

Matthew 3B

- Last time, we left John the Baptist at the Jordan with the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elite of his day
 - Let's pick up again in v.7 and re-read the encounter

Matt. 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Matt. 3:8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

Matt. 3:9 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.

Matt. 3:10 "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.

- As I taught last time, these men were the reigning experts in Israel on matters of God and piety
 - Since Israel was governed by a religious law, these religious men were also the governing rulers of the people (under Roman occupation)
 - So as with any government, these politicians were divided into political parties or factions
 - And like today, these factions covered the spectrum from radical to orthodox, conservative to liberal
 - The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of Jewish politics
 - They were the descendants of Ezra and the scribes
 - They studied and memorized the Law of Moses and the associated volumes of rabbinical writings that had developed over the centuries
 - They interpreted these laws and enforced them in Jewish society
 - Pharisees took a conservative, literal, hardline view of their rules
 - They enforced the letter of the law with threats and intimidations

- But like most pious self-righteous religious authorities, the Pharisees were hypocrites
- Listen to how Jesus described them

[Matt. 23:23](#) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

[Matt. 23:24](#) “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

[Matt. 23:25](#) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.

[Matt. 23:26](#) “You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

[Matt. 23:27](#) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.

[Matt. 23:28](#) “So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- The Pharisees held their grip on power by holding these rules over the heads of the people
 - They were self-proclaimed gatekeepers of Heaven, dictating what Jews must do to please God
 - And they determined who had met the rules and who hadn’t
- The Pharisees exploited the people’s desperation to be approved by God and used their religious power to become powerful and wealthy
 - Another quote from Jesus

[Luke 16:13](#) “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

[Luke 16:14](#) Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

[Luke 16:15](#) And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

- So to understand the Pharisees, remember the Pharisees convinced the people they held the keys to entering the Kingdom
- And they exploited this power to make themselves rich (sound familiar?)
- On the other end of the Jewish political spectrum, were the Sadducees
 - Sadducees were the liberal religious leaders
 - Sadducees thought the Pharisees took religion too seriously and too literally
 - The Sadducees rejected many basic teachings of Scripture including the reality of resurrection and the existence of angels or even of a spirit
 - Because of their liberal views, they focused less on Scripture and the supernatural and more on earthly politics and accomplishment
 - The Sadducees' power came from having control over the temple operations in Jerusalem
 - Herod's temple was a massive and complex operation at the center of Jewish life
 - The Sadducees were responsible for all that happened inside the temple
 - They had authority over the temple guards and priests, and they presided at any criminal trials conducted in the temple
 - And most importantly, the Sadducees managed the temple funds, which meant they had control over the purse strings
 - Every Jew was required to tithe between 20-30% of their annual income to the temple
 - So a tremendous amount of money flowed into the Sadducees' coffers every year
 - By itself, such wealth gave the Sadducees significant power over the people

- If that weren't enough, the Sadducees also held a majority of seats on the Sanhedrin, the ruling counsel over the Jews
 - So the Sadducees were the party in power in Jesus' day
 - They retained their power by maintaining a cozy relationship with the Roman officials ruling Judea
 - In contrast to the Pharisees, who openly despised Romans
- So the Pharisees and Sadducees were rivals for political power in Israel
 - And given their significant political differences, it's surprising to see these two groups aligned on any matter
 - Pharisees and Sadducees couldn't even agree on opposing Rome
 - So it took a significant threat, a common enemy, to get these two groups to join forces
 - And John the Baptist was one such enemy
 - John was the exact opposite of the two groups
 - He has no pedigree, and his teaching agreed with neither groups
 - John not only opposed the status quo in Israel, he called for others to do the same
 - Therefore, his teaching threatened to erode the power base of these two groups
 - So from the point of view of a Pharisee or a Sadducee, John was a revolutionary that needed to be silenced
 - Even as the Pharisees and Sadducees jockeyed for power in Israel, both groups' success depended on the status quo
 - To them, John represented a third party disrupting the delicate balance
 - So these leaders have come out into the wilderness to challenge John's work
 - They've heard of the crowds and the strange rituals John was conducting
 - But what truly concerned these men was John's message that the Messiah was soon to arrive

