

The Fruits of True Repentance, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 3:7-10

Code: 2188

Matthew, chapter 3, verses 7 to 12...the fruits of true repentance...the fruits of true repentance. In our last study we met the greatest man that ever lived, a man by the name of John the Baptist. In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist..." Up until this time, he was the greatest man that ever lived. Matthew presents John because Matthew has as his purpose and his intention in his book...his gospel...to present to us, Jesus, as King. And all kings always had heralds, announcers, forerunners, people who came before them, prepared the roadway and announced that the king was about to arrive. And consistent with Matthew's emphasis on the fact that Jesus is a king is his presentation that, like every king, He has a herald, He has a proclaimer, He has somebody who's out there announcing that He's coming and preparing the way for Him. And so it fits in beautifully with Matthew's purpose to present something of this man, John the Baptist.

Now, in our study together last time, two weeks ago, we noted regarding John that there were certain things that made him great. And we concluded our study by reminding ourselves that some of the things that made John great are transferable to us and potentially we can exceed the greatness of John. The same verse, Matthew 11:11, that said John was the greatest man that ever lived, also said, but greater than John is the least in the kingdom. In other words, the Lord has given to us who are on this side of the cross, some greatness that didn't belong to those on that side. We have resources that they didn't have. And if we were to adopt into our own lives the things that made John great, we would be greater than John. And I mentioned to you that there were at least six characteristics of John that made him great: his obedience to his calling, he was filled with the Spirit, he was self-controlled, he was humble, he proclaimed God's Word and he won many people to the Lord. Now, those were the characteristics of a man who was the greatest man that ever lived. His was a ministry of preparation. He was calling on Israel and he was telling Israel that the King was coming and it was time for them to repent. It was time for them to be converted. And you'll look at verse 2 again and remind yourself of his message. "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is imminent"...at hand...the next event. And the King was coming and they needed a radical change of mind, a radical change of heart, a transformation of life to prepare for the King and His kingdom. And we talked about the fact that this was a shocking message to the Jews, a stern rebuke of their shallow, hypocritical and useless religion. They weren't ready for their Messiah. They weren't ready for His kingdom. They weren't ready to be a part of that kingdom. In fact, at this particular point, they would be definitely on the outside. Israel was lost in sin. Israel was unworthy of the King and thus, unable to inherit the kingdom. And the arrival of the long awaited King should have been good news,

but first there was bad news. And the bad news was that they couldn't have the kingdom and they couldn't receive the King because of the sin in their lives. That was really a jolt because they saw themselves as children of Abraham, sons of the covenant, sons of the promises, circumcised, people of God, subjects of the King, just waiting centuries for the One who was to come. And now when He is coming, they are told that they have absolutely no right to enter His kingdom. In fact, John says you must repent and be baptized. And I told you two weeks ago that the baptism was the kind of baptism that was done on Gentile proselytes who were coming into the Jewish faith. And by offering a baptism, John was in effect saying to them, you are no better off than a Gentile; you are apart from God and you are a non-subject in His kingdom and you cannot receive His King. And so they needed to do what any Gentile needed to do. They needed to repent, be converted and the outward sign of that inward washing was to be baptized. And so John was calling for a fundamental change. He was calling for a tremendous and total transformation. They were sinful and filthy and they needed cleansing to be ready for the Messiah.

Well, his ministry of preparation was well received. If you'll notice verse 5 it says, "Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea"...the whole city went..."and all the region round about the Jordan. And were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." John was preparing people for the coming of Messiah. This was a baptism of preparation. This was a baptism which symbolized an inward confession and cleansing of sin. In fact, in the book of Acts and verse 4 of chapter 19, the apostle Paul describes the meaning of John's baptism. He says this: "John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on Him who should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." John's was a baptism of conversion and repentance. But it was not the conversion that was to come later when Christ came; it was a preparation for the coming of Christ. And when Christ came, it was needful for them to believe on Him to be saved. It's in this sense, perhaps, that you can understand it. John's baptism made them a true Old Testament saint, but they needed, when Christ came, to be made a true New Testament saint. For example, in the 19th chapter of Acts, which I just read to you, there were some disciples of John the Baptist and when the apostle Paul said to them, what baptism were you baptized with, they said, the baptism of John. And then he said to them, but John's baptism was only a baptism of repentance and you are to believe on Him that was to come after. And then they believed and, again, they received Christ and were baptized there in the Holy Spirit. So what really happened in Acts 19 is people who had become Old Testament saints in the true sense under John became New Testament saints under the ministry of the apostle Paul. When they confessed their sins and set their hearts right before God under John, they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ when He arrived, then that was that which John was preparing them for.

Now, this man was a tremendous man. The other gospels talk about him. But Matthew gives us just one sample of his preaching in verses 7 to 12. That's what we want to look at, one sample of John's preaching. It is a sample that is also recorded in Luke, the third chapter. And it's a fascinating illustration of the kind of a man that he was, his power, his boldness, his courage. It's all here.

Now, I want to show you five elements, five elements in the narrative: the congregation, the confrontation, the condemnation, the conflagration and the consolation...you don't think that took a few minutes (laughter)...the congregation, the confrontation, then the condemnation, then the coming conflagration and then a final word of consolation. And I believe that this portion of Scripture is one of the clearest presentations of genuine saving repentance in all of the New Testament. Now, the scene for the sermon is as follows...the sermon that John preached. From verse 5 and 6 we know that people were flocking to see John. They were excited about the coming of Messiah. Many of them were really genuine. They wanted to get their lives right. They wanted to really confess their sin. They wanted to repent and be converted and get ready and receive the King and His kingdom. They were excited about it and they were coming out to see John...a godly remnant, some real solid and honest people. And they were listening and they were converted and they were baptized and they were ready for the King...sincere, genuine, repentant people. But all weren't so genuine and all weren't so sincere and all weren't so real. Let's look at the text and first of all notice the congregation, a very special congregation.

