

True Repentance: God's Highway to the Heart, Part 4

Scripture: Luke 3:15-17

Code: 42-44

We return in our study of God's Word to the third chapter of Luke, this marvelous gospel. Luke is such a great historian, such a great theologian. And, of course, on top of that he was inspired by God to write every word that he wrote. Luke gives us the record of the life and ministry of Jesus. He gives us such a rich, rich look at it because he loads up all the background material. We're right in the middle of that chapter 3 of Luke.

Luke has given us the flow of history from the birth of John, the great prophet, the greatest man who ever lived up until his time, so said Jesus as recorded in Matthew 11:11. Followed by the birth of Jesus and all the great events that surrounded both the birth of John and particularly the birth of Jesus.

As you come in to chapter 3, thirty years passed by. And John is now launching his ministry. John, this great prophet, known as John the Baptist because of his baptizing ministry, he is the forerunner of Messiah. He is the herald who announces the Messiah is coming. He has two responsibilities really. One, to prepare the people for Messiah's arrival...two, to identify the Messiah to the people.

When John begins his ministry it is about six months before Jesus appears publicly. John is preaching. He's preaching a message, according to verse 3 of chapter 3, a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If one is to have a relationship with God, if one is to receive the blessings the Messiah brings, the sin must be forgiven. If one is to receive forgiveness, there must be repentance. The note of John's great preaching was repentance. That's how he prepared people for Messiah and His arrival. Simply stated, John's message is this, God will forgive your sins if you repent and then embrace the Messiah.

That is exactly what we preach today...it isn't any different. We preach that God will forgive all your sins if you will repent and embrace the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus Christ. But John has been concerned as all true prophets are concerned not only to preach the true gospel, not only to preach repentance and acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but John has been very, very aware of the fact that there is much shallow repentance. He's very used to it because it's standard stuff in Israel. Really, hypocrisy was a way of life. They had mastered the art of intricate hypocrisy from the top down, from the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, Sadducees, they had crafted hypocrisy into a fine art that filtered right down through the people. The whole nation was predominantly hypocritical. They were used to shallow repentance, superficial repentance. John, as

are all other true prophets, is very much aware of the fact that that is the work of Satan, that Satan is primarily a religionist. He devotes his time and his effort to deceiving people about their spiritual condition through false religion. He is disguised, says Paul, by very, very clever, clever disguises. He appears himself as an angel of light when in fact he is a demon of darkness. His ministers also disguise themselves as angels of light and they go about to do the work of shallow repentance and conversion. They are counterfeiters.

And that's how it was in Israel at the time of John. There was much shallow, superficial religion. And consequently John preached what I call hard truth, harsh, confrontive, unrelenting, penetrating, convicting because he understood how predominant this shallowness was. I'm convinced that all preachers should see that, particularly in an environment where Christianity has some kind of nominal influence. We should follow the pattern of John. He is really the proto-typical preacher for us, preaching the gospel in all its strength and all its glory and wonder and all its hardness as well, trying to penetrate through the shallowness and reach the depth of the real issues.

John was very aware of what the Bible is continually telling us, that many, many people repent on a shallow, non-saving level. For example, Jesus said there are people who say Lord, Lord, didn't we do this and didn't we do that in Your name? And He says, "Depart from me you workers of iniquity, I never knew you," Matthew 7. Jesus described these kinds of people also in His sermon on the Second Coming in Matthew 25 as having the lamp of profession but without the oil of salvation. Titus chapter 1 and verse 16 they are described as those who profess to know God but in works they deny Him. In 2 Timothy 2:19 they name the name of Christ but they do not depart from iniquity. That's common. They name the name of Christ, they don't depart from iniquity. They say they know Him but they deny Him by what they do.