- The Jewish people had long waited for the promised Savior
 - Over the centuries, Israel's rabbis studied Scripture to know when and how the Messiah would arrive and what He would do once He appeared
 - So it fell to these religious leaders to confirm for the people when God had fulfilled a Messianic prophecy
 - So when someone like John made Messianic claims (like the Messiah had come or was soon to arrive), these men would come to investigate
 - But these religious leaders assumed that the coming Messiah would look and sound a lot like them
 - The Pharisees assumed the Messiah would look like a Pharisee, while the Sadducees thought He would look like a Sadducee
 - Each religious sect believed they were poster children for Godliness
 - And so when the Holy One of Israel came, they were sure they could spot Him
- The same thing is still happening today
 - Every pious group believes they've cornered the market on God
 - Mormons believe God is a Mormon living in Utah
 - Muslims believe God is a Muslim in Mecca
 - Catholics think God makes His home in the Vatican
 - And every deeply religious person believes that when they meet God, He'll remind them of themselves
 - Because when people invent ideas about God, we naturally project our preferred assumptions upon Him
 - People do this, never stopping to wonder whether those assumptions are rooted in anything true or real
 - But what about us? What about Christians? Can we do this too?
 - Well, to the extent we rely on the word of God, then we avoid this problem

- By His Word, we can truly know God and understand Him for Who He has revealed Himself to be
- But on the other hand, if we depart from a reliance on God's Word, then we too can remake God in ways that affirm our wrong thinking
 - We might remake God into a God of prosperity
 - Or a God of healing or a God of social justice or a God of mystical signs and wonders
 - We project our hopes and desires upon Him, making Him one-dimensional, and in so doing, we diminish God
- The only true and proper way to understand God is by studying what He has revealed to us in His Word about Himself and His purposes
 - We can't imagine something else – something we prefer – and project that thinking onto God, expecting it to be true in the end
 - That's not spiritual insight...that's a fantasy
 - God is Who He is, and He's very unlike you and me
 - God is holy, righteous, pure, omniscient and all powerful
 - We'll never meet anyone or experience anything truly like God this side of Heaven
 - And so when God appeared as Man, our Messiah, Jesus Christ, He affirmed absolutely no one
 - Jesus validated no one, nor do God's true representatives when they are speaking and operating by the Spirit, as was John
- But to the Pharisees and Sadducees, someone like John certainly didn't qualify as a representative of God
 - Even though God's Word told Israel to expect to hear a voice crying in the wilderness, announcing the coming of the Messiah
 - Nevertheless, these religious elites saw nothing in John that looked like the God they had assumed was coming for them
 - Yet these men were members of the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling council of Israel,

- So they were obligated to investigate and authenticate any Messianic claims
- And based on their decision, the people of Israel would be instructed on whether to accept or reject John's movement
- John knew what was going on, of course, and he knew they would oppose him since his message undermined their way of life
 - So John decides to land the first blow
 - In v.7, John calls these men a "brood of vipers"
- The Greek word translated "brood" is literally the word, "offspring"
 - John is calling these men children of a deadly serpent, which is a not-so-subtle reference to Satan
 - Spiritually speaking, John is saying these men were children of the devil
- And if you think John is being harsh, remember what Jesus said about these same men

John 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

- John and Jesus both called these men children of Satan, because in a literal sense they were
- Like all unbelievers, these men found their spiritual source in Satan
- They were born with a nature shared with the devil, a nature of sin and rebellion
- Everyone is born this way, according to Scripture, born into sin
 - But the sin of these men goes further, because even as they oppose God, they portray themselves as speaking for God
 - Notice John asks sarcastically, who warned them to flee from the coming judgment
 - Remember, I said last time that John's message included a call to repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand

- But John knew these men hadn't come out in response to his call
 - They weren't afraid of the coming judgment because in their mind, they were going to be just fine
 - Here again, if you imagine God looks and thinks a lot like you, then you're not going to be worried about meeting Him
 - On the other hand, the more you understand your sinfulness and your need for God, the more you will cry out to Him seeking His mercy
- So John warns them in v.8 to do just that, to turn from their sin while they still had opportunity
 - He tells them to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, which was the prerequisite to receiving the baptism of John
 - To bear fruit in keeping with repentance means to demonstrate a true desire to change their sinful ways
 - John told the Pharisees to show some evidence they had repented, which is what John had been telling everyone
 - In Luke's Gospel, we learn some of the ways John was counseling people to bear fruit

Luke 3:10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?"

Luke 3:11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise."

Luke 3:12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

Luke 3:13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."

Luke 3:14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."

