

The Fruits of True Repentance, Part 2

Matthew 3:7-12

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Matthew 3, verses 7 to 12. This is a sample of the kind of preaching done by the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Let me read it to you, beginning at verse 7, Matthew 3. "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come for baptism, he said unto them, 'O generation'" - or offspring – “of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth, therefore, fruits befitting repentance, and 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. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees, therefore, every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire, whose fan is in his hand and he will thoroughly purge his floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Now, in those brief few verses, we find a sample of the preaching of John the Baptist. And basically, his message is always the same as we see it indicated to us in the gospel record. It is a message calling for repentance. It's no different here. We find that, as we note in verse 8, that he calls for the fruits of repentance. And in verse 2 of the chapter, we see that his message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Let me back up a little bit before we approach the text. God promised His people a savior. We're all very much aware of that. God promised them a messiah, a king. And even throughout the time of Israel's moral and spiritual decline, even throughout the time of Israel's decadence, even throughout the time of Israel's chastening, the Holy Spirit continued through the mouth of the prophets to speak about the coming of the King, the Messiah, the Christ. And hope was always kept alive, at least in the hearts of the godly remnant, as the Holy Spirit used men like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Joel and Zechariah and Malachi to sing over again and again the songs of the splendor of the King and of His coming kingdom. Even in times of decadence, and even in times of chastening, the message was still there. And for those that were godly, it was heard and it was believed, and the anticipation filled their hearts. This went on throughout all of Israel's history until the great silent period after Malachi. The Old Testament ends with the prophecy of Malachi. And that's the end of the prophetic voice as far as the history of God's people is concerned. And, in fact, Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, ends this way: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." The last statement of the Old Testament is that there was going to come a man who would be really in the spirit and power of Elijah, and he would turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God and that was really a prophecy of, what man? - John the Baptist. So that the Old Testament ends with a statement about the coming of John the Baptist, the New Testament then begins with the ministry of this man. And in between is this 400-year period of silence, four long centuries from

Malachi to John the Baptist where no God-inspired voice spoke the message of the Messiah, the coming kingdom of righteousness and of peace. But just as suddenly as the silence began, just so suddenly was it broken by the powerful and bold preaching of a desert prophet by the name of John the Baptist or John the Baptizer. Either is correct.

In chapter 3, verse 1, he is introduced, "In those days came John the Baptizer." And he hit the silent sky like a comet. He was the first prophetic voice in 400 years and his message was the most anticipated of any message that could ever be delivered. His message was the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the King is coming, the thing for which Israel had hoped, the anticipation of the kingdom, the One which they had longed to see - the King Himself - was nigh, was near. And we've learned in our study that John the Baptist was the herald of the King. He was the announcer. He was the forerunner. And so we have met him because this fits Matthew's plan.

Matthew wrote his entire gospel to present Christ as King. And Matthew well knows that all kings have a herald. All kings have an announcer. All kings have a forerunner or someone who straightens out the path, who gets things ready for his arrival. And, consequently, Matthew goes to great lengths to introduce to us this herald in order that he might affirm from another angle, that indeed Jesus Christ was a king. Like any king, He had a herald, and not just any herald, not just any forerunner, but according to Matthew 11:11, John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever been born up until his time. Indeed, a great man. So Matthew introduces us to John because it fits his theme.

And John's message was the message of repentance, the message that was needed to get Israel ready. Because the tragedy of the matter, as we have seen, was that even though the King was coming and even though the kingdom was imminent, the people were not ready and the people could not receive the kingdom. There was sin in Israel. Israel was lost. In fact, Israel was no different than Gentiles at this point. And that's why John preached a baptism, because baptism was actually the rite which a Gentile proselyte went through to become a part of Israel. And John was, in effect, saying, "You're on the outside looking in. The good news, the King is coming; the bad news, you're not ready. You've got to be converted. You've got to be changed." The word "repentance," literally, is "converted." You've got to be transformed. You've got to turn your life around and get ready for the King or you will not be able to receive His kingdom.

And so it was bad news that John preached before it was good news that he announced. The bad news, look at verse 2, repent. The good news, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That was the twofold message that John preached. Before the kingdom could be received, repentance had to occur. Before they could ever enter into the place of blessing and be a part of what God had planned, the kingdom, they had to come to a place of conversion, transformation, 180-degree turning around, away from their sin, a fundamental change in their relationship to God and the way they were living their lives. And as I said, it was to be symbolized by baptism, the symbol of Gentile proselytes entering Judaism. And, really, the Jews were outsiders. This was a shocking message. So, repentance keyed John's message.

Now, repentance is an important thing. It's a great, great biblical truth. And I want you to understand it before we look again at his message. The great theologian Eric Sauer said this, and I think it's a good summation of the thought of repentance. He said this, quote, "Repentance is a threefold action. In the understanding, it means knowledge of sin. In the feelings, it means pain and grief. And in the will, it means a change of mind," end quote. And all three have to be there. In general, then - and stay with me on this, 'cause I want to explore these three for just a moment - in general, then,

repentance involves first of all, insight in the mind, understanding; secondly, despair in the emotions or the feelings; and thirdly, a change of life, changing the pattern, turning around, coming to the place where you see the truth in your mind. And then you cry out with the apostle Paul, "O wretched man that I am" - and you have despair. And then you remove all self-redemption possibility and you turn around and become totally dependent upon the grace of God. We know in the New Testament that redemption is presented as a gift. God has granted redemption it says, in Acts, chapter 5 and chapter 11. Redemption is a gift, according to 2 Timothy, chapter 2 and verse 25, where the Bible says, "In meekness, instructing those that oppose them, if God perhaps will give them repentance." It's a gift from God. God grants this gift in a threefold measure. Let's look at them. We've already mentioned them. Let's look at them specifically.