Now, in Luke's gospel, chapter 3, Luke calls to our attention that these words were heard by the entire multitude. So the dialogue that ensues here with this special congregation was not just with them, but it was heard by everybody. The whole multitude heard everything he said. So it was quite a devastating thing. But he zeroes in on a specific congregation that showed up. Verse 7: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come for baptism"...that's the proper rendering. "When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come for baptism..." And stop right there. Now, here we are introduced to the congregation. There is a whole multitude and the whole multitude heard what John said, but singled out by the Holy Spirit through Matthew, is the special congregation of Pharisees and Sadducees. And they were coming for baptism. The use of the pronoun *epi* here is a purpose use. It refers to purpose. They came for the purpose of being baptized. They were gonna get in on this deal. And his response to them also indicates that they had come for baptism because he questions the legitimacy of their desires. But before we go any further, we gotta find out who they are. Now, as you study the New Testament, the gospel records, you run constantly into the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Sometimes they are designated as the chief priests and elders, but usually those people were either Pharisees or Sadducees. Who are they? Why did they come? Were they sincere? What was really on their minds? Judaism, for the most part, at that particular time, had three special little sects or groups within it, three that kind of had a special little emphasis. Group number one and the most familiar to us, was the Pharisees, and they were the largest in number. Group number two was the Sadducees and group number three...and we know very little about them from the New Testament although archeologically we've discovered some interesting things about them...the third was the Essenes, E-S-S-E-N-E-S. The reason we don't know much about them is because they lived way out in the desert and they were sort of like hermits. It was their copying of the Scriptures that left us with the Dead Sea Scrolls. You had the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes and they were pretty much the most well-known sects or groups within

Judaism. Now, the ones that are important in the gospel record because they were in the mainstream of Jewish life were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Now, as for when they arose on the scene we really don't know. It's very obscure. It's very difficult to find out when they first began, either one of them. But let's jump in at the point of the Pharisees and see if we can't reconstruct who they are and where they came from. They were successors to a group known as the Hasidim, H-A-S-I-D-I-M, if you want to write it down, Hasidim. Now, the Hasidim means the pious in Hebrew, the pious or the saints. Now, I'm gonna give you a little more history. You're gonna get a lot of this in Matthew, so you might as well get used to it. There's a period between the Old and the New Testament, right. You remember that 400-year period, prophetic silence? It's called the inter-testamental period. Now, during that period we have some fascinating history and we have a lot of information about that history of that period because of some books that are called the Apocrypha. They're not inspired books, but they are books that give us a little information about history. Now, during that 400 years, Greeks ruled in Israel, all right. This was the time of the great Greek Empire. And the Greeks ruled in Israel. It was also the period of time when the Jews got really upset about the way the Greeks ruled. And you know about a man named Antiochus Epiphanes who was a Greek ruler in Israel who was a horrible guy, you know. He went in there and slaughtered a pig on the altar and stuffed the pork down the priest's throat, which was a bad, bad thing to do, believe me, if you wanted to incite Jewish people. The Bible had forbidden them to eat pork and he made a mockery out of it. Well, during the period of Greek rule there arose in Judaism a group called the Hasidim. These were the pious, the dedicated, the devout, the consecrated, the spiritual ones. And they literally despised Greek culture. And they despised Greek custom. They wanted to adhere steadfastly to the principles of Judaism. They were devout and pious and they were also super patriotic. In fact, they aided and abetted the Maccabean Revolution where Judas Maccabeus, who was a Jew, and his sons got a revolt together. Boy, they were in support of that revolt. They were part of the heroic struggle because at first the Maccabean Revolution was propagated basically by religious conviction. It was propagated because, in their hearts, those Jews felt this was a desecration of the sacredness of their religion and their land. And so the Hasidim, although they were devout, spiritual, pious, almost mystical people, actually supported the revolution because they were so zealous for the sacredness of their country. By the way, at a later time, the Maccabean Revolution got a new leader by the name of John Hyrcanus and he began to pervert the real motive and it became political with him. He secularized the revolution and at that point, the Hasidim pulled right out of it. They lost all interest in it. And, in fact, they opposed violently the descendants of those they had supported in the revolution. Now, scholars feel that the Pharisees are the descendants of the Hasidim, that by the time of Christ this would be the reorganized Hasidim or this would be the reformed Hasidim under a new name. Pharisee is a word that means separatist...separatist. And they were really separatists. They saw themselves as the most devout. We used to say that the Pharisees were looking for a vacancy in the trinity. They were so pious and super spiritual and separated. They separated themselves from the heathen. They separated themselves from publicans...tax collectors. They separated themselves from sinners. They separated themselves