It's like the church at Sardis in Revelation 3, they have a name that they live, but in fact they are dead. They're like Simon Magus. Simon Magus, you remember, in the eighth chapter of Acts came and followed the Apostles and ostensibly, superficially repented and was baptized. It was so superficial that Peter said to him, "You're going to perish." Shallow repenters are very common. The scribes and Pharisees were very good at it. They sort of led the parade, they defined it.

So John knew all of this. He knew what the apostle Paul experienced. Remember now, Paul was a Pharisee. Paul is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, that is he was a traditionalist. He was an orthodox, hyper-orthodox. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Jew which meant that he was in the framework of Abrahamic heritage. He was zealous concerning his religion to the point where he wanted to execute heretics. As far as externals were concerned, he could not be held guilty of any outward violation of the law of God. He fulfilled all of that and he came to the conclusion when he saw Christ that it was all manure. Just another illustration of the intricacies of shallowness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:20 that if your righteousness doesn't exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never enter the Kingdom.

So, you see, there are many people like the Pharisees. They pray. They fast. They attend religious services. They attend religious ceremonies. And they're not converted. They talk about penitence but it's very shallow. They give alms to the poor. In some cases they might even give their bodies as martyrs, but they're not regenerate. It may be on the surface and it's true today that there are people who are good at sort of binding up their visible corruption by refinement, by education, by self-discipline, by original personal sort of convictions, or even by some level of religious illumination or partial reformation. They might even shake a little bit under the threat of judgment, like Felix who trembled when the gospel was preached to him. But they're still shallow.

That is very common. And is particularly common in our environment today when the gospel has been reduced to such a minimalistic level. And much of the time is preached utterly without a call to repentance.

Well, in the words of Jesus all those kinds of people are building on sand and when judgment comes it's going to wash their religious house away. All these well-intentioned religious people are no better off than the most irreligious. Did you hear that? All these well-intentioned religious people are no better off than the irreligious and no better off than the profane who relish in all their iniquities to the max and flaunt their sin. These would-be religious people, these shallow repenters are no better off, in fact they are worse off, they are worse off for the fiercest judgments of God, the fieriest elements of hell, the severest levels of punishment in eternal damnation are reserved for those who profess to believe in the true God and have been actually impenitent hypocrites.

John knew that. And any preacher who is faithful must realize that. And I told you a few weeks ago that even though all Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to hear John, huge crowds of people going out there, no doubt by the thousands to hear his message and be baptized and get ready for the Messiah, when all was said and done and Jesus came and lived for three years and taught and died on the cross and rose from the dead and went back to heaven, and all the believers were gathered in Jerusalem in an upper room, there were only 120 of them. So even with the strong preaching of John, even with every effort made possible to avoid shallow repentance and to shatter the illusions of superficiality, in the end it is still a major problem. And how much more severe a problem it is when we don't preach the strong gospel as John preached it.

He knew all the falsities of Jewish religion. He knew all of the tricks of the human heart, all of the hypocrisies, all of its self-righteousness. So he confronted shallow repentance and called for the real thing. And as we started in verse 4 and moved on through all the way to verse 17 in this section, we've been looking at the essence of true repentance. John wasn't going to be guilty of not preaching the true message of repentance. And we've already given you the points that define that.

First of all, true repentance is marked by a reflection on personal sin. We saw that in verse 5. "Every ravine has to be filled up, every mountain and hill be brought down, the crooked become straight and the rough roads smooth." That's an analogy of what has to happen in the human heart. If God is going to come to the human heart, the highway is going to be made, a highway of forgiveness into your heart. It is a highway of repentance. And that means the deep and secret, dark and base things of the life have to be brought up. And the high and lofty elements of pride and self-righteousness brought down. And the devious, deceitful and crooked and perverse patterns of life straightened out. And all the other sinful clutter taken off the road so that a smooth highway is made for God to bring His forgiveness. One has to deal with the breadth and length and height and depth of sin in his own life. Even to the degree where he's willing to confess himself as these Jews had to as no better than a Gentile, needing what essentially was a Gentile proselyte baptism. Here they were as Jews having to confess they were no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile as far as God was concerned because they were still in a condition of unforgiveness. So there had to be a reflection of personal sin.

