

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 8, Chapter 3 Continued 2

As we re-open Matthew chapter 3, we left off with verse 7, the mention of Sadducees and Pharisees coming to John ostensibly to be immersed by him, but in reality it was to investigate this strange man who seemed to have developed a large following nearly overnight. Let's re-read beginning with verse 8.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 3:8 - end

John immediately discerned that the Sadducees and Pharisees who came to him were not coming with trueness of heart. He knew this not because he had some divine ability to read minds or hearts but because he well knew what the Sadducee and Pharisee leadership believed and taught, and that it was fundamentally in conflict with Holy Scripture and therefore in conflict with what John's baptism was all about.

The Sadducees were Jewish aristocrats who ruled over the Temple. Not since the Maccabees had succeeded in taking the Temple back from the pagan gentile Antiochus Epiphanies and his army (about 190 years earlier than John the Baptist's time), was the Temple leadership structured or occupied by the Levite clans that God had ordained in the Torah. Rather, unauthorized priests (not of the correct priestly lineage) were put in charge, and then later those who became even the High Priests literally purchased their way into their prestigious and powerful positions.

To understand what a mockery of the Temple system these Sadducees were, one must try to piece together what it is that they believed and taught. To begin with, the Sadducees were complicit with Rome in their handling of the Jewish

people since the only thing that actually mattered to them was holding on to their wealth and authority. Notice carefully what they denied: they did not believe in resurrection, and refused acceptance of the existence of any kind of afterlife. They believed not in human free-will, or even God's will per se, but rather in the thoroughly Greco-Roman concept of Fate. These doctrines would set them on a path of irreconcilable differences with the teachings of the man for whom John was divinely sent to prepare the way: Messiah Yeshua. Interestingly, the Sadducees also denied the authority of Oral Torah, also known as Jewish Law, Tradition, and **Halakah**.

Sometimes it can be difficult to trace why a religious sect believes what they do and denies what they do. But in the case of the Sadducees denying the authority of **Halakah** the reason is rather obvious: it was as a result of their political and religious rivalry with the Pharisees. **Halakah** (Tradition) was the center and focus of the teachings of the political/religious sect of the Pharisees. Recall we have discussed on a couple of occasions that there was a well ordered dual religious system in place in the 1st century A.D.: the Temple system and the Synagogue System. The common Jews and many of the wealthier Jews were attached to one synagogue or another and that was where they obtained their moral, ethical, and religious instruction. Much of their social life revolved around the synagogue. The Temple system was where the common people went when they needed legal justice (the Sanhedrin being the highest court), and it is also where they followed God's laws concerning sacrificing, tithing, and observing the ordinances of the appointed times including the biblical feasts. The Temple was also where, according to the Torah, the people were to go for direct Torah instruction from the Levite priests; but that practice had long ago died out.

I want to point out Matthew's acute awareness of this dual religious system and the position and place each of these systems inhabited within Jewish religious and social life, as well as the authority structure of each. It might surprise you to know that even though Jewish scholars give no credence to the New Testament's claim of Yeshua of Nazareth as being the Messiah, they readily acknowledge that the most complete (nearly the only) record of the history, practices, and beliefs of 1st century Judaism is found in this same New Testament. Paul's letters and the Book of Matthew more than any others seem (from my personal interaction with Jewish biblical scholars) to be the ones they consult the most..... and I think for good reason. Paul was a highly trained and learned Pharisee and a prolific writer who dealt with both Holy Land and Diaspora Jews, and Matthew was clearly a well-educated Jewish Believer who

had been deeply immersed into the Jewish culture of the 1st century and so understood many of the cultural nuances.

John the Baptist knew upfront that what the Sadducees believed and much of what the Pharisees believed were not compatible with what he believed and with what he strongly felt he must teach in advance of, and soon alongside, the ministry of the Messiah of Israel, Jesus. He knew that nothing he said was going to change their minds, and in fact they didn't honestly come to him as seekers of truth, but rather they came to intimidate the people who were flocking to John and to try to find fault with him.

It has been a common Christian teaching for centuries that the Pharisees and Sadducees as depicted in chapter 3 are representative of all Israel, and the sincere people coming to John to be baptized are representative of the Church. Later in verse 9 when John says that mere descent from Abraham is not sufficient to prove one's distance from sin, he adds that God could raise up sons of Abraham from stones. So it has been an equally common teaching that these stones are representative of gentiles. The early Church Father Jerome (from the 4th century) used as his belief that the stones in this passage meant gentiles by pointing to Ezekiel 36. In his commentary on Matthew Jerome says this:

"God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." He calls the Gentiles stones because of their hard hearts. We read in Ezekiel: "I will revive their stony hearts and give them hearts of flesh".

