



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 3:1–12

Gospel of Matthew

“The Herald of the King”

TRANSCRIPT

Matthew chapter 3 verse 1 through verse 12 is our Scripture reading for this morning. We have just completed the infancy narrative of our Lord, which is one of the most significant parts of the Gospel of Matthew, and now we launch into the description of the beginning of the ministry of our Lord which is announced by John the Baptist:

“In those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, Saying, ‘Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet, saying, THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, PREPARE YE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’ And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then came out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about the Jordan; and they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, ‘O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits befitting worthy of repentance: and think not to say

within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: and therefore every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he who cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing-floor; and he will gather his wheat into the grainery, and he will he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

May God bless this reading of his Word.

The importance of John the Baptist in the ministry of the New Testament may be gleaned from one particular statement that the Lord Jesus made concerning him. In the 11th chapter of this same Gospel of Matthew, in reference to John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.” It’s evident from this statement that the importance of John the Baptist is forever settled in Holy Scripture.

And not only this, but in the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, the writer of that gospel relates the ministry of John the Baptist to the beginning of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. In other words, the ministry of John the Baptist is extremely important for the gospel itself. And then, as you well know, there are two passages in the Old Testament in which the ministry of this last of the Old Testament prophets is prophesied, and significant words are said concerning it.

John was a rugged, stern John Knox kind of character, who thundered out the way of the Lord to a stiff-necked generation. I do not think that any true preacher of the Word of God would have relished the task that John the Baptist was given. And yet John, although his message was not

yet geared for the times—he surely was not a relevant preacher—had a tremendous influence on his contemporaries. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, has said that the ministry of John the Baptist was attractive because all of Jerusalem and Judaea and the region round about the Jordan went out to him. His ministry was convictive because they were baptized by him and confessed their sins as they were baptized, and it was invective because he did not hesitate to say to that generation of Pharisees and Sadducees who came to his baptism, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned thee to flee from the wrath to come?”

I have a good friend who often preaches the Word of God, and he loves to say when he comes to that particular text in which John the Baptist calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a generation of vipers, I’m sure that he felt that when the love offering was taken up.” [Laughter]

Now the theology professor that I had when I was going through school used to make a great deal over the fact that a statement concerning John the Baptist, for example in the third verse of this passage, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” should be noted, for you will notice that John the Baptist was a voice and not an echo. And I have always, as I have read of the story of the John the Baptist in the gospels, reflected upon that comment because it does so beautifully express the fact that John was his own man.

He was an individual who did not hesitate to say precisely what God gave him to say, and he did not say what he said making it dependent upon the attitudes of those to whom he was sent by God. He was truly a voice. He was not an echo.

We have lots of preachers today whose ministries might be described as echoes. They do not say anything that is really significant which has not already been said. And often whatever they say is the saying of some individual who has not really thought of his ministry as a ministry which has come from a burden that God himself has given to him.

We have been saying that Matthew is the royal Gospel, that it presents the king and his kingdom. And we have considered in the opening chapters his impeccable birth and genealogy in which it is clearly set forth in which he is the one who has the right and title to the Davidic throne,

that his unearthly birth qualifies him as being truly the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of the book of Isaiah. We have stood by his cradle, and we have observed the Gentile that have come from the east in their worship of him, giving him homage and gifts. And we have seen in this the anticipation of the fact that through the ministry of the Lord Jesus the Messiah, ultimately, not only shall Israel come to worship of the Son, but the whole of the Gentile world as well.

It is sometimes said, and the implication is sometimes given, that the ministry of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is a ministry that is addressed to the few. Now that is true so far as this present time is concerned. In the Old Testament, it is largely a remnant who comes to faith in Christ, and in the New Testament it is largely a remnant that comes to faith in Jesus Christ. And throughout this present age, it is largely a remnant that comes to the Lord Jesus. But when the purposes of God are finally accomplished, and the kingdom of the Son of God comes to pass upon the earth, we are going to see a gigantic conversion that shall reach to the four corners of the earth. The ministry of salvation that is set forth in Holy Scripture is no miserly kind of salvation. And in the worship of the Gentiles we have seen an anticipation of the fact that the ministry of the Lord Jesus shall reach, ultimately, to the whole of this earth. And then finally, we have seen the divine providential care manifested in the deliverance of the family of our Lord from the clutches of wicked King Herod.

