

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Seeing and Delighting in Jesus through an Expositional Journey through the **Gospel of Matthew** 7- The Ministry of the Baptist- Part 2

Church April 3, 2022

Matthew 3:1-12

1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,

2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'"

4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan;

6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

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?"

8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

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.

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.

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.

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."

*To the Glory of God the Father; God the Son;
and God the Holy Spirit. Amen*

Now in some respects, what we call, “*History*” is the Chronicle; or the Catalog; or the Collection of truly “*Great*” people. I love reading Biographies of truly “*Great*” people- people, who actually made a wonderful and helpful Contribution to the world- like great Leaders in Politics; or in Business; or in Medicine; or in Technology; or in War; or in the Church. These are people that invented; and planted; and built; and fashioned things. These people thought lofty thoughts; and they dreamed very big dreams. And then they went out and accomplished their vision. I love reading about how these people handled the stress of this Life; and how they faced defeats; and how they simply refused to allow the Trials of this Life to stop them.

But it is hard today to actually sort out the truly “*Great*” people from those who are merely famous for no other reason than they are famous. These are people, who are nothing more than a creation of the Media. And then there are those, who are famous for being *infamous* (Evil).

So, there are sports stars; and actors; and music personalities that are called, “*Great*” today. But, for the most part- these people are actually examples of Egotism; and Arrogance; and Self-righteousness- which, in my Book- doesn’t make them “*Great*” at all. In fact- if you look at the Issue of “*Greatness*” and the popular perspective on it- the term, “*Greatness*” is usually associated today with things like Fame; and Money; and Popularity; and the amount of Attention that the Media places on an individual; their press releases; and how much Society admires them. And that’s the kind of people who are termed, “*Great*” in our day.

Another form of “*Greatness*” looks strictly at someone’s significant Achievements- something beyond just entertaining people. And this measurement of “*Greatness*” says that the truly “*Great*” people are those who significantly impacted the world. They impacted people in a profound and lasting way. These people impacted people *forever*; or they impacted the world with some improvement on this Life.

But we need to realize my friends, that part and parcel to being made in the Image of God- is that we want to be “*Great*”. We want to do “*great*” things; and to impact this world; and make a difference. But part and parcel to what it means to be fallen- is that we seek to become “*Great*” so that we will receive the Glory. Because in the deepest part of our darkened hearts- we seek after the Admiration and Praise of the people in this world. And we seek the Fame and the Accolades that “*Great*” people get.

In other words, what it means to be “Lost” and “Fallen” and “Sinful”- is NOT that we are all mass murderers; or that we rape children; or seek War. Thankfully, very few people are like that. But what is infinitely more Common is that fallen people are those who don’t simply “do” Darkness- but those who “**LOVE** the Darkness rather than the Light” (**John 3:19**).

So, being “Lost” and “Fallen” and “Sinful” has to do with what we love; what we enjoy; and what brings us the most satisfaction. And lost people will love and enjoy and be satisfied with ANYTHING other than God. But that is the classic definition of Idolatry.

So, being Lost involves much MORE than us simply NOT worshipping God. No, in our fallen State- we want to be worshipped! Not only do we refrain from worshipping God ourselves- but we desire to rob God of the Worship that only He is entitled to receive; and we desire that all Worship and Admiration and Glory comes to us! And that means that ALL Lost and Fallen people are in a hostile and continuous War against God for the Glory that should ONLY go to Him!

And that means that we should look at Salvation as being the Act of God whereby we are radically and thoroughly transformed (by what God alone does for us) that we obtain the very zenith of our own Joy and Satisfaction- when God alone is worshipped; adored; admired; praised; and glorified. In other words, it is Salvation that allows us to love God. And so, those who have experienced the Miracle of the New Birth live their lives- in such a way- to please God. And what pleases God is that He ALONE is glorified. And we do that because we have judged God to be “Great”!

And so, who gets the Glory; who is praised; who is worshipped; who is admired; who is adored; who is loved; and who is Great- is the seminal Issue of our Day.