Yet when we go to Ezekiel 36, which Jerome used to validate his point, we find that it was pertaining directly to Israel, whose people were to be gathered out of all nations and sent back into their ancestral land. This habit of cherry picking verses out of context and applying them willy-nilly to try to confirm or create a desired doctrine has been something of a plague within our Christian institutions, which (as did the Sadducees and Pharisees) lead the people to many false doctrines that blinded them to the truth. By no means was verse 9 referring to gentiles but rather the reference to the stones was simply an expression meant to indicate that although to be born to a Jewish mother was sufficient enough for one to be considered part of the covenant people of God (the Hebrews), and therefore to be considered a son of Abraham, it was the **faith** of Abraham that had to be appropriated and not merely his blood line.

Fellow Believers, it is important that we realize that there is biblical truth and

there is NOT biblical truth; and there's little in between. All too often Christians fold when confronting a fellow Believer who plainly misunderstands some of the most basic biblical truths, or when facing the sharp rebuttal of a person of another religion. In the 21st century that other religion is almost always Islam. We shy-away because, we claim, we value peace and harmony over disagreement. While it is not that we should all be as bold or as lacking in tact as John the Baptist (or Paul for that matter) by calling people snakes or stupid, nor should we be unyieldingly rigid on biblical and spiritual matters that are at times challenging, highly nuanced, and not so cut and dried (an attitude of my way or the highway), we also must not compromise on the weightier matters of critical importance such as the enduring relevance of God's laws and commands, and the supremacy of Christ's sacrifice on the cross above the central figure and doctrines of all other faiths.

Many Believers are reluctant to **defend** their faith because outside of a handful of bumper sticker sayings they learned in Church, they realize that they can't make a reasoned argument **for** their faith. Or they know that the outward evidence of their faith (the fruit) is lacking and they don't want to be embarrassed by someone who points it out. So often we hurriedly just disengage by telling the non-Believer or the deceived Believer that we respect their faith, and we move on....relieved. I don't think we should do that. Rather we can make it clear that we respect the person. But to tell them we respect their questionable faith is nothing we'll find any Apostle, John the Baptist, or even Christ saying because to do so validates in that deceived person what may be a very wrong faith that leads them further into darkness instead of into light. So what do we do? We all instinctively know when someone is coming to us for an honest inquiry, hopefully as a teachable person, versus when they're coming to trap us or simply wanting to engage in a dispute. Honest inquiry deserves an honest and well-mannered answer; but a person who comes only to be divisive or means to ensnare us or to display anger, deserves only to be given a polite "good bye". At the same time, we must equip ourselves with sound biblical truth, earned by serious Bible study, so that we can give a sincere person an honest and reasoned answer, and also know God's Word well enough to discern when we should take more time to explain versus when we should walk away. John the Baptist was doing exactly that when he called out those Sadducees and Pharisees who came to him with insincere motives.

In verse 10 John tells the Sadducees and Pharisees what happens to the insincere... like them. He uses the metaphor of an axe chopping down a tree that

doesn't produce good fruit and then destroying the felled tree with fire. The tree represents a person who is a member of God's covenant community: an Israelite. The fruit is the product of that person's life..... that is, his actions and deeds. It is what is seen outwardly that is a window into that person's character; it reveals what that person dedicates his life to. So bad fruit comes from bad character and good fruit comes from good character. But in the context of religious Judaism bad fruit means evil deeds or lack of good deeds, and good fruit means doing righteous deeds and works. I stress: everything that we're reading so far in this chapter has John applying it to his fellow Jews; and in this particular instance it is especially aimed at Jewish religious leadership that he sees as having bankrupt character thus producing only wicked fruit.

It is true that later on in Matthew's Gospel, Yeshua makes use of the same statement that John used; but more likely the reason for using it is that it seems to have been a rather standard Jewish expression of that era. Yeshua says this:

CJB Matthew 7:16-20 ¹⁶ *You will recognize them by their fruit. Can people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?* ¹⁷ *Likewise, every healthy tree produces good fruit, but a poor tree produces bad fruit.* ¹⁸ *A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, or a poor tree good fruit.* ¹⁹ *Any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire!* ²⁰ *So you will recognize them by their fruit.*

Christians of all branches have allegorized these words of Christ to make all kinds of applications. But in this quote, Christ is referring to ONE THING ONLY! Listen to the verse that precedes what I just quoted to you.