Now we turn to the voice of prophecy which had been silent for 400 years. It's hard for us to realize, as we read the Old Testament and turn to the New, that there is this lengthy period of time between the prophetic word of the Old Testament and the prophetic word of John the Baptist. But for 400 years, the voice of prophecy had been silent. But now it sounds again through this modern Elijah. And we must never forget, too, that what God is doing through John the Baptist is the most important thing that is happening at that particular time.

It's very striking that in the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke, when the ministry of John the Baptist is announced, it is announced in the midst of a series of names. These men were the important men of their day. Listen to them: “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (the Roman Emperor), Pontius Pilate (the Procurator of Judaea) being governor of Judaea,

and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee (this is not the same Herod the Great, but Herod the tetrarch of Galilee), and his brother Philip, tetrarch of the of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests (the religious leaders of the day).” So here we have Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Philip, Herod, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas—the great men of their day of that region—and yet, the important person is John the Baptist. “There came the word of the Lord to John the Baptist.”

It’s hard for us to realize, and very difficult for us to make our own the fact that what is happening today, what is truly significant, is not what is happening in Washington, now what is happening at 10 Downing Street or any of the other streets of the politicians of our world, but the thing that is truly significant is what is happening in the ministry of the Word of God. And I dare say—and I do not say this because I am doing the preaching, of course—but I dare say that the chances are that something that is happening here in the ministry of the Word is more important than many of the great things that we read about on the front pages of our newspapers. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, God’s voice of prophecy finally speaks again through a man.

Now we must, as we read the Gospel of Matthew, remember that we have in chapter 2 and chapter 3, and between these two chapters a twenty-eight year interval in the unfolding of the truth as set forth in Matthew. So, that there is a great deal of time between the ending of the second chapter and the beginning of the third. And when we read the prepositional phrase “in those days,” we should read it very generally. For a twenty-eight year interval occurs, and suddenly we are thrown right into the presence of this great man, John the Baptist.

Alexander McLaren has said, “Matthew leaps, as it were, into the arena full grown and full armed.” Evidently, Matthew didn’t think it necessary to write a biography about John the Baptist. He was so well-known through his ministry that he may introduce him with this great interval and not lose anything in the description of him.

His coming is described in those first two verses, “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea.” Now we must also remember, as we think about this great man of God, that the real source of his coming is not some particular idea that John came upon that he would like, for example, to be a preacher, or that he would like to be a prophet. He did not read the Old Testament word and say, though he must have read it very intensively, “I think that I, too, would like to be prophet; I think I’ll train, I think I’ll go to theological seminary because I would like to preach. I think I would like the opportunity to stand before a multitude of people and move these people—that must be a lot of fun, that must be a real challenge. I think I could find my life fulfilled by being that kind of man.”

No, the Word of God came to John the Baptist. It was a burden that came to him from God. Now the Apostle John puts it very pointedly and very accurately. He says there was a man sent from God whose name was John. So he was a man who was sent from God. In other words, the ministry of John the Baptist is not a ministry which has its origins in John. And it doesn’t have its origin in the ministry or the ideas or the thoughts of the people of John’s day. The ministry of John the Baptist has its origin in God. He is a man sent from God.

And there is one word that describes the ministry of John. It is the word, preaching, the word, proclaiming. Now that one word description is very vivid. It’s a word that literally means to act as a herald. That’s what he was. He was the kind of man who ancient kings had who ran before a chariot and shouted out as the chariot with the king upon it came into village after village, “The king! The king!” And so John’s ministry was a ministry of shouting, proclaiming, acting as a herald for the message that God had given him. Quite a bit different from the preaching of our day.

Now I think that John the Baptist’s preaching was the preaching that was a kind of burden which John obtained from the Lord, in which he felt such a burden that he must preach in order to get rid of that particular burden that had come to him. Richard Baxter used to like to say, “I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.” Incidentally, that’s the way I preach, too. Now whether I like it or not, that it is the fact. I am a dying man, and you are dying men and

women. The Word of God, if it makes anything plain, makes this plain: that every one of us is dying. You are dying. Perhaps you thought that you were not. No one has told you that you have cancer, but you are dying. You see, the whole teaching of the Word of God that every one of us, even these young people, are dying. Death is ever at work in our bones. And in the ministry of the Word of God, we are proclaiming the Word of God as dying men, two dying men.