But whether we look at “Greatness” from the standpoint of Celebrity, or whether we look at “Greatness” from the standpoint of human Achievement- in either case- it falls way short of God's Definition of what true “Greatness” is.

God's label of “Greatness” is reserved for something that *transcends* all other perspectives on the human level of “Greatness”. So, in the Bible, the term of “Greatness” or “Great” has to do with Who God Himself labels as being “Great”. And here we meet such a person. God Almighty, through the angel Gabriel- said John the Baptist was “Great.” But not just any kind of “Greatness”. In **Luke 1:15**, God said John the Baptist...

... will be great in the sight of the Lord;

... John would be “Great” in God’s Sight! And that is the highest Honor anyone could ever receive! But that also means that John was NOT “Great” to the world. And he was NOT “Great” to the unbelievers; or to the pagans. And John was certainly NOT “Great” to the Jewish Leadership of Palestine at that time. But to God- John the Baptist was “Great”. In fact, Jesus said this about John in **Matthew 11:11a**

Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!...

... but then Jesus finished this verse by making yet another strange Comment:

... Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

So, Jesus said John the Baptist was “*greater*” than anyone else who had ever been born. And yet none of the normal trappings associated with “*Greatness*” in human Society are a part of John's life. He had no royal birth- to put it mildly. He was born to a very, very old and very, very plain and common couple. John had no Prominence by virtue of his personal Heritage. He was no intellectual as far as we know- because we don't know anything about his intellectual Capabilities. He's not at all assigned any Responsibility in terms of inventing anything; or in terms of ideologies; or ideas; or business. He came from a common, simple, undistinguished family living in a small village somewhere, according to **Luke 1:39**, in the Judean hillsides, some non-descript place.

And John had no formal Education. He lived in relative Isolation. Down in verse 80 of **Luke 1**- the good doctor wrote that while he grew and developed strong in spirit- John lived the majority of his life in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel. So, he grew up in almost complete Isolation. He grew up away from the social centers; away from the capitol city of Jerusalem; and away from any interaction with society in general.

And John was not political. John was not part of those, who had resigned themselves to living in slavery under the Romans- nor was he a part of those zealots, who sought to overthrow the Roman authorities through acts of terrorism. He was apolitical- or non- political.

And John certainly was not fashion conscious. According to **Matthew 3 &4**- John wore a very plain garment of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist. And that seems to be his daily, every day wardrobe.

And we also know from Scripture that unlike many people of his day as well as ours- John wasn't much into a healthy diet as a means to obtain godliness. John ate locusts- no doubt dried out and perhaps cooked and crunched and probably covered with wild honey. So, this is not somebody you would invite over for Christmas dinner.

And John had no involvement in any formal Institution. He wasn't associated with the Priesthood- even though he came from a priestly line. He wasn't associated with Royalty at all. He wasn't associated with any of the official Institutions of his day. He founded no Institution. He started no real Movement.

He was responsible for no Organization; he didn't invent anything; or begin a thriving Business. In fact, the people in Authority back then- both in and out of the Church at the time- all resented him. And they resented him fiercely. And he resented them too. And he described the single most religious group of people on earth at that time as a bunch of poisonous snakes. And from that we can see that John really wasn't big on diplomacy and winning friends. So, we know he didn't take a Dale Carnegie Class.

And so, we need to ask, "*Why?*" Why was John "*Great*" in God's Sight? And a "Man-centered Theology" would then ask, "*What did John 'do' - that made him great in God's Sight?*" Because all of Theology that centers of Man rather than God ALWAYS asks this same Question: "*What do I need to do to earn Favor with God?*"

So, those, who seek to "*make much of Man*", and who voluntarily choose to rob God of His Glory and steal that Glory for themselves- they would make a list of all the things that John did. And then they would come to the Conclusion that it was "who John was"; and "what John did"- that made him "*Great*". And then they would teach that if only we would "do what John did" and if we would dare to "become what John was"- then we would be "*Great*" too.

