

Matthew 3:1-12. "Prepare His Way" (p.758)
Ajax Alliance Church. Sunday December 10th, 2023.

Matthew 3:1-12. [3:1] In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, [2]"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [3] For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" [4] Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. [5] Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, [6]and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. [7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [8] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. [9] And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. [10] Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [11]"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (ESV)

Before people meet for Christmas gatherings, it is not uncommon to send out an R.S.V.P. to determine who is coming. The host declares that there will be a party at such and such a time, and such and such a location. You tend to know generally who else is coming and what to do to prepare. This message is really a herald to proclaim the event and prepare for the arrival of guests.

In ancient times it was common for a herald to precede the arrival of the monarch, to announce his coming and to prepare for his safe and proper travel. With a group of servants, the herald would make sure that the roadway was as smooth and uncluttered as possible. Holes would be filled, rocks and debris would be removed, and unsightly litter would be burned or hidden. As the group traveled along and worked, the herald would proclaim the king's coming to everyone he encountered. His twofold duty was to proclaim and to prepare. That is what John's ministry did for God's great King, Jesus Christ.

As we approach the Christmas season, we have this duty as well. Amidst all the generic and non-descript trappings, we need to proclaim who is coming and prepare ourselves and others to meet Him.

To Prepare the Way for the arrival of Christ, John the Baptist presented two things. He was calling for people to prepare for the coming of Christ, first in preparing for 1) His Ministry (Matthew 3:1-6) and 2) His Message (Matthew 3:7-12) in pointing to the coming King.

In Order to Prepare for the Coming of Christ, we need to prepare for:
1) His Ministry (Matthew 3:1-6).

In verses 1-6, Matthew focuses on the role of John the Baptist in regard to a) The Man (v.1), b) Message (v.2), c) Message (v.2) d) Motive (v.2-3), e) The Manner (v.4),

all involved with f) *The Ministry* (v.5-6). We first see *The Man* himself. The time reference indicated with the phrase: “Now in those days” serves as a transition between chapters 2 and 3. It was a common literary phrase, indicating the general time in which the events being described occurred. The date at which he appeared is stated, in *Luke 3:1*, to have been “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar; i.e. between August, A.D. 28, and August, A.D. 29” (*The Pulpit Commentary: St. Matthew Vol. I.* 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (66–67). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.).

John the Baptist was in Matthew’s day already well known as the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah (cf Acts 13:24; 19:4) (Hagner, D. A. (2002). *Vol. 33A: Word Biblical Commentary : Matthew 1-13.* Word Biblical Commentary (45). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.). Popular Jewish expectation anticipated a messianic forerunner. Deuteronomy 18:18, speaking of the prophet like Moses to whom all Israel should listen, became a seminal text in the development of this expectation. Some expected a literal Elijah to return from heaven, based on Mal 4:5. John comes fitting no one stereotype but fulfilling a variety of prophetic roles and themes (Blomberg, C. (2001). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (72). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.).

- One of the most powerful ways to “Prepare His Way” this Advent season is to show how most expectations about Christmas actually point to a fundamental reality. What Christ actually did, says and is, is a lot more profound than polite seasonal sentimentality.

The author, named John, possessed a common Jewish name in New Testament times and is the Greek form of the Hebrew Johanan (see 2 Kings 25:23; Jer. 40:8; etc.), which means “Jehovah, or Yahweh, is gracious.” Baptist, or Baptizer (*baptistēs*; the Greek ending, *tēs*, signifies one who performs an act), was an epithet given him because baptizing was such an important and obvious part of his ministry. His ministry is that he came, which is a word (from *paraginomai*), which often was used to indicate an official arrival, such as that of the magi (Matt. 2:1), or the public appearance of a leader or teacher (Matt. 3:13). For thirty years both John and Jesus had lived in relative obscurity. Now the coming of the herald signified the coming of the King. The beginning of John’s ministry signaled the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (see Acts 10:37–38). His ministry first and foremost involved preaching is from *kērussō*, the primary meaning of which is “to herald.” It was used of the official whose duty it was to proclaim loudly and extensively the coming of the king. John’s primary place of ministry, like his primary place of training, was in the wilderness of Judea. This terrain was an appropriate symbol of the spiritual state of the people of Israel. It also calls to mind the wilderness in which the Israelites wandered for 40 years when their unbelief delayed their entry into the Promised Land. It was symbolic of John’s ministry to call the people away from the corrupt and dead religious system of their day-away from ritualism, worldliness, hypocrisy, and superficiality. John called them away from Jerusalem and Jericho, away from the cities into the wilderness—where most people would not bother to go if they were not serious seekers. John brought them away, where they were freer to listen, think, and ponder, without the distractions and the misleading leaders they were so accustomed to following. (Albrecht, G. J., & Albrecht, M. J. (1996). *Matthew.* The People’s Bible (35). Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Pub. House.).