First of all is that intellectual part. And by the way, each of these, the intellectual, the emotional, and what we'll call the volitional element of repentance has a different word for it in the New Testament. Most interesting. Each of them has a different word so that they are delineated by the Holy Spirit as well. First of all is the intellectual. Repentance begins when there is a knowledge of sin, when there is a recognition of sin. So John, like any good preacher of repentance, confronted people with sinfulness. There had to be an understanding of sin involving a sense of personal guilt, a sense of personal defilement, a sense of personal helplessness. Now, all three of these are illustrated very aptly in Psalm 51. Take your Bible and turn to it with me for a minute and I'll point this out to you. We see the intellectual element of repentance in Psalm 51, in verse 3. This, by the way, is David's repentant heart crying out to God after his terrible sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and then in order to eliminate her husband he got him out in a battle and instructed his soldiers to get him in the heat of the battle and then leave him there until he was killed. And in response to that, his heart is broken and he repents. But first of all is the intellectual part in verse 3. "For I acknowledge my transgression and my sin is ever before me." Verse 7, "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow." Verse 11, "Cast me not away from thy presence. Take not thy Holy Spirit from me." Now, in all three of those verses is a recognition of sin. Verse 3 explicitly, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, my sin is ever before me." Verse 7 and 11, implicit, the sense that he needs to be cleansed, the sense that he needs to be purged, that there is something wrong, that God may leave him, verse 11, the Holy Spirit may be removed from him. And so there is an acknowledging, an acknowledging of sin, a recognition of what we are before God. That is the beginning of repentance.

The story goes that Lady Huntington was invited, or rather invited, I should say - the Duchess of Birmingham - to come to hear George Whitfield preach. The duchess responded in this manner, quote, "It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. It is highly offensive and insulting," end quote. Well, Lady Huntington was insulted when George Whitfield attempted to call her to the recognition of sin, and consequently she never entered into the act of repentance.

Mr. Moody, after preaching to the prisoners in a Chicago jail, visited them cell by cell. In the first cell he found two men playing cards, and they said, "We're here because false witnesses have testified wrongly against us." In the second cell the man said that the guilty man had escaped and "I was only an accomplice and I am here." And in the last cell only, Mr. Moody found a man crying over his sins, and there it was that Mr. Moody stopped. You see, the recognition of sin intellectually is where repentance begins.

Henry Drummond, who wrote the wonderful little book on *The Greatest Thing in the World* on 1

Corinthians 13 - some of you may have read it - after hearing the confession of sinners on one occasion said this, "I am sick of the sins of these men. How can God bear it?" Recognition of sin is the beginning, but it is not the end. It's just the beginning. True repentance involves more than that.

Let me show you why I say that. A hardened Pharaoh in Exodus, chapter 9 and verse 27, says, "I have sinned." A double-minded Balaam, in Numbers 23:34, said, "I have sinned." A remorseful Achan, in Joshua 7:20, said, "I have sinned." An insincere Saul, in 1 Samuel 15:24, said, "I have sinned." And a desperate, despairing Judas said, "I have sinned." But in none of those cases does the Bible ever record that true repentance took place, because the intellectual element is only the beginning of it, not the end of it.

There must be, secondly, the emotional; and, as Eric Sauer says, this what we have in the feelings. We go from the mind to the feelings, and it becomes a recognition not only of sin, but that sin is hateful to a holy God, and then there is an overwhelming sense of guilt in the emotions. Psalm 51 again - in this psalm where David is facing his sin, we find this element in verse 1: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." You see, here is a man crying for mercy and the only man who needs mercy is a man who is - What? - guilty. You see, innocent men don't need mercy. Justice will do fine for them. It's guilty men that need mercy, and David recognizes here that he is guilty and his emotions are stirred. In verse 10, "Create in me a clean heart" - he sees the evil in his heart - "O God, renew a right spirit in me." Verse 14, "Deliver me from blood guiltiness." And David even felt the anxiety and the pain in his physical body. He cries out to God in the midst of this sin, in terrible anguish in his heart. In fact, back in Psalm 32, he says, "When I kept silent about my sin, my bones became old through my roaring all the day long...day and night thy hand was heavy on me. My moisture is turned into the drought of summer." Like your tongue dries up when you know you've done something wrong and you're facing the test, David just dried up. His bones hurt. He had physiological responses to the emotion of guilt. And we see that repentance involves not only an intellectual element but an emotional sense of guilt, a deep recognition that sin is against the holy God, and an overwhelming sense of sorrow. And, beloved, I would just hasten to add that all true elements of repentance, all true acts of repentance, must include this feature. It's gotta be there. You have in Luke, chapter 18, this interesting statement about the rich young ruler: "And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful for he was very rich." You say, "Oh boy, that's good, he was sorrowful." Yes, but there's something wrong with that kind of sorrow. When I talk about - now watch this - when I talk about emotional pain over sin, I mean that the pain is over the violation of a holy God, not over the consequences. It's got to be *lupe kata theon*. It's got to be a sorrow directed toward God. Sorrow that is merely a sense of shame because everybody found out, or sorrow that is really fear of the consequences, is selfishness. And that is selfward. True emotional guilt, true sorrow in the heart, is because God has been violated and that's the stuff of which real repentance is made. There are a lot who are sorry they got caught, right? Lot of people who are sorry they lost their reputation, lot of people who are sorry they got some consequences; that's different. Listen to this. True repentance doesn't think of consequences, it doesn't think of other people's opinion, and it doesn't think of excuses; it does think of transgressing God, it does think of being personally guilty. So it is *lupe kata theon*, "sorrow toward God." That's the issue. And when there is genuine repentance, there will be this deep sense of sorrow directed toward a holy God who has been offended. Judas - when he betrayed Christ and he was condemned - it says in Matthew 27:3, repented. But it wasn't the right kind. It wasn't the right kind. It wasn't the repentance that is Godward; it was the repentance that says, "I don't like the consequences." That's different.

