Fruit in Keeping with Repentance

**Matthew 3:7-12**

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**Introduction:** The Prophet John the Baptist was creating a lot of excitement in Israel. The response was clearly a work of the Holy Spirit. John did no miracles and did not heal. He lived and preached in an obscure part of the wilderness that required a 25 mile trek by foot to reach. When people did arrive they were told that their response to God was wrong and their belief in religion, ritual and sacrifice were unable to save them. John preached “repentance” or a change of mind and direction. The long awaited Messiah was on earth. “He was coming right behind me,” was his message. There is no human explanation for the response other than God. Isaiah had predicted that a herald would go immediately before the Messiah when He arrived. He would clear the path and announce the arrival of Messiah.

**Isa. 40:2-3** "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." 3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

Isaiah is actually speaking of the time when Christ will return to establish His Kingdom on Earth, but The Holy Spirit leads Matthew to also apply it to Christ’s first coming to redeem Israel and all mankind by His death on the Cross and His Resurrection. God caused Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside to flock to John. Many, many repented and demonstrated their changed minds and hearts by being baptized.

Among the crowds on this occasion were two thirds of the main sects of Jewish Religion in that day. The third sect were recluses. They were called the Essenes and they lived in the desert and seldom interacted with the rest of Israel. The Pharisees and the Sadducees considered themselves the spiritual leaders of Israel. There was fierce jealousy between them but when it came to opposing Christ and those who proclaimed Him they always managed to find common ground. When the NT speaks of “The Jews” in a negative light it is almost always speaking of these self-righteous, unbelieving, hypocrites. Jesus warned the common people not to be like the Pharisees and Sadducees saying,

**Matthew 6:1-2** "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. 2 "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

The Sadducees made a pretense of believing the Scripture, but like liberal “Christians” in our day they did not believe God or God’s Word. Angels, the resurrection and the miracles of God were all discounted by them. They were focused on the physical exclusively and used religion to enrich themselves beyond the dreams of avarice. They ran the temple money tables where they could extort money from simple, poor believers trying to please God by bringing their sacrifices to the temple. Jesus actually drove these guys out of the temple on two occasions. He messed with their cash cow and they hated Him for it.

The Pharisees had actually convinced themselves that they could perfectly keep the law and therefore control and guarantee their own salvation. Their name means “separated ones.” They considered themselves to be true Israel. Everyone else was rabble in their minds and they considered the common man accursed. When the temple police returned from questioning Jesus and reported that “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks” Jn. 7:46 …..

**Jn. 7:47-49** The Pharisees then answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you? 48 "No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? 49 "But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed."

Both sects were insufferably proud, arrogant and godless. Both looked on everyone else with disgust. Both were expecting to be rewarded by God. The Sadducees worked to get theirs in this life while the Pharisees expected the royal treatment in the life to come. Their hearts, minds, and actions were insidious. Jesus warned His hearers and us to …

**Matt. 16:6** ….. "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Out in the wilderness, camped by the Jordan river, John has been preaching repentance and confession of sins followed by a concrete action called baptism. Baptism was not the means to Salvation but was the evidence that a person had repented and confessed their sin. So when John looked up and saw a crowd of Pharisees and Sadducees coming near to be baptized he got his preacher’s back up. He knew these guys and like Jesus, John had also grown up surrounded by them. I am always shocked when I meet one or a church full of them today. Their ideas and spiritual legacy still exists. Jesus came precisely to deliver us from every form of self-righteousness and dead religion and yet men will turn to it again and again. Paul begged the Galatians not to turn to it. God begs us in the same way to look at our deliverer Jesus and draw near to God instead. We can trust in religion and morality or in Christ, but never in both.

**Gal. 4:3-9** So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. 8 However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.

9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?

**But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers … [7a]:** A brood of vipers is a nest full of snakes. Vipers were extremely poisonous and like these “Jews” they could appear to be something entirely different. Vipers look like sticks when they freeze to avoid being noticed. Paul accidently picked one up on Malta while gathering sticks for a fire.

**Acts 28:3** But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand.

The spiritual mother snake to this litter was, and still is Satan himself. He will be utterly destroyed in the final day but for now he is a formidable, contemptable, liar and deceiver.

