

S e r m o n s o n
Matthew

We Have Abraham

Matthew 3:7-9

With Study Questions

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But when he 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 wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, ⁹ and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. (Matthew 3:7-9).

Review

We learned that the gospel’s first offensive was preaching (Matthew 3:1). John the Baptist came preaching that people should repent for the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Matthew 3:2). God’s people should continually avail themselves of the provision of preaching. God’s people should also seek (as must have been the case with John’s listeners) to bring others to hear the word preached. And the word preached should be repentance.

The desired effect of the preaching is that those listening would repent, or have a change of mind or heart; that their hostility or indifference toward God would melt away and they would embrace Him as their Father; that their pride would be vanquished and they would acknowledge their need for redemption and a redeemer—who is Christ the Lord; that they would trust in the wisdom of Christ over the wisdom of the world in every aspect of their life. But first and foremost the desired effect of preaching is that those hearing would trust that Christ alone is sufficient to bring us safely before our Maker’s judicious gaze—it is the salvation of lost souls.

John operated under the assumption that there was a unique historical event about to transpire—the establishment of the kingdom of God. The reign of King Jesus and the beginning of His kingdom would be, and truly has been, the turning point in history. As important as salvation is, it is wrong to think that this kingdom was restricted to the personal salvation of souls. At its very beginning it would stab through the curtain of the immaterial and private world of men’s hearts into the concrete and material affairs of men; the world would never be the same—in any respect. John’s sermon will reveal this to be the case.

The Brood

But when he 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 wrath to come” (Matthew 3:7)?

John now turns his attention to the religious leaders of the day—the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were full of pomp and ceremony. They loved to display their religious fervor in a public manner to be seen by men (Matthew 23:1-5). The Sadducees were generally subtler than the Pharisees but did not believe in the resurrection (Matthew 22:23).

What we learn from this passage and others like it (Matthew 23; Luke 3), is that these religious leaders were hypocrites who laid heavy burdens on their followers. They were excluded from the true kingdom of God and held others from it as well. They were hypocrites—giving an outward display of holiness yet dead in their hearts. It is no wonder that John’s words toward them were so harsh; the same will be true with the words of Christ (Matthew 23; John 8).

Public Rebuke

John had obviously missed his etiquette and cotillion classes. He has visitors and calls them the children of snakes! His preaching toward this specific group was both harsh and public. Was this proper? Should he not have spoken to them privately—one on one?

John's public rebuke was not inappropriate because their (the Pharisees and Sadducees) ministry was a public ministry and their spiritual victimization of others was widespread. We should not doubt that John desired their salvation but he also had a concern for the "sons of hell" (Matthew 23:15) they were producing. His current flock needed to know the shepherds from the thief (John 10:7-10). But is this type of open conflict healthy?

If I am sick I want to know that doctors have had spirited argumentation over the proper cure. If I am accused I want to know my attorney has not shrunk back from fighting for justice. Before we send young soldiers off to war I want to know that men of intellect and sagacity have thrashed it out—even if feelings get hurt and political careers are threatened. Yet the Christian community has supplanted the purging fire of confrontation with tact.

I am not suggesting that Christians should be mean-spirited or elitist or improperly sarcastic. But when someone assumes the responsibility of opening their mouth on behalf of God they should be willing to suffer the scrutiny of examination; they should desire it! There are few things that have plunged my nose deeper into books and my heart deeper into prayer than a hearty questioning of the accuracy of my representation of God.

Would John the Baptist have silently shared the table with Mormons or Muslims? Would he have nothing to say to Roman Catholics or Jews? And what about the amazingly popular books that have defined current Protestant evangelicalism: *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the *Prayer of Jabez*, the *Left Behind* series the *Purpose Driven Life*, etc.? Do they not deserve a healthy dose of analysis and examination? And what about your pastor (and in this I include myself)—is he offended when you question him? Neither John, nor Paul, nor James, nor Peter, nor Jesus Himself would sit idly by and allow religion to be presented without cross-examination. And neither should we!

An inaccurate representation of God is the greatest of evils; heaven and hell hang in the balance. If God's people allow it to go unchecked they will neither know how to love God nor how God loves them. They unwittingly become the perpetrators of a legacy of spiritual darkness. Let Christians not take rank with such tepid effeminacy. Let us rather be like the Bereans who, under the teaching of Paul and Silas, were considered noble-minded because they...