So you begin with the intellect and then it moves to the feelings. But no matter how convinced the mind is about sin, and no matter how pained the emotions become, even in the right way, true repentance will never happen without the third area, and that's volitional - intellectual, emotional, and volitional. There's got to be an act of the will. There's got to be a turning around. With David he recognized it and he felt guilty for it and his guilt was directed toward God, but the thing that really made the repentance happen was the fact that he had an act of will in which he said "I will not do this anymore. I turn from this." He changed his life pattern. Look at Psalm 51, verse 5. "Behold, I was shaped in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me." He recognizes that this is the past, this is the way it was. But in 7 he says, "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow." Turn it around. Turn this depravity around. Turn this sinfulness around. "Create," verse 10, "in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me." You see, his will wanted a dramatic change. That's vital. That's vital.

That's illustrated, I think, in the New Testament in many cases. One that's especially meaningful - the prodigal son. First of all, the prodigal son intellectually knew he'd done wrong. Right? And then he got very emotional about it, and he began to look at the pig slop that he was eating. He began to realize what a terrible mess he was in. But finally, he was volitional in Luke 15:18 - "I will, I will" he says. "I will" - What? - "arise, go to my father and I'll say to him, 'Father, I've sinned against heaven and before thee. I am no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thy hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father." There was the act of true repentance consummated. He moved in the direction of God.

In Luke 23:42 you have true repentance where the thief says, in verse 41, "We indeed suffer justly; we receive the due reward of our deeds." He says, "I acknowledge I'm a sinner." "This man has done nothing amiss. And he said to Jesus, "Lord." And right there that man changed his allegiance, didn't he? For a long time either himself, or Satan, or whatever had been lord, but now it was Jesus. "Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom." "From now on, I want to be identified with You." There was a change. His will was activated. And the other thief, it wasn't so with him, it wasn't so. Now, you see, once repentance occurs, there will be an immediate response.

And this is what we find, looking again in Matthew, chapter 3, now. This is what we find in Matthew, chapter 3 and verse 8, called the fruits of repentance. When this really, honest, legitimate, intellectual, emotional, volitional turnaround and transformation occurs under the power of God as a gift from God, when God does this miracle in a life, there will be fruit, there will be results. All true repentance will bear fruit. John's message then is true repentance. And John is very concerned with validating anybody's supposed repentance on the basis of whether or not they manifest - What? - fruit. If it isn't there, then the repentance isn't valid, because where there is real repentance, there will be real results. Where there is a transformed life, where there is conversion and transformation, there's got to be a by-product. And so that's the main message that John uses to confront the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Now, let's go back to Matthew 3 and again look at this confrontation. John's message: repentance. You've got to repent, and it's gotta be real, and honest, and legitimate, and manifested by the fruits of repentance. And do you know what those fruits of repentance are? We'll remind you, in case you've forgotten, in just a moment.

Now, as we look at this sample sermon - and we've already begun to look at it and gotten down to verse 10, and we'll pick it up there after a brief review - we have noted that in John's message we

find five elements: the congregation, the confrontation, the condemnation, the conflagration and the consolation. John's out in the wilderness, okay? Incredible man, wearing a garment made out of camel skin, eating bugs and honey, lived not only there when he was ministering, but had lived there throughout his life, waiting for this moment. He was God's man. He was set apart. He was uncorrupted by the system. Just by the way he appeared and by his very dress and diet, he was a rebuke to the materialistic-minded people of his age. He was the prophet of God, anointed by God to announce the coming of the King, and the people began to flock out to him from inside the city. They began to come in droves. And with all of the people that were coming, one day there appeared a special group, and this is point one in our message, and this is the congregation. And we saw who they were. Look at verse 7. "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and the Sadducees come for baptism." John looks up one day and here come the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious leaders, the two leading factions of Judaism, the legalists and the liberals - the Pharisees being the legalists, the Sadducees being the liberals. And they were coming for baptism. In other words, they were gonna do whatever needed to be done to get in on this deal. They wanted to be included. They were afraid that this new movement would exclude them. If the people were in it, they were gonna be it, because they wanted to hold their control over the people. And it may be, too, that they felt in their hearts that maybe this guy was a prophet of God and maybe there was some magic in this deal and let's get in on it if there is. Or whatever their motive was, it wasn't the right one, and John knew it right off the bat. They wanted to be a part. They were the ritualists and the rationalists, not the realists. They weren't legitimate, repentant men; they were phonies. And by the way, it's most fascinating for us to remember from last time that they were arch-enemies. The only thing they'd ever agreed on was whatever they needed to save their political skins, and they also agreed on the death of Jesus Christ. But apart from that, they despised and hated each other and were in absolute disagreement. But when they found a common enemy to their power and their authority and their prestige, they really got together. And so they came as hypocrites.

And we move from the congregation to the confrontation. John confronted them as such in verse 7. He said to them, "O offspring of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" "You snakes, what made you run before the bush fire? What chased you out here? What cleared you snakes out of your holes? What fire made you run? Are you legitimately running from the wrath of God?" And I told you last time that that viper he's talking about there is that little snake that looks like a stick. And it's on the desert out there, and whenever there was a fire in that dry grass or whenever a farmer would burn his field, those little snakes would come scurrying ahead of the flames. And John the Baptist is saying, "What chased you here? Is it really the wrath of God? What's your real motive? What brought you phonies out here pretending to be running from the wrath of God?" And John really unmasks the masquerade. What's your real motive? Well, he knew it wasn't genuine repentance.