**Genesis 3:1** Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden '?"

**Rev. 12:9** And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

John saw wickedness while preaching repentance every day, but even he was shocked that these guys…of all people… were going to actually request baptism that was exclusively for those who repent and confess their sins. Shameful and appalling!

**Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [7b]:** When ever a field was burned after harvest to prepare it for the next planting the vipers would flee the flames. It was a common sight in that day. These self-righteous men wouldn’t know anything about repentance because they considered their way of life to be the only godly one. John MacArthur offers this insight:

“The implication is that the Pharisees and Sadducees were expecting John’s baptism to be a kind of spiritual fire insurance, giving protection from the flames of the wrath to come. True repentance and conversion do protect from God’s wrath and judgment, but superficial and insincere professions or acts of faith tend only to harden a person against genuine belief, giving a false sense of security. John would not be party to such hypocrisy and sham. It was the deceitfulness of their true master, Satan and not genuine fear of God’s judgment, that led them out to hear John and to seek his baptism as a pretentious formality.” ***John MacArthur Jr***

**"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; [8]:** All valid gospel preaching begins with sin. It is sin that kills us. Sin is loosely defined as rebellion, but not the kind we see in our children or in the streets. In this case it is rebellion against God’s offer of salvation. It is free! It requires no righteousness whatsoever! It is available to the lowest and vilest sinner! Prostitutes, thieves, diseased lepers, all the common rabble that these religionists despised were coming to John and would soon be going to Jesus.

**Luke 15:1-2** Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

But all valid Gospel Preaching ends with the free offer of Eternal Life through faith alone in Christ alone. Salvation is of God alone. Only Jesus could and did live a sinless life. He offers that to any and every sinner in return for trust in Him alone. God the Spirit brings men to true repentance. He does that by giving our dead human spirits (they died because of sin) life. All men are dead to God and only made alive to God by what Scripture calls New Birth. Jesus revealed this to Nicodemus personally.

**Jn. 3:3** Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Paul gave the details later on.

**Eph. 2:4-9** But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God;

 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

So what is “fruit in keeping with repentance?” It is a work God does in every person who believes (trusts) in Him alone for salvation. Fruit is always produced by something else. A tree, a root system, soil and water. It cannot produce itself. When any person believes that they are a sinner and confesses that sin and gives their life to Christ, God Himself begins the process of changing our hearts and actions. This truth should have been well known to Israel’s religious leaders, and Bible teachers, but dead hearts know little to nothing.

**Ezek. 36:26-28** "Moreover, **I will give** you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and **I will remove** the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 **"I will put** My Spirit within you and **cause you to walk** in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. 28 "You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and **I will be your God**.

If you have trusted Christ alone for salvation you have already experienced this promised heart transplant with it accompanying transformations. Paul described the how of this to Gentile believers in Galatia this way:

**Gal. 5:19-25** Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

**And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. [9]:** National or religious heritage cannot save you. I knew a religious woman years ago. She was bitter. She was unhappy. She was, as she put it, “A Methodist.” She once said, “I have been a Methodist my entire life and I am not about to become ‘born again’ now!” She believed that her godly heritage would work for her.

Now to be fair, John and Charles Wesley were miraculously converted from dead religion. John actually went to the mission field in America as an unregenerate preacher. He and his brother Charles had started a “Holy Club” and were very much like these men coming to John. John was converted by Monrovian believers on the ship returning from America and Charles (at his brother’s urging) attended a weekday Monrovian meeting and heard the Gospel and was saved. They were an awesome pair. John preached, taught and wrote and Charles penned many of our most beloved hymns. What a heritage, But heritage cannot save you.

That was a work of God and not of John and Charles. The same was true of being a child of Abraham. God called Abraham when Abraham was a godless pagan and brought him to faith.

**Rom. 4:3**  For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."

But God insists that being a descendant of Abraham will not save. Being born Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian or Baptist will not save. Being an American will not save. God alone makes children of God. He does not need anything whatsoever from men. Salvation is from God without any human help or merit.