- But of course, John knows the religious leaders had no interest in such things
 - So anticipating their response, John refutes one of their common claims: that they were children of Abraham

- The religious leaders taught that being a physical descendant of Abraham was sufficient to assure every Jew entrance into the Kingdom
- They referred to this teaching as “the merits of the fathers”
- It taught that all Jews were credited with the righteousness of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob on the basis of their bloodline alone
- And therefore, repentance wasn’t necessary...every Jew held a get-out-of-hell-free card
- John says don’t suppose that you can say this and be assured of Heaven
 - They thought themselves special because they were born into the right family
 - But John says that counts for nothing
- John says God could even raise up children, meaning followers, from stones if necessary
 - In Hebrew, the words “stone” and “children” rhyme, so John is making a play on words, like a schoolyard taunt
 - And it’s literally true, when you remember that God made the first man from dirt
- So, being a child of Abraham was not a notable achievement
 - If God could raise up children of Abraham from stones, then the Pharisees and Sadducees were nothing special
 - No, entrance into the Kingdom and God’s presence starts with repentance
 - A changing of one’s outlook away from sinful rebellion and toward faith in God
 - And John says the opportunity to make that change was drawing short
 - In v.10, John says that the axe is already at the root of the trees, ready to cut down any that doesn’t bear the fruit of repentance
 - John is speaking in metaphor, but his imagery is easy to follow

- The axe represents the Messiah's judgment, and as John has been preaching, the time of that judgment was coming soon
- It was already at the root of the tree, so to speak, ready to judge the tree's worthiness
- The trees were the people of Israel, of course, trees God had "planted" in the hope they would produce good fruit for the Master
 - The fruit pictures a person's deeds done in keeping with repentance
 - So those Jews who demonstrate a true, heartfelt repentance in anticipation of God's mercy were the ones producing good fruit
- Now a farmer would never cut down a tree that was producing good fruit...he would let it stand and continue producing
 - But a farmer eventually cuts down unproductive trees
 - So John was teaching that those who accepted John's baptism in anticipation of Jesus' coming were going to withstand the coming judgment
 - But those who failed to bear good fruit would be judged worthless and suitable only to be thrown into the fire, which is a picture of hell
 - That was going to be the fate of these religious rulers
- Next, John elaborates some more on that coming judgment

Matt. 3:11 "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; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Matt. 3:12 "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."

- John opens saying, "as for me, I baptize with water"
 - In saying this, John is describing the nature of his ministry, of course
 - But he's also diminishing his importance as well

- His ministry was *merely* one of baptizing in water, a symbolic action
- Now his ministry was important, yes, but only because it pointed to the Messiah's greater ministry which was soon to come
- John says that the one "who is coming after me is mightier than I"
 - John appreciated that his personal ministry was nothing if it did not glorify Christ
 - His ministry was a success only if it led people to Jesus
- I think that's a safe rule for how we should conduct our own personal ministries, too
 - If what you're saying or doing brings people to Jesus Christ...
 - To knowing Him in faith, to following Him in obedience, to serving Him in love...
 - Then you're on the right track
- On the other hand, if our efforts in ministry do little more than call attention to ourselves or draw people to following us, then we've gone wrong somewhere
 - We're following in the footsteps of the Pharisees, thinking we have something inherently worthy inside us that God needs
 - Remember, God once spoke through the mouth of a donkey in the Old Testament
 - So what great thing of value do you think you bring to this relationship?
 - We need to think like John the Baptist, who said elsewhere speaking of Jesus, "He must increase but I must decrease"
 - John knew his place, because he understood his place in relationship to the Son of God
 - In v.11, John says he was not even worthy to carry Jesus' sandals
 - Carrying another man's sandals meant something very specific to Jews in that day
 - The Talmud describes the duties of a slave as including taking a master's dirty shoes off his feet at night

- And carrying his clothes to the bathhouse
- So John was clearly saying he was so unworthy in comparison to Jesus that he could not even qualify to be Jesus' slave
 - And of course, if John the Baptist is not worthy to qualify as Jesus' slave, then how could any of us qualify to be Jesus' slave?
 - Yet the Bible calls Christians slaves or servants of Christ
 - How can we be servants of the Messiah if we aren't worthy?
- The answer is grace
 - Unmerited favor...God giving us a position of honor and blessing that we don't deserve
 - And doing so merely on the basis of His mercy and love
- That's what John was preaching to these men and to these crowds
 - He was telling these leaders they couldn't merit what they thought they had coming
 - You could only have it through repenting and seeking God's mercy and grace
 - And the Lord was prepared to grant mercy to those who humble themselves in this way
- Finally, John issues a final warning to these men, saying that the One Who follows John will conduct a much more powerful type of baptism
 - At the end of v.11, John says the coming Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire
 - To understand what John is saying, you have to visualize the scene taking place here
 - In this moment, picture John by the river, with a crowd of followers waiting to be baptized
 - At the edge of the crowd, stand these religious leaders looking on and scoffing
 - So as John speaks these words in v.11, imagine John beginning with his eyes scanning the repentant crowd of followers seeking God's forgiveness