And so in verses 8 to 10 we came, thirdly, to the condemnation, and he says in verse 8, "Bring forth, therefore, fruits befitting repentance." This is really a condemnation. He's really saying, "You phonies. You come running out here like everybody else pretending to repent and wanting to get this baptism and identify with the Messiah and be a part of this whole thing. You're chasing, you're running out here, supposedly fleeing from the fire of the wrath to come. What's your real motive? I know it isn't genuine repentance, because if it was, there would be the fruits of it and I don't see that. You better bring forth legitimate fruit of repentance before you can legitimize your supposed act of repentance." So John challenges them to true repentance in verse 8. And then he reads their minds, in verse 9, and says, "And think not to say within yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" "Don't be saying to yourself, 'Well, have you forgotten, we're real Jews. We're the children of Abraham.'" "What do you mean, turn around, get converted, be repentant." "Why, we're the sons of

Abraham. We have a guarantee in the kingdom.” And we went into that last time, didn't we, how they felt about that? John says, “Listen, you better not count on that.” “I say unto you, God is able to make children of Abraham out of rocks if He wants to.” That's no big deal. And, I think, implied in the stones here is the Gentiles. “If you Jews want to turn your hearts to stone, then God will take the lifeless stones, the Gentiles, and turn them into the children of Abraham.” So he says, “You better not depend upon your descent from Abraham. You better not depend upon your self-righteous hypocrisy. If this is real and you really want to be baptized and you're really fleeing from the wrath to come, the only way you'll escape the wrath to come is to have genuine repentance and to bring forth the genuine fruit of repentance and not to depend upon your ancestry to redeem you.”

And then the condemnation really focuses on them in verse 10, and let's pick it up right there. Verse 10, "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire." Now, this is really a strong, strong statement. In those days, men kept vineyards and orchards. And at the end of the harvest season, the keeper of the vineyard, the keeper of the orchard would go through and check out all of his vines and all of his fig trees. And the fruitless vines and the fruitless fig trees that were dead and produced no life he would cut down lest he waste his time on them. And so again in an agricultural illustration, John pictures God, as it were, coming to find the fruitful tree, the tree where the fruit of repentance is visible. And where He doesn't find it, He lays the axe, as it were, at the root, indicating the axe is resting there waiting to do its work of judgment. The tree without the fruits of repentance is cut down and burned.

Look at it in verse 10. "Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit" - the fruits of repentance - "is hewn down and cast into the fire." That's precisely the illustration used by our Lord Himself in the 15th chapter of John, the 6th verse. "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, is withered, and men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned." Now, John is saying this: “Look, you can pretend to be running from the wrath to come. You can pretend to be fleeing from the judgment of God, but if there's not any fruit there, and if you're depending upon your self-righteous smugness and your descent from Abraham to save you, you're in a lot of trouble because the axe is already laid at the root of your tree because there's no fruit. There's an imminency here. He says - look at it - "the axe is laid unto the root of the trees" already. “Now,” he says, “it's there. It's there now. Judgment is now. It's imminent.” Notice a most interesting thing that judgment, in John's preaching and in all of the prophetic preaching of the Old Testament, was connected with the coming of the Messiah, just as much as salvation was. And they didn't see any great gap like we see salvation now and the great judgment at the end of the millennial kingdom. They didn't see all of that gap in there. They just were told, as the prophets always had been told, that when the Messiah comes, the Messiah will come for salvation, and He will come for judgment, and they saw it as one. They saw it in unison. Listen, in the temple when Jesus was taken there as an infant, in Luke, chapter 2, verse 34, Simeon said about that child, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel." From the very beginning when the baby came, it was judgment and salvation and they knew it. That was always the word of the Old Testament prophets. The Old Testament prophets looked to the time of Messiah as a time of great, wondrous blessing and salvation and equally as a time of great and wondrous judgment and didn't necessarily see that there would be a great change or a great gap in between. I think about Isaiah 11, "There shall come...a rod out of the stem of Jesse, a Branch," and that's Christ. It talks about in verse 3, immediately, that He is going to judge. "With righteousness shall he judge the poor, reprove with equity for the meek of the earth...he will smite the earth with the rod of his mouth and the breath of his lips shall" be used to "slay the wicked." Boy, that's a little different than the Bethlehem baby story, isn't it?

The prophets saw Him coming in great judgment. Isaiah 61:1 talks about this Spirit of the Lord - listen to this - "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me" - this is Christ, a great prophecy of Christ, and He even quoted this Himself, being the fulfillment of it - "because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek. He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, the opening of the prison to those who are bound." What a great thing. The Messiah's gonna come and He's going to preach good tidings to the meek, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, open the prison to those that are bound. That's the salvation element. The very next verse says He will "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God." A day of wrath and day of judgment - they went together. The prophet Joel, in the third chapter of his brief prophecy, essentially deals with the same thing. We won't take time to look at it, but John preached that same message.

He said, "Hey, the kingdom is at hand but the axe is laying at the root of the tree, too." I can't help but think back a few weeks ago in Matthew that as soon as that little baby arrived, as soon as that little baby arrived it wasn't very long until other little babies were slaughtered, until there was chaos in Israel, until 70 A.D. came and the whole nation of Israel was drowned in a bloodbath and the city of Jerusalem literally obliterated from the map. When John preached this word, when John said the axe is laid at the root of the tree, do you realize the destruction of Jerusalem was only about 40 years away and it would be all over. And so there was imminent judgment. By the way, this is always true. There is always imminent judgment, because the moment you die, the moment any man dies, there is judgment. Oh, not the final great white throne judgment, but listen, when you die without Jesus Christ, at that moment you go out of the presence of God forever. That's judgment. And, additionally, God brings about judgment and vengeance even in this life before we die. If you live a life in violation of God's principles, you will suffer consequences here and now. Read the book of Proverbs. The bottom line in the book of Proverbs is this: It's gonna be good for the good and bad for the bad, here and later. That's the bottom line in the book of Proverbs. Good for the good, bad for the bad, now and later. The axe head is at the root of the tree. And, of course, ultimately, the great white throne judgment - terrible, fearful, fearful judgment. So, John had to say judgment is just as near as the kingdom is near. If the King comes, He comes not only to save, but He comes to judge and always the same. By what you do with Jesus Christ, you determine whether He's the Savior or the Judge. If they continue to hold their ritualism - the Pharisees - and if the Sadducees continue to hold their rationalism, their self-righteousness, or if they feel that the baptism of John is some magic prophylactic that's gonna cure any of their problems, or if they're depending on any work of the flesh, if they're depending on going through any religious rite for its own external benefit, or if they hold to their descent from Abraham or any of that, the axe is laid at the root of the tree. They need to repent. In Acts 17:30 the apostle Paul preached, "God hath commanded all men everywhere to" - What? - "repent." The other alternative is that the axe is laid at the root of the tree marked for imminent destruction. That destruction could come tomorrow if you die. It can come tomorrow in the consequence of sins that enter into your life even if you're alive. I believe much of the disease and suffering and pain and sorrow of the world is the inevitable consequence of sin. Or it'll come in a future time when Jesus returns. And, ultimately, it'll come at the great white throne, but it's imminent.