Secondly, there needed to be a recognition of divine wrath. John at the end of verse 7 preached the wrath to come. And that is absolutely critical. Any faithful preacher preaches on hell. He preaches on fiery, eternal judgment because why bother to come to Christ for the forgiveness of sin if you're not going to by that coming escape eternal wrath? There must be a recognition of divine wrath to elicit a true repentance.

Thirdly, there must be a rejection of religious ritual. Remember I told you John says to them..."You know, you're scrambling down here like snakes, you haven't changed your nature, you're still snakes. You're still subtle and devious snakes. All you're doing is scrambling like vipers in front of a prairie fire. You're trying to get to the water." It's a very, very clear analogy, like snakes would run before a brush fire to get to the water to save their lives, he sees the Pharisees and the scribes, in particular, but the rest of the crowd as well, not wanting their nature changed but in their vile identification with the ultimate serpent, Satan, they're just scrambling to avoid wrath through John's baptism. Very shallow and superficial and he says to them...I didn't tell you to do that. I didn't tell you you could escape the eternal judgment of God simply by getting dunked in the Jordan River. You have to reject any religious ritual. That's not what's going to save you, that is only an outward symbol of a heart work.

Fourthly, true repenters reflect on person sin, recognize divine wrath, reject religious ritual and, fourthly, there is a renunciation of ancestry. A lot of people think they're going to get into God's Kingdom because of their parents or grandparents, and certainly the Jews felt that way down in verse 8. He says, "Don't begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham for our father, because I'm telling you God can make children of Abraham out of rocks. That's nothing special. That's not going to save you. What you got from Abraham was a sin nature. Yes, you got covenant promise, yes you got some wonderful promises and blessings, you'll never know any of the fulfillment of those unless your sin is dealt with. And being a child of Abraham doesn't save you from your sin, you have to reject that

ancestral view. Just because you were a part of a family that had religious heritage has nothing to do with your personal salvation.

And then fifthly, not only a reflection of personal sin and divine wrath and rejection of religious ritual and ancestry, but fifthly, true repenters demonstrate a revelation of spiritual transformation. He says in verse 8, "Bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance." In other words, if this is real repentance, I'm going to look at your life and see the evidence. If it's the real thing then God is changing you and you're going to be a new creation, you're going to be a different person."

Listen, a new creation isn't reserved for the New Testament, that was always the case. When anybody was a true repentor, when anybody came to God and confessed sin, anybody in the Old Testament era or any time comes to God, truly repents, truly is forgiven, they are changed. They are transformed and it is manifest in their lives by how they live. And we discussed the details of that in verses 9 through 14 how that practically works out.

That's the essence of repentance. That's what true repenters do. They deal with their personal sin in a full sense. They understand divine wrath. They reject religious ritual and ancestry. And they give evidence of the genuineness of the work of God in that true repentance by the fruit of their life. That leads us to the final point here, I started into it last week, we'll finish it this morning.

Where there is true repentance there is also a reception of the true Messiah, that's number six, a reception of the true Messiah. You know, you could go through all of that repentance and fall short if you didn't embrace the true Messiah. Acts 4:12, "Neither is there salvation in any other name. There is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved." Heaven has given no other name. John 1:12 says, "As many as received Him, He gave the right to be called children of God." Acts 16:11, I think it is, it says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

I went back this week again just to check in my mind was I right, that article in "Christianity Today," where there was a statement on salvation made. And the person who wrote the statement, an excellent statement, was asked by the editors of the magazine, "Don't you think you're being too narrow when you say that in order for someone to be saved they have to have an intellectual knowledge of Jesus Christ?" I thought, "Maybe I missed that." But that's what it said. The idea that somehow you could be saved apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ is heresy. It's a sad lie. John says in verses 15 to 17, there's one coming, He's mightier than I, He's the one you've got to look to. Don't look to me, verse 15, "The people were in a state of expectation, they were wondering in their hearts about John as to whether he might be the Christ." Remember, he never claimed that, never. He never claimed that. His followers never claimed that. They never claimed that he was the Messiah, he never claimed that he was the Messiah.