Now John, then, was a man who was a preacher with a burden from the Lord. Incidentally, some of you may have read a few weeks ago that a Unitarian now holds the record of length of preaching. Now I think I've known some Baptist preachers who could challenge him any Sunday of ministry, but nevertheless, this Unitarian as I understand it—I did not hear the final length of his preaching session—but as I remember, he preached over sixty hours straight. And that troubled me a great deal, because I couldn't think of a Unitarian having enough to say for more than five minutes, frankly [laughter]. But he went sixty hours plus. And then I read some of the things he was preaching, and I was comforted greatly because his message at the particular time was a message on the morals of Socrates, which I thought was probably the general type of content of his message. John was a preacher.

Now you will notice it says in the 3rd verse, “For this is he that was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet, saying, THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, PREPARE YE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.” So that Matthew relates the ministry of John the Baptist to Israel's return to her land following the Babylonian captivity. Now he does this by means of the use of the Word of God typically. In the Old Testament, that passage may well have had direct reference to the return of Israel from their captivity, and that, too, would have been a work of God, as the context of Isaiah 40 indicates. But John and Matthew see far beyond that and realize that that return is only a type of the ultimate return which shall be accomplished at the second advent of the Lord Jesus. So this is the one who cries, “PREPARE YE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.”

There is an old eastern proverb which said there are three states of misery: sickness, fasting and travel. Before a traveler set out upon a journey, he was advised to pay all of his debts, to provide for his dependents, to give parting gifts, to return all articles unto trust, to take money and good temper for the journey and then bid goodbye to everybody, travel was so difficult. The ordinary roads were no different than tracks. They were not surfaced at all because the soil of Palestine is hard and will bear the traffic of mules and asses and oxen and carts. A journey along such a road was an adventure, and indeed an undertaking to be avoided.

There were a few surfaced and artificially prepared roads, but their roads, generally speaking, were the roads of kings, and prepared for the coming of kings to villages and cities. They were originally built for the use of the king, and they were called the “King’s Highways.” Now that is the background of this word in the third chapter, “PREPARE YE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.” John regarded his ministry as a ministry of preparation for the coming of the King, and he calls upon the peoples to make ready the highway because the King is soon to come.

We look now at John’s manner of life and his ministry in verses 4 through 6, and his bearing and his baptizing come to the fore. In the fourth verse we read of his clothing, “And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.” It is evident that John was a man whom we would call an ascetic. But his asceticism was not a contrived asceticism, it was the expression of his stern, severe, no-nonsense spirit. I think if we had looked upon John the Baptist today, we likely would have said he’s some kind of a freak, for that is the way he must have appeared to his own generation.

He came out of the wilderness, he had only this camel’s hair garment. I’m sure it did not come from Neiman Marcus, and was not of that kind at all. He had a leather belt about his waist, and he was eating locusts and wild honey, and I can see a leg or two still on his face as he came out of the wilderness [laughter] and was preaching his particular message.

Now, we have had some strange kind of activities in our day. We have had people who swallow goldfish. I understand that in the Congo they eat ants. And I know that in France, many very cultured Frenchmen—and some misguided Americans—eat snails, or escargot. But this was undoubtedly not strange food to the day in which John lived, but rather it was a kind of diet of what we would call a poor man. In other words, John, if he had come in the southern part of the United States, would be perhaps described as a man who ate grits and cornbread, and occasionally, also, had a plate with some okra upon it. [Laughter] There were locusts and wild honey, that was his food.

Now his ministry is described very briefly in verses five and six in a little more detail with some of the essence of his meeting, of his ministry. But we read in the fifth and sixth verses that the ministry of John created a kind of universal excitement. No tired clichés, no worn-out formulas; nor any of the faddy follies of the pseudo-intellectuals of John’s day characterized his ministry.