- Prepare your heart for the celebration. Let no distraction, either from unrepented sin or sheer business get in the way of realizing and celebrating Christ this season. Prepare your home not just with decorations, but in reading and celebrating the coming King. Prepare others. Perform the work

of a herald this Advent season. Call those around you out to hear of what it means that Christ has come.

His Message in verse 2 was not (prolonged) but pithy, not soothing but soul-searching, not flattering but frightening.... He was a preacher of imminent doom (see verses 7 and 10), a catastrophe that could be avoided only by a, radical turnabout of mind and heart (Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 9: New Testament commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. New Testament Commentary (196). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.). The message John proclaimed was simple, so simple it could easily be summarized in one word: repent (3:2a; cf Acts 13:24; 19:4). Repentance (Gr *metanoia*) is basically “a change of mind” which results in a change of conduct. Repentance is not sorrow. It involves a complete change of attitude regarding God and sin and is often accompanied by a sense of sorrow and a corresponding change in conduct. Such repentance does not arise within ..., but is the result of God’s mercy in leading (an individual) to it (cf. Acts 5:31; Rom 2:4; II Tim 2:25). Thus, repentance involves the very process of conversion whereby (an individual is) born again (*KJV Bible commentary*. 1997 (1876). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.)

Quote: D. A. Carson writes, “What is meant is not a merely intellectual change of mind or mere grief, still less doing penance... , but a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief, which results in ‘fruit in keeping with repentance.’ (D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 99.). Repentance presupposes that our lives are off course and we need to turn them around. But it also points us in the direction of the Savior, who alone is able to make atonement for our sins (Boice, J. M. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (49). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.). The present tense, (which could be rendered) “be repenting,” indicates a state or condition, one befitting the day of the Messiah, thus a life lived in repentance (Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (93). Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Publishing House.).

The Motive for calling for Repentance is not in order that the kingdom of heaven may come, but because it is coming or approaching (for the kingdom of heaven is at hand). The people should repent and be converted because the King was coming, and He deserves and requires no less. The unrepentant and unconverted cannot give the heavenly King the glory He deserves, do not belong to the heavenly King, and are unfit for His heavenly kingdom. (Lange, J. P., & Schaff, P. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures : Matthew* (73). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.).

- We may prepare our homes for Christmas or prepare for Christmas activities, but the real reason in "Preparing His Way" is to prepare our hearts, through repentance for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

The “kingdom of heaven” is a circumlocution for the kingdom of God, reflecting pious Jewish avoidance of the divine name. The expression appears only in Matthew, but it occurs thirty-three times and is largely interchangeable with “kingdom of God,” as 19:23–24 makes clear. “Kingdom of heaven” perhaps refers also to the fact that all power and authority in heaven are given to Jesus. After four hundred years, the people of Israel again heard God’s prophetic word. Malachi’s prophecy was followed by four centuries of silence, with no new or direct word from the Lord. Now, when His word came to Israel again, proclaiming the coming of the King, it was not the expected word of joy and comfort and celebration but a message of warning and rebuke. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, waiting to be ushered in, but Israel was not ready for it. (E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 47.).

