life that follows that repentance.

So, John the Baptist looks at the pharisees and the Sadducees. He knows that their lives do not match up; they do not line up with genuine hearts of repentance, and he says, "Bear fruits worthy of (or 'in keeping with' (axios)) repentance" and in verse 10, "Every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." True repentance not only should, but will have

corresponding genuine works, demonstrated in both attitudes and actions. A right relationship to God brings right actions and love toward our fellow human beings. Those who claim to know Christ, who claim to be born again, will demonstrate a new way of living that corresponds to the new birth. It's not only about what you say, but its also about whether your life is in keeping with what you say. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven'" (Matt. 7:21).

J. Edwin Orr, the revivalist and historian, was with Billy Graham when the evangelist addressed a meeting in Beverly Hills attended by the notorious gangster, Mickey Cohen., "He expressed some interest in the message," Orr later wrote, "So several of us talked with him, including Dr. Graham, but he made no commitment until some time later when another friend urged him with Revelation 3:20 as a warrant to invite Jesus Christ into his life. This Cohen professed to do, but his life subsequently gave no evidence of repentance, a mighty change of heart and life. When he was confronted with this by the friend that led him to Christ, Cohen rebuked him saying, 'You never told me that I would have to give up my work.' He meant his rackets. And he said, 'You never told me that I would have to give up my gangster associations.' Cohen was completely unwilling to change and his profession of faith was proven to be a sham."

The Pharisees and Sadducees did not suffer from Cohen's ignorance, though. They knew a great deal about repentance. It had historically been a basic doctrine of Judaism. One ancient rabbi wrote, "Great is repentance, for it brings healing upon the world. Great is repentance, for it reaches to the throne of God. A man can shoot an arrow for a few furlongs, but repentance reaches to the throne of God." But the religious leaders of Christ's time had for the most part rejected this kind of thinking, preferring the more comfortable doctrines of men.

Many of the Pharisees believed, and many Orthodox Jews of our own day still believe, that simply their Jewishness assures them a place in God's kingdom. Some rabbis at that time taught, "All Israelites have a portion in the world to come." They spoke of the delivering merits of the fathers who passed on spiritual merit to their descendants. Some even taught that Abraham stood guard at the gates of hell to turn back any Israelite who happened that way.

John the Baptist was aware of this kind of false thinking, so he makes the statement in verse nine, "Do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." They thought they were in a unique position, that God needed them to fulfill His purpose, that they were secure and didn't need to concern themselves with genuine repentance. But they underestimated the power of God. God did not need them to accomplish His plan. If necessary, He could make children of Abraham out of pieces of rock.

They would not be saved by their physical descent. They would not be saved by prideful self-righteous legalism. They would only be saved by genuine broken-hearted repentance over their sin, that turned from it and in faith cried out to God for mercy. Repentance proven true by a life of spiritual fruit: love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control, true

worship, service, mercy, justice, zeal, confession, humility, brokenness and poverty of spirit mingled with joy and hopeful submission to God’s word and His Messiah – this is repentance that saves.

Does your life demonstrate the fruit of true repentance? Be honest, because there is no question more important for you personally or for your loved ones. Paul encourages us to examine ourselves to see whether we are truly in the faith.

Do you know anyone relying on the wrong thing to get into heaven like the Pharisees were? What? \_\_\_\_\_  
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Take a few moments to read 2 Cor. 7:9-11. What is the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow? \_\_\_\_\_  
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What are the marks of true repentance seen in verse 11 of that passage? \_\_\_\_\_  
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How does your live compare with 2 Cor. 7:11? \_\_\_\_\_  
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### Thursday

We have seen the two aspects of repentance as it relates to God’s judgement: repentance escapes the wrath of God and repentance is proven by its fruit. There is a third aspect I want to draw your attention to:

**3. Repentance determines your spiritual baptism (vv. 11-12).** These verses read, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The baptism of John, if you remember from the previous week, was a symbolic act. It was an act that marked an outsider’s desire to become part of the People of God. It is an outward act that is meant to picture an inward reality: the death to self, the dying to the old way of life, repentance as one goes down into the grave, and then being raised to walk in a new life as the person comes

up to follow after God, to love and live for Him.

But, says John, there is one coming after me, who is mightier than I, a reference to the Messiah. He is mightier than any mere man because He doesn't baptize with water, but He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The word baptism means literally to be plunged into. That's why we don't baptize by sprinkling or pouring, if it can possibly be helped. It would be an oxymoron and not faithful to the example of Scripture or the actual word God uses. Now there are three possible ways that you can read verse 11:

1) You can see the reference to "the Spirit" as the giving of the Holy Spirit that the believer receives at the point of salvation, and the reference to fire as a statement about the purifying power of God, which he uses to purge his children of their dross and make them holy. Fire is not always a reference to wrath. Sometimes it is indicative of a work of grace (Is. 6:6; Zech. 3:9; 1 Peter 1:7).

The problem with this reading is that we clearly have three parallel verses in 10, 11 & 12. In verse 10, John says that trees that do not bear good fruit are cut down and thrown into the fire; and in verse 12, he uses fire again to clearly speak of God's unquenchable wrath. It simply makes no sense to conclude that the middle verse uses fire to refer to an entirely different subject and this view disregards what many commentators call a "striking parallelism." No, John is talking about judgment throughout, and the contrast is between those who are truly repentant and those who aren't. This leads us to the second possible interpretation.