Well, it doesn't tell us here what they said. It doesn't tell us here what their reaction was. But then again, that's not Matthew's point. Matthew's point is just to present the herald of the King, just to present the King. Luke tells us what happened. Luke gives us the same sermon, only he fills in what happened. And in Luke's account in chapter 3 - you have to turn to it - let's see what happened. After the condemnation - first there was the confrontation as he spoke to this unique congregation, then

came this scathing condemnation. And what was the reaction? Want to hear something amazing? Luke records – listen - absolutely no reaction from the Pharisees and the Sadducees, none. No reaction. Matthew records it. No reaction *at all* from them. But somebody reacted; believe me. Verse 9 of Luke 3. Here's the same verse, "And now also the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. And the people asked him saying, 'What shall we do then?'" You see, the message wasn't even to them, but they were the ones who were hurting. They were the ones who were afraid. They were the ones who wanted to get it right. And that's the difference between true repentance and phony repentance. The ones who really cared, they were the ones who said, "What do we do?" As far as we know, the Pharisees and the Sadducees didn't say anything. And he said, "Show me the fruit of repentance," in effect. "Show me the fruit. He that has two coats, give one to somebody that doesn't have any. He that has food, give it to somebody who doesn't have any." And the tax collectors came and said, What do we do? And he said, "Don't take any more than you're supposed to." In other words, it's a style of life that's honest and upright and righteous and loving. "And the soldiers said, 'And what shall we do?' And he said, 'Don't hurt anybody and don't lie and be content with your pay.'" Now, this isn't how you become a regenerate person, this isn't how you get right with God; this is the result of getting right with God. But you see, there were some people who really did care. They were the genuine, not the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They continued the masquerade even until the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The people, they wanted the manifest, the fruits of true repentance. And there was a remnant of people baptized by John ready for the coming of Messiah.

So we see the congregation, the confrontation, the condemnation. And fourthly - and this is really the heart of the passage in terms of teaching doctrine - the conflagration. That means fire. Let's look. Now watch this. John expresses the ultimate result of the condemnation in terms of fire. At the end of verse 10, the last five words, "and cast into the fire"; the end of verse 11, the last three words, "and with fire"; verse 12, "whose fan" - we'll talk about what that word means in a minute - "fan is in his hand, he will thoroughly purge his floor, gather the wheat into the granary, but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." Verse 10 ends with "fire." Verse 11 ends with "fire." Verse 12 ends with "fire." That's the conflagration that comes in response to the condemnation.

Now, fire is a biblical symbol of divine judgment or divine punishment, and we can't take the time to cover every element of it. But in Genesis 19:24, for example, it says "and the Lord rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven." Now here is a good illustration of fire as an emblem and a symbol of judgment. There it was a literal molten fire. In Numbers 16:35 it says, regarding those who had prostituted the priesthood, "And there came out a fire from the Lord and consumed the two-hundred and fifty men that offered incense." Some kind of a fire; just devoured them. Deuteronomy 4:24, then, identifies this concept with God. "For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire," Deuteronomy 4:24. He is "a consuming fire." Deuteronomy 32:22, "For a fire is kindled in my anger and shall burn unto the lowest sheol and shall consume the earth with her increase and set on fire the foundation of the mountains." Now, I'll tell you, when God gets upset, there's gonna be fire. That's what it's saying. And again and again and again we see this throughout the Old Testament. One other maybe I can give you, Jeremiah 4:4, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and take away the foreskins of your heart" - in other words, get your religion inside - "ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem lest my fury come forth like fire and burn that none can quench it because of the evil of your doings." So you can see then that fire is manifest by God in judgment. It is a way in which God defines His act of judgment. In Malachi, just as a closing word in the Old Testament, it ends with a word about fire. Chapter 4, verse 1, the last chapter of the Old Testament, "Behold, the day comes that shall burn like an oven and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall be stubble and the day that cometh shall burn them up." And the Lord says He'll not leave root

or branch.

And you find the same thing even in the New Testament - fire. Jesus spoke about it. In Matthew 5:22 He said, "Thou fool shall be in danger of hell fire." Matthew 5:29, "If your right eye offend you, pluck it out, cast it from you, for it's profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." That's Jesus talking. And again the word there, "hell," is gehenna, "the gehenna of fire." Look at Mark 9:43. We'll go on to Mark and then one in Luke. Mark 9:43, again just to show you this emphasis in the New Testament, "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched, where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." Now here you get the idea of this fire that can't go out. In Mark 9:47 again it talks about plucking out the eye rather "than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire." And in verse 48 it says it again, "where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." And in Luke you have the same situation. Luke 3:17, the chaff will be burned with fire unquenchable. So repeatedly in the Old Testament and repeatedly in the New Testament, fire is connected with judgment. And that is something we want to keep in mind.

They are in danger of eternal fire, of hell, of gehenna, of judgment, of damnation. It's very serious. John is not just saying, "Boy, if you don't do this, you're gonna miss the abundant life; boy, if you don't do this, you'll never know peace and happiness; if you keep doin' the way you're gonna do, you're not gonna really have joy, you're not gonna have a positive self-image." He's saying if you keep goin' the way you're goin', you're gonna burn in hell. That's the consequence. And there's no way to put that fire out. Jesus said that. There's no way. "Every tree," Matthew 7:19, "every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire" - *every* tree. Nobody gets off, no escape. Listen, if Satan, as wily, as clever, as powerful as he is, isn't gonna escape getting cast into the lake of fire, what would make any man think he could?