Please turn to Isaiah 40 (p.561)

If there ever is a **time of year for sentimentality**, the Christmas season seems to top with **stories** of a little baby and gifts. **The plain reality with the birth of Christ** is that **He ushered a new kingdom reality. The rule of heaven though repentance of sin and submission to this new king is at hand. The mission of John the Baptist** had long before been described **by the prophet**:

Isaiah 40:3-5. [3]A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. [4] Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. [5] And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (ESV)

- **Isa. 40:3-5 symbolically pictures the approach of (Yahweh) for the purpose of leading the procession of Jews who will be returning joyfully to their homeland after long years of captivity. In the Syrian desert, between Babylonia and Palestine, the way must be prepared for the Lord's coming. So, a herald cries out to the people** (Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 9: New Testament commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. New Testament Commentary (198). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.)
- **Advent is a time that "Prepares His Way" from the bondage of selfishness that so charities our life over the year to a focused time on what the coming of Christ means.**

As herald of the great King, **John** in **Matthew 3:3** did **not** clear the roads and highways of obstacles, but sought to clear people's hearts of the obstacles that kept them from the King. **The way of the Lord is the way of repentance, of turning from sin to righteousness, of turning moral and spiritual paths that are crooked into ones that are straight, ones that are fit for the King. The call of John's voice that was crying [bōntos] in the wilderness of Judea was the shouting of urgency commanding people to repent, to confess sin and the need of a Savior. His paths (tribous) are well known, as the Greek term implies, because they are clearly revealed in Scripture. John and his preaching are directly equated with the words of Isa 40:3 of the voice of one in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord.** (Mangum, D., ed. (2020). *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament* (Mt 3:1-12). Lexham Press.)

- **Before we celebration the coming of Christ on December 25, what needs to be cleared out of your life? What is standing in the direct path of righteousness that needs to be cleared out? More important than Christmas decorations, Preparing the Way for Christ means clearing out our hearts to be ready for Him.**

Notice now in **verse 4 The Manner of John's coming. John claimed** to be God's messenger, but he **did not** live, dress, or talk like other religious leaders. **Those leaders were proper, well-dressed, well-fed, sophisticated, and worldly. John obviously cared for none** of those things and even made a point of forsaking them. His **garment of camel's hair** and his **leather belt about his waist** were as plain and drab as the wilderness in which he lived and preached. **His clothes were practical and long-wearing, but far from being comfortable or fashionable. He was much like the first Elijah** in that regard (**2 Kings 1:8**). **His diet of locusts and wild honey** was as Spartan as his clothing. It was nourishing **but little else**. In **not** worrying about what to eat or wear, **John demonstrated the character** of a true disciple of Jesus (cf. 6:25-

34; 10:10; 24:45). (Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C., Jr. (2004). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Vol. 1, p. 297). T&T Clark International.)

- Although **this time of year** often means **great feasting and lavish gifts**, we must **look at our diet and clothes** as being tools for ministry. There indeed are **responsibilities of food and clothing** for those who have little or nothing, that **God expects us to provide for those who have not.**

The immediate effect of John's preaching was dramatic. **Verse 5** describes his **Ministry**. **People were coming** from the great city of **Jerusalem**, which was a considerable distance away. They came, in fact, from **all Judea, and all the region/district about/around the Jordan**. In other words **they were coming from all over southern Palestine**, including both sides of the **Jordan River**. As Matthew reports later in his gospel, **the people recognized John** as a prophet (**21:26**). We know by the **presence of the Pharisees and Sadducees** that there was some measure of **hypocrisy** in the crowd. (Weber, S. K. (2000). *Matthew* (Vol. 1, p. 35). Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

- More than any other time of year, we tend to do **so much traveling the Christmas season** to be with others. This is **a tremendous opportunity to Prepare the Way for Christ** with so many people in such a special way.