from Jewish people who were even indifferent to their causes. And they dubbed the multitudes within Judaism, the people who do not know the law, John 7:49 says. They looked at them with disdain. They separated themselves from everybody who wasn't what they were. They were isolationists. They didn't want to become contaminated or defiled by associating with anybody or anything that was in any way ceremonially unclean. And you see, what had happened, it all started out kind of okay with the Hasidim, but by the time it got to the reorganized Pharisees, they perverted everything. And there was no inward life left. There was no real devotion. There was no real consecration. There was no real piety. There was no real godliness. It was all an external, phony deal to set themselves above everybody else as the real super spiritual people. They were, literally, fanatics at self-righteousness. They withdrew themselves, Luke 7:39 says, from all sinners. And they tried to condemn Jesus for even going near sinners. You remember that? They blasted Him for hanging around drunkards, winebibbers and sinners and any of those kinds of people. They tried to force Jesus into their same kind of fanatical self-righteousness. The historians tell us that when they returned from the marketplace, they immediately performed a series of washings. Before they would ever eat anything, Mark 7, verse 4, they performed these washings because they were afraid that they may have bumped against somebody while they were in the marketplace who was an unclean person. Now, by the time of Christ, the whole concept of patriotism was gone. They'd lost their patriotism. That kind of departed with the Hasidim. They'd lost their true piety. They were nothing but shameful hypocrites. They had an influence that they no longer deserved and which they harmfully abused, lording it over the people. And Jesus really attacked them. You know, Jesus doesn't condemn people; He condemns sin in the Gospels. There was only one person or one group of people that He really condemned with scathing words and they were the religious phonies of His day. He forgave people taken in adultery. He dealt with sin and never damned sinners until it came to the religious phonies and He let them have it. In fact, in His last message in Matthew 23, He unleashed a tirade against them. And so they were the spiritual phonies. And there were lots of them. There were lots of them. It was very popular. Well, you get into the group of the Pharisees and you were a spiritual somebody.

Now, on the other hand there are the Sadducees and we don't know what the word comes from. There's all kinds of possibilities. Maybe the best one would be the fact that in the Old Testament, I Samuel, there was a high priest by the name of Zadok, the Septuagint Zadok. And some feel that they took this name Zadok and from it they got Sadducee because they were basically the high priestly class. We don't know that that's true. That's a good guess, I guess. They were the opposite to the Pharisees because they were the compromisers. They didn't particularly care about the intrusion of Greek culture. They could have cared less about Greek customs. They were the ones who corded and kowtowed and hassled around and fiddled with Rome to get everything they could out of it. The high priests at the time of Jesus were Sadducees. They were compromisers. They didn't believe in any resurrection so they didn't have to worry about how they lived cause there weren't any consequences. They just, you know, made hay while the sun shined; that's all. Everything was here and now, get it while you can get it, make it while you can. And so they did

everything they could politically to make sure they got out of Rome all they could get and they played the political game to get into the seats of power. They were few in number, extremely wealthy, they were a priestly party...and the chief priest, by the way, is almost a synonym when you see that in the Bible, the term chief priest, the New Testament, is almost a synonym for the Sadducees. Their big thing was to make money and they ran the temple franchises. You say, what? Oh, yeah, they had big business in the temple. When certain feast time came, in fact, all year long, when people came there, pilgrims from other countries, to make sacrifices, the first thing they had to do was exchange their money because they had to buy sacrificial animals. And in the temple they sold everything, the doves and the pigeons and the goats and the sheep. They sold it all there. They provided the whole bit and when these pilgrims would come to the temple they would first of all have to exchange their money to trade in Jerusalem. And the place you exchanged your money was at the temple and, of course, they charged an exorbitant interest to change the money. And then it turned right around, when they went to buy the animals, they paid incredible prices for the animals and the Sadducees were getting wealthier and wealthier and wealthier. And that's why Jesus went in with a whip and cleaned them out. And when He cleaned the thing out, that's when He alienated the Sadducees cause that was their business that He was messing with. And that's why people like Annas and Caiphas hated Him for the rest of the time that He lived and ministered until finally they got Him to the cross. So they were wealthy, they were political, they were influential and many of them were in the Sanhedrin and they were very sympathetic to Rome. The Pharisees were a lot more popular with the people because the Pharisees were at least sort of minimally patriotic whereas the Sadducees were hated by the people for the most part because they kowtowed to their conquerors.

Now, the chief differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees are these and I'm gonna give them to you very simply. First one is in Acts 23, verse 6. Here's where we find the first difference and it's in basic theology...Acts 23. Now, when Paul perceived that one part of the group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, boy, he knew he was in a great position. He knew how to start a riot. So "...he cried out, 'Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.'" Boy, he really nailed it because the Pharisees were hot on the resurrection. They liked that idea. Listen! A Pharisee literally lived for the resurrection. He spent his whole life keeping every picky little minute aspect of the law in hopes that someday, when it was over, man, he would be in the resurrection, glorified. Listen, those guys lived for the resurrection! Listen, they said no to everything in this life so they thought they could get God in a position to have to say yes to everything in the life to come. You don't live the way they lived unless you figure you're gonna get it later. They lived against rule after rule after rule after rule hoping to make it in the next world. On the other hand, the Sadducees didn't even believe in the resurrection so they just made it while they could. And so when Paul got up and said I am a Pharisee of the Pharisees who hope in the resurrection, he nailed the big _____ between those two and he got what he wanted. Verse 7, "And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees"...he got them in a theological argument..."and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection..." And as I told you before that's why they're so sad-you-see

(laughter). Well, it's true! Maybe that's where the word came from. Anyway, they said "there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees confess both." Now, they got into the real theological _____. They didn't believe in any resurrection. They didn't believe in anything spiritual. They didn't believe in any angels. In other words, they believed everything was here and now in the physical world and that was it. And so they had this big fight. They contended sharply, it says in verse 9. So the chief differences were religious. First of all, they differed over eternity...the future.