And that is the dominant way the Bible is taught and preached in our day. It is always about the exaltation of Man. And in their view- God is merely the "*Tool*" that we can use- to help us become "*Great*". And please allow me to muster as much diplomacy as I can to say- that kind of thinking; that kind of Preaching and Teaching is- Blasphemy!

Recently, I was speaking with a couple of men, who come from the "Full-Gospel"¹ side of the tracks. And many of those who are in that Movement like to quote **John 14:12** that says,

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.

... where the word, "**greater**" in this verse is interpreted as meaning: *more important*.

But that is not at all what Jesus meant. The "**greater**" in this verse simply has to do with our Works being *more widespread* or *greater in scope* than was Jesus' Works. You see, Jesus' entire earthly Ministry was carried out in 3-1/2 years in one single country to basically one group of people (Jews). But the Church of Jesus is told to go into every nation on earth and, over time, touch the

¹ Full- Gospel and Charismatic are simply different labels that are used to describe those involved with the Pentecostal Movement.

heart and mind of every human on earth. Christianity influences entire Nations; and it alters the very Customs and Governments of the people of those Nations. For example, since 1950- the Nation of South Korea has been so influenced by the Gospel that it is no longer listed as a “Buddhist Nation” and is now considered to be a “Christian Nation.”

This is an example of what the Bible means when it says that Jesus will,

"SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET"? (Hebrews 1:13 quoting Psalm 110:1)

... and what the Bible means when it says,

For the earth will be filled With the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, As the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14)

The people of the Church of Jesus are busy- preaching the Gospel to as many people as we can every day - using every tool and invention that we have access to. Why? Yes, it is because Jesus told us to (**Matthew 28:18b-20**). But it is also because we cry out to God that the Great Commission will be successful; that the Gospel will triumph; and so that when Jesus comes back- He will be able to...

... present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:27)

... and all of this will display the Glory of God- NOT the glory of Man. And it will show the entire world just how “*Great*” God is.

Okay, so, what was the “*Greatness*” of John the Baptist? Well, we could point to the fact that John cried out against Sin. For example, he seems to have only one Message:

Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!

So, John called the people to do two things:

1. Turn away from Sin
2. Prepare for the Kingdom by preparing to meet the King

... but many hundreds of millions of people, who have been saved over the last 2,000 years, have done that. Because calling sinners to Repentance is part of the overall Main Message of the Christian Church. Why? Because there is NO Salvation without genuine Repentance.

Now to “Repent” has to do with a visible, tangible and measurable change in Behavior that is based on a profound change of mind. And that change of mind is the result of hearing Divine Truth proclaimed accurately.

You see, as Humans- we hear words that are spoken- with our natural ears. And what we hear goes into our minds. And as we begin to savor and then digest what is spoken in our minds- our minds will then inform our hearts. And it has to be that way- because we simply can’t trust our own hearts. Ever since the Fall- the human heart is completely untrustworthy. Here is what God the Holy Spirit infallibly spoke through the Prophet in **Jeremiah 17:9**:

The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?

So, because we are fallen creatures- it is possible for us to genuinely love something that God hates. And it is very possible that we can genuinely be happy and content with things that the Bible says are Sins. We can be actively engaged in Sin and not even be convicted about it.

So, others will teach that we need to by-pass our hearts and follow our Consciences. But the Reality is that our Consciences are only as godly and as accurate as what we have been feeding on. So, we need something else; something external to ourselves; something unmovable and accurate; something that is always true; and always correct; and always godly; and always pleasing to God.

Many would suggest that we simply “follow the internal “Leading” of the Holy Spirit- that dwells inside of genuine believers. But once again- discerning accurately the Leading of the Spirit takes time and experience- and there are so many today, who would tell you that they are being led by God’s Spirit- and yet they are doing things and saying things that can’t be found anywhere in the Bible.

A little over 500 years ago- these Issues (and a whole lot more) were being analyzed and discussed by many people. And the Reformers elevated their “Protest” against the unbiblical and Man-made doctrines of Rome- until they simply could not ignore them anymore.