In **verse six**, it notes that **those Jews submitted to being baptized** was more than a little significant, because that **was not** a traditional Jewish ceremony. Both the **Levitical and the Essene washings** were repeated, those of the Essenes as much as several times a day or even hourly. They **represented repeated purification for repeated sinning**. **John's washing**, however, was **one-time**. The only one-time washing the Jews performed **was for Gentiles**, **signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism**. **A Jew who submitted to such a rite demonstrated**, in effect, that he or she was an outsider who **sought entrance into the people of God-an amazing admission for a Jew**. Members of God's chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs of the covenant of Moses, **came to John** to be **baptized** like a Gentile! The fact that he chose a permanent and deep river (**in the river Jordan**) suggests that more than a token quantity of water was needed, and both the preposition "**in**" (the Jordan) and the basic meaning of the verb "**baptize**" **probably indicate immersion**. In **v. 16** Matthew will speak of Jesus "**coming up out of the water.**" (France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (109). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.)

- Someone who is a genuine believer will **willingly submit** to the ordinances of Christ. Someone, for example, that is **not** willing to testify to faith through baptism **shows** signs of **rebellion not** indicative to healthy faith.

Baptism here symbolizes before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, **could not save them**. **They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord** for salvation. It is that of which **the baptism** was a public witness, as they confessed **their sins**. **They had to come into the kingdom just like the Gentiles, through repentance and faith**-which included a public admission of sins (cf the same Greek term [*exomologeō*] in Phil. 2:11, where it refers to a verbal confession). **John's baptism** was the acknowledgement of one's sin; **believers' baptism** is the acknowledgement of one's salvation. **John's baptism** involves the confession of sin (Matthew 3:6); **believers' baptism** involves the confession of Christ (Acts 8:36, 37). (Butler, J. G. (2008). *Analytical Bible Expositor: Matthew* (p. 43). LBC Publications.)

- That is why we believe that **baptism by immersion of a confessing believer** is the only legitimate form of baptism. It **necessitates** a declaration of faith. **Other forms**, like infant baptism **neither** picture the **meaning** of baptism, the

scriptural examples of baptism **nor** **the confession of faith** that is tied to baptism.

Illustration: Why did John the Baptist point to the person of Christ in His ministry. The reason is that only Christ meets our greatest need. **If our greatest need** had been information, **God would have sent us** an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a **scientist**; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an **economist**; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an **entertainer**; But **our greatest need is forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior** (Galaxie Software. (2002; 2002). *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. Biblical Studies Press).

To Prepare the Way for the arrival of Christ, **John the Baptist presented 1) His Ministry** (Matthew 3:1-6) **and now finally,**

2) His Message (Matthew 3:7-12) **pointing to the coming King.**

Matthew 3:7-12. [7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (ESV)

In the narrative of **Matthew 3:7-12** Matthew focuses on four elements: a) The Congregation (v.7a), b) The Confrontation v.7b, c) The Condemnation (v. 8-10), and d) The Consolation (v.11-12). First with *The Congregation* itself in **verse 7**. **Among** the great number of people who **came out to see John in the wilderness** (v 5) were **many of the Pharisees and Sadducees**, who **John singled out** for special **warning and rebuke**. **Matthew speaks of them as one group**, emphasized by the use of a single definite article (**the**) rather than two ("the Pharisees and the Sadducees"). It is clear from John's response to them that **he considered their basic problem and need to be exactly the same**. Religiously, politically, and socially the **Pharisees and Sadducees** had almost **nothing** in common. During New Testament times about **the only common ground they exhibited was opposition** to Christ and His followers (Matt. 22:15-16, 23, 34-35; Acts 4:1; 23:6). They had **one other common religious and spiritual ground**. The **Pharisees** **expected their reward in heaven**, while **the Sadducees** expected theirs in this life, but **the trust of both groups was in personal works and self-effort**. **Both emphasized the superficial and nonessential** and had **no concern for the genuine inner spiritual life** or for the welfare of their fellow man. That was "**the leaven** of the **Pharisees and Sadducees**," the **hypocritical, self-serving, dead externalism** about which **Jesus** warned His disciples (Matt. 16:6). **Much of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount** was directed at the **Pharisees**. The **Sadducees** were the descendants of **Zadok**, who was **high priest in the days of Solomon**. They, too, adhered to the Law, but they were anti-supernaturalists and **denied the resurrection**. (Campbell, I. D. (2008). *Opening up Matthew* (p. 31). Day One Publications.)