That's indicated in chapter 19 of Acts. It tells us Paul was passing through the upper country and he came to Ephesus and he found some disciples. Interesting, he's in Gentile area, he finds some disciples and he says to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether the Holy Spirit has come." They had heard of the Holy Spirit, all Jews knew of the Holy Spirit, of course. But they hadn't heard whether the Holy Spirit had come in the way that had been promised. And he said to them, Paul did, "Well then in what baptism were you baptized?" And they said, "Oh, into John's baptism." These were disciples of John from way back who had never yet heard about the Messiah. They had been baptized down there in the Jordan River at the time that John was doing his baptism. Wandered back off into the Gentile world but never knew about the Messiah. And he said then, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance," Paul said, "telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is in Jesus." Just point that out to you because I want you to know that's exactly what John said. He never told anybody to believe in him as Messiah. Paul says he told people to believe in the One that was coming after him, even Jesus.

And that's the way it was from the beginning. When Gabriel told Zacharias, the father of John, when he was going to have a son, he said his son would announce the coming of Messiah. That's what John knew from the very time the angel gave the message, and that's always what he knew and that's always what he preached. He was not that light, John 1 says, but was sent to bear witness of that light. He knew that...he knew that. And he makes that very clear because he knows that question is in people's minds. In verse 16 he answered and said to them all, that's a very important phrase because the Greek language there indicates a formal introduction to official teaching. Here was an official doctrinal statement, "As for me, I baptize you with water but one is coming who is mightier than I and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John says don't get us confused, folks, we are worlds apart...we are worlds apart. I can baptize you with water, that's all I can do. I can take you down here into the Jordan River and I can dunk you, and that is not very special, anybody could do that, you could do that, I could do that, anybody could do that. That is not a supernatural act. That is not some kind of act of great power. That is just a plain old human act. You can take somebody in water and baptize them. John says I can do that. But literally in the Greek with a definite article, "The coming One," and again I say that is a technical title for Messiah, "The coming One...the coming One," that's how the Jews knew Him as the coming One, "who is mightier than I." In the eleventh chapter of Luke and verses 21 and 22 He is called the stronger One, the coming One, the stronger One, the Messiah. "I'm not even fit...John says...to untie the thong of His sandals." And I told you last time that task of taking somebody's sandals off and washing their feet was so low on the service ladder that you couldn't get lower than having to do that job and it was a job usually assigned to a Gentile because it was beneath the dignity of a Jew to do it. John says I'm not even fit to climb up to the point where I could tie...untie His sandals, I don't even belong with Him. I'm not even near Him. I'm not even fit to go up and do the lowliest, most despised duty. We're so far apart. We are in two different worlds. We are so far apart.

The reason we're so far apart is clear. "I baptize with water," end of verse 16, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." That is a great statement filled with tremendous profound truth. John says...Look, I can immerse you in this Jordan River, I can do that, anybody can do that...what I can't do is immerse you in the Holy Spirit or immerse you in fire. I can do a human thing but I can't do a divine thing.

What he's saying here is the One who is coming, the coming One, the stronger One, the mightier One, the One I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals, that One will do things that only God can do...only God can immerse you in the Holy Spirit. Only God can immerse you in fire. John is pointing out the deity of the Messiah. John is saying...I don't have the power to save you and I don't have the power to damn you. I don't have the power to immerse you in the Holy Spirit. And I don't have the power to immerse you in hell. That's not my power.