God is intent on getting full and total credit for salvation. The Gospel of Christ insists on this. This is why and it is vital for you to know: Religion cannot undo or cancel the sins we commit. We were born dead to God and therefore dead to His ways. We sin naturally. We lie, we dishonor our parents, we seek our own satisfaction at the expense of others. We steal. As we grow up we covet things that others have, commit adultery in our hearts and bodies. We kill (which Jesus equated with hatred). In short we are a mess. Gospel preachers know this first of all about themselves and about the ones to whom they preach. The reformed preacher Richard Baxter described his ministry this way: **“I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.”**

These self-absorbed and pompous men actually believed that they could cancel out all of this sin with their ritual’s, robes and “so called” righteous life style. Millions believe the exact same thing today. It is the default belief of all men. Even men who know they are lost and laugh about being hell bound believe that men must save themselves by their own behavior. Such men and women have despaired of doing that because they know they are broken and cannot reach God’s righteous standard. This is the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

**"The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [10]:** Any good vintner will remove dead vines and even apparently live ones that bear no fruit. Why water, fertilize, weed and care for plants that give you nothing in return. This is a word picture everyone listening could easily grasp. The Apostle John invoked the same lesson from everyday life in his Gospel.

**Jn. 15:1-6** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

**"As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals [11a]:** John’s ministry is vital but it is not saving. He is proclaiming salvation but he knows full well he is not providing it. This should be common knowledge among all religions, but sadly it is not. It seems that men have a natural character flaw that causes them to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think. Paul warned the Roman church of this very thing. Sadly they did not keep this truth close to their hearts and turned into The Roman Catholic Church.

**Rom. 12:1-3** Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

When a man gives himself to Christ, God begins the work of transformation. It is never our job to transform ourselves but instead to give ourselves (in trusting faith) to Christ and then allow Him to change us.

So preachers can preach and they can baptized those who accept Christ and trust fully in Him. We can teach sound doctrine and exalt and proclaim Christ Jesus. We can pray for you and strongly encourage you to be a vital part of Christ’s church. We can urge you to love Christ and to deeply love one another from the heart. But we know none of this will save. What you believe about Jesus does not save you. Doctrine and sound theology are absolutely important but they do not and cannot save. Following Christ and seeking to obey Him are crucial but even if you could do it perfectly…and you cannot…it cannot save you. John knew this full well. Jesus has done 100% of what we need for salvation. Our part is to trust Him. We do that by consciously abandoning all trust in ourselves and anything else men offer. We trust Jesus and nothing else. …..

**He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [11b]:** Jesus Himselfpromised to send the Holy Spirit to comfort us and to empower us. The Spirit came to indwell the church on the day of Pentecost. Our spiritual life and standing with God and the “fruit in keeping with repentance” are all a work of the Spirit in the lives of God’s children. In the end it is the Spirit that helps us, enables us and transforms us. Spirit Baptism is not tongues or any of the other phenomena. It is Christ placing (immersing) us in the Spirit of God who then begins transforming us by giving us the fruit the Spirit.

But there is another baptism mentioned by John. Those who reject Christ will sadly be baptized with fire. Hebrews describes this vividly.

**Heb. 10:26-31** For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. 28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on *the testimony of* two or three witnesses. 29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Jesus Himself baptizes with The Spirit or with fire.

**Jn. 5:21-23** "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. 22 "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, 23 so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

**"His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." [12]:** Threshing floors were on every property in Israel. The dirt was packed hard and the wheat was placed on the floor and an ox would pull a log or stone over it repeatedly until all the straw or chaff was separated from the grain. Then the farmer would use a winnowing fork to throw the grain into the air so that the wind could blow the chaff away while the heavier grain would fall to the floor. In the end all the grain would be separated from the worthless chaff and brought into the barn. The chaff could then be raked up and burned. So John’s message to the self-righteous and the religionists is a sever warning. Fake repentance and confession may work with men but it will never, ever work with God. Those who trust Christ to have taken their judgment for sin on Himself at the cross are baptized with The Holy Spirit. Those who reject Christ and prefer to trust in their morality, good works or religion will bear their own judgment…the baptism of fire.

**CONCLUSION:** God knows every heart. The vast majority of mankind is trusting in something that they personally do, ascribe to or practice to put them in correct standing with God. John the Baptizer demolished all such hope and in its place offers trust in Jesus Christ alone….

**Col. 1:13-18** For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.