- **We can do so many "religious" activities** this season to think we are doing something extra spiritual. Unless our **genuine inner spiritual life** and **concern for our fellow human beings** is the essence of our activities, it is **nothing but religious hypocritical, self-serving, dead externalism**.

This group was "**coming to his baptism**" (literally, *coming to the baptism*) **rather than "coming for baptism"** (NASB). **If he were a genuine prophet** perhaps they could gain his approval, parade the pretense of repentant spirituality, and capitalize on or even take over the movement-in the way **religious opportunists** still do today. **Whatever their reasons were, they were wrong, wicked reasons**. They were **not seeking** God's

truth or God's working in their own lives. They were **not repentant**; they had **not confessed** their sins; they had **not** changed at all—as **John** well knew. They were **not** genuinely seeking the true righteousness that delivers from judgment. They were the same smug, self-righteous hypocrites they had been when they started out to find **John**. **Just what did John's baptism mean? It signified a person's willingness** to turn from his or her sins and from the false belief that being born a Jew automatically put a person in right relationship with God (Weber, S. K. (2000). *Matthew* (Vol. 1, p. 36). Broadman & Holman Publishers.).

- For some, known as **the “Christmas & Easter Crowd”**, there is the **mistaken** belief that in two corporate worship attendances, they have fulfilled what God expects. Christianity is **not** coasting into the Kingdom of God. **Neither** can we ride on the coattails of a devout member of our family. People are **not** born into the kingdom of God. That is why John says we must be born again in **John 3**.

Notice now b) The Confrontation in the second half of verse 7. **John's awareness of the insincerity and lack of repentance** of the Pharisees and Sadducees is evident in those strong words. They intended to **carry their hypocrisy** even to the extent of submitting to John's baptism, out of whatever **corrupt motives** they may have had. *Gennēma* (**brood**) may also be translated **“offspring,”** signifying **descendants or children**. The description of the religious leaders as **“vipers.”** was strong but accurate. It **spoke of the poisonous character** of their **principles, conduct, and influence**. They were like **“that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan”** (**Revelation 12:9**). **Jesus used the same epithet (brood of vipers)** to describe the Pharisees on several occasions (Matt. 12:34; 23:33). **Vipers** (*echidna*) were small but very poisonous desert snakes, which would have been quite familiar to John the Baptist. They were made **even more dangerous** by the fact that, when still, **they looked like a dead branch** and were **often picked up unintentionally**. Calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers pointed up the danger of their religious hypocrisy—as well as the fact that **their wicked work** had been passed on to them by the original serpent (**Gen. 3:1–13**) through their spiritual forefathers, of whom they were the **brood**, or offspring. Like the desert viper, they **often appeared to be harmless**, but **their brand of godliness** (cf 2 Tim. 3:5) was **venomous and deadly**. **In His series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees, in Matthew 23:13, Jesus said** “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in” . **They were responsible for keeping countless Jews out of the kingdom, and therefore from salvation and spiritual life.** (Butler, J. G. (2008). *Analytical Bible Expositor: Matthew* (p. 43). LBC Publications.)

The question of Who warned you to flee continues the viper figure. **A brush fire or a farmer's burning the stalks in his field after the harvest** would cause vipers and other creatures to **flee** before the flames in order to escape. It was a common sight in many of the Mediterranean and Arab regions, and one that **John the Baptist** doubtlessly had seen many times. 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. The last line of v. 7 therefore oozes with sarcasm. John knows full well that **the Jewish leaders** are **not fleeing** from the coming **wrath**. This **wrath** forms part of the full arrival of the kingdom, which will lead to judgment of God's enemies as well as blessing for his followers. God's **wrath** does **not reflect** “the emotion of anger but

that part of his divine holiness that actively repudiates that which is unholy in his creatures.” 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. (R. H. Mounce, *Matthew*, GNC (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 22.)

- The most dangerous thing that some people do this time of year is to attend corporate worship. Some mistakenly believe that if they just attend at Christmas and Easter, be baptized, or have their name on a membership role, then they have avoided the wrath to come.
- Only through true repentance and conversion can someone legitimately have assurance of eternal life.