CJB Matthew 7:15-16 ¹⁵ *"Beware of the false prophets! They come to you wearing sheep's clothing, but underneath they are hungry wolves!"* ¹⁶ *You will recognize them by their fruit. Can people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?*

So who exactly was Yeshua referring to? It was false prophets. His admonition certainly was not being aimed at every Israelite in general. This use of the term false prophets meant false teachers of God's Word. By the 1st century it is not that the term "prophet" had lost its meaning as one who tells us of future events or consequences. In the New Testament unless the term prophet is referring to one of the prophets of old, nearly always it means a person who teaches the **Tanakh** (the Old Testament, the Bible). So we have 2 important take-aways

from this. First: biblical context must always be preserved. John was NOT making some vastly generalized statement about a tree not producing good fruit being cut down. He was applying it ONLY to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to investigate him and to bother the people who came for John's baptism. And Christ was not making some vastly generalized statement about a tree not producing good fruit being cut down. In this case He was applying it only to those who claimed they were teaching or preaching God's Word but in fact were not. And second, in both uses of this Jewish metaphor the result of bearing no fruit or bad fruit is the same: eternal destruction.

Those who learned Torah with me will recall that in the Bible God uses fire mostly for two purposes: either purification or for destruction. Purification is to burn off the dross of sin and imperfection, but it leaves the core element not only intact but pure. Destruction is to take a wicked thing and end its existence. From John's message the leaders and teachers of the Temple and the Synagogue are who are being warned; and from Christ's message the teachers of God's Word are again being warned only this time the warning is being more broadly applied to all Israelites who would claim they are teaching the biblical truth or are bringing "a word from the Lord" to others; but in fact they are not and instead they are twisting the truth in order to deceive.

In verse 11 Messiah is more formally introduced by John. His statement in the CJB is:

^{CJB} Matthew 3:11 *It's true that I am immersing you in water so that you might turn from sin to God; but the one coming after me is more powerful than I- I'm not worthy even to carry his sandals- and he will immerse you in the Ruach HaKodesh and in fire.*

It's more familiar form is found in the KJV.

^{KJV} Matthew 3:11 *I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:*

These two translations express exactly the same thing so there is no conflict. However the KJV translation is the better one to help us deal with what it means to be baptized in water unto repentance (repentance meaning, as the CJB properly explains, to turn from sin to God). The Theological approach is to say

either that it means that the water itself actually brings about our repentance, or that it summons repentance within us. However there is another alternative meaning that far more fits with the Bible in general. It is that immersion in water (baptism) expresses our already repentant condition. This position makes repentance a joint venture between the worshipper and God whereby an act of God's will places the needed faith within us in order that we can accept His truth, thereby enabling a response of the human will to sincerely repent. Thus until God moves upon a human the human does not move. Therefore even in our repentance God gets all the glory.

While John calls for an immersion in water that amounts to a public profession of the worshipper's act of repentance, he says that the One who is coming (Yeshua) will immerse this same repentant worshiper in the Holy Spirit, and with fire. Immersion in water is only ritually symbolic in one sense, but yet is done as an obedience to the commandment of God. However immersion into the Holy Spirit actually changes the very nature of that same person. This change is expressed by the words that follow "Holy Spirit, which are "with fire". Remember what we just discussed: fire is used for purification or it is used for destruction. The "fire" of the Holy Spirit brings divine purification to the worshipper, stripping that person of the uncleanness caused by a life time of sinning, and making him or her acceptable to God; rather than that person remaining unclean and unacceptable to God, thus suffering the divine destruction that will come to those who refuse the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Let me simplify that: acceptance of Our Savior allows us to be immersed into the Holy Spirit of God, which brings on a completely changed nature within us. Those who refuse it (Jew or gentile) will face the consequence of complete eternal destruction.

I want us to be very careful as we encounter phrases such as "immersion into the Holy Spirit", immersed in "fire", and so on. The writers of the Bible, under God's inspiration, use metaphors and illustrations and cultural situations of the physical world that they were familiar with in order to help describe and explain the otherwise inexplicable. But the physical is not the spiritual so we must not carry the illustrations and comparisons out too far. One of the main obstacles for Believers in the 21st century is to grasp what these metaphors and illustrations and cultural situations used to impart spiritual understanding meant to these 1st century Jews, because it is the meaning within that context that is the most correct.