And the entire Protestant Reformation could be boiled down into two main Issues:

1. Who (or what) has the Power and Authority to “bind the Conscience”; and determine “Right” from “Wrong” and identify what is and what is not a Sin?

2. How are lost people Justified (forgiven and made Righteous)?

And those deceived by the “Roman religious system” answered the first Question by saying, “*The Pope- in his capacity as the ‘vicar of Christ’ has that Authority*”. But the Reformers said, “*No, only the Word of God (rightly interpreted) has the Authority to “bind the Conscience” and determine what is and what is not a Sin*”. And the Reformers summarized this first Issue with a Latin phrase, “*Sola Scriptura*”. ALL Doctrine; ALL Teaching; ALL Correction: and ALL Reproof- MUST come “from the Scriptures; and from the Scriptures- ALONE!

Those deceived by Rome answered the second Question by saying, “*Lost people are forgiven and made Righteous by Grace through Faith- AND through the lifelong participation in the Sacraments.*” But the Reformers said, “*Lost people are forgiven and made Righteous through the imputation of Christ’s spotless Righteousness- by Faith- ALONE- INSTANTLY- without the ongoing participation of the Sacraments!*” And they summarized this biblical Truth with another Latin phrase, “*Sola Fide*” or “*By Faith ALONE*”.

Now, of course there were many other Issues- but these two Issues represented the “*Formal Cause*” and the “*Material Cause*” of the Reformation.

And once that Truth began to be proclaimed and understood- people began to realize that Conviction was brought about in the mind through a thorough hearing of the Bible- as it is preached and taught and did NOT come through the words of the Priests; the Bishops; the Cardinals; and the Pope.

So, now people were being brought under Conviction as God the Holy Spirit empowered the Word of God as it was proclaimed in their midst. And as they were convicted- God granted them the “Gift of Repentance”- which gave them both the Power (Ability) and Desire (Will) to turn away from Sin and turn toward the Lord.

But even though this all came to a head 500 years ago- the Concept of people being convicted by God the Holy Spirit- as the Word of God is heralded to them- and then God granting those who were convicted- both the Power and the Desire to turn from their Sins and turn toward the Lord- was NOT new. John the Baptist established this Precedent as he preached Repentance. Please turn with me to **Luke 3:7-18**- and let’s see HOW John the Baptist preached Repentance:

7 So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

8 "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to 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 "Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?"
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."
12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"
13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."
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."
15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ,
16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."
18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

Now if you think that getting wet washes your Sins away- then you don't understand what Baptism is. Baptism is the first outward and visible Sign that you have *already* experienced the Miracle of the New Birth; you have *already* been forgiven and have *already* been made Righteous by Faith alone- by a sovereign Act of God; and you have *already* been adopted into the Family of God.

And so, with the new Nature that is created in Righteousness and the Holiness that is of the Truth; and with the eyes that God has sovereignly given new sight to; and with the ears that God has sovereignly enabled to hear the Word of God- and believe it- you then are convicted of Sins and you have been granted both the Power and the Desire to turn from those wicked Sins and turn to Jesus- with nothing held back (Repent).

So, did John then baptize those people, who had received the new Divine Nature in the New Birth? Did he then baptize people, who had their eyes opened? Did John baptize those people, who had their ears sovereignly unstopped? Did John baptize the people, who had already bene forgive and had received the very Righteousness of Jesus Christ by Faith alone? Did John then baptize those, who had already been adopted into the Family of God?

NO, HE DID NOT! There was one more thing that the Holy Bible

teaches that John REQUIRED of those who wanted to be baptized. They had to bear the “*Fruit of Repentance!*” What in the world is that? It is the “*Unmistakable Fruit*”; the “*Inarguable Proof*”; and the “*Indisputable Evidence*” that the person has indeed been born again. That they have indeed been justified; and that they have indeed been adopted into the Family of God. “*Well, Brother Blair- what does that Fruit of Repentance look like?*” Look again at **Luke 3:8-14** again:

8 "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to 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 "Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

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

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."

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

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

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."

