

017: Shucking the Corn

(based on Sermon #010 in the Life of Christ Series)

Thus far, I have shared 16 studies on the Judgment Seat of Christ, and matters sanctification and reward and inheritance and the coming Millennial kingdom

- we have talked about the kingdom of heaven and New Jerusalem and the outer darkness and reward for overcomers
- we have learned about salvation of the soul in contrast to salvation of the spirit and the gospel of the kingdom in contrast to the gospel of grace
- and we have talked much about the importance of discipleship and preparing for the kingdom
- now I am going to do something different in our studies
- I am going to take you on a journey through the ministry of Christ

the Lord willing, we will go through all 3-1/2 years of His ministry, step-by-step, and we will do so chronologically

- as we go along you are going to see all the truths we have learned thus far put into practice in the Gospels
- and we are going to add even more truths as we go along
- I guarantee this will be a rewarding journey, if you will stick with it
- to be sure, you will have numerous AHA! moments, just as I did when I first studied the life of Christ through this lens
- are you up for the challenge?
- then, buckle your seat belt, because it will be a lengthy journey
- our first study on the journey will focus on John the Baptist and his message
- what an interesting character!

- I have titled this study, “Shucking the Corn”

In the Appalachian region of North Carolina where I live, it is common to hear someone say, “Preacher So-and-So really shucked the corn in his sermon!”

- Are you familiar with that terminology?
- An online dictionary defines *shucking the corn* as “a term used by people native to the Appalachian Mountains to describe a speech or sermon that is particularly energetic.
- The term is most commonly used in reference to ‘hellfire and brimstone’ preachers.”
- In Matt. 3 John the Baptist “shucks the corn” in the presence of the religious leaders of Israel who have ventured out into the Judean wilderness from Jerusalem to hear him.
- They have heard about this strange preacher who wears odd clothing and dunks his converts in the Jordan River.
- He pulls no punches and steps all over their toes.
- But he is empowered by God and preaches a powerful message.

I am now going to read our text, Matt. 3:1-12

- 1-2 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”
- 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying:
“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make His paths straight.’ ”
- 4 Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

- 5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him
- 6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.
- 7 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?”
- 8-9 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 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.
- 10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
- 11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
- 12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Any study of the life of Christ must begin with His forerunner, the eccentric John the Baptist — literally, John the baptizer — who happens to be the cousin of Jesus.

- John the Baptist is undoubtedly one of the most unusual characters in the Scriptures.
- In addition to the description we just read in v. 4, he is also a Nazirite from birth.
- That is, he has been set apart by the Lord for his calling, along with his parents, who have raised him according to the Nazirite vow.

- According to the Old Testament requirements, he could not cut his hair; he could not eat or drink anything from the grape vine, and he could not touch anything that was dead, lest he become unclean.
- Samson, of course, was a Nazirite, and so was Samuel the prophet.
- Elijah may have been, as well, because we read in:
- 2 Kings 1:8 So they answered him, “A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist.” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”

The leather belt — unique to both Elijah and John the Baptist — adds an interesting connection between these two prophets.

- The Old Testament closes with a fascinating prophecy:
- Mal. 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.
- Is this prophecy referring to Elijah himself, or someone else who would come in like manner as Elijah?
- The answer is found in what the angel Gabriel announces in the opening of the New Testament to the priest Zacharias about the miracle son that he and his wife Elizabeth will have in their old age.
- Luke 1:17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Elijah was the powerful prophet who prayed down fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel in the showdown between Jehovah and Baal, and the result was a great revival in Israel.

- John the Baptist, as we shall see, was also a powerful prophet, in the spirit and power of Elijah, who also saw a great revival in Israel.
- Ironically, John the Baptist is frequently portrayed in artwork and films as having shorter hair and Jesus having longer hair, but the reality is just the opposite.
- Jesus was a Nazarene (from Nazareth), not a Nazirite and, therefore, would not have had longer hair.
- On the other hand, John the Baptist *was* a Nazirite and, therefore, would have had long hair — for that was part of his vow to God.

Imagine a long-haired preacher, whose clothes are really odd.