Secondly, they had a different view of Scripture. This is most interesting. The Pharisees recognized...now, watch this...two standards of divine truth...two standards. One was the Old Testament and the second was oral tradition. In that sense they were very much like what church today?...the Roman Catholic Church where you have Scripture plus tradition. They believed that the Scriptures, that was one way where you got God's revelation and, secondly, by oral tradition. And, man, they had added to the Scripture oral tradition from rabbis through the centuries to make up their laws and codes. And that's why when Jesus confronted them in Matthew 15, He said you've so messed up the law of God with your tradition. But they believed in two sources. The Sadducees, on the other hand, believed in only one. In fact, they believed that only the Scripture, not tradition, not oral tradition...they rejected all that stuff, all those ceremonies that had been added to the Old Testament, and I'll go even a step further...they believed that only the five books of Moses were the ones that were superior so that they put the Pentateuch even over the rest of the Old Testament. They thought the Old Testament was important, but the five books of Moses were even more important. So there was a difference there.

And then, thirdly...there was a difference, first of all, then, in their view of the future, there was a difference in their view of Scripture and, thirdly, there was a difference in their view of sovereignty and free will. I put it this way. The Essenes were the hard-line Calvinists. There weren't any Calvinists in those days because Calvin wasn't born yet, but the Essenes were the hard-line sovereignty, no freedom, you don't have any choice; it's all bang, bang, bang, bang, God laid it all out and nobody's got nothing to do with nothing...no freedoms. On the other end, the Sadducees totally rejected a divine decree and they were the ancient Armenians. They said, it's a big free-for-all. God's just up there saying, boy, I hope those folks will do such-and-such. And the middle-of-the-road people were the Pharisees. They believed in divine decree and man's freedom. So this is just another place where they differed. They wanted to hold for a decree, the Pharisees did. The Sadducees, not at all.

Well, that just gives you a little bit of distinction. And this is why it's so amazing...now, get this...do you realize that all throughout the history of the Pharisees and Sadducees, they never had anything in common except their mutual hate of Jesus Christ? Amazing. That's what got them together. And once Jesus Christ got on the scene, even when His forerunner got on the scene, John the Baptist, they got together, because they saw somebody and a message that was a threat to their security. By the way, the Sadducees faded out of existence in 70 A.D. When the destruction of the Temple came,

the Sadducees just faded out of existence. The Pharisees come popping back a little while after and they are basically responsible for re-devising what is today known as reconstituted Judaism. They're the ones who kind of put it all back together again after the destruction of the Temple.

Now, let me summarize it. The Pharisee was a ritualist; the Sadducee was a rationalist. The Pharisee was a formalist; the Sadducee was a free thinker. The Pharisee was a separatist; the Sadducee was a skeptic. The Pharisee was a commoner and the Sadducee was an aristocrat. So in terms of where they were in life, there was differences. In terms of what they believed there was a difference. In terms of their approach to religion there was a difference. But I want you to understand one great thing. Though they differed, they were yet in perfect agreement on one thing and that one thing is this, that you, by your own works, earn whatever you're gonna get. See. For the Sadducee, man, it's all here and now so get out there and get it any way you can get it. For the Pharisee, it's all in the afterlife, but the way you get it there is to work like mad here with self-effort. So you got the Sadducees working like crazy to get it now and you got the Pharisees working like crazy to get it later. And on that they agreed, whatever you get, you get by working for it, self-effort. And so religion for them was self-effort, externalism. And all of the sudden here comes John the Baptist. And John the Baptist is out there and he's saying, you know what really matters?...your heart. What's inside matters. And boy that was it; they hit the wall. Their emphasis was on the outside; his emphasis was on the inside. Their emphasis was on the outside; Jesus' emphasis was on the inside. And Jesus said to them, on the outside, you're all whitewashed and on the inside you're full of what?...dead men's bones and you stink. You whited sepulchers! You whitewashed graves! You see? Jesus exposed the Pharisees for their externalism. In Matthew...let me just read you Matthew 23:23. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin..." You know what that is?...herbs and plants and seeds. Man, if they had ten seeds, they dropped one little seed in the offering (laughter). They were really picky. But, he says, you "omitted the weightier matters of the law" like "justice and mercy and faith..." You're great on seeds, but lousy on justice, mercy and faith. You're all external. "You blind guides who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You make clean the outside of the cup and the platter, but within are full of extortion and excess." Whoa! So Jesus really nailed them. And He did the same thing to the Sadducees with a whip when He threw them out of the Temple. And He alienated both groups. They hated Jesus, they despised Jesus, and according to Matthew 27:18, the Bible says they envied Him. They were jealous of Him. And at last, they showed their real unity. Listen, let me tell you something, people. I taught you this in Galatians and I remind you of it right here. There are only two religions in the world; the religion of divine accomplishment and the religion of human achievement. That's all. There are only two religions; the religion of divine accomplishment which says God did it all, just believe it and receive it, and the religion of human achievement which says you've gotta do some of it or all of it. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees, though they differed about theology and things like that, were both a part of the religion of human achievement. And listen, people, that is a religion that has been spawned by Satan since the fall. Same old stuff...same old stuff. And they finally agreed because they were the pawns of the devil. But they had to get the