So, first, John tells these people that they MUST bring forth “Fruit”. Well, what kind of Fruit? John said it was “**Fruit in keeping with Repentance**”; or “*Fruit that is in accord with Repentance*”; or “*Fruit that proves that you have indeed repented*”. In other words, if you are to be baptized- you MUST already be born again; justified; and adopted. But how are we going to know that these three Works of God the Holy Spirit has, in fact, been manifested in individuals? We can’t see the human heart. So, what do we look for? Evidence; Proof; or Fruit- what John called, the “**Fruit in keeping with Repentance**”.

And the first thing John tells these people is that they are NOT to lean on their ethnic Pedigree. They are to completely ignore their Nationality. And they are to pay no attention to the fact that many of them can literally trace their own family lineage back to “father Abraham.”

And this is yet another Reason why I am teaching you that, in the New Covenant- things like being Male or Female; or being Old or Young; or being Educated or Uneducated; or being Rich or Poor; or being a natural Jew or a Gentile; or what political Connections your family might have; or how much

money you may have; or what your ethnic heritage is- is entirely and completely IRRELEVANT! The ONLY thing that matters- is: "*Do you believe?*" And IF you believe; IF you have trusted in Jesus and in His finished Work; and IF your Confession about these Issues rings true- all of that will compel you to understand that you are NOTHING but a wicked rebel that deserves NOTHING but eternal Damnation. And that Truth will compel you to completely ignore how hard you have tried to earn God's Favor; and how many religious things you have done; and how long you have prayed and how many times you have fasted and how often you have taken Communion.

And the Union with Christ that you now have- by reason of the fact that you have already been born again; and have already been justified by Faith alone; and have already been adopted- those marvelous things will Empower you to humble yourself; and you will be willing to do *whatever* the Lord may require of you. And you will gladly and eagerly and energetically bear this Fruit of Repentance.

And you are happy that the ax has been laid to the Root or the Origin of all your Sin. You rejoice that God is dead earnest to change you- forever. You are thrilled that Jesus will burn every bridge that leads back to your former Life; and you are delighted that- even though you don't even deserve the bullet it would take to kill you- you run toward the Lord and fall on your face and you cry out to Him- "*Lord, Your Will- NOT mine!*" and you speak to your King, "*O, precious Savior- what would You have me to do? Here am I- use me for Your Glory!*"

And in the case of those who have been blessed by God to have more than what they need- John says, "**The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.**" And in the case of those, who used to be tax collectors, John says, "**Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.**" And in the case of those, who were soldiers before they were saved, John says, "**Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.**"

Now, the Idea here is that BEFORE we are baptized- we need to bear this godly Fruit that cries out to everyone that can see- "*I have truly turned away (Repented) from my former life of Sin and Selfishness and I am now following Jesus!*" In other words, Church is NOT a hobby. We don't merely "go to Church". We become *part* of the Church- for the rest of our lives. We are now identified with Jesus- and with every other genuine believer- in every area of our lives- for the rest of our lives.

Now the hypocrites will pass out about right now. And they will scream, "*Legalism!*" They will say, "*But I prayed the Prayer; and I walked an Aisle; and I shook the Preacher's hand; and I raised my hand; and I signed the card! And that's enough! I have added Jesus to my already planned out life and that's enough!*" But John said to them back then and we should say to them today, "*Who*

told you to flee from the Wrath that is coming! Unless you bring forth Fruit that proves that you have turned away from Sin and have turned toward the Lord- I'm not going to baptize you!

In other words, “*No Repentance- No Baptism!*” If there has been no happy turning *away* from Sin along with a glad turning *to* Jesus- then there is no reason to be baptized!” And remember, Lost people CANNOT love God. But ALL truly regenerate folks DO love God. And if our Relationship with Jesus is based in Love and NOT merely Duty or Obligation- then *whatever* Sacrifice God may demand from us- is NOT a Drudgery- but a Delight- because it is based on a genuine and deep and profound Love for God!

Now the Second thing that John demanded and expected from ALL of those he baptized is that now that they have been born again; and justified; and adopted into the Family of God (Union with Christ)- they MUST now live their lives, in such a way, that contributes to *preparing* them to live in the Kingdom of Heaven; and to stand before Jesus Christ as He judges the world.