The Jews understood this. You notice there's not a big explanation about this because the Jews knew that when Messiah came He was going to be a dividing line. They knew that because the prophets said that over and over in the Old Testament. The coming of the Messiah was a two-edged sword, believe me. When the Messiah came there would be blessing. And when the Messiah came there would be salvation. And when the Messiah came there would be the Kingdom. But when the Messiah came there would be judgment and there would be death and there would be burning.

You see, the Jews knew about the New Covenant. And I'll just give you the quick little summary. When God was giving covenants to Israel, He gave them promises in those covenants. The ones that are important for us to know are the promises He gave to Abraham. They understood that God promised to Abraham that He would bless this people if they were faithful. If they would be His witness nation. It wasn't that He wanted only to bless them, He wanted to bless the whole world through them. But if they would be faithful He would bless them. And all that blessing is laid out to Abraham and to Isaac and Jacob. And then He made promises to David that He would bless them with a Kingdom that would stretch over the whole earth. And they wanted those blessings. The Jewish people wanted those blessings.

But God gave them another covenant called the Sinaitic Covenant, the one made on Mount Sinai, or the Mosaic Covenant made with Moses. That was the covenant of law. In order for you to be blessed you've got to keep the law. Well they couldn't keep the law and so all the law did was damn them and cut off the promises of Abraham and the promises of David from them. So here they were caught in that situation. God made promises, they couldn't attain to those promises because they couldn't attain to the standard of holiness God required which was perfection and they were crushed under the Mosaic Law, they were crushed under the inability to keep God's law. So God had to introduce another covenant, that other covenant was called the New Covenant. It was the covenant they needed, it was the covenant of forgiveness. And when you read New Covenant passages,

whether you're reading Ezekiel 36:25 to 27, or whether you're reading Jeremiah 31:31 to 34 you find in the New Covenant, God says I'm going to give you a New Covenant and in there is the forgiveness of sins. God's going to forgive your sins. If you'll come to Him and ask and repent, He'll forgive your sins and He'll make a New Covenant and once you come through the New Covenant, then you can have the promises to Abraham and you can have the promises to David fulfilled.

So they knew the New Covenant. They knew it because the prophets wrote about it. But they also knew this that in the New Covenant was the giving of the Holy Spirit. You see, in the New Covenant it says in Ezekiel 36:25 that God's going to put His Spirit within you. And they knew that when a person was really converted, when a person was genuinely forgiven, even in Old Testament times, God's Holy Spirit took up residence in that person. They knew that. Did you think that only people in the church age received the Holy Spirit? Not so. Why do you think I read this morning in Psalm 51:11, David said, "Don't take Your Holy Spirit from me." He had sinned so greatly that he was fearful that he had gone too far and God would reject him. Don't take Your Holy Spirit from me.

They understood the role of the Holy Spirit. They understood the Holy Spirit's role in creation. They understood the Holy Spirit's role in the life of a believer to take up residence. That God in the New Covenant would plant His Spirit. Now remember, folks, the New Covenant wasn't ratified officially until Jesus died, but was in place and operative through all of redemptive history. God forgave those people who repented and asked Him to forgive them on the basis of what Christ would do because in the mind of God it was already done because God lives in one eternal present and that's why God calls Jesus the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. So they were all people who were ever saved were saved by the New Covenant terms. And in the New Covenant, according to Ezekiel 36, God's Spirit is planted in believers. So they were knowing that when the Messiah comes, He's going to come, He's going to bring the blessing of the New Covenant and He's going to bring the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only going to be planted in us, but the prophet Joel said when the Messiah comes and sets up His Kingdom, the Holy Spirit is going to do some amazing things. There's going to be a mighty explosion of the work of the Holy Spirit. So they associated the coming of Messiah with the Holy Spirit.