religion of human achievement together to fight the religion of divine accomplishment represented by Jesus Christ. And it all came to that. And Jesus even condemned them together as well as condemning them separately. In Matthew 16, verse 6, Jesus said, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." Watch out for their phoniness, their evil. You know, today we have Pharisees and Sadducees. We have ritualists and rationalists, don't we? The ritualists are the legalists; the rationalists are the liberals. The ritualists are the people who tell us that if we go through enough beads we'll be saved. The ritualists are the people who tell us if we just do certain ceremonies on the outside we're all right. And the rationalists are the ones who tell us, well, the Bible isn't really the Word of God; you have to just kind of feel God in your own personal way. And Jesus isn't really God incarnate; He's just a good man to follow. The pattern to God is we've got Him today, see. And while they may differ dramatically, the legalists says you gotta do the things the rules say. The liberal says, hey, man, whatever's going on in your head; it's all right. And although they differ greatly, they both are the religion of human achievement. Either by doing it or thinking it up, it's man's effort...same old stuff. And by the way, when they came to John...let's go back to Matthew 3...we probably ought to talk about Matthew 3 since it is our text (laughter). Matthew 3...I get all wound up about this stuff. In Matthew 3 we find a very interesting thing in the Greek. "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and the Sadducees..." What's interesting to me about this, in the Greek there are two nouns but only one article. And it seems to be that John is kind of pointing to the fact that he saw them as one group. It's sort of like he was saying, "and when he saw the Pharisees/Sadducees." They're just like one group, one class of religious phonies, one class of people all wrapped up in the religion of human achievement. In one case it was get it now, in one case it was earn it for later, in both cases it was the same thing. You say, well, John, if they're so bad off and they've got it all figured out with their human achievement, why are they coming to be baptized. Good question. Why are they coming to be baptized? What do they want out of John? Well, you know something? The Bible doesn't tell us why they came. But I'll give you some reasons that I thought of. First of all, they may have come because they were curious. I mean, if the whole city of Jerusalem had come out there, you know that they're gonna come out. And it's amazing that they figured it was a threat to them, too, right, or they wouldn't have banded together. Or at least we assume they were together because they appear together so frequently following this. I think maybe, too, that the Bible tells us, you know, that all men perceive that John the Baptist was a prophet and I think they were intimidated by the population that thought this man was a prophet of God. And maybe they even had some real questions cause they'd had prophetic silence for 400 years. Maybe they figured that maybe the people are right. Maybe the guy's a prophet. We certainly can't stay in here and be ignorant while everybody in town's running out to find out about it. We gotta find out about this guy. And so under the pressure of curiosity and the pressure of the people believing he was a prophet, they showed up. And I got another thing, too. I think maybe they figured if they didn't join the people, they might get left out and then the people would know something they didn't know and they might lose their influence. And I think, also, that they probably wanted to get in on the movement so they could move to the top and take it over. Listen, that's an old one. We've got that in

Christianity today. We've got all kinds of people running churches and running organizations in Christianity who aren't Christians. Satan moves these people in. The apostle Paul told us that. Beware, because when I leave grievous wolves shall come in not sparing the flock. Watch out for false teachers. Watch out for false apostles. Watch out for the people who want to come in and take over the church...false leaders. They wanted to get in on it. This was a movement that was gonna make a difference. If this was a movement that was gonna capture the people, then they were willing to stoop to conquer. Now, you can see they were all the wrong reasons. There was no real repentance, no real repentance, no real confession of sin, no honest spirituality, no real search for God, no real heart rending sorrow, no desire to get a heart that was sinful, righteous, to get ready for the coming King and His kingdom. They were so smug and self-righteous, they believed that they would be the great exalted ones in the kingdom when it came just as they were so they didn't repent. There wasn't any conversion, no transformation. They were just deceitful hypocrites. And they just come walking out minding their own business and they run into John. And I don't know what they figured about this guy but I'm sure they didn't figure what they got.

So we move from the congregation to the confrontation. Look what happens. What a greeting. When he saw them come for baptism...they were gonna carry out their phoniness, see, they were _____ carry it out all the way, gonna get baptized, make everybody think they were really a part of this whole deal, stay in a position of leadership in the community. If everybody's doing it, we're gonna do it, too. We got it today, don't we? I mean, if you gotta be born again to be a part of the deal, get born again. And then whatever it takes, you see. If getting born again will get you elected, man, get born again...whatever it takes. So that's exactly what you have here. We don't want to get left out. We're gonna come right in, be a part of this deal and keep our control. And so we move from the congregation to the confrontation and good old John the Baptist nails them with a jolt. "...he said unto them, 'O offspring of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" Now, that is a very direct approach (laughter). Man, it's a far cry from saying, now, ladies and gentlemen, here come our esteemed leaders (laughter). Oh, offspring of snakes, who chased you out here? The proud sons of Abraham, honored leaders of the nation, and he says, "you offspring of vipers." You know, the Lord must have liked that title for them cause He used it a lot (laughter). It became rather common. Jesus said to them in Matthew 12:34, "O offspring of vipers..." And then over in Matthew 23:33, Jesus again to them, "...O offspring of vipers..." Boy, I mean, that's pretty strong stuff. What does he mean by that? Well, he exposes in one expression the great and fatal sin that marked them. He condemns them instantly as religious phonies. Let me tell you why. Viper, echidna, interesting little Greek word. It refers to a small, poisonous desert snake very familiar to John the Baptist. And that snake was so deceitful. It looked like a dead branch or a little stick and it would stay still and somebody gathering firewood, pshw. That's exactly what happened on Melita in Acts 28, you remember, in verse 3, the firewood, and Paul was at the fire and that little thing that looked like a stick got Paul, Acts 28. That was the viper, deceitful. Suddenly it would strike and sink its teeth in and shoot its poison. Now, he doesn't call them just vipers; he calls them offspring of vipers for they were just the product of the people who preceded them. He really talked about the sin of their fathers. But