...sought the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so (Acts 17:11).

Have we not been instructed...?

Test all things; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Bearing Fruit

John's sermon continues.

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance (Matthew 3:8).

Paul writes to Titus,

This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men (Titus 3:8, 9).

Matthew's gospel will continually appeal to good works. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is His commentary on the law of God. Some have mistakenly understood this emphasis on bearing fruit to mean that people are actually saved by the fruit they produce. This would be equivalent to saying that the production of apples makes a tree an apple tree. That, of course, would be absurd. But when apples are produced it evidences what kind of tree it is. A false faith will generally evidence itself.

How many have we seen who did not have the genuine faith which perseveres in the midst of persecution and temptation (Matthew 13:3-19)? They rise up in the church with great enthusiasm but when the pains of toil and defeat puncture their lives they are no longer to be found. If wisdom is justified by her children then faithlessness is justified by its fruitlessness.

We Have Abraham

"...and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (Matthew 3:9).

There is a very popular brand of Christianity called Dispensationalism which asserts that ethnic Jews are still to be considered God's chosen people. Is this true? John's message to the ethnic Jew is that they shouldn't even give their ethnicity a thought.

We learn from this verse, and many like it, that entrance into God's kingdom has nothing to do with ethnicity. Galatians 3:7 and 29 teach us that those, and only those, who believe in Christ are the seed of Abraham. Jesus taught that ethnic Jews who didn't believe in Him were not Jews at all (Revelation 2:9; 3:9).

When the Jews said they had Abraham and God as their father, Jesus said: **"You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44).** Paul in Romans 9:6, 7 taught **"For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham."**

Some will object and remind us that God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Has God gone back on His promise? Certainly not. God's promise was made to the descendants of Abraham who were descendants by faith—not ethnicity. In Romans 11, Paul anticipates this question when he asks,

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1).

But notice that Paul is not finished with his description of himself. He doesn't appeal to his being the recipient of God's promise based upon his ethnicity or mere external citizenship. He doesn't take refuge in the nation of Israel but compares himself to the faithful remnant.

God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, ³"Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? ⁴ But what does the divine response say to him? *"I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."*⁵ Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace (Romans 11:2-5).

God's covenant was always dependant upon His promise and the attending, God-given faith of its recipients (those who had not bowed to Baal). God has kept His promise. The dispensationalist, I believe, errs regarding who the recipients happen to be.

Removing the Greatest Comfort

But John does something else here. He is removing their greatest religious comfort. □ They had deluded themselves into thinking all was right between them and God because of the nature of their blood. It is no wonder the teaching of Jesus was so confusing to them as we read in John,

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³²And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."³³ They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* You say, 'You will be made free'" (John 8:31-33)?

They had forgotten their political bondage and were in an utter fog regarding their bondage to sin.

What we see in the teaching of John here and regularly in the teaching of Jesus is the exposing of those false structures on which men seek to comfort their souls. How many Roman Catholics are damned because they trust in the mediation of their church over the mediation of Christ? How many Jews and Muslims are damned because they trust in their own goodness over the goodness of Christ? How many would-be Protestants have been lulled into a false sense of assurance because they had the religious experience of the sinner's prayer at a Billy Graham or Harvest Crusade rather than the intercession of Jesus?

John's message is, "Don't speak to me of the mass! Take no comfort in your Jewish blood or darkened works! Don't begin to say to yourself, 'I've prayed the sinner's prayer.'" John's message is "bear fruits worthy of repentance." This fruitful repentance means dispensing with the panoply of shadowy comforts found in human productions and place the trust of your works and the comfort of your soul in Christ alone.

Questions for Study

1. What is the first offensive Matthew records regarding Christ's kingdom (page 1)?
2. What did John preach (page 1)?
3. What is the desired effect of preaching (page 1)?
4. Does the kingdom of God strictly pertain to personal salvation (page 1)?
5. What do we know about the Pharisees and Sadducees (pages 1, 2)?
6. Are public rebukes always wrong? Explain (page 2).
7. Why is a misrepresentation of God so awful (page 2)?
8. What is repentance and why is it important (page 5)?
9. What was John's disposition toward those who took comfort in their ethnicity (pages 3-4)?
10. Who are the true children of Abraham (pages 3-4)?
11. What was John seeking to remove from the Pharisees and Sadducees (page 4)?
12. How do we see this type of problem around us today (page 4)?