- He doesn't wear robes like everyone else. He's certainly not stylish.
- He wears the Jewish equivalent of bib overalls in the pulpit.
- For him, it's a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt.
- Robertson says it is "rough sackcloth woven from the hair of camels."
- John's pulpit is a pile of rocks, for he is out in the wilderness, preaching to people here and there.
- I can't imagine that any modern church would invite a guy like this as a guest speaker.
- He would be too weird for most people to accept.
- His hair length and dress standards would surely keep him out of any fundamentalist church.
- Not to mention, he would bring awful food to the church potluck dinners: locust casserole and wild honey for dessert.
- His lack of diplomacy would keep him out of the church growth movement, for his preaching steps on too many toes!

Despite all the oddities, Jesus held John in very high esteem.

- Here's how Jesus felt about His cousin:
- Matt. 11:11 Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.
- It is this man who is ordained by God to be the forerunner of Messiah and to announce His coming.
- I find it interesting that the Bible does not emphasize the *person* of John the Baptist as much as it does his *message*.
- He is "the voice of one crying in the wilderness."
- That is, he stands in the shadows, behind Christ, but his voice is heard loudly and clearly, heralding the arrival of Messiah.
- His mission is to "prepare the way of the Lord," to "make His paths straight."
- John is the one who will come along first in time and make spiritual preparations for Messiah's arrival to follow.
- How so? By making paths straight — by leading Jews to repentance and putting them back on the narrow way that leads to life.
- As we shall see, that is not a message of salvation, but a message of sanctification.

Luke's Gospel presents a more detailed description of John's purpose – Luke 3:4-6

- 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight.
- 5-6 Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made

straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

- Luke quotes Isa. 40 which refers to the millennial kingdom of Messiah.
- Some commentators believe that during the tribulation the topography of Earth will be leveled out due to the global seismic activity.
- Valleys will be pushed upward; mountains will shrink down.
- Literally, the high peaks and deep ravines of the earth (including those in the ocean) that were formed during the great flood of Noah’s day, will be leveled out to their pre-flood state during the tribulation.
- As a result, wadis, winding ravines, canyons, and crooked river beds will be straightened out as they are leveled.
- And all flesh will see the salvation of God.

This salvation is not spiritual salvation, the regeneration of individuals when they believe on Jesus for eternal life.

- In context, this is Messianic salvation, the deliverance of Israel from Gentile nations, and Messiah’s rule over planet Earth.
- In a nutshell, this is a reference to the millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ on Earth for a thousand years, as described in Rev. 20.
- Incidentally, the overwhelming majority of references to save, saving, and salvation in the Bible – some say more than 90% of all usages — refer to some sort of physical salvation, *not* spiritual salvation.
- It is important to remember that when interpreting Scripture.
- We must be careful not to read our New Testament theology back into the Old Testament.

The Jews listening to John’s message of God’s salvation would have understood national Messianic deliverance — something entirely different than what comes to mind when we hear the word salvation.

- In the millennial kingdom *all* flesh, *all* mankind, will see God’s salvation in the form of Christ’s kingdom rule.
- John’s purpose, his mission, is to proclaim this truth as a “voice crying in the wilderness.”
- We come now to the sermon itself, and it has three points.
- **Point 1: Repent.** John began with a clarion call to: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 3:2).

Unfortunately, many evangelicals assume the Jews were virtually all unbelievers when Jesus came to Earth.

- Based on this assumption, they interpret this message in v. 2 as the gospel by which we are saved, the means by which unbelievers receive eternal life.
- But that is not correct!
- From the message preached by John and Jesus we can conclude that the Jews were already believers when Jesus came the first time — believers in an Old Testament sense.
- Thus, this particular message is good news for those who are already saved, not for unbelievers.
- The good news is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
- More will be said about the meaning of this phrase later in this study

How do unbelievers become regenerated and receive eternal life? In other words, how are they *saved* in a spiritual sense?

- The scriptural answer is abundantly clear.
- Listen to the following Bible verses:

- John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.
- John 5:24 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.
- John 6:47 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.
- John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."
- Acts 16:30-31 And he ... said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."
- Eph. 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.
- Many more verses of this nature could be quoted, but the answer to my earlier question is quite clear scripturally.
- Unbelievers receive eternal life — they are regenerated and thereby saved spiritually — when they believe on Jesus for eternal life.