Now as you read through what Jesus said to the 7 Churches of Asia over in the first few Chapters of **the Book of the Revelation**- you come away with this:

Our Minds and our Hearts; our Lives and our Opinions and our Beliefs; and what brings us Joy and what brings us Sadness; what we Fear and what makes us Happy; what we Resist and what we Embrace; how we look at Money and Politics; and Marriage and Power and Sex and what we laugh at and what we cry about- ALL of these things (and a whole lot more) have to change DOWN HERE! All of these things- including what we value and what we cast of; what brings us the greatest degree of Delight and what brings us the depths of Despair; what we see as nothing and what we are willing to die over- ALL of this- EVERY AREA OF OUR LIVES- either brings God Glory- or it robs God of His Glory. Every element of our earthly existence either honors God or it fights against Him. It either prepares us to live in God's Kingdom and to stand faultless before the Judge of the whole World- Whose eyes burn like Fire- or it has no redeeming value and is a hindrance to our Walk with God.

But the Truth is that we don't see all of this at once. We do not understand this when we are first placed into the Church of Jesus. In other words, we have to *grow* into these things. Now we are fully justified- but we are still learning what it means for us to live in that Justification.

So, John the Baptist told those he baptized- that there is both a glorious Kingdom and unspeakable Wrath that is coming to this earth. And those who are truly regenerate- will enter into a process a progressive Process into Holiness. And

this Process is agonizingly slow. And it involves every single area of our lives. And by necessity, this Process to become Holy involves strange things like:

- Trials
- Tests
- Agonies
- Persecution
- Hardships
- Tumults
- Afflictions

... and things like this.

But this life-long Process that enables us to share in God's Own personal Holiness also includes things like:

- Victories
- Blessings
- Happy, Sweet, and Lovely things

... and it includes a Joy that is growing *exponentially* and that begins to consume our very lives.

This is the Process called, "*Sanctification*". And it begins the very moment we have been adopted into the Family of God and it extends until the very moment that we draw our last breath. And Sanctification is the life-long Process of us becoming more like Jesus in our Humility; and our Joy; and our Obedience and it is what prepares us for God's Kingdom.

And the Bible says that Sanctification enables us to share in the very SAME Holiness that Almighty God has! Please turn with me to **Hebrews 12** and I want your eyes to fall on verses 9-14. Now there is a lot here- but look what the writer says in verse 9:

9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?

10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble,

13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

... and all of this is specific to the New Covenant.

And the New Covenant *begins* right here- with John the Baptist and water Baptism. And that served to make John's Ministry unique. So, there was a lot that John was doing- in addition to baptizing repentant people in water.

But did all of this make John to be "*Great?*" Partly, yes. But there is still more- *much* more. For example, John was chosen to be the "*Forerunner*" of Jesus. And no other human on earth was chosen for this- except John. So, in that sense- John's Ministry was unique.

So, John the Baptist went *before* Jesus to prepare people *for* Jesus. So, when John preached, "*Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand!*"- and then baptized them- that was part of preparing people for Jesus.

And that means that without repenting- people are NOT prepared to meet Jesus. And that also means that without being baptized- people are also NOT ready to meet Jesus. And John preached this to everybody. So, everybody needs to repent. Why? Because everybody is a sinner. And that also means that all those who repent- should also be baptized.

So, is that what made John "*Great?*" Well, yes, but hundreds of millions of genuine believers over the 2,000 year history of the Church have followed Jesus into this Sanctification and into a preparation to meet the Lord and enter His Kingdom- but they were NOT called, "*Great?*". So, there is still MORE.

Now John was also the *fulfillment* of the Prophecy given by Malachi that said,

Malachi 3:1-3

1 "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.

3 "He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.

... so, once again, John was sent to prepare people for Jesus.