So, they understood that. When the Messiah comes the Holy Spirit is going to come and He's going to pour out the Holy Spirit. Joel says He's going to pour out His Holy Spirit. They also knew that the Messiah would have the Holy Spirit in a unique way on Him. Isaiah 11 associates the Messiah with the seven-fold Holy Spirit. Isaiah 42:1 associates the Messiah with the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 61:1 associates the Holy Spirit with the Messiah. So when the Messiah comes He's going to come with the attendant power of the Holy Spirit, He's going to bring the Holy Spirit and He's going to grant the Holy Spirit to those who believe. He's going to pour out His Spirit, Joel 2:28 and 29, in fact He's going to pour out His Spirit beyond Israel on all flesh.

So they associated the coming of the Messiah with salvation and salvation in New Covenant terminology meant the granting of the Holy Spirit. So John says...Look, when He comes He's going to come and immerse you in the Holy Spirit. They would understand that. Oh, New Covenant blessing, this means that the Messiah is going to come, bring the Holy Spirit. He's going to give us that New Covenant salvation. And we're going to be immersed into the Holy Spirit. They understood that. And that's why on the day of Pentecost when Peter stood up to preach, Acts 2:38, he said, "Repent, repent, receive the forgiveness of sins and you shall also receive the Holy Spirit." You see, nobody is converted, nobody is saved, nobody is forgiven, nobody is transformed by some human act. When a sinner is truly repentant and comes to God in a broken and contrite spirit and asks for forgiveness and God forgives and transforms, it is the working of the Holy Spirit. So in the Old Testament, the New Testament alike it was the Holy Spirit that brought about that wonderful work of regeneration.

Now you say, "What's the difference now and then?" The only difference is in some...some degree, there's some quantitative work of the Holy Spirit in the church that is in some sense different or some qualitative work of the Spirit that is in some sense different than it was in the Old Testament, but it's the same Holy Spirit. He has been with you, Jesus said, all along in the future in the time after the church He shall be in you. I don't know the details of that that means, it's a new dimension of the Holy Spirit which we enjoy. They were not at all without the Holy Spirit since He is essential in the New Covenant, I'll plant My Spirit within you.

So, what John is offering them is this, the Messiah is way beyond me because He dispenses the Holy Spirit. I can't do that. I can't do that. No man can do that. Secondly, He's greater than me because He's going to bring fire.

Now if the Jews heard the word "fire" in connection with Messiah, they had plenty of Old Testament scriptures to pop into their minds. Many, many times in the Old Testament "fire" is associated with judgment. And I'm not going to take the time this morning to give you all those scriptures. But, for example, and there are many, many of them, Isaiah 29:6, "From the Lord of hosts you will be punished with thunder and earthquake and loud noise, with whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire." That's just one of many, that's Isaiah 29:6. You can see it in Isaiah 31:9, Ezekiel 38:22, Zephaniah 1:18, Zephaniah 3:8, Daniel 7:10, God's final judgment is associated with fire.

But for a moment, look at the last book again of the Old Testament Malachi. Malachi 3, and here we're in the context of John's ministry because Malachi 3:1 is a prophecy about John...I'm going to send My messenger, he'll clear the way before Me...God says I'm coming, again this indicates that the Messiah was in fact God incarnate. I'm going to come and I'm going to send My messenger to clear the way...that was what John did, he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, clearing the way for the coming of Messiah. I'm going to send John before Me and then the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple. And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold,

he is coming. So, He's coming, He's coming, the coming One, that's where they got that term for Messiah, the coming One, but before the coming One is going to be the messenger who announces His coming, so that's John. And when He comes, verse 2, who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire. When He comes He's going to come to bring the Holy Spirit. But He's also going to come to bring fire.

Go over to chapter 4 verse 1, "Behold the day is coming, it's that same day when He comes burning like a furnace and all the arrogant and every evil doer will be chaff and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." So when the Messiah comes, the coming One arrives, it's going to be a day like a furnace that's going to consume everything. "But...verse 2...for those who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His beams. You're not going to be burned, you're going to go forth and skip about like calves from the stall and you're going to tread down the wicked and they're going to be ashes unto the souls of your feet on the day which I am preparing, says the Lord of hosts." Boy, what a frightening thing.