And then verse 12 really crystallizes the truth because it pictures a threshing floor - fascinating imagery. "Whose fan is in his hand." Now, the "fan" here is a shovel. It's not a shovel like you think of a shovel. It literally means shovel. It's a winnowing shovel - big flat thing. You'll notice that you have the floor mentioned in verse 12 and the purging and the shovel and here's what happened. This is a threshing floor. After the harvest - again, we're still dealing with an agricultural series of metaphors here. This was John's lifestyle out in the wilderness. There was a threshing floor and the threshing floor was a most unique thing. They would take a hard place in a field, usually where there was rock bed, and they would wet it and wet it and pack it and pack it until it was just very, very hard. And they would shape it like a saucer so that it was deeper in the middle and then became shallower, just like a saucer. And then, around the outside of it, they would stack rocks to act as a little wall to keep the grain in. And then when the harvest was done, they would take the bunches - bunch by bunch of the grain, whatever it was - and they would throw it onto the threshing floor. And then there would be an ox or oxen, depending upon the size of the threshing floor, and that ox or oxen team would walk around the threshing floor dragging great heavy pieces of wood over the grain which would act in a way to separate the kernel from all the rest of the straw and the dirt and the dust and everything else that was attached. Usually, 30 to 50 feet in diameter would be enough for a single threshing floor, and sometimes there would be many of them. Now, what would finally be left would be the hard kernel, and then there would be some of the crusty coating of the kernel and dirt, pieces of straw and so forth, and that had to be separated out. And so the farmer or whoever was doing it would take this flat shovel and usually, as I read about this, I found that they would build the threshing floor on a promontory if there were mountains around where the wind could blow by easily, or on a great flat field on the front coast, the coast of Sharon.

And the Mediterranean breezes, particularly one season of the year, would blow at a certain time in the afternoon. And they would take that shovel and lift up all of that stuff and they would throw it in the air and the grain would fall straight down and the chaff and the straw and the dust and the rest of it would blow away. Only the grain would fall. This was called winnowing. And it left them with just the grain or the wheat. Bunch by bunch, they went through this process. And as the Mediterranean breeze would come from May to September through the harvest time, they would go through this process, the heavier kernels falling straight down. And here we find the Lord Jesus Christ and He's got His threshing floor. "His" modifies the One who comes after me who is mightier than I, and that's Christ. And He has His shovel and He is throwing these things in the air and the wheat falls straight down, is gathered into the granary. The rest of the stuff blows aside, is picked up and burned with unquenchable fire. By the way, this is a picture of ultimate judgment. And in the ultimate judgment, Christ oversees the whole project, but it's actually carried out by the angels. The angels actually do the winnowing. The angels actually do the separating. The angels are the ones given this unique responsibility, and we'll find that out later on as we study the book of Matthew.

So at the second coming of Jesus Christ, He's gonna come in judgment and He's gonna separate. The good grain - now watch this - goes to the granary. What's the granary? Take a guess - heaven. Heaven's the granary. And the chaff goes into the fire. And what's the fire? - hell. Very simple - heaven, hell. Good grain into the storehouse, into the granary, into heaven, the kingdom. And the godly who repent, they are the good grain. The godly who manifest the fruit of repentance, they are the good grain. The true children of the kingdom, they are the good grain and the rest is chaff. In fact, way back in Psalm 1 the psalmist said this: "The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind" - What? - "driveth away." And so we see this fearful picture of judgment. Conflagration. Hell on the one hand and heaven on the other. And so does John confront them, condemn them, and warn them of the fire of God's vengeance if they do not manifest the fruits of repentance.

Beloved, all I can say to you is the same message stands today. Jesus came as a savior or a judge, to offer heaven or hell, blessing or cursing. And you are either wheat to be gathered to the granary or you are chaff to be burned with unquenchable fire. And you will make the decision by virtue of whether or not you bring forth the fruits of repentance that manifests that you have in your mind become aware of your sin, that you have in your emotions recognized personal guilt, and that you have in your will called upon the Lord Jesus Christ to change you from the way you have been. If that has occurred in your life, if true repentance and conversion has occurred in your life, you are wheat and you'll be gathered to the granary.

And then, John - we have to close with this - has also not only a message of conflagration for a condemned and confronted congregation, but finally a message of consolation, verse 11. There's got to be a positive and here it is. There is hope. Salvation is offered here, in fact, even in verse 8. Verse 8, he's pleading with them, even though it's a sort of a rebuke and even though it's a condemning exposure of them, there is in it the possibility where he says "bring forth fruits of repentance." It's an offer anyway. They can respond. There is an invitation there. And then, in verse 10 he says similarly, "every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is cut down." And the implication there is that you could bring forth good fruit. So you have an invitation in verse 8 and you have a potential in verse 10. And there's even a promise in verse 12, He will gather His wheat into the granary. You can come. You can bring forth fruit. And you can go into the kingdom. He's already kind of had that there in a very positive way. You can be a part of the precious grain for which Christ is now preparing a place, according to John 14, that He may come again and receive us unto Himself. He's gonna come back

to the threshing floor and pick up the grain and take it to be with Him. But verse 11 is very specific about the consolation. It takes the hints in 8, 10, and 12 and focuses them on Christ in verse 11. He says, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Now, this is a marvelous verse that demands our concentration as we close. Three baptisms are mentioned. Watch them. First, John's baptism of repentance; second, the baptism with the Holy Spirit by Jesus Christ; thirdly, the baptism with fire. The first, John's baptism of repentance, was in preparation for Christ's coming, right? It was the baptism of a Gentile proselyte. It was saying to Israel, "You're on the outside. You gotta get right with God before you can enter the kingdom. Before you can receive the King, there needs to be preparation." The second, John says, "He who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." That was in connection with Christ's coming. Christ came, established His church, baptized the church in the Holy Spirit. And the third will be the result of His return, the baptism of fire. John's baptism - why, it was only a preparation, just a preparation. You remember in Acts 19:4, "Then said Paul, '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.'" He was just getting them ready. They were going through baptism as a symbol of an inward cleansing as they confessed their sins and they got right with God so they'd be ready when the Messiah arrived. This wasn't Christian baptism; this was a pre-Christian - this was an Old Testament act of faith and repentance.