Verse 12 presents the contrast to the last words of verse 11. In verse 11 John

speaks of the repentant worshipper being immersed into the Holy Spirit and in the fire (of purification); that is, to use the vernacular of today, what happens to the Saved. Verse 12 now speaks of the alternative; what happens to the unsaved. Notice how this illustration shows what happens when this same wheat from the same harvest is winnowed. Winnowing is a process of separation. In the winnowing process a winnowing fork is used to toss the harvest up into the air, and the breeze carries away the lighter part but the heavier part falls to the threshing floor. The usable wheat kernels are in this way separated from the waste part. The grain is saved and put away, but the unusable chaff is gathered up and burned up. The winnowing is another metaphor used to illustrate the consequence of those who have refused the baptism offered by Christ; a baptism that John says he cannot offer. Notice thus far how the saved and the unsaved will experience fire. The Believer's experience with fire will not only not hurt us or harm us, it will purify us. The non-Believers' experience with fire destroys them.

Now notice something else. Backing up just a bit, the opening words of verse 10 are: "Already the axe is at the root of the trees". And the beginning of verse 12 is: "He has with Him His winnowing fork". What would these 2 phrases say to you if you were a Jew living in the 1st century? To me they would say "imminent". They would say "any day, now". But those words would certainly not say to me "it will happen in some distant future". John, and then Jesus, were not the ones to raise the alert of the Apocalypse. They were living in the times of the expectation of it and their presence and message also seemed to validate it. The belief that the Jews were already in the End Times was well established, and it was further believed with each passing year of Roman occupation and each new atrocity perpetrated upon the Jews.

In a sudden turn of events, verse 13 changes the entire tone of what has been happening when Jesus comes to John to be immersed. Notice that we are finally definitively told where the baptisms of John had been taking place: at the Jordan River. I'll take a brief detour here to ask a question: why was John baptizing in the Jordan River and not at one of the many Mikvehs scattered around Jerusalem? More than likely it is because the Temple authorities never would have allowed it since whatever witness to purification immersion was required, it would have been under Temple rules and supervision. We've already established that John was a not a welcome figure to the Temple or the Synagogue, so he had to baptize at someplace where they held little or no control. The solution was the Jordan River.

Interestingly, the place where John was regularly baptizing and living at that time may have been found. Dr. James Tabor, Professor of Ancient Judaism at the University of North Carolina, and Shimon Gibson, head of the Archaeology Department at the University of the Holy Land feel the evidence is strong that this place has been discovered. And, right where one might expect it; east of Jerusalem at the Jordan River. It includes a cave where John lived, because we are told that he was in the desert. He needed to keep a certain distance from the Jewish religious authorities, and indeed this place would have provided that distance.

When Yeshua arrives at the Jordan River, John of course balks at the suggestion that he should baptize this man because he has already said that he is not fit to carry the sandals of the One who is coming (Yeshua); and yet Yeshua insists. The controversy and doctrinal debates that surround Yeshua's immersion by John is hard to overstate. I have personally found 9 different explanations for Jesus seeking this baptism and I know there are more. I am not sure I agree with the conclusion of any of them.

It is my opinion that what leads to these many (and sometimes strange) doctrines about Yeshua's baptism is because of trying to vault Him from His 1st century, Jewish culture and environment into our present age, with Christ leaving behind His Jewishness and becoming a Christian.

When we deliberate about this event (that in any case is not without its mystery) and take into account the very Jewish nature of it, some aspects of it become more clear. For one thing: this was hardly Yeshua's first immersion. He would have been immersed hundreds of times by this point in His life, just as any observant Jew would have been; especially a Jew that lived in the Holy Land as opposed to one who lived out in the far flung Diaspora.

I spoke to you before about what, exactly, John's baptism was meant to do. And how even among the 3 synoptic Gospel accounts, it isn't entirely clear. I think then when we look at them as a whole from the long view and not the microscopic, the meaning comes into better focus: it is about repenting from sins. I think this because typically immersion (baptism) had to do with being purified from some sort of ritual uncleanness. It was as a required preparation for entering the Temple grounds, for example. Jews well understood that water didn't atone for sin; sin required the spilling of innocent blood at the Temple altar. So John's immersion had to do less with purification and more with declaration. And

the declaration was that the candidate had decided in his or her heart that they were a sinner, they were sorry for offending God, and that they no longer wanted to sin but rather they wanted to turn back to God and His ways. No doubt the undercurrent of the times in which the Jews thought they were living in the End of Days drove many to search themselves inwardly and question whether they were indeed right with God..... or not. When we look around at the world we live in today, does it not send up some red flags indicating that we ought to be doing to same..... and perhaps with the same motive?