So when the Messiah comes there's going to be a forerunner, according to Malachi 3. Then the Messiah is going to come and He's going to come in fiery blazing judgment that's going to consume the ungodly and turn them into ashes. And He's going to save those who belong to Him and that's all John is saying. When the Messiah comes, He's going to do the supernatural work, He's going to immerse some with the Holy Spirit, He's going to immerse the rest in fire. Fire is in Luke's gospel frequently a metaphor for judgment. For example, in Luke 9:54, His disciples James and John come to Jesus and said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Well at that point Jesus rebuked them for saying that but they understood that associated with Messiah was the consuming fire of judgment on those who dishonored God. In Luke 12:49 Jesus said, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth." Wow. "And how I wish it were all ready kindled." What a statement. Jesus came to burn people up.

In the seventeenth chapter of Luke and verse 29 we're reminded that fire went out from God, fell on Sodom and Gomorrah and destroyed everybody.

So Luke touches on the fire of judgment in his gospel. Obviously the book of Revelation, chapter 19 verse 11 describes fire when Christ comes. But maybe the strongest word comes from 2 Thessalonians 1:7 when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

See, when Messiah comes He comes to separate. John had a work of separation. His baptism separated, but it only separated visually, or superficially. There were the baptized and the non-baptized. But when Messiah comes, His separation is at a supernatural level. He will separate those

who are immersed in the Holy Spirit, who received promises made to Abraham and David, who receive all the blessings of salvation, who receive the Holy Spirit and eternal life. And on the other hand, those who are going to be burned eternally in everlasting hell. Messiah is a divider.

Now the principle given at the end of verse 16 is illustrated in verse 17 by just a simple and graphic illustration that is reminiscent of the language of Malachi 4 that I just read you. Verse 17, here John and his preaching illustrated the principle of baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It's like a winnowing process. "And His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn so He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now here's the imagery, very interesting. This separation the Messiah is going to do can be illustrated by an agrarian illustration very familiar to the Jewish people because grain was grown in all the lowlands of Israel, and is still in many places there today. When all the grain was gathered, it was brought into a flat, hard floor and there were winnowing shovels, really, a winnowing shovel, a large, flat shovel that was thrust under a pile of this grain and then thrown in the air. And the breeze would then blow the lighter chaff, or straw, away from the grain and the grain being heavy would fall straight down. So it depended upon the way the wind was blowing. At the end of that process when the entire floor had been picked up and thrown into the air, all the grain would be piled in the middle and the chaff would be lying on the perimeter...therefore the separation was complete. And when the separation was done, the wheat would be taken to the barn, and the chaff would be burned with fire.

This is not a new illustration, by the way. Psalm 1 verse 4. "The wicked are like the chaff which the wind drives away." Jeremiah 15 verses 5 to 7, exactly the same illustration. The ungodly again are like chaff. So here you have the picture. When Messiah comes everybody will be dealt with.

And I want to point something out to you in verse 17. You see that verb "to thoroughly clear" - "to thoroughly clear," that's very interesting in the Greek. That is a verb diakathairo, that's what we call a hopox legamana(???) in the Greek which means it's the only time in the New Testament this word is used. It's a very...it's a very unusual word, it is a rare word, this being its only usage. What it means is no traces are left, nothing is left, everything is dealt with. The separation is complete. That is to say nobody is left out. The separation will take place completely. You either fall in the pile of grain, or the pile of chaff. You are either barned with the grain which means you go into the glories of heaven, or burned with the chaff which means you go into the terrors of hell.

This is strong preaching, isn't it, by John. I wish you'd all pray that God would raise up more preachers like John. You don't want to be without love or without compassion, but you need to preach the truth with boldness, courage and conviction because the sinners need to know what they're dealing with. Everybody will be dealt with, thoroughly that threshing floor will be cleared, everyone will be done with. And there are only two piles, the barn and the burnt.