Furthermore, he was not characterized by the tediousness of the splitting of theological hairs. And I want to always qualify that kind of statement by saying that you well know there is nothing I like more than theology, and there is nothing that I think that is more important than theology, but it is possible—it is possible; I never do it [laughter]—but it is possible to split some theological hairs with the result that the saints of God are not edified. I hope when I do that you’ll come and tell me, you’re doing what you said you never would do. It can be done.

But John the Baptist was not that kind of man. He evidently was a man who filled an aching void in the hearts of a number of the people, for a great number of those who were in Judaea and Jerusalem, and all about the region of the Jordan flocked out to hear him. And furthermore, they flocked out to hear him denounce them, which was an amazing kind of response. So we must say that Mr. Morgan is correct. His ministry was, for a large segment of the populace, at least for a time, a very attractive ministry, and evidently, because—partly because—he did not say those things which the Pharisees and Sadducees had been saying for so many years and which created the impression that they did not come from the living God.

The thing that characterized his ministry was the ministry of baptism. What was the origin of this ministry? We are not told in the Old Testament, for example, that the Messiah shall baptize. Furthermore, we are not told in the Old Testament that the forerunner, or the ambassador of the king, John the Baptist, will baptize. So it's not surprising, then, that we have sought through the study of the Scriptures and through the study of what we know of the customs of the times, to seek an answer for the question: what is the origin of the baptism of John?

We do know that it was the custom of the Jewish people at this time to practice proselyte baptism. They loved to baptize, but baptize Gentiles. And in proselyte baptism, it was customary for the individual, if he were male, to be circumcised. Then he would immerse himself, and then he would offer a gift in the Temple. And by this procedure he became a member of the Jewish race. So in other words, he became a proselyte to the Jewish faith by these three things: circumcision, self-immersion, and an offering of a gift or a sacrifice in the temple.

Now John's baptism is not characteristic of this or is like that. For in John's case we read nothing of any circumcising. And furthermore, instead of the individuals immersing themselves, John immersed them. And it was so strange that that is one of the reasons why they called him John the baptizer, John the Baptist, because he did the baptizing.

Now not only that, but the strangest thing of all, he baptized Jews. And when his ministry was heard and when it was reflected upon in Jerusalem, they sent out to John to ask about his ministry. And the interview is recorded in the Gospel of John in the first chapter, and they asked him who he was. And he said, essentially, the same thing that is said here. He said that I am the forerunner of the king, and I have come to baptize and prepare for the coming of the king. He is so great that I'm not even worthy carry his Bible, so to speak. I cannot even unloose the sandals of his feet. He is the great coming King.

So the origin of his baptism, then, is not with John. It's not with the people and customs. It is something absolutely unique. It was given to John the Baptist as part of his ministry to the people at that time. What is the relation of the baptism to repentance?

Well over in the Gospel of Mark, we have a slightly fuller description of the relationship of John’s baptism to repentance and forgiveness. For we read in the 4th verse of the 1st chapter of the Gospel of Mark, “John did baptize in the wilderness and did preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” Now this gives us a great deal of help when we think about the purpose of water baptism, for there is no question but that in a moment, John the Baptist will compare his baptism to what we know as Christian baptism. There are great numbers of people in the Christian church today who believe that the forgiveness of sins comes through the act of water baptism.

Now if we should pay careful attention to the ministry of John the Baptist, we would be delivered from that error. Notice the fourth verse. It says that John would baptize in the wilderness, and he would preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Now if you’ll look carefully at those expressions, you’ll notice it does not say that he preached the baptism of the remission of sins. It says, specifically, he would preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. It is not the baptism by which the remission of sins comes, it is the repentance through which the remission of sins comes. And if we had paid careful attention to that, we would not be misled by the teaching of Christian baptism which shall follow in other parts of the New Testament.

So in the case of John’s baptism, it was designed to be symbolic, it was designed to be representative of great spiritual realities that were related to personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now what is the relationship of this preaching to the nation as a whole?