And in doing that- John the Baptist said there is a Kingdom that is different from every other Kingdom on this planet. And there is a King, Who is over this Kingdom Who is MORE Powerful; and MORE Kind; and MORE Merciful and MORE glorious than any other King! And John said that the way we enter this Kingdom is through Repentance and Belief!

And in this Kingdom- there is NO Crime; and NO Injustice; and NO Poverty; and NO disease. In this Kingdom we will NEVER die! And there is no need for the Police or the Army or the FBI in this Kingdom. In fact, in this Kingdom, we will have no need for the light of the Sun or the Light of the Moon. But in this Kingdom- Jesus is the Light!

But John and the Biblical writers said that the ONLY people, who can live in this Kingdom- are those who have humbled themselves and who have rejected the Logic and the Ways of this fallen world and have been adopted by the Father and now live their lives to the Glory of God. And so, John is preaching about this Kingdom and how to enter into it. And he is baptizing people to signify that they have turned from the Sin of this life and have embraced God as Sovereign over every aspect of their lives.

Now it is hard to find anything more important than that. And it appears that this kind of Preaching is so important and so necessary- that what John is doing should go on forever. But one day, as John was preaching and baptizing- a group of people walked up to where John was. And this is the Account of that as recorded by Matthew:

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?

8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

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.

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.

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.

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."

So, one day, the single most fastidious religious people on earth at that time walked up to John. These people studied the Old Testament 12 hours every day. From the time they were 12 years old until they died- these men dedicated their entire lives to calling people back to obedience to the Law of Moses and to prepare themselves for the Messiah. And yet, they are the only group of people Jesus never said anything Good about.

Now remember, the Pharisees were the religious Conservatives of their day. The Sadducees were the religious Liberals; the Essenes were the religious mystics of their day; while the Sicarii were the Terrorists of their day.

So, when these religious experts walked up to John- John began to speak to them. And he said,

... You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 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.

Now we need to understand that John is NOT merely insulting these men. No, God the Holy Spirit, Who walked inside of John, was anointing him to give these men a correct diagnosis of their spiritual Condition before God. So, this is NOT merely John's invective against the Pharisees because he just happened to not like them. No, this Diagnosis was true. And John is giving these men a series of very important Biblical Truths that we need to know today:

- False Teachers are like poisonous snakes (Vipers)
- There is a powerful and frightening Wrath of God that is coming that people MUST flee from
- Repentance ALWAYS brings forth godly Fruit
- Being a "*Child of Abraham*" or a "*Seed of Abraham*" has NOTHING to do with Birthright; Nationality; or Ethnicity

... so, let's look at each one of these.

False Teachers are like poisonous Snakes (Vipers)

We always need to remember that Christianity does NOT teach that people are saved because of what they "*do*". Christianity teaches that lost people are brought into the Kingdom of God by what they "*believe*"; and because of what they "*trust in*"; and what they "*confess*" and NOT by what they "*do*". All the

“*doing*” in Christianity is AFTER a person has experienced the Miracle of the New Birth; and has been justified (by Faith alone); and then adopted into the Family of God.

But every false Religion on earth teaches a derivative of the very SAME wrong Concept: that Lost people have to “do” something to earn God’s Favor- so He will save them. But Christianity alone teaches that Jesus did for us- what we *cannot* do for ourselves- in that He lived a sinless Life; died a vicarious (substitutionary) Death; and rose again on the third day. And so, faith in Jesus and in what Jesus alone has done- is what will bring a lost person into the Kingdom of God. And that is what we mean when we say that we are saved BY Grace and THROUGH Faith- absent any humanly initiated Works.

But because we are saved by what we believe and NOT by what we do- what we believe- matters. And so, it isn’t that we believe in ANYTHING. But that we trust in and accept and believe and have faith in the RIGHT thing- the biblical thing.

And this is why it matters what we teach; and why it matters what we believe. Because if we put our Trust and Hope and Faith in something God did not *do*; or in something God did not *say*- we will remain lost.

False Teachers put forth false Teaching. And false Teaching deceives people. False Teaching is like poison and the false Teachers are like poisonous snakes. John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees- a “**brood of vipers**” because God didn’t say what these men believed; or what they taught.

