

**The Messiah Has Come
(A Study in Matthew - Week 5)
Matthew 3:7-12
“A Brood of Vipers”**

Introduction

Then Jesus told them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” **Matthew 16:6**

John the Baptist’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were fairly old when he was born (**Luke 1:7**), so it is doubtful that they lived long enough to see the fiery preacher that their son grew up to become. John was a descendant from the priestly line of Levi, and his father was serving as a priest in the temple when John was born. So, obviously, there were still some devout priests who served with distinction and dedication to The LORD when both Christ, and John were born. However, many had been corrupted.

During the time of Christ, the “priestly class”, as it were, consisted of two major groups, namely the *Pharisees* (*Perushim* in Hebrew, meaning “separated ones”) and The *Sadducees* (in Hebrew *Seduquim*, which literally means “Zadokites”, for they considered themselves to be descended from Zadok, the High Priest of Israel during the reigns of King David and Solomon). Together these two groups made up the *Sanhedrin* a 71 member body, which served as Israel’s “*Supreme Court*”, in all matters religious. As the Jewish nation was under Roman occupation at the time, only those who were considered loyal to Rome would be granted membership within the court. Any perceived disloyalty would have resulted in being removed from the ruling body, as evidenced by the fears on the court when Jesus began to gain popularity among the people.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened with the Sanhedrin and were saying, “What are we going to do since this man is doing many signs? If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” **John 11:47-48**

So, it goes with out saying, that in order for a priest to remain in power in first century Palestine, one had to be willing to compromise; to play politics, if you will, so that they could maintain the lavish and prestigious lifestyle to which they had become accustomed. As it has famously been said, “*Power corrupts, and absolute power, corrupts absolutely.*”

The Jewish people of John’s day had very little respect for the Sadducees, for they were all members of the aristocratic class, not to mention their world view was extremely liberal. They didn’t believe in life after death or even angels. Their sole concern was in the here and now, as it were, and they were consumed with getting all that they could get from this life. They prided themselves in their pragmatism and considered any who placed value on anything other than the present world to be ignorant, and therefore, beneath their station.

The Pharisees were an ultra-conservative group who were considered slightly more legitimate in the eyes of the people. They were descended from the Maccabean separatists, who had revolted against Antiochus Epiphanes for his attempted *Hellenization* (conversion to Greek methods and customs) of the Jewish people. Their name actually means “*separated ones*” as a definitive statement that Israel was, and shall always be, God’s chosen people, and as such, should keep themselves pure and holy by staying away from all Gentile entanglements.

The Pharisees, in order to maintain what they considered to be their spiritual purity, had added many unbearable oral traditions to The Law of Moses. They believed that by observing all these added commands they made themselves even more acceptable to God. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in a resurrection, as well as a spiritual realm, but they believed erroneously that they would inherit these things based upon their own good works and Jewish heritage.

In the eyes of John the Baptist, although they had very different outlooks and core beliefs, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were exactly the same. They were both lost and undone without God. Albeit religious, they were deceived into believing that the kingdom of God was a thing to be earned and even granted to them as a guarantee simply by their perceived elite heritage. What was needed from both the Sadducees and the Pharisees was a genuine repentance and a humbled spirit before The LORD. And without this, they were condemned to inherit nothing other than God's divine judgment.

So, as we look at a sample of John's preaching today in the book of *Matthew*, let us examine our own hearts and see if there be any vestige of these which he called, "a brood of vipers" within us. For in order to be saved, one must humble themselves and realize that they are truly in need of saving! This is John the Baptist's message for us all. And it speaks of *The Self-Righteous and Deceived, The Spirit-Filled and Delivered, and The Separated for Destruction*.

Self-Righteous and Deceived (vs. 7-10)

When he (John) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them. "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown in to the fire. Matthew 3:7-10

As John's preaching and popularity began to spread throughout the region, the Pharisees and Sadducees decided to come and see what was happening. We can not completely ascertain their motives for wanting to be baptized by the prophet. We can only speculate. However, it is not hard to imagine that they simply wanted to keep up their appearances of great spirituality in the eyes of the people. After all, what would the masses think of them had they spurned the teaching of one such as John, who obviously was a true prophet of God?

It is evident from The Scriptures that the religious leaders of Jerusalem were often obsessed with the whims of the people. They certainly did not wish to lose their prominent positions of spiritual authority. So quite often they were willing to "go along in order to get along", as it were. This reality is proved out by how many times they wanted to do away with Christ, but they were afraid of the people's reaction (**Matthew 21:46**).

Whatever the reasoning behind the religious leader's desire to be baptized, John saw right through their deception, and he called them out for it. Hearing themselves addressed as a "brood of vipers" would have been received as a stinging blow to these self-righteous men. For to be accused of such was the equivalent of calling them out as children of the devil, the great serpent who brought a curse upon all the earth. It would have indeed been an awkward exchange to say the very least! But John had no fear of any man, and he spoke truth, no matter whom it offended. Jesus, also bestowed upon the religious zealots of Jerusalem this very same title, when they accused Him of being possessed by the devil.

Brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. A good person produces good things from his storeroom of good, and an evil person produces evil things from his storeroom of evil. I tell you that on the day of judgement people will have to account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:34-37

John let these self-righteous charlatans know that he would be more than happy to baptize them, were they to demonstrate a genuine spirit of brokenness and repentance. But because they were hypocrites and insincere, he offered them a warning instead. For they foolishly believed they were on

solid footing with God simply because of their religious pedigree and heritage. But just because they were descended from Abraham didn't guarantee them access into God's everlasting kingdom. In fact, baptism in those days was reserved only for pagan Gentiles who longed to convert to Judaism! No self-respecting Jew would ever deem it was necessary for them to repent and be baptized! But only those who turn from their sin and seek the grace and mercy of God are able to enter the kingdom of God. After all, God could raise up stones as children of Abraham! And Israel's rejection of their Messiah would result in devastating judgment from on high. John warned them that the ax was at the ready to cut down their "family tree", as it were, in order to graft in new branches that would come to faith! (cf: **Romans 11**).

Upon Israel's rejection of their rightful Messiah, judgment did indeed fall upon the nation, and God did in fact raise up others (namely the Gentiles) to believe in Him and receive the grace freely offered to those who repent. While God does still have a plan for the nation of Israel in the last days, many who were children Abraham have indeed perished for their unbelief. To be saved from God's wrath requires a true spirit of repentance; a broken spirit that acknowledges its need for a savior and comes with the realization that the very best we have offer is filthy rags in the sight of a holy God (**Isaiah 64:6**).

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Matthew 5:3

To believe that we can be "good enough" to be pleasing to God is to be self-righteous and deceived.

Spirit-Filled and Delivered (vs. 11)

I baptize you with water for repentance, but The One Who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove His sandals. He Himself will baptize you with The Holy Spirit and fire. Matthew 3:11

John was sent to be a herald of the coming Messiah. The Christ would come, after John preached to prepare His way. It was John's mission to warn the people that in order to receive the salvation that God was sending in the form of His Only Begotten Son, a true spirit of repentance would be necessary. After all, if one doesn't think they need saving, then how will they ever turn to the Savior? John made it clear that he was nothing by comparison to the One Who was to come.

Removing the sandals of another in those days was considered the menial task of a slave. It was a slave who would stoop down to remove the sandals of his masters guests in order to wash the dirt off their feet before entering the house. Jesus demonstrated this humble attitude as He washed the feet of His disciples before partaking of the Passover meal (**John 13:1-20**). John declared that The Christ was so infinitely holy, that he was unworthy even to touch His sandals. Again, it is by fully humbling ourselves that proves we see Christ as He truly is!

John's mission to call others to repentance though water baptism was far less than the baptism Christ would bring; for those who would believe upon Him would receive the baptism of The Holy Spirit of God. Baptism by water is a symbolic act. In and of itself, it has no power to save. It is merely an outward expression of a transformation that has taken place within the believer.

John's baptism was symbolic of the washing away of sin in repentance. For you see, genuine repentance not only requires us to be sorry for our sins, but to purge ourselves from them as well. Just as John's baptism symbolized the washing of dirt away from the body, true repentance causes us to rid ourselves of the sin (dirt) that has so corrupted our minds. Sin is a corrosive thing that destroys both body and soul, and therefore, in order to be free of its corruptible influence, one must remove it (wash it away) forever. It is not repentance merely to be sorry and keep doing the same thing over and again!

The baptism that Christ would bring was far different. He would baptize us (the word *baptizo* in the Greek literally means *to immerse*) into the Holy Spirit, thereby making us one with God's Spirit. We are as Believers "*immersed*" in God as He is immersed within us. The act is inseparable, for once The Spirit is in us, and us in Him, our very nature is transformed... forever. You cannot be *in* Christ, and then subsequently come *out* of Christ. In other words, once salvation is granted, it cannot be undone, for our very spirits have been bound with His.

Believer's baptism is a symbol of this transformation. Being immersed in water baptism cannot save us, but it shows the transformation that has taken place inside us. It is a picture of a death, burial and resurrection. The old man is dead and buried, and the new man, the one that has been immersed with Christ and transformed, is raised to walk in newness of life! In other words the born-again believer is now dead to sin. This is what Believer's baptism symbolizes. This is what John spoke of when He preached to the people that Christ's baptism was superior to his in every way. John did not have the power to immerse us in the Spirit of God, but Jesus can and does every single time a repentant sinner places their faith in Him!

Some people have misunderstood John's message that Christ would also baptize with fire. They mistakenly believe the fire he spoke of has something to do with *The Spirit*. **It does not.** He was warning those who would listen that either we believe in Christ and are baptized (immersed) into Him, or we will be judged according to our own works and be baptized by fire (judgment). No one can survive God's baptism of fire for their works, along with themselves, will be destroyed in judgment. So either we accept Christ's offer of salvation and be baptized by The Spirit, or we will meet our doom by the baptism of fire. The choice is yours; to be spirit-filled and delivered or be baptized in fiery judgment and perish.

Separated for Destruction (vs. 12)

His winnowing shovel 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 fire that never goes out.

Matthew 3:12

A horrible fate awaits those who reject the offer of grace found in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They will stand before the Great White Throne of Judgment to be judged according to **their** works. And on that day, no one will be declared righteous in the eyes the righteous judge, **for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.** The Greek word for sin in *The New Testament* is *hamartia*, and it is actually a term used by archers to describe a miss of the target, when shooting with the bow. To sin, therefore, is to miss the target of perfection set by God Himself. On the day of judgment, mankind will not be graded on the curve, or by comparison to other men, or even on a balancing scale to weigh out good deeds versus bad. All will stand in judgment compared only to a flawlessly, perfect God. And all will "miss the mark" on that day.

When we read of John's warning to the Pharisees so long ago, we cannot help but wonder how they could be so blind as to not see the truth. After all, they were so very religious and devoted to their system of belief, and yet, they were hopelessly lost. What a tragedy to be standing in the presence of such a preacher as John the Baptist, and later on, even Christ Himself, and not recognize the danger they were in!

And yet, many today, within the Church itself, are in the very same dangerous predicament. They believe that they are saved because they once prayed a prayer, or even were baptized in the church. In other words they believe they are saved because of something *they* have done! The Pharisees came to be baptized, and yet, they were still lost. So you see, its not about some religious ordinance or ritual, but rather, it all comes down to whether or not a person has had a genuine faith encounter with The Risen Christ. And truth be told, there are many regular attendees of many churches scattered throughout the world who have not had such an encounter. For to be *in* Christ is to be transformed by Him.

I am reminded here of The Apostle Paul. Did you know that every time Paul came to a certain city to plant a church, several so-called "people of faith" came in behind him and tried to tear down everything that he had begun to build? It's true! It was as if they were on a schedule to destroy everything he had worked so hard to accomplish. And they very often did so in the name of religious fervor! Do you really think that those people knew God? Of course they did not, or they would not have stood in opposition to His will. Sadly, the very same thing goes on in churches every day. There are hoards of people that do the very best that they can to hinder the work of those whom God has called.

One day, Christ Himself will go about the business of cleaning out His Church. John likened this to the threshing of wheat. In those days, when it was harvest time, sheaves of wheat were taken into a depression in the ground and trampled in order to break down the stalks, separating the worthless hulls from the grain. Then the entire crop was picked up a little at a time in a sifting basket. The wheat and chaff were thrown up together into the wind and the chaff which was lighter would be blown away in the wind, leaving the kernels of wheat to fall back onto the threshing floor.

The church is much like the very same wheat crop. There are some who have gathered within it that are **not** genuine believers. Rather than work together for the common good, they are a brood of vipers sent to disrupt and bring about dissension. And for a time, it seems as if they will flourish, but a great separation day is coming, when Christ will forever remove the wheat from the chaff, the harvested crop from among the weeds. And then, the righteous will receive their eternal reward, while the chaff will be consumed with everlasting fire. Once again, either be baptized by The Spirit or baptized in the fires of judgment. These are the only two options available to us.

The plain truth is; there are a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees scattered throughout the modern day church. And yes, I realize this is not a *literal* truth, but rather it is a *spiritual* one. For the spirit of deception that defrauds many into believing that deep down they are basically good, and that God would never call *them* to repentance is still very much alive and well in these modern times. We convince ourselves that because we live in the so-called "*Bible Belt*" that we are not wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (***Revelation 3:17***). So we continue to go about our daily lives in lukewarmness and self service. If ever there were a need for repentance and revival it is now. So as we read the message of John, we should wisely re-examine our own priorities, asking ourselves if we are as close to Christ as we once were, or as we should be. And if the answer is no, then repentance is most certainly essential.

I believe that we are indeed living in the last days. And as His obedient servants, we ought to be doing everything that we can to prepare this world for our Master's return. If we long to see revival in our land, then it must begin in the house of God.

TRUTH!!!