And then there was another coming, he said, "mightier than I," "mightier than I" - superior in power, superior in position, superior in baptism. "All I can do is baptize with water. I can only deal," said John, "in symbols but He will deal in realities and He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit." No wonder you hear John say in John 3:28, "You yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom, but the friend of the bridegroom who standeth and heareth Him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. This is my joy. This my joy, therefore, is fulfilled. He must increase and" - What? - "I must decrease." He said, "It isn't me; it's Him, it's Him. I'm just the friend of the bridegroom; I'm not the bridegroom, just the friend." And then John's humility is so beautifully seen. "He who comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear." Literally, I'm not fit to carry His sandals. The word in the Greek for "shoes" signifies that which is bound under, and it's simply a reference to - they used to make a sole for the bottom of the foot out of wood or out of leather, rawhide. And they would just put that sole on the bottom of the foot, and they would just strap it to the ankle and the foot. Bedouins today might wear such a sandal made of untanned sheepskin.

Of all the things that a slave had to do, the lowest slave on the totem pole, the most menial task of all was to carry his master's sandals. When the master came home, took off his sandals, he washed his feet, carried his sandals away. That was the lowest task that any slave ever had to do. In fact, when the disciples met in the upper room the night before Jesus was to be taken and captured, they wouldn't do it to each other. It was too low. And they were having a fight about who was the greatest in the kingdom, and finally Jesus had to get up and do it Himself. And here John says, "I'm not even worthy to carry His dirty sandals. I can't even get that high, He's so far beyond me." And it's important that he said that because in Luke 3 we find that people were saying, "Is this the Christ? Are you the Christ?" And, boy, he didn't want them confused on that. "I'm not even worthy to wash His feet and carry His shoes. This One will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" - this great, great truth.

Here is the great, initial prophecy of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah would completely

overshadow John. As to ability, He would be mightier. As to person, He would be worthier. As to work, His would be greater. And between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ there was such a qualitative difference as would be between the infinite and the finite, between the eternal and the temporal; and John said, "I'm not even worthy to carry His shoes. He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit." And He did, didn't He? Jesus said, "I can't send you the Holy Spirit until I go back to heaven, but when I go to heaven, I'll send the Spirit." And He did. He promised that in that night with His disciples in John, chapter 14 and following. And He sent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost and baptized those believers. Christ literally baptizing them with the Holy Spirit, placing them in the body of Christ. First Corinthians defines this for us. First Corinthians 12:13 says, "For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body." All believers placed into the body of Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit takes the believer and places him in Christ. It's the unifying thing. It is the act by which we are fused with Jesus Christ. It is the act by which we are fused with every other believer, that which we were speaking of this morning.

This must have been a wonderful message for these people because, you see, they had been waiting for the Holy Spirit. They knew the prophecy of Joel that He would come, the Messiah would come and He would pour out the Spirit on all flesh. Ezekiel said there's comin' a day when God is gonna come, the Lord is gonna come, and He's gonna take away the stony heart and give you a heart of flesh. And then God said, "And I will put my spirit within you," Ezekiel 36. That's why when Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born of the water and the spirit," Nicodemus knew exactly what He meant. He meant Ezekiel 36. The water and the Spirit there doesn't refer to physical birth and spiritual birth; it refers to the tremendous prophecy of Ezekiel 36. They were waiting for the Messiah and they knew the Messiah would bring His Spirit. Isaiah 11 prophesied a Spirit with *manifold* might and power. They were waiting for this - the Spirit's coming. And he says, "It will be not me but Christ who will come, and He will baptize you with His Spirit. He will submerge you in the power and the person of the Spirit of God." So John's announcement here is prophetic and it happened in Acts chapter 2. And from that time on the prophecy of Jesus came true. Jesus said, "the Spirit is now with you," but in John 14:17, "He shall be" - What? - "in you." And the Spirit of God came to dwell in every believer. And so, says John, this is beyond anything I could do. Mine is only preparatory. And, beloved, when we become a Christian, at the moment that we are saved, God has granted in Jesus Christ that we are a gift. And Christ has determined that with that gift, that He will grant us the Holy Spirit. Every believer is a gift from the Father to the Son. And to every one of those believers, the Son grants the Spirit. We are placed in a fusion with Him and the body of Christ.

But then there was another baptism. Look at it at the end of verse 11. It says "and fire," "and fire." To what does this refer? That's the real question here. We'll close by considering it for just a moment. Some people say, "Ohhh, that's Pentecost, that's Pentecost. You got it all there in Acts 2, baptized of the Spirit right there, and it says over each person was, as it were, cloven tongues of fire." And so they say, "cloven tongues like as a fire of fire," that's the fulfillment of this. Well, I got several problems with that. Number one, it doesn't say it was fire at Pentecost, it was just - it was tongues. But to appearance, it looked like fire, "cloven tongues like as fire," like a little flame; but it was a tongue, not fire. It doesn't say here He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with a tongue that looks like fire, but that's what happened at Pentecost. And by the way, I would add also that in Acts 1:5 Jesus did not speak of, quote, "and fire." When He told them that the Father was gonna pour out the Spirit, He didn't say "and fire." He never made that prophecy when referring to Pentecost. And no such fiery tongues were given at the baptism of the Spirit in the case of Cornelius. And yet Peter, in Acts 11:16, specifically states that what happened to Cornelius was a fulfillment of the Savior's promise. I don't think that we can tie this fire into the tongues that look like fire of Pentecost, although that would be a natural thing to do if you didn't really study it thoroughly. Jesus, when He spoke of

Pentecost, when He spoke specifically of Pentecost, never talked about this fire. And as I said, in Acts 11, Peter said that what happened to Cornelius, where you don't have that fire or those appearances of tongues indicated at all, Peter said that was a specific fulfillment of the Savior's promise. So His promise relative to Pentecost included no fire.