Well, just as the preaching of the Apostle Peter later to the Jewish nation, so the ministry of John the Baptist was directed to the nation, as a nation, for they were the covenant nation, the recipient of the promises made to Abraham and to David, and the blessings of the New Covenant. But at the same time, a ministry directed to individuals, so John’s ministry was addressed to the nation as a whole. He was calling that entire nation back to God, back to the covenants which God had made with them. But at the same time, since there can be no calling of the nation without a calling to the individuals who make up that nation, the ministry of John the Baptist is a ministry to the nation as a whole, but it is a ministry to the individuals who make up that nation as well.

The message is more fully described in verses 7 through 12. And I want you to notice, in the remainder of the time that we have, three notes that characterize it. First of all, it was a proclamation regarding repentance. Now we must be careful to understand precisely what the Bible means when it uses the term repentance.

There are some, unfortunately, who feel that we should not use the term “repentance.” I do not, myself, subscribe to that particular interpretation of the New Testament. It seems very evident to me that in the book of Acts we read that the Apostle Paul preached repentance towards God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. We even find in the 2nd epistle that Peter wrote reference to repentance. Repentance is a biblical doctrine, and it is a doctrine that may be proclaimed today and should be in the proper proportion.

What does repentance mean? Well first of all, it does not mean to be sorry for sins. Repentance does not mean to weep and cry and wail at an altar in front of the meeting room. It does not mean to rise up out of the chair and come down to the front at the conclusion of the meeting when a public invitation is given, and weep and wail over one’s past sins.

Now, of course, it may be possible that someone should, in response to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in conviction, weep and wail over one’s past sins. I do not in any way denigrate that activity. There are some who should weep and wail, perhaps, over their sins. But that is not the meaning of repentance.

As a matter of fact—you’ve heard me say this before—as far as the Scriptures are concerned, the proper response to the gospel of Jesus Christ is not to come down front at the conclusion of the meeting; not to raise your hand in response to the preacher’s call; not the response of writing upon a decision card. But the New Testament response to the preaching of the gospel is to request to be baptized by the elders of the church, for water baptism is the proper response to the preaching of the ministry of the Word of God. It is the biblical way to express our testimony to faith in Jesus Christ. And when men do respond to the gospel, and do ask to be baptized in testimony to their faith, I dare say that those conversions are more likely to be genuine conversions.

But repentance does not mean to be sorry for our sins. If it meant to be sorry for our sins in an outward way of weeping and crying, then it in effect would be mingling works, human works, with the grace of the gospel message. So it does not mean that. As you well know, the term “repent” comes from a Greek word that—or two Greek words—one of which means “to think,” and the other meaning “after.” And so the idea of “to repent” is to have an afterthought.

Now an afterthought is usually a different thought, so that the word came to mean “to change one’s mind.” That’s the meaning of repentance, to change one’s mind. It is a mental thing, pre-eminently, and not an emotional thing, pre-eminently. It reflects a change of mind with respect to one’s convictions concerning truth. So that when one repents, he changes the object of his trust. He no longer trusts in the church. He no longer trusts in his good works. He no longer trusts in his baptism. He no longer trusts in his religious activities. He no longer trusts in his culture, in his education, or in whatever it may be in which he is trusting for his relationship to the eternal God. So to repent is to change one’s mind.

It does not mean to promise to do better. As a matter of fact, the word repent is the equivalent of the Old Testament word to turn or to return. And if you’ll go through the Old Testament, you’ll discover that the term, turn or return to the Lord, means, essentially, to return to the covenantal promises that God has given. So the term “repent” is a covenantal term. It is a term in which God calls the people to whom he has given these magnificent promises of grace; it’s a call to them to come back to this covenantal relationship which has been established. So it’s a call to exercise faith in returning.

Now the reason the term repent is so common with Israel and so common in the Synoptic Gospels is because those parts of the Word of God are addressed to people who have abandoned their covenantal relationship, and are in a backslidden state, who are in rebellion and in revolt against God. And so the word that goes to them is: repent. Change your mind. Come back to the blessings of the unconditional covenantal promises which I have given to my elect.

Now in the other parts of the New Testament, when the ministry to the Gentiles becomes more prominent—since their relationship to the covenantal promises is slightly different (which we shall talk about later)—it’s not surprising, then, that the word addressed to them as term for response to the gospel becomes not so much “repent” (though it’s still there) but “believe.” And it’s very striking that the same Gospel of John which has described John’s ministry as a man sent from God says that he came “that men may believe.”