Some may wonder: What about repentance?

- Repentance is never required for salvation!
- Why, then, do so many insist that repentance IS required for salvation?
- Because their theological system has led them to assume the Jews of the first century were unbelievers on their way to hell who needed to be saved.
- Thus, they say, John's message of repentance (and later it becomes Christ's message) is a call to be saved in the

way we understand that term as New Testament believers.

- Tragically, that error in interpretation has led to a form of salvation by works, for repentance is a work.
- The meaning of the word *repent* is a change of mind that precipitates a change of behavior.
- That is the way the word is used virtually everywhere in the New Testament.
- I have some very sincere friends who believe in salvation by faith alone, and they say that repentance is required for salvation, but they insist that repentance is a change of mind *only*.
- They frequently refer to the two-sided coin of repentance and faith, essentially making the terms synonymous, or at least, very closely related, which they are not.

The two-sided coin analogy cannot be found in the Scriptures, and it muddies the waters of understanding what it means to be saved.

- Repentance and faith are *not* synonymous, nor are they closely related.
- To believe is to be persuaded about the truth of something.
- Repentance, as I have already pointed out, is a change of mind that results in a change of behavior.
- One can insist that repentance is a change of mind only, but if there is no behavioral change, then in the Bible sense, there has been no repentance.

Notice what John the Baptist says in v. 8:

- Matt. 3:8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,
- If you are not bearing fruits worthy of repentance, then you have not repented.

- And bearing fruits worthy of repentance is *doing* something.
- Those who require repentance for salvation thereby include works for salvation, whether they realize it or not, and that is biblical error.
- Once again, I emphasize that John the Baptist (and later Jesus) was not preaching a “get saved from hell” message, but rather a “get right with God” message.
- The former is for unbelievers who need to be saved, the latter is for believers needing to restore fellowship with God and get back on the pathway of sanctification unto reward.

Marvin Vincent, the Greek scholar, sorts through this very effectively in his definition of repentance:

- “*Metanoia* (which is the Greek word translated *repentance*) is ... a change of mind which issues in regret and in change of conduct ... Repentance, then, has been rightly defined as “Such a virtuous alteration of the mind and purpose as begets a like virtuous change in the life and practice.”
- Here’s the point: You can insist that repentance is a change of mind and nothing more.
- But that is denying the way the word is used in the Scriptures — as a change of mind resulting in a change of behavior, or else it’s not genuine repentance.
- We must, therefore, be clear in our biblical teaching that repentance is not required for salvation, because repentance is a work of man.
- Salvation is given by the grace of God to those who simply believe Him for eternal life.

Thus, when John the Baptist preaches, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” he is *not* proclaiming the gospel of grace by faith alone to unbelievers.

- He is urging believers to, “Humble themselves and pray and seek God’s face and turn from their wicked ways,” in the spirit of 2 Chron. 7:14.”
- He is preaching the same message the Old Testament prophets had proclaimed to Israel repeatedly.
- Following are two examples of the Old Testament prophetic call to repentance, though there are many in the Old Testament:
- Isa. 30:15 For thus says the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.” But you would not.
- Mal. 3:7 “Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts.

With regard to John’s message of repentance, Joseph Dillow, author of *Final Destiny*, says:

- “With this statement, Jesus echoes the “prophetic forgiveness” promised to the nation if they would repent, that is, if they would admit their error, desire to change their behavior (Gr *metanoēō*), and then make plans to rectify the situation (Gr *epistrepō*). Such repentance would lead to a return from exile and escape from temporal national catastrophe. Certainly, a personal dimension was involved. As individuals repented they joined the believing remnant, which Jesus was calling out.”
- How we interpret this message of John is absolutely critical.

- But that is not the only term that is frequently misinterpreted.

Another important term to understand is *kingdom of heaven*.

- Marvin Vincent points out that it should be literally translated, “the kingdom of the heavens.”
- Most interpret it simply as Heaven, but that is incorrect.
- The kingdom of heaven is *not* Heaven, that is, the third Heaven, the place of God’s dwelling.
- Nor is the kingdom of heaven some type of spiritual kingdom that believers enter into when they are saved.
- The kingdom of the heavens is the realm of reward in the Messianic kingdom, the New Jerusalem, which is the *city* of reward.
- Abraham looked for a city having foundations, built by God.
- Jacob saw the ladder or stairway between Heaven and Earth.
- Presumably, what Jacob saw was the connection between the New Jerusalem and Earth.
- Jesus told Nathanael he qualified for that realm because he was “without deceit.”