Please turn to Luke 3 (p.806)

Notice now c) The Condemnation beginning in verse 8. The marks of a truly repentant heart are fruit in keeping with repentance. Fruit consists of acts that are done; and the aorist imperative demands actual doing (Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (107). Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Publishing House.),

In his parallel account Luke mentions several examples of the kind of fruit John was talking about.

Luke 3:11-14. [11] And he answered them, "Whoever has **two tunics** is to share with him who has none, and whoever has **food** is to do likewise." [12] Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" [13] And he said to them, "**Collect no more than you are authorized to do.**" [14] Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "**Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.**" (ESV)

That this would be as Matthew 3:8 describes fruit in keeping with repentance. (*Axios*) This has the root idea of having equal weight or worth, and therefore of being appropriate. True repentance not only should but will have correspondingly genuine works, demonstrated in both attitudes and actions. The Scribes and Pharisees mistakenly believed that outwards actions were enough to satisfy God's wrath. Someone who has repented, and trusted on Christ alone to satisfy God's wrath will bear fruit in keeping with that repentance. John The Baptist calls his hearers to turn ... from being unfruitful trees threatened by the eschatological fire into fruitful trees (Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C., Jr. (2004). *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Vol. 1, p. 306). T&T Clark International.)

In Matthew 3:9, John directs his warning to the religious leaders heading off their probable excuse: and do not presume/suppose to yourselves, “We have Abraham as/for our father.” They believed that simply being Abraham’s descendants, members of God’s chosen race, made them spiritually secure. Not so, John said, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Those who remembered Isaiah’s description of Abraham as “the rock from which you were hewn” (Isa 51:1-2) might reflect ruefully on the possibility of God’s substituting different “stones.” Descent from Abraham was not a passport to heaven. It was a great advantage in knowing and understanding God’s will (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5), but without faith in Christ, that advantage becomes a more severe condemnation. If Abraham himself was justified only by his personal faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-3), how could his descendants expect to be justified in any other way? (Rom. 3:21-22)

France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (112). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.)

John apparently believed that **God's ultimate judgment** was **imminent**. Because the Messiah had arrived, **he says in Matthew 3:10** **Even now the axe is already laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. At the end of every harvest season the farmer would go through his vineyard or orchard looking for plants that had borne no good fruit.** These would be cut down to make room for productive vines and trees and to keep them from taking nutrients from the soil that were needed by the good plants. **A fruitless tree** was a worthless and useless tree, **fit only to be cut down and thrown into the fire.** **Fruitless repentance** is **worthless** and **useless**; **it means absolutely nothing** to God. **The tree that lacks such fruit** will be totally destroyed—not only **cut down** but **also thrown into the fire.** “Does John seem too stern? **Jesus spoke with similar sternness; no gospel is needed if there is no judgment**” (Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 60). W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.)

The final section begins in **verse 11** with **d) The Consolation.** **John explains how his baptism differed** from that of the Messiah: **I baptize you with water for repentance.** **John's baptism** reflected a ritual the Jews often used when a Gentile accepted the God of Israel. **The ceremony** was the mark of an outsider's becoming a part of the **chosen people.** **In John's ministry** it **marked the outward profession of inward repentance,** which prepared a person for the coming of the King. John said that he baptized **with water,** meaning that **John** was the agent, and that with which he baptized was **water.** In a similar way **he refers to the Christ** as the one who will do another kind of baptizing, and that with which He would baptize would be the **Holy Spirit.** Simply interpreted, this means that **Jesus is the one who does the baptizing with the Spirit,** and the baptism is the **Holy Spirit** Himself. **What one receives in the baptism with the Holy Spirit** is the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Master (Augsburger, M. S., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1982). *Vol. 24: The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 24 : Matthew.* The Preacher's Commentary series (18). Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc.).