Now, there are other people who say that the fire here - and this was, I remember, G. Campbell Morgan's view - that there are other people who say this is His spiritual purging, that when He baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, there is a fire that purges and cleanses and purifies us. Well, that's a good guess at best because nothing in the context would tell us that. That's just a pure guess because there's not one thing in the context to point to that. That would be just conjecture. And I thought to myself, too, "How could you be born with the water and the Spirit and at the same time with fire? The water would put the fire out." But anyway, it's best, it's best in my view to see this as a separate judgment of fire. I think it refers to immersing men in fiery divine judgment. When He comes, He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, we've already seen - now, note this - that in Scripture, fire speaks of God's judgment. It can be used in a refining sense, but it speaks most dominantly of God's judgment and wrath. These are distinct baptisms. The former, of the Holy Spirit, belongs to all believers; the latter, to all unbelievers. The former, to those with true repentance; and the latter, to those with no repentance. And this, I think, beloved, fits the contextual use of fire in the passage. If fire means judgment - fire in verse 10; and fire means judgment - fire in verse 12; it would be really stretching the point for fire to mean something else in the verse in between without the Holy Spirit making a comment on it to show us that it meant something else. It fits the context. You have three parallel sentences in verses 10, 11, and 12. Every one of them ends in fire. And in each case the fire would be the same. There would be no reason to make any difference - fire of judgment. And by the way, even in Luke, chapter 3, verse 16, Luke also includes "and fire." And he includes "and fire" because he has the other images that Matthew has, the burning of the unfruitful trees and the burning of the chaff. On the other hand, Mark, in Mark 1:8, and John, in John 1:33, and Acts 1 and Acts 11 where the images are not used - that is, the chaff is not used and the trees are not used - neither is the fire discussed. So the fire only appears in the gospel record and in the book of Acts in passages where there are other indications as to what that fire means, which is important for us in interpreting it.

Now, in the other two images - image in verse 10, the cutting of the tree; in verse 12, the burning of the chaff - two classes of people are presented, the destiny of each stated separately. Good fruit and no fruit, hewn down and burned; verse 12, wheat and chaff, gathered and burned. And here it's the same thing. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ baptized with the Holy Spirit, those who reject, with fire, with fire. Listen. It had been predicted by Malachi that the Messiah would purify the nation. He predicted it. He predicted that when He came He would come with fire, that He would purify. But listen to me. Listen to Malachi 3:1. "Behold I will send my messenger" - this is Christ coming - "he shall prepare the way before me" - that's John the Baptist - "and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant." Now, what happens when He comes? "Who may abide the day of His coming? And who shall stand when He appeareth?" Listen to this. Do you remember this from "The Messiah"? "For He is like a refiner's" - What? - "fire...And He shall sit like a refiner and purifier of silver...purify the sons of Levi, purge them like gold and silver." Now, this tells us that He's coming to purify the nations. But how? By just removing the dross, just cleaning them up a little bit? No. Chapter 4, it tells us how, verses 1 to 3. "The day cometh that shall burn like an oven and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall be stubble...the day that cometh shall burn them up." In other words, this isn't just purification; this is consummation - "shall burn them up," see. The fire predicted in 3 is described in 4 of Malachi as that which burns up, consumes the wicked like stubble. And, beloved, John the Baptist, 400 years later,

picked right up where Malachi left off and he says, "Israel, He's coming, and He's coming for salvation, and He's coming to baptize you with the Spirit, but if you say no to Him, He'll come with the baptism of fire, just as Malachi said it 400 years ago."

But let's emphasize this in parting. There is the consolation that there is One coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The King is coming, and the King is going to respond to the one, verse 8, who "brings forth the fruit of repentance." The King is going to respond to the one who "brings forth good fruit," verse 10. The King is going to respond to the wheat to be gathered into the granary, and He is going to baptize those in the Holy Spirit or with the Holy Spirit. That's the herald of John. That's the message. And the choice is yours and mine as to which we choose. No one can make it for us. We must make it for ourselves. Listen, Jesus said, "I am come to send fire on the earth," Luke 12:49. Just listen. "I am come to send fire on the earth. And what will I, if it be already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I constrained till it be accomplished? Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division. For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father, the mother against the daughter, the daughter against the mother, the mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." You say, "What in the world is He saying?" He's saying Jesus came to make a difference. Jesus came to be a fire as well as to be a savior. And there's gonna be a division, sometimes right in a household, right in a family. On the village green in Bedford, John Bunyan heard the voice of Him whom he was to serve in the future. And all of a sudden he drew himself up and faced eternity because the voice said this to him: "Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or wilt thou have thy sins and go to hell?" That is precisely the question John the Baptist used to face the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the question is the same today. Let's pray.

Thank You, Father, again tonight for a clear word from the Holy Spirit through the pages of Scripture. We do honor You as the God who speaks the truth. And we know that when You talk about heaven, it's true; and when You talk about hell, it's true. We know that You ask to see the fruit of true repentance, the manifestation that it's real. Father, I pray tonight that You would move in the hearts of those of us who are here, particularly those who don't know Christ, who've never committed their life to Him, who've never truly repented, seen their sinfulness against the background of a holy God, felt the guilt and the personal stain and ugliness of such sin, and then turned their will to Jesus Christ and asked Him to forgive and to take over their life. Father, may they do that tonight. May this be the night when they pass from death to life, when the axe that's been laying at the root of the tree is picked up and taken somewhere else because the tree all of a sudden brings forth new life, when that which looked like chaff is all of a sudden miraculously transformed into wheat to be gathered to the granary, when at the place where the fruit of repentance was absent it flourishes. This we pray, Father, for the Word of God says, "You're not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." May it be that no one leaves this place without fulfilling that Your desire. Amen.

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