- To these people, John says the coming Messiah will baptize you in a much greater way
- He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit
- Of course, we know John is referring prophetically to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that came upon the Church at Pentecost
- But now, as John continues his sentence, his gaze shifts from the crowd to those scowling faces of the religious leaders
 - And as John's eyes meet theirs, he completes his thought "...and fire"
 - That is to say, Jesus will baptize these hard-hearted unbelievers not with the Holy Spirit but with fire, a judgment fire
 - John had just used that same metaphor of fire burning to describe the future destiny of anyone who did not repent
 - So here, John pointedly says these unrepentant religious leaders would see a baptism too... a baptism of fire
- John has presented a clear and stark choice
 - Either we are baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit
 - Or else we will be baptized by Jesus with judgment fire
 - Either we are consumed by His forgiveness and mercy
 - Or else, we will be consumed by His wrath
 - There is no third option
- And just to make sure we get the point, John gives us one more metaphor
 - In v.12, John uses the metaphor of a harvest, of Jesus harvesting the good grain (*i.e.*, the "fruit") while consuming the chaff
 - Harvesting is a common metaphor in the Bible...we're going to see it multiple times in Matthew's Gospel
 - It pictures God coming to claim those who are His, while separating out those who are not
 - The grain seed (which is the fruit of the stalk) is harvested because it is valuable and desirable to God

- While the chaff is cast off and burned because it is worthless
- So will it be for all humanity at God's judgment
- And to be clear, the Bible's not talking about living a perfect life to earn God's favor or maintaining a "church" life
 - John is talking about a true heart change
 - Truly turning away from our old thinking and beliefs and toward a new understanding of God
 - Of recognizing our own unworthiness before God and accepting His mercy given to us through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ
 - That's bearing fruit
- So to paraphrase John's words, don't suppose for yourselves that you came from a good Christian family and that's good enough to get you into Heaven
 - And don't suppose that because you have a Godly spouse or parent, that you get credit by association
 - And don't think that the time will go on forever and there will be no judgment
 - Or that you get some second chance to know and receive Christ
- We each get one life, the Bible says, and then comes judgment
 - And since we don't know when our life ends, then just as John said, God's axe is laid at our tree
 - One day we face Him, one day we will be held to account
 - When we come to that day...a day some of us may face very soon...will we be ready?
 - Will we go into that moment like a Pharisee?
 - Proud of your heritage, proud of your knowledge and accomplishments
 - Assured of your eternal future, or so you think, merely because of these worthless accomplishments?
 - You're cold-hearted and hard-headed

- Unwilling to admit your sin before God, unmoved by God's Word
- And unable to accept God's mercy
- Or maybe you take life like a Sadducee?
 - Too sophisticated to believe in supernatural things, like a spirit or resurrection or the Kingdom
 - So absorbed by earthly things and worldly power and wealth that you're unconcerned about what lies beyond this world
 - You don't have time for God or the Bible, much less to consider a judgment or hell
 - You're blissfully ignorant and determined to stay that way
- Or maybe you're like one of John's followers
 - You know yourself...you know who you are and what you've done, things you're not proud of
 - And you believe what you read in the Bible, that of God and His holiness and of a coming judgment and of hell and eternal punishment
 - You know the end of the world is coming, or at the very least, you know your life will end one day
 - And when that day comes, you want to be ready to face the Lord
- So like those men and women, who streamed out to see John by the Jordan, you're eager to receive God's mercy
 - You dearly want His assurance that He has forgiven you
 - You want to know your sins have been forgiven and that you have peace with God
- So who are you? The good, the bad or the ugly?
 - If you think you're good enough for Heaven and so you don't need to worry about repenting, then friend, let me say you are overestimating yourself
 - And if you're the bad boy or girl who rebels against authority assuming that there is no coming judgment, then friend, you are underestimating God

- And if you know you're ugly, a sinner who needs God's mercy and desires to have Christ's payment on the cross to cover your debt before God, then friend, let me assure you that you have it now
- The Bible says

[Rom. 10:9](#) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

[Rom. 10:10](#) for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.