they were deadly hypocrites. They were poisoning a whole nation with their fatal deception. They were passing themselves off as if they were harmless and they were venomous. And by the way, it was fitting that he called them vipers because their own originator and their own leader was nothing but a viper himself and who was that?...Satan. Revelation, chapter 12, verse 9 and Revelation, chapter 20, verse 2, Satan is seen as a serpent. He is a serpent in the Garden. John 8, he is a deceiver. He is a liar. And so he calls them poisonous, deceitful vipers, snakes. And then he says this to them. This is just incredible. He says, "...who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And this ties in with the vipers. John knew the desert very well. And it had...basically, in the desert, and if you were there today, you'd see that this is all there is...in places in the desert there was dry, short grass and it's just very dry and you see fields of it. Maybe it's sometimes left over from a harvest, but just sometimes growing there. Perhaps the water of the Jordan allowing some growth and then as the heat of the summer comes and the Jordan becomes a little narrower, it dries out and is very parched. And then, now and then, around the desert as John would well know, you would see these stunted little bushes, thorny bushes, very brittle for lack of water. And sometimes a desert fire would come. And when a desert fire would break out, it would sweep like a river of flame across that dry grass and those brittle little thorny bushes. And invariably, and this is still true, in front of that wall of fire would come scurrying these little snakes, these little vipers and other little scorpions and desert creatures running for their lives. In fact the same thing happened when a field was burned. Today in America we still burn fields after harvest. They did the same then. During the time when the grain was growing, the snakes would hide in the grain. They would live there. And then all of the sudden the harvest would come and they might endure the harvest. And then the field burning would come and if the field was being burned, you'd see the little snakes fleeing across the desert in front of the fire. And so John the Baptist faces the snakes and says what made you run to safety before the fires of judgment? You see this picture? Graphic. He sees these people scurrying in front of the flame. It's as if to say, who brought you snakes out of your holes? Man, I mean, he is really _____. This is a blast of indictment. What brought you out of your holes? What fire got you moving? And, you know, in his own mind and in his own heart, he knew what that fire was. It was the fire of the judgment of God he's about to talk about. But that wasn't what really moved them. They weren't moved by the fire of the judgment of God; they were chased out of their holes by Satan. The devil had pushed them out there to carry out their hypocrisy. And just like snakes scurrying before a fire, they were running out there as chased by Satan. They should have been running out there running from the wrath of God with real repentance. Notice that phrase at the end, "who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And, there, John pulls the thought together. It was the wrath to come that he was talking about. By the way, the word wrath occurs 300 times in the Old Testament, many times in the New Testament, refers to God's judgment. Who warned you about God's judgment? And in their hypocrisy, you know, they might have thought, oh, we're coming with everyone else, you know. But they weren't really running from God's judgment because they never really faced it. And so he indicts them. This is a confrontation. He says, you snakes, you phonies. Who really chased you out here in your pretense to be running from the wrath to come? Who really chased you? And,

of course, the answer was Satan. So we see the congregation and the confrontation. Look at the condemnation, verse 8.

And, here, John opens up to them what has to happen. He saw the phoniness, he saw them pretending to be running from the wrath to come, as it were, fleeing to prepare for the Messiah and he says, you phonies, who sent you to do this. And he recognized their phoniness and so he gives them a true statement, a way that they can prove their genuineness. Verse 8, "Bring forth, therefore, fruits befitting repentance." Listen, if you're really running from the wrath to come, if you're really snakes scurrying before the fire, then let me see the fruit of your real repentance. Show me that it's genuine. And what are the fruits of repentance?...a transformed life. That's the fruit of repentance. In Acts 26:20 it says, the apostle Paul replying to King Agrippa about his ministry, said that he was going throughout "Damascus...Jerusalem...the borders of Judea, then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God"...now listen..."and do works fit for repentance." You have the fruit of repentance here; you have the works of repentance in Acts 26. What are they? Look at Luke 3 and I'll show you...same speech by John as recorded by Luke. Let me see the genuineness of your repentance. You really scurrying before the wrath to come? Let me see the fruit of it. You see, in verse 7 he says, "...O you offspring of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth"...verse 8..."therefore, fruits worthy of repentance..." What are they? Go down to verse 11...verse 10. And the people say, well, what do we do? What are they? What is the fruit of repentance? "He said unto them"...verse 11..."he that that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none. He that hath food, let him do the same. Then came also tax collectors to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than that which is appointed you.' And the soldiers likewise demanded of him saying, 'And what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely and be content with your wages.'" Now, that's pretty simple isn't it? Now, you can go back to Matthew. What he's saying is there ought to be a change in your lifestyle. Stop doing what you used to do. Do righteous things, not unrighteous things. Be loving and sharing and kind. He says to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, if you got two coats, give one to somebody and if you've got food, give it to somebody who's hungry. Let me see something in your life. That's exactly what James says: "Faith without works is"...what?..."dead." You'll never prove true repentance unless the fruit of repentance and the work of repentance is visible. True repentance will manifest a changed life. And there's a beautiful little word here. "Bring forth, therefore, fruits befitting repentance." That Greek word means "of equal weight." In other words, there ought to be works that are of equal weight with repentance so you can see it's legitimate. And this wasn't true of them and he knew it and they knew it and everybody around knew it. And so he nails them with it. If you're coming here with genuine repentance, then let's see it. Let's see your life change. This is the thing that I've been saying for so many months and I think I've been saying it for a couple of years now. When all these people come down the pike and say I'm born again, all I can hear is John say, all right, then you show me the fruits of repentance. Show them to me. That's the message. Now, they knew what true repentance was. You say, well, maybe they didn't know. Oh, yes, they knew. Listen, those Jews knew repentance. They knew it inside out and