Now there is something interesting about all false Teachers- they are never content with merely being deceived themselves. No, they always go to deceive others as well. So, the poison that had taken them away from the true Gospel was now something they were proud of and wanted to teach to a many people as possible.

But there is another thing about False Doctrine and false Teachers that is frightening. These men thought they were Right. They were teaching what they honestly believed- and what they were practicing themselves. And that is the insidious aspect of false teaching. It not only deceives the those who listen- but it deceives the Teachers too.

And we also need to realize that these men were deceived with their Bibles open. You see, some people are deceived because they never read their Bibles. But these men read their Bibles- and they were still deceived!

And this is why Jesus attacked these men the way He did. You see, satan always attacks people at their weakest link. But God always confronts people at the point of their greatest strengths- at the very spot they are the most proud of. So, while satan whispers taunts and tries to bring discouragement to

people because of their weaknesses- Jesus confronted the Pharisees at the three points they were the most proud of:

1. The Temple
2. The Sabbath
3. The Word of God

These men hung their hats on these three Aspects of what was supposedly obedience to the Old Testament. Only it wasn't. These men had little or no connection to the 39 Books of the Old Testament.² What they taught and believed- they invented in their own minds. God didn't say it.

So, their Pride and Joy was the Temple in Jerusalem. And so, neither Jesus nor those who followed Him sacrificed an animal in the Temple the entire time He was on the earth. And then Jesus infuriated the Jews by telling them that the Temple- with all of its Glory- would all be torn down.

Their next area of Pride was their fastidious observance of the Sabbath. Now all God had told His people to do on the Sabbath was to rest. Such a lovely word, "*Rest*". Just rest. Don't work- lay aside the burdens and trials of this life for one day and just rest.

Well, these guys took that simple and beautiful Concept of resting and they built an entire religion around it. And they had developed and written book after book- volume after volume of what people could and could not do- from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. What you could and could not do with your left hand. What you could and could not do with your right hand. How far you could walk on the Sabbath and how to get around that restriction. And all of this became so convoluted that nobody knew what to do.

And so, Jesus went around- completely ignoring everything the Pharisees taught about the Sabbath. And it drove them crazy. And then Jesus said this in **Matthew 11:28-30**:

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.

30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Now we read this today and we say, "*Wasn't Jesus being sweet here? He is so precious- telling us to rest in Him!*" And most of the time, we don't realize the Context of why He said this. Jesus was actually rebuking the Pharisees about their false Teaching about the Sabbath. And so, what He was saying was, "*I am the*

² ... and modern Judaism doesn't either.

Sabbath! Rest in Me!” So, the Truth about the Sabbath is that the Sabbath is NO longer a particular day of the week- it is a Person- Jesus Christ!

Now the Pharisees also took great Pride in the fact that they had the Scriptures and they read and studied the Scriptures and that they alone knew what the Scriptures meant. And this is the identical path that the Priests in the Roman religious system have taken. And so, Jesus insulted them to their face by saying this all the time, “*Have you not read... have you not seen in the Scriptures?*” So, the Truth was they did NOT know the Scriptures. Because if they did- they would have worshipped Him! No wonder these men hated Jesus.

We have to understand, dear friends, that false Teaching cannot forgive a single Sin or save a single Soul. It is always wrong. It can’t be redeemed. All that we can do with false teaching- is to reject it. And after we have confronted them to their face and seen that they refuse to repent- ALL we can do with false Teachers is to reject them.

Because when false Teaching is present- Lost people stay Lost; and save people veer off into foolish and harmful things.

So, this had nothing to do with personalities. John didn’t insult these men simply to be rude or a smart aleck. No, these religious Conservatives were teaching false Doctrine. And nobody on earth has the Right to do that. And that is what made John angry. And so, he confronted them to their face. And we should be alert and able and knowledgeable about the Bible to the degree that we can follow John’s example and do the same. And Lord willing, I’ll finish what made John the Baptist “*Great*” next week.

Amen. Let’s pray

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.