The second baptism mentioned here is by the Messiah, a baptism by the One John says **is coming after me** and who **is mightier than I,** whose **sandals** John was **not worthy/fit to remove.** **One of the lowliest tasks of a slave in that day** was removing the sandals of his master and any guests and then washing their feet. **It was the symbol** Jesus Himself used in teaching His disciples to be servants (**John 13:5–15**). **The humility of John,** one mark of his spiritual stature, is evident in this description of the One he heralded and is consistent with his expression in **John 3:30** that “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Among the ways in which **the Messiah** would be **mightier** than John would be in His baptism **with the Holy Spirit.** **At Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4)** and during the initial formation of the church (**Acts 8:5–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7**), the promised **Holy Spirit** did come upon the disciples, baptizing them and establishing them in the body of Christ. Though **without** such dramatic attending signs, **every believer since that time** is baptized into the church by Christ with **God's Spirit.** “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free” (**1 Cor. 12:13**). **The third baptism mentioned here is that of fire.** Often in Scripture **fire** symbolizes **wrath** (Deut. 9:3. etc). But **fire** is also indicative of the work of **grace** (Isa. 6:6, 7; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:3; I Peter 1:7). The mention of **fire** (“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”) fits this application to **Pentecost,** when “there appeared to them divided tongues as of fire, resting on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). **The flame illumines. Fire cleanses. The Spirit does both.** Nevertheless, it would appear from the context (both before and after; see verses 10 and 12) and from **Joel's Pentecost prophecy (Joel 2:30; cf. Acts 2:19),** considered in *its*

context (see Joel 2:31), that **the ultimate fulfilment of the Baptist's words awaits Christ's glorious return to cleanse the earth with fire** (II Peter 3:7, 12; cf. Mal. 3:2; II Thess. 1:8). It therefore seems logical and natural to take **verse 11** also as **a contrast between believers** (those baptized **with the Holy Spirit**) and **unbelievers** (those baptized with the **fire of God's judgment**). (Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 9: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. New Testament Commentary (208–209). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.)

Finally, as in the preceding two verses, in **Matthew 3:12**, John again gives **consolation to believers** but **warning to unbelievers**: **And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.** **The figure is changed to that of a farmer** who has just harvested his grain crop. **In Palestine**, as in many other parts of the ancient world, **farmers** made a **threshing floor** by picking out a slight depression in the ground, or digging one if necessary, usually on a hill where breezes could be caught. **The soil** would then be wetted and packed down until it was very hard. **Around the perimeter of the floor**, which was perhaps thirty or forty feet in diameter, rocks would be stacked to keep the grain in place. After **the stalks of grain** were placed onto the floor, **an ox, or a team of oxen**, would drag heavy pieces of wood around over the grain, **separating the wheat** kernels from the **chaff**, or straw. **Then the farmer would take a winnowing fork** and throw a pile of grain into the air. **The wind** would blow the chaff away, while **the kernels**, being heavier, would fall back to the floor. Eventually, **nothing** would be left **but** the good and useful **wheat**. In a similar way **the Messiah will separate out everyone who belongs to Him** and, like a farmer, He will **gather His wheat into the barn**, where it will be forever safe and protected. Also, in a similar way to the farmer's, **the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.** **The long-awaited Messiah would Himself perform both functions**, though **not** in the time and sequence that John and the prophets before him may have thought. **The final separation** and the ultimate judgment will be only at Christ's second coming, **when the unsaved** "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (**Matt. 25:46**). The language of 3:12 indicates this is **a thorough judgment** that **no** one will be able to escape. **The judge** will make **no mistakes in sorting** the believer from the unbeliever. (Weber, S. K. (2000). *Matthew* (Vol. 1, p. 38). Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

- **John's introduction to the person and ministry of the Messiah prepared the people** and will **"Prepare His Way"** for all those who truly hear, **for the arrival of their King.**

(Format Note: Some base commentary from MacArthur, J. (1989). *Matthew* (49–72). Chicago: Moody Press.)

Closing Hymn:

Prayer Room Invitation

034 Benediction: **May the Lord of Hosts** guide you so that **you will prepare the way** for His Coming. **May you live** to receive the crown of life, which **the Lord has prepared** for those that love Him. **Go now in the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.** (cf. 2 Sm. 5:10; James 1:12)