upside down. Repentance was a part of their life. It was central to their thought. It was central to their theology, central to the Old Testament. G. F. Moore wrote, quote, "That God fully and freely remits the sins of a penitent is a cardinal doctrine of Judaism," end quote. The rabbis themselves said, and I quote, "Great is repentance for it brings healing upon the world. Great is repentance for it reaches to the throne of God. The law was created 2,000 years before creation," the rabbis said, "but repentance was created before that," they said. The rabbis said, quote, "A man can shoot an arrow for a few furlongs, but repentance reaches to the throne of God. And to the Jews," said the rabbis, "repentance is the gateway to God." Again, Moore says, and I quote, "the transparent, primary meaning of repentance in Judaism has always been a change in man's attitude toward God and in his conduct, a moral and religious reformation of the individual," end quote. They knew all of that. They knew what real repentance was. Maimonides, that great Jewish scholar of medieval times, defines repentance and traditional Judaistic terms with these words: "What is repentance? Repentance is that the sinner forsakes his sin, puts it out of his thoughts and fully resolves in his mind that he will never do it again," end quote. They've always had that view. The Old Testament was literally loaded with words calling the Jew to repentance, to changing his life, to eliminating sin and in its place, establishing righteousness. Jeremiah, chapter 33, and verse 18...and I'm showing you this to let you know that they were responsible, they knew. Well, it's probably Ezekiel 33:18. I knew it was one of the two. Yes! "When the righteous turneth from his righteousness and committeth iniquity, he shall even die for it. But if the wicked turn from his wickedness and do that which is lawful and right, he shall live by it." Listen, they knew what the standard of God was. There was never a question about it at all...turning from sin, turning to God. Hosea 14:1, "O Israel, return to the Lord thy God for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words and turn to the Lord. **Say unto Him, Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously..." That was part of their whole history. The little prophecy of Jonah, that wonderful record, chapter 3, verse 10, "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. And God repented of the evil that He had said He would do unto them and He did it not." You want to know something wonderful about that verse?...that it says that God saw their what?...works. You know how God evaluates repentance? Listen to me. You know how God evaluates repentance? By what?...your works, your fruit. It doesn't say God read their thoughts. It doesn't say God heard their prayers. It says God saw their works. In fact, the Jewish teachers used to teach that one of the most important verses in the Old Testament was Isaiah, chapter 1, because in it, in verse 16, were the nine norms of repentance. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." That's a fabulous thing. You see how it all starts. First you wash yourself and you make yourself clean and you put away evil from before your eyes and you cease to do evil. And then you learn to do well. And then you seek justice. You see, it starts inside and then it works outside and then you relieve the oppressed and judge the fatherless and plead for the widow and it all lines up in works, the things you do to manifest it. Listen, the Jews knew repentance. They knew it not as a sentimental sorrow, but as a real transformation of life. They knew it. They knew what it was and they knew there were phonies. The

Pharisees and the Sadducees should have known the fruits of repentance. They should have known the works of repentance. And so says John the Baptist to them, "Bring forth, therefore, fruits befitting your repentance." If you're here for real to be baptized, then let's see it. Let's see it. "Repentance," said the rabbis, "is like the sea. A man can bathe in it at any hour." And, you know, I couldn't help but think of that as I was looking at this verse. Do you realize that verse 8 is actually an invitation? At the same time that it's an indictment, it's an invitation. He says, come on, I'm giving you the opportunity. Bring forth fruits befitting repentance. The rabbis used to teach that the gates of repentance never close. Such is the mercy of God that He will receive even secret repentance. Rabbi Eleazar said, and I'm quoting, "It is the way of the world when a man has insulted his fellow in public, and after a time seeks to be reconciled to him, that the others say, You insult me publicly and now you would be reconciled to me between us two alone? Go bring the man in whose presence you insulted me and I will be reconciled to you. But God is not so. A man may stand and rail and blaspheme in the marketplace and the Holy One says to him, Repent between us two alone and I will receive you." I'll never forget an occasion in my life years gone by where a man who was in the ministry publicly condemned another man in the ministry widespread. I won't mention who, but you would know. Just condemned him from one end of the country to the other. The man who was condemned went to the other man and said, If I've offended you, I'm sorry. Would you accept my repentance and give me your forgiveness? And the man...I heard him with his own lips said to him...I told that guy, you have publicly made an issue and you must make a public repentance before I'll forgive you. That's the very opposite of the way God works. Aren't you glad for that? The rabbis always felt that God would take a man no matter what he'd done in the marketplace and if he repented, God would forgive him in private if no one ever knew. He didn't have to go back and set all the records straight. And so these Pharisees and Sadducees, they knew that. Repentance was extended to them. The opportunity was there. It was available. But John went further cause he knew they wouldn't take it. He knew what they were thinking. He said, "And think not to say within yourselves..." Now, don't you hate it when somebody reads your mind. Whoo! "Think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father, for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." Big deal! You have Abraham as your father. God can make a child of Abraham out of a rock. You're not so hot. Now, this...he says, stop presuming on your descent from Abraham as a passport to Heaven. Boy, this was really a shock to them. Do you realize that orthodox Jews believed that they were saved by their Jewishness? I'm sure you know that. The rabbis said, quote, "All Israelites have a portion in the world to come." They believed that. They talked about...listen to this...they talked about the delivering merits of the fathers, the delivering merits of the fathers. They had their own Jewish treasury of merits. Another thing the rabbis taught was that Abraham sat at the gates of Gehenna and Hell to turn back any Israelite who happened by chance to come that way. They said that it was the merits of Abraham which enabled the ships to sail safely on the seas, that it was because of the merits of Abraham that the rain descended on the earth, that it was the merits of Abraham which enabled Moses to enter into Heaven and receive the law, that it was because of the merits of Abraham that David's prayer was heard, even for the wicked