New Jerusalem will be the ruling headquarters for the Messianic kingdom.

- According to Rev. 21-22 it will descend from heaven and hover over Earth.
- Jesus will dwell there, along with faithful saints, for it is the city of reward.
- It will be a place of incredible brightness because of His presence.
- There will be no need for exterior light, such as the sun.

- Those believers who are not rewarded will be excluded from the bright city of reward and will dwell in the relative darkness outside of that realm.

When John the Baptist proclaims, the kingdom of the heavens is *at hand*, what does he mean?

- He means the kingdom of the heavens is near, in the form of an offer.
- Keep in mind that, according to the Old Testament, the Jews were already guaranteed rulership *on Earth* in the millennial kingdom.
- However, what Jesus came to offer was something of far greater magnitude.
- For those who qualify by repenting and living righteously, God will grant them inclusion in the *heavenly realm* of the millennial kingdom, the New Jerusalem, the city of reward.
- This message, preached first by John, and later by Jesus, was a spectacular offer for national Israel to have an inheritance in the kingdom of the heavens.
- Of course, later we will see that national Israel rejected the offer, so Jesus eventually took it away from Israel and is now in this age of grace offering it to the church.
- Nevertheless, qualifications must be fulfilled, and it all starts with repentance.

We have seen the first point of John’s message: REPENT!

- why? because the kingdom of the heavens is at hand
- and now to point 2:
- **Point 2: Get baptized to demonstrate you have been cleansed and forgiven.**
- The parallel text in Luke 3:3 says that John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission (forgiveness) of sins.

- John's baptism seems somewhat different than Christian baptism.
- John's baptism was about *renouncing* sinfulness and was for the Jews while Christian baptism is about *announcing* identification with Jesus and is for the one new man in Christ.

Do you remember the believers that Paul met in Ephesus in Acts 19?

- Presumably, they were Gentiles who had not heard of the Holy Spirit and had only been baptized with John's baptism.
- They apparently knew nothing of the one new man in Christ.
- So Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.
- In a later study, we will see why Jesus submitted to baptism by John.
- But for now, the point to be made is that those who were humble about their sinfulness, repented, and indicated the seriousness of their decision by being publicly baptized.
- and that leads me now to point 3 of John's message

Point 3: Messiah is coming, and He will judge.

- John's third point is that Messiah is coming after him.
- John humbly admits that he is unworthy to carry the sandals of Jesus, and in Luke's parallel account he says I am unworthy to unloose his sandals (i.e., to take them off).
- Then John turns to judgment.
- This Messiah, John proclaims, will baptize with (in) Holy Spirit and with (in) fire.
- I personally think it's an either-or situation.

- Either get right with God and receive Holy Spirit baptism or reject His offer, continue in your sinfulness, and get baptized in fire.
- What is baptism in fire?
- Matt. 3:12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Using agricultural imagery, John says that Jesus is ready to thresh the wheat.

- He uses a winnowing fan to separate the chaff from the wheat and, once separated, the wheat is put into the barn, while the chaff is burned.
- The unquenchable fire is not hell.
- It is called unquenchable fire because it is a reference to Gehenna fire, the fires that burned continuously in the Valley of Hinnom.
- Gehenna fire, as we will see in more detail in a later study, is a metaphor for the coming temporal judgment upon Israel for disobedience.
- From our vantage point, we know that happened in AD 70, at the hand of the Romans.
- Thousands of Jews were killed and their bodies dumped in the Valley of Hinnom outside the walls of Jerusalem.
- That was God's temporal judgment upon Israel for not repenting of her sins.

Ultimately, the fires could be a reference to the Judgment Seat fires.

- 1 Cor. 3 says "the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is."

- Joseph Dillow says, “Gehenna refers not to eternal damnation but to negative consequences that may come on unfaithful believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ.”
- so this is quite serious.
- Those who reject Messiah’s offer of repentance unto reward will be judged by Him, both temporally and with respect to kingdom rewards.
- We come now to the application of John’s message

John applies his message to two groups of Jews: the proud and the humble.