2) You can see the reference to "the Spirit" as the giving of the Holy Spirit that the believer receives at the point of salvation, and the reference to fire as those who are plunged into the depths of hell, who do not bear fruit and are thrown into that terrible lake. And yet, the actual grammatical construction in Greek suggests that v. 11 refers to only one baptism, which combines the Holy Spirit and fire. The language employs only one preposition to govern two nouns, which then act as a compound object. This is no big deal in English, but in Greek the most natural understanding would be to interpret this as one single baptism with two aspects. However, this interpretation doesn't seem quite right either. Fortunately, we have a third alternative that perfectly satisfies both the concern of the first interpretation and the actual grammar.

3) The "you" in verse 11 is plural, and John is obviously addressing both the believing and the unbelieving, with a special reference at the outset to the Pharisees and Sadducees, who are clearly wicked and headed for hell, if they don't repent. They are the most obvious antecedent for the pronoun "you" in this verse. Now it has been predicted by the prophet Malachi in chapter 3, verse 1 and following, that the Messiah would come and purify the nation as silver is purified in a furnace. This does not simply mean that He would purify individuals by consuming what was faulty in them and making them holy, but Mal. 4:1-3 tells us that it means God will purify the

nation by both consuming the wicked like stubble and healing the faithful. The entire nation, then, would be thrown into the fire, which would then have these two effects

John the Baptist is clearly referring to this prophecy. He even uses the same language. What does that mean? He is saying that the whole nation of Israel, all the people, will be baptized, as it were. The furnace of God's Spirit will consume the wicked and unrepentant in wrathful judgment, and at the same time He will leave a purified, rejoicing, and healed people. This view of the text, then, perfectly satisfies the parallelism of verse 10 and 12 and the grammar of verse 11, and it brings out both ideas, the purifying of God's people and the judgment of the wicked, which is exactly what Malachi had in mind.

Now this brings us to a crucial question: How will you fare when God comes to baptize not only Israel, but all the nations in judgment? Will you be thrown into an unquenchable fire, or will you stand before Him rejoicing and purified? \_\_\_\_\_

I do want to take a few moments to discuss the statement of John in verse 11, "whose sandals I am not worthy to carry." There was a well known rabbinic teaching which said, "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong." So John is showing incredible humility in his relationship to Christ, by saying that he is not only unworthy to be His disciple, he is also unworthy to be even the lowest of the Lord's slaves. And this was the greatest man who ever lived!!!

How do you view yourself in relation to Christ? Do you act toward Him with reverence as a man or woman, who is not even worthy to be His slave, or do you take Him for granted and treat Him flippantly?

### **Friday**

The final thought I want to bring to your attention this week has to do with the statement in verse 12, "He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

This idea of wrath, of eternal torment in unquenchable fire is an uncomfortable one. It is frightening. If you think about it honestly for very long, it will terrify you and make you upset in a good way. Do you know who spoke more on God's wrath than anyone else in all of Scripture? It was Jesus in the Gospels. He spoke more about it than Moses, Isaiah or any other speaker in Scripture. In fact, He said more about it than all other people combined. The Lord reserved to Himself a special place for teaching on this doctrine. Why? Two reasons: First, to protect against people saying it was someone else's idea, but not Jesus'; and second, because He loves us. He wants us to take the way of grace that He came to provide. And He wants us to be saved from ... Himself. He knows what He will do. He knows what His justice will entail far better than anyone else can even begin to comprehend.

Imagine touching your hand for a moment against a hot burner on your stove, or brushing against

a hot pan. You've probably done that at some point. You know the pain of that. Jonathan Edwards once wrote about wrath, "We can conceive but little of the matter. In your conception imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven for a great furnace (plunged in), where your pain would be as much greater than the occasional accidental touching of coal of fire as the heat is much greater. Imagine also, that your body were to lie there a quarter of an hour full of fire, and all the while full of quick sense, what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace? How long would that one quarter of an hour seem to you? And after you had endured it for one minute, how overbearing would it be to you to think you were to endure it for another fourteen? But what would be the effect on your soul, if you knew you must lie there enduring the torment to the full for 24 hours? And how much greater the effect would be if you must endure it for a whole year? And how vastly greater still if you knew that you must endure it for 1000 years? Oh how then would your heart sink if you knew you must bear it forever and ever. That there would be no end. That after millions and millions of ages your torment would be no lesser to an end, and that you knew that you should never be delivered. But your torment in hell will be immensely greater than this illustration represents. How then will the heart of a poor creature sink? How utterly inexpressible and inconceivable must the sinking of the soul be in such a case."

Oh beloved, this is not a joke. When the Lord speaks of torment and hell and unquenchable fire in His word, He is being deadly serious. He has determined to do it. He has purposed in His heart to deal with sin in this way. He is mightier than all and His purpose, His righteousness, His justice will prevail. And if this is your fate, then you will not be able to withstand it. You will not be able to put on a bold face or pluck up your courage in the face of it. You will not have any satisfaction at your past life. You will not even be able to justly rail against your tormentor, because at that time you will know that He is right and that His actions concerning you are best and just. If this is your fate, you will no more be able to fight the fire than a little spider that is flicked into a great bonfire could fight against that fire. There is only submission to the flame. There is only screaming pain, weeping and gnashing of teeth, as you are plunged into His wrath, full of fire and full of quick sense for all eternity.

There is an alternative according to our text, and that is the way of repentance. If one possible outcome is to be thrown into everlasting torment, then the other is to be finally set free from this body of death and to be plunged completely and utterly into unhindered everlasting joy. And as the fire of hell does not diminish and is unquenchable, so the joy of God is also undiminished and unquenchable. This is what John the Baptist hoped to urge these men toward as he shocked their consciences that day.

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 25 about a master who calls his servants to account. To the unprofitable servant the master says, "cast him into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." To the faithful servant, he says, "Enter into the joy of your Lord." The difference between the two is repentance.