these merits sufficed. They said, if thy children were mere dead bodies without blood vessels or bones, thy merits, O Abraham, would avail for them. And it's just that spirit that John is rebuking. A degenerate person cannot claim salvation on the basis of a heroic past. An evil son cannot plead the merits of a saintly father. They were trying to hold onto their nationality. They were dead wrong. Later on when they confronted Jesus, it even got worse because they said we are the children of Abraham; you can't talk to us like this. Abraham is our father. And Jesus answered and said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham." See? We're right back to works again, the fruit of repentance. "But now you seek to kill Me, a Man that hath told you the truth which I have heard of God. Abraham did not do this." And then He went on to say, frankly, "You are of your father"...whom?... "the devil..." That's your father, not Abraham. No religious attainment, no birth is gonna deliver them. You know something very interesting to me? Do you know that the rich man in Hell in the story that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus...you remember that?...the rich man went to hell...the rich man was a man who had Abraham for his father. That's right. He had Abraham for his father. I'll tell you something else. He even heard Abraham call him "son" and it didn't do him any good. He recognized Abraham as a father. Abraham recognized him as a son _____ it didn't do him any good. No religious attainment does. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees that confronted John were headed for Hell because they were relying for their eternal security on their descent from Abraham. They were Jews and they were so smug. And he says to them, God is able to take these stones and make children unto Abraham out of them. What a statement. You see, it minimizes the importance of being a son of Abraham. But more than that; listen to this. It is a symbolic statement I feel. If these Jews...now watch...if these Jews, by turning their hearts to stone in resisting God's converting grace, if they wish to do that, if they wish to turn their hearts to stone, then God will take stones, lifeless, useless, dead things and make them into his sons. And I believe those stones are symbols of the Gentiles. If you want to turn into rocks, dead, lifeless and useless, then I'll take the dead and lifeless and useless Gentiles and turn them into sons. In chapter 8, verse 10, Jesus said the same thing. He met a centurion servant who was a Gentile and he saw and he listened and he marveled and he said, "...Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." I never met a son like this. And here's a rock that I can turn into a son. "And I say unto you that many" such Gentiles "shall come from the east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven. But the sons of the kingdom"...the Jews..."shall be cast out into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." If God finds a son who has become a rock; He'll find a rock that He can make a son out of. And so John confronts them and condemns them.

And then in verse 10, and we'll just read it and pick it up next time, he says, "now also is the axe laid at the root of the trees..." In other words, the guy who's gonna chop down the tree has laid his axe beside the tree to be destroyed. Now he really gets serious and we'll cover that next time.

Let me ask you this as we close. What are you trusting in? What are you trusting for your salvation? The Pharisees, they trusted their works, their self-righteousness. They were good. They kept all the

religious rules. The Sadducees, they were just gonna make hay while they could right now. They weren't worried about the future. It was all here and now. But together they were smug because they felt that they had inherited ___ the right. After all, they were the sons of Abraham. You know, I hear that from people today only it's this way. Why, I'm such a...I'm a basically good...God would never do that to me or send me to Hell. He'd never do that. And the axe is already laid at the root of their tree because they've never brought forth fruit that manifests genuine conversion, confessing sin and acknowledging Jesus as King. Let's pray.

Father, thank You again tonight for clear word to us about repentance. There may be some folks here tonight, I'm sure there are, to whom the message of John would be so important. What are you doing here? What are you doing here? Who brought you here? Who drove you before the fire of judgment, you deceiver, for you have never brought forth the fruit of real repentance. There are probably some people right here who are in this church tonight, maybe even a part of it, who appear to be something they're not, who appear to be running toward God, away from His wrath, who appear to be a part of His people, turning away from their sin and judgment to Him, but the fact of the matter is, they're not because there's no evidence. There's none of the fruit of repentance. There's none of that Godly life that manifests and befits true conversion. Father, I pray that You'll do a work in their hearts, touch people, that they might truly be converted. I think of what Paul said that we must look to ourselves to be sure that we really are saved. And the way to see it is in the manifestation of the fruit. For those, Father, who are here tonight who may not know You, I pray that tonight they'll open their heart and confess their sin and not lean on their own works, their own goodness, their own self-effort, maybe even Christian parents, maybe a heritage, but that they'll come running before the fire of judgment genuinely seeking the grace of salvation. We pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.

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