Would you notice an interesting word in verse 17? Unquenchable...with the word unquenchable you move from the analogy to the reality. The fact is that the fire that burned the chaff eventually went out. When all the chaff was consumed and there was nothing left to fuel it, the fire went out. But the fire that John is talking about and the fire that Messiah brings is a fire that never goes out. That introduces to us for the first time eternal hell. Oh, I mean the first time in Luke, not the first time, cause even the Old Testament talks about it. Job chapter 20 verse 26, you can read for yourself Isaiah 34 verses 8 to 10, talks about God's judgment and a fire that never goes out. Isaiah 66 and verse 24, the last statement in Isaiah, "Those who have transgressed against Me, their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched." And Jesus quotes that in the New Testament...the unquenchable fire. Isaiah talked about...the Jews knew...Messiah would judge with an eternal fire. Hell is an eternal time of punishment, really an eternal and timeless experience of punishment. Jesus picked up this message. Jesus said more about hell than He did about heaven. The Apostles preached it in the epistles. The book of Revelation speaks of it.

So John's preaching was very straightforward. He called people to true repentance and he called them to turn and acknowledge the true Messiah. And the one who was greater than John, so much greater because all John could do was a human, physical ceremony, but the Messiah could immerse people in the Holy Spirit...on the other hand, he would immerse them in eternal fire. You have to acknowledge Him as God, therefore. This is a statement about the deity of Christ. This is a monumental statement of the deity of Christ. Jesus is going to do what only God can do, save people and damn people, glorify people and punish people. This is the standard, beloved, for all gospel preaching. It's a call to repentance and an acknowledgement that Jesus is the great divider who either saves or damns.

So, repentance means you come to an honest understanding of your own personal sin. You recognize divine wrath. You reject ritual and ancestry. You demonstrate transformation in the fruit of true repentance. And you receive the true Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And, you know, it does weigh heaven on my heart that there are so many people who call themselves Christians today who have no understanding of this and they're engaged in a false repentance, shallow, non-saving repentance. Let me give you a final warning about that regarding false repentance. False repentance is grounded in selfishness, rather than the honor of God. Because it has nothing to do with the honor of God, and only has to do with the regret that a person has because of the consequence of sin. It's not built on the fear of hell, or the fear of dishonoring God. False repentance also leaves the feelings unchanged. The love of sin is not subdued and the passion for holiness is not initiated. False repentance leads men to hypocritical concealment. Once you've falsely repented, now you've got to keep it up. And so you just lay on one more level of hypocrisy after another to keep up the deception. That leads eventually to self-deception and to a deadly false security where you begin to believe the lie you're living that you wanted originally others to believe

and now you've come to believe it, and that is that you really are God's when in fact you're not. And that hardens your heart. Each time shallow sorrow washes over the emotions of the heart, and doesn't truly break that heart, the fountains of feeling are more and more dried up. And then the conscience seared and then you're irretrievable.

John understood this. We need to understand this and call people as we would call you today to a true repentance.

Father, we thank You again for the clarity of Your Word. We would pray, first of all, that You would raise up many faithful preachers. We think of these 300 plus young men at the Master's Seminary, first of all, Lord, would you raise up a mighty force of men from that place who preach with the boldness, the power, the conviction, the clarity of John. May he rise even in our generation to become the model of a real true preacher, not the surfeited self-centered and shallow examples that so many follow today. And, Father, would You as well by the mighty work of the Spirit of God in the hearts of those who are caught up on shallow repentance, who to some degree have followed a certain regret grounded in their own selfishness because of the consequence of sin, who have not had their feelings changed, not had the love of sin subdued, who are to one degree or another hypocrites piling on more cover up, more sin leading to deadly false security and actually hardening the hearts, searing the conscience. Lord, before it gets that far, break through that false repentance and work a true work that will produce the fruit of repentance in changed life to Your glory. And we thank You, Father, for this forgiveness which is ours when the repentance is genuine and the faith is real and placed in the one and only Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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