Whereas in the Synoptic Gospels it is said that he came and said “repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand,” but when the ministry becomes addressed to Gentiles, they, not having the precise covenantal relationship that the Jews had, the proper term for them is “believe”—put your trust in a person who has performed a certain ministry. So then, repentance. It means, essentially, what believe means, but is directed toward the negative side of the relationship to God.

John’s ministry was repent, for the kingdom of the heaven—now what is the kingdom of heaven? Why the kingdom of heaven is the Messianic kingdom promised in the Old Testament that the Messiah would come and he would set up his kingdom upon the earth. There is not description given of any kind of new understanding of the kingdom in the New Testament, so we are to seek the meaning of it from the Old Testament. The meaning is very plain: the earthly kingdom of the Messiah which he shall set up upon the earth.

John’s message is that that kingdom of the heaven is at hand, because the King has come. There are two aspects of this kingdom: the aspect of the ministry of the Lord Jesus at his first coming, in which he lays the foundation for the kingdom in the shedding of his precious blood, for it is the blood that he shed that inaugurates the New Covenant which is the foundation of that kingdom; and then there is the ministry of the king at his Second Advent, at which he destroys the enemies of the program of God and brings that kingdom to pass upon the earth. So then we have a public manifestation of the king. He comes as the hidden king in his first coming. He comes as the magnificent king of glory in his second coming.

The Jewish teachers, though they did not understand lots of things, understood some things very well. For example, they said, if it were possible for Israel to repent perfectly for even one day, the Messiah would come. And of course, that is true with this exception: that if Israel should repent, if Israel should repent—forget the one day—if Israel should repent, then their kingdom promises should be fulfilled.

Now the second thing about John’s message is that it contained a special proviso concerning reality. In verses 7 through 10, we get the distinct picture of ritualism represented by the Pharisees, and rationalism, represented by the Sadducees, getting religion. And John does not seek to give them any kind of honeyed words which might attract them. “O you generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” How would you like it, if on Sunday morning, I should address you by your true title: generation of vipers? You wouldn’t like it too much. But they like John, because they were sick and tired of the sweet words that meant nothing.

And even though John’s ministry was a ministry of condemnation, they loved it because they knew that it was true!

And so I say to you, you generation of vipers, just as I am part of you, these words are words that strike home because they are true. They describe all human beings; not simply those men and women who stood before the great prophet John the Baptist. But it describes the character of human nature down through the years, for that his precisely what we are.

The striking thing about it is, of course, is that these men were religious men. They were the religious leaders of the day. If you gathered all the Baptist preachers and all the Presbyterian preachers and all the Episcopalian preachers and all the Roman Catholic priests and all of the independents together, and if you could get all the whole vile company together in one great meeting, you would have individuals who were constantly in the presence of the ministry of the Word of God. But, O the disobedience that exists in the hearts of the religious. And so John’s words, O generation of vipers, is very telling.

You know, when you think about it, and you look at the apostles of the Lord Jesus, there was one man who listened to all the sermons of Jesus Christ—I thought that Thomas Goodwin’s remark, just so brief, is so pointed and so true. He said, with reference to Judas, “Judas heard all Christ’s sermons.” How true that is.

It’s possible for us to hear all the preaching and still be a generation of vipers. It’s possible for us to attend all the meetings, such as this, hear the ministry of the Word of God and be totally unresponsive to it. And so, it’s not surprising, then, that John should say to this crowd of people who knew all about religion, “Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.” Demonstrate what you have professed your repentance by the deeds that you perform. And, the very fact that John called upon them to be baptized, and baptized them, was testimony to the fact that he regarded them as lost sinners.

And finally, there’s a great promise here in verses 11 and 12 regarding the future baptism in fire. Now John very briefly compares his own ministry with the Lord Jesus Christ’s ministry. He says, in effect, that I baptize you with water unto repentance, and that therefore my ministry is symbolic. It is preparatory. It is in water. But there is someone coming whose ministry will be real. It will be final. And it will be a ministry of the Holy Spirit. And you will notice that there will be two ministries that have to [do] with fire that are set forth by John.