- The proud are primarily the scribes and Pharisees, and even the Sadducees, the religious leaders of Israel.
- The humble are the down-and-outers, the tax collectors and harlots and common man.
- John addresses the proud first in his sermon:
- Matt. 3:7-10 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? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 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. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

This is where John shucks the corn.

- He calls the religious leaders a brood (offspring) of vipers — highly venomous snakes.
- Preaching hard against sin often results in persecution, and we know that John eventually dies a martyr’s death.
- Here the Pharisees and Sadducees have followed the crowds to the Jordan River.

- They are merely hypocrites who want to put on a good religious show.
- John asks the religious leaders, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”
- In other words, “Why are you here? How do you expect to escape coming judgment, living as hypocrites?”
- And then in v. 8, he says to them, “Demonstrate repentance by obedience to the Lord.”

According to v. 9, the Pharisees have the attitude that, as children of Abraham, they don’t need to repent because the prophets guarantee Israel rulership over the Gentiles in the coming kingdom.

- But they totally miss the point.
- They fail to realize that Messiah is offering something better — inclusion in the *heavenly* realm of the kingdom, which is far better.
- Because of their prideful attitude, John warns in v. 10 that the ax is ready to chop down the national tree, so to speak.
- They will be burned up in the fire — the fires of the coming Roman invasion.
- John hints of something special in v. 9. God is able to raise up children to Abraham from “these stones.”
- Indeed, God will do something spectacular that will shock the Jews.
- The Gentiles will be given the same offer the Jews have rejected.
- Those Gentiles meeting the conditions will become rulers with Jesus in the *heavenly* New Jerusalem.
- The Jewish religious leaders could have never anticipated this.
- Not only does John apply his message to the proud, he also applies the message to the humble.

- For this application look at the parallel text in Luke 3:

Luke 3:10-14

- 10 So the people asked him, saying, “What shall we do then?”
- 11 He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”
- 12 Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”
- 13 And he said to them, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”
- 14 Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, “And what shall we do?” So he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”

The common people who are humble and serious about John’s message, want to know what they should do to please the Lord.

- John says, “If you have two shirts, give away one to someone in need.
- If you have extra food, share it with others.”
- To the tax collectors, who were known to be cheaters and thieves, he said, “Don’t collect any more than what is appointed.”
- No more padding their pockets with the excess, like Zacchaeus.
- To the soldiers — and these are surely not Roman soldiers but Jewish inspectors that accompany the tax collectors and line their pockets too — he says:
- “Don’t intimidate people or falsely accuse, and be content with your wages.”

- These inspectors were known for threatening and sometimes roughing up people to get more money out of them. No more!
- Notice that in every case, they must *do* something.
- This is obviously not salvation.
- Some like to say this is what they are to do *after* salvation.
- It is the way genuine Christians will act, they say.
- If that’s the case, then works are the determining factor as to whether one has been saved or not.
- No, these works are not for confirming salvation.
- They are the works necessary if one is to be rewarded by Jesus in His coming kingdom.
- They are the works necessary to qualify to rule with Him.

We come at last to the invitation

- What is the result of John’s preaching?
- Matt. 3:5-6 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.
- Multitudes of believers respond by getting right with God and submitting to baptism.
- The *all* seems to be a manner of speaking.
- Obviously, not everyone from Jerusalem and Judea was baptized.
- However, there is something exciting here.
- John experiences a great revival, much like Elijah his predecessor had experienced on Mt. Carmel.
- Multitudes are repentant and get baptized to renounce their sins.
- Surely, this must mean hundreds, if not thousands, respond to John’s message.
- However, the religious leaders, by and large, do not.

What a tragedy when children of God do not obey the Lord and do not see their need to confess sin and forsake it by the grace of God.

- Of course, this is a message to the Jewish people of Jesus' day.
- But because the Jewish religious leaders rejected it, Jesus took the offer off the table and now offers it to you and me.
- Are you preparing for the coming kingdom by repenting of your sinfulness and living obediently?
- John's message is essentially a call to revival, in the spirit of 2 Chron. 7:14.
- Oh, that God's people would take Him up on His promise and meet His conditions!
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS!