

S e r m o n s o n
Matthew

He Will Thoroughly Clean

Matthew 3:10-12

With Study Questions

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And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.¹¹ I indeed baptize you with water unto 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 fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:10-12).

Review

This morning we continue examining the first sermon given in the gospels—a sermon by John the Baptist in which he would prepare the way of the Lord.

What was this preparing of the way? For some, John’s message could be compared to the flowers thrown before the holy carriage of the King and His entourage. For others it would be more akin to warning flyers thrown upon an evil nation prior to its carpet-bombing obliteration. As we shall see there is clearly a good news/bad news aphorism taking place in John’s sermon.

John called his listeners to repent because something unique was about to take place—the kingdom of heaven was at hand. As prophesied, King Jesus was about to take His throne and His kingdom would begin to cover the earth. We see images of this kingdom in both the Old and New Testaments:

And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:35).

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field,³² which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches (Matthew 13:31, 32).”

The antagonists of this kingdom make their showing in verse seven. Ironically they were the religious leaders—the Pharisees and Sadducees—who abused their followers and merely made an outward show of religion (Matthew 23). John publicly rebukes them. He calls them to repent and bear good fruit. Step one in the advancement of the Christian faith throughout the earth would be a judgment of the household of God (1 Peter 4:17).

In Malachi, which is the Old Testament context prophesying John the Baptist’s ministry (Malachi 3:1), we read, arguably, of the Pharisees:

Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? says the Lord of hosts to you priests who despise My name (Malachi 1:6).

Preface

There are three major points I would like to bring forth as we examine verses 10 through 12 of John’s sermon.

First we will make our exegetical observations. This is just a fancy way of asking what these verses are actually about. I think we will find that John was prophesying of a specific and unique historic event which would take place during the lives of most

of his hearers—the beginning of the kingdom of God. This launching of Christ's kingdom would be both glorious and devastating.

Secondly, we will make theological observations; what does John's sermon tell us about Christ and His kingdom—and about God? I believe that John's sermon demonstrates a necessary link between the advancement of Christ's kingdom spiritually (in the immaterial world) and the advancement of His kingdom physically (in the material world). In other words, the warnings and blessings of religion, of Christ and of His kingdom, have both eternal and historical implications.

And finally we will seek the application. How does this knowledge of Christ and His kingdom work its way into my daily routine?

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I. Exegetical Implications

A Unique Historical Event

John's sermon reaches a fever pitch. His metaphors are striking! The merciless lumberjack is about to level the forest. If he doesn't see fruit (repentance and genuine faith in Christ) the trees will not merely be cut down, they will be thrown into the fire. John speaks of one who is coming after him (Christ) who is mightier than he. Jesus will perform two types of baptisms—one of the Holy Spirit and one of fire. These baptisms will be akin to the farmer who throws the grain in the air in order to remove the chaff for burning while, at the same time, gathering the wheat into his barn.

What in the world is John talking about? What trees are about to be cut down? What is His winnowing fan? What is the threshing floor? Who is the wheat and who is the chaff? And what is the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the baptism of fire?

A Time Text

One may offer a simplistic answer to these questions by asserting that John's words are restricted to eternal judgment. No doubt eternal judgment is an aspect of John's sermon. But there is a time-text that does not allow this to be restricted to an eternal judgment.

The kingdom of heaven was *at hand*. That which was future tense (*at hand*) for John was past tense for the Apostle Paul who considered himself to have already entered the kingdom of heaven (Colossians 1:13). So strictly speaking, today's pastor cannot give this sermon in the same way John gave it. *The ax is laid at the root of the trees*. One can hardly miss the imminence of this warning; something was about to happen! *The baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire* were events that were future for John but in the past for us (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Judging Israel

The trees which are about to be cut down—the chaff—are the faithless Israelites—specifically the clergy—who had continually rejected Christ and His prophets (Matthew 23). They would soon find themselves annihilated by military overthrow. This is Christ's baptism of fire! The Bible tells us that this would happen

soon (Matthew 23:36; 24:34). History tells us that the axe of Christ was the Roman Empire.

Some may object to this interpretation insisting that this judgment requires the physical presence of Christ; after all He is the one with the winnowing fork in His hand. But if that is the case, how then do we explain the imminence (soon-ness) of John's words?

It may help to remember how God exacts His judgments. Was not the king of Assyria the rod of God's affliction (Isaiah 10:5)? In the same way we saw the celestial picture of Herod seeking to kill the baby Jesus portrayed in Revelation via its invisible, spiritual manipulations...

And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born (Revelation 12:4).

...we see Christ as the conquering vindicator behind the military overthrow of the enemies of His church.

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. ¹³ He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. ¹⁵ Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. ¹⁶ And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (Revelation 19:11-16).

What event (or events) is this? Do we really think Jesus is going to be riding a horse with a literal sword coming out of His mouth? Some argue that this is the subduing of men's hearts by the word of God and I don't doubt that that is partially correct. But the striking of the nations and the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God has the ring of judgment. And keep in mind that individuals, not nations, are judged in eternity. Nations are judged in history (verse 15).

If there is still any doubt as to the unique historical nature of the judgment of which John speaks, we need merely continue reading Matthew. The gospel is replete with these types of specific sanctions leveled against this specific generation. For example, in the parable of the vinedresser, notice who the vinedressers actually are (verse 45):

"Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ³⁴ Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. ³⁵ And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. ³⁷ Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what

will he do to those vinedressers?"⁴¹ They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease *his* vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: *The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes?* Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.⁴⁴ And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder."⁴⁵ Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them (Matthew 21:33-45).

There is little doubt that John's sermon, at least, includes the political, material destruction of the nation of Israel in 70 AD.

II. Theological Implications

Eternal and Historical

What do we learn about Christ's kingdom in this sermon? What do we learn about God? What I believe we see in John's sermon is an inexorable (unyielding) link between God's eternal judgments and His historical judgments. What I mean by this is that the type of faithlessness which will result in the damnation of souls on Judgment Day will also have the consequence of temporal judgments throughout history.

In this sermon John is issuing a specific warning to a people who, because of their lack of faith, were about to be annihilated militarily. Their audience before the tribunal of God was imminent because God would soon ravage them with material destruction. Can this be viewed as unreasonable? How foolish it is for us to think that the kind of infidelity that makes us guilty before God in eternity will have no consequences in time and space.

Let us not think for a minute that moral, social, political and economic defeats in history will not have eternal consequences. We praise God when doors are open to communist countries because we know that it is through these open doors that the gospel can be presented which is the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16). We praise God because we know that even though the door may have been opened through political means in a penultimate (secondary) manner, it was opened by God in an ultimate (primary) manner. Nonetheless it was political—some person or group of people did it in history.

Let us also not think for a minute that the spiritually destitute people who make godless moral, social, political and economic commitments will not have a day of reckoning both in history and eternity.

III. Application

So what difference does this make to us? What are the implications of such knowledge?

Big Picture

In a macrocosmic level (big worldview), the sermon of John the Baptist, in principle, can and should be a great source of comfort to our Christian brothers and sisters abroad who, seeking to be faithful to King Jesus, often find themselves under the fist of political oppression. Christ's kingdom will prevail. For even though this was a unique historical

event, Christ will continue to ride His white horse until all His enemies are made a footstool for his feet (Psalm 110:1; 1 Corinthians 15:25).

Conversely, the sermon of John the Baptist should be a source of trepidation to the church in the west which is somehow living under the misimpression that the theological and ethical deterioration of Christ's kingdom (as it is represented in His churches) will not be on the receiving end of His judgment and potential decimation—this includes our political nation which is sanctified by godly citizens.

Local Picture

In a microcosmic sense (small worldview) Christians must realize that, even though we have been set free from the curse of the law as a criterion for salvation, blatant disregard for the law of God will produce the type of licentiousness that causes the salt to lose its savor, making it good for nothing but to be trampled underfoot (Matthew 5:13). King David never lost his salvation for his torrid affair and act of violence (2 Samuel 12:1-15). But it did result in terrible judgments within his household and kingdom; both eventually crumbled. Although David didn't lose his own salvation he burgeoned a godless legacy.

In other words if the church becomes a place where Christians cease warring against their sins (both moral and theological—of thought, word, and deed), there will come a time when the theology is contoured to view the sin as acceptable (as we have seen in many homosexual churches). When sin is viewed as acceptable then there is truly no need of Christ for He came to save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21). The expectation for those churches and those influenced by those churches, and the nations surrounding those churches, is the diminishing influence of the gospel and eventual judgment in history and eternity.

Christ would soon clean house. He would not suffer His kingdom—His church—to be polluted beyond what His honor allows. We must all, therefore, continually heed the words of John the Baptist and bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Questions for Study

1. What did it mean that John “prepared the way” for Jesus (page 1)?
2. Why is it necessary to see John’s sermon as addressing a unique historical event (pages 3, 4)?
3. Who were to be the recipients of the judgment in John’s sermon (pages 4, 5)?
4. Discuss Jesus riding the white horse. What does that represent (page 4)?
5. What do we learn about the nature of Christ and His kingdom through the events preached about by John (pages 5, 6)?
6. What difference does this make in the life of Christians (pages 6, 7)?