He says in the 11th verse—by the way, it’s very striking and appalling and even terrible to reflect that verse 10 and verse 11 and verse 12 all end with fire—have you noticed that? And the last is the most appalling of all: with unquenchable fire. But he says in the 11th verse, “I baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who cometh after me is mightier than I whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”—or with “the fiery Holy Spirit.” The reference is, I believe—there is some question about this—I believe unto the Day of Pentecost when the saints are gathered together, the baptism of the Holy Spirit took place, and cloven tongues as of fire came and sat upon each of who were there in the Temple area. That was the baptism of fire referred to in verse 11.

But then in verse 12, John’s thoughts go beyond that to the time when the Messiah shall come in final judgment before the kingdom. He says that his fan is in his hand, and that he will thoroughly purge his floor, and he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. And he refers there to the coming of the Lord Jesus to exercise judgment when he comes at his second advent to judge the earth.

You’ll notice John does not know anything about this interval between the first coming and the second coming. As a prophet who resided in the Old Testament prophecy primarily, he looks forward to the great events of the New Covenant period, and he sees mountain peaks, but he does not see the valleys that lie between the peaks. And so he sees the first coming mingled with the second coming. And as history unfolds, we have learned that there is now 1900 years plus between the first advent and the second advent, but John puts them together, for his vision is not yet clarified by the unfolding of the revelation of God. The future, in a sense, is fore-shortened for John, but the truths that he proclaims are truths.

Well, I see that our time is up by my watch. The official watch is mine; that one is five, six minutes fast I assure you. [Laughter] Now there is an important aspect that is omitted by Matthew in the ministry of John. You no doubt have noticed. There is no reference here, specifically, to sacrifice for sin. Is it possible that John was not acquainted with the fact that the fundamental ministry of the Lord Jesus is his death? No now, it’s the same John the Baptist who in the first chapter of the Gospel of John cries out, “Behold the Lamb of God!” John knows that the foundation of the ministry which leads to repentance and the remission of sins is the shedding of the blood of our Lord Jesus upon the cross at Golgotha. That’s the last and the highest plateau of the ministry of this great prophet, who after 400 years introduces and concludes the prophetic ministry of the Old Testament prophets.

And he announces a king who shall come, one who shall bestow the Holy Spirit in Spirit baptism, one who shall exercise his judgeship in fire and also one who is a lamb who shall die for the sins of those who belong to the Savior.

What was the result of John’s great ministry? Well, it landed him, as we would say, in the slammer. That is exactly the end to which John the Baptist came. And yet, some of the disciples of the Lord Jesus came from the ministry of John the Baptist. They were his disciples, and then they became disciples of the one who was greater than John.

Now even though this ministry of John the Baptist finally landed him in prison and ultimately meant that he lost his head, we should never forget that it was divinely initiated and divinely sustained.

I sometimes get very tired, I must say, hearing people say, the Lord must be in this because look at the material blessings that have resulted from this particular ministry. And so we are appointed to great buildings, we are appointed to large crowds of people who come to hear the message of the Word of God, and we are told, thereby, we have the inevitable and certain proof of successful ministry. Now if that standard were applied to John the Baptist’s ministry, we would have to conclude his ministry was ultimately a failure. True, great crowds around Jerusalem and Judaea flocked out for a time, but this man finally lost his head.

Now this ministry, however, was divinely initiated. He was a man sent from God, and it was divinely sustained, and when it came time for God to conclude the ministry, so he did. Ministry is ultimately to be judged by the standards of God and the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit. And there’s a great lesson for us in that.

Now if you should be here this morning and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, we issue, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, an invitation to you to put your faith and trust by the grace of God in him who loved sinners and died for them. If you have never realized your sin, may God the Holy Spirit bring it home to your heart, and may you also recognize that Christ died for sinners. And if God has implanted within your heart a desire to know him, may you come in simple trust saying, “I thank Thee, blessed Lord, that Thou has died for sinners. I’m a sinner. I receive the gift of eternal salvation. May God the Spirit bring you to that trust. May we stand for the benediction?”

[Prayer] Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit be and abide with all who know him in sincerity. And O Father, if there should be someone here who has not yet come to Christ, give them no rest nor peace until they rest in him.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.