But then the question becomes: if Christ was born sinless, and had remained sinless all of His life, then why His insistence that He be baptized for "repentance of sins"? His answer to that question helps only a little bit. In verse 15 Yeshua tells John it is to "do everything righteousness requires". But what does that mean? Again, there is little scholarly consensus. I'd like to offer this as a solution: virtually every suggestion proposed by Bible scholars to interpret this passage that I've ever seen assumes that the righteousness being spoken of is human righteousness..... OUR righteousness. Rather I think this is speaking of God's righteousness. Instead of spending a great deal of time explaining this, on your own please read the Torah Class lesson #21 on the Book of Exodus. There this matter is dealt with in detail. For today I will only give you the bottom line: it is that God's righteous is all about salvation. God's righteousness is a saving righteousness. God's righteousness is His will to bring about righteousness in humans according to His plan. And His plan involved a Messiah that was as human as He was divine.

Thus in Yeshua's eyes, He journeyed the long distance down the Jordan Valley from his home in the Galilee to obey His Heavenly Father and to begin to carry out His part of The Father's plan of salvation. In this way, Yeshua achieved the righteousness of God. So much so that at that same moment we're told that the Holy Spirit of God descended upon Him like a dove. This does NOT mean that a supernatural dove lighted upon Christ. Rather this describes a spiritual happening in physical terms, and physical terms and illustrations are all we have to use. So let me say this another way: God's righteous is what Yeshua was referring to..... not human righteousness.... but of course humans benefit from it. God's righteousness is His will to save. Yeshua is the focus and fulfillment of God's plan to save, and thus since Yeshua is God, He too carries within Him God's righteousness. The Holy Spirit coming down from Heaven is meant as visible proof of this since Yeshua was also a readily identifiable human being who grew up in Nazareth of the Galilee. And then a voice from Heaven..... clearly the

Father's voice since Christ was chest deep in the River Jordan at the time..... said that this man was the Father's Son whom He loves and in whom He is well pleased.

Let's back up a bit. One of the things we see happening here (when Jesus comes to John) is that we have a contrast developed between John and Jesus. Jesus is supreme and above John. This might sound simple and obvious to us today. But there is no doubt that this was not necessarily how John's followers took it. One such example takes place in Acts 19. Recall that John by this time was long dead.

CJB Acts 19:1-7 *While Apollos was in Corinth, Sha'ul completed his travels through the inland country and arrived at Ephesus, where he found a few talmidim. ² He asked them, "Did you receive the Ruach HaKodesh when you came to trust?" "No," they said to him, "we have never even heard that there is such a thing as the Ruach aKodesh." ³ "In that case," he said, "into what were you immersed?" "The immersion of Yochanan," they answered. ⁴ Sha'ul said, "Yochanan practiced an immersion in connection with turning from sin to God; but he told the people to put their trust in the one who would come after him, that is, in Yeshua." ⁵ On hearing this, they were immersed into the name of the Lord Yeshua; ⁶ and when Sha'ul placed his hands on them, the Ruach HaKodesh came upon them; so that they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. ⁷ In all, there were about twelve of these men.*

So there were independent groups of John's disciples who had developed their own sense of what baptism meant, what should happen afterwards, and still maintained something that could only be called John's baptism. However, John never claimed that his baptism brought salvation; only that it was for repentance of sins. Repentance is not the same as trust in Christ. Repentance is a necessary step towards salvation, but it is not salvation.

Good New Testament scholars note a particular tension that grew between John and Jesus, and between their separate groups of disciples. We learn of the ambiguity in John's mind about Yeshua in another part of the Book of Matthew.

CJB Matthew 11:1-3 *After Yeshua had finished instructing the twelve talmidim, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns nearby. ² Meanwhile, Yochanan the Immerser, who had been put in prison,*

heard what the Messiah had been doing; so he sent a message to him through his talmidim,³ asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?"

Some time after John's immersion of Yeshua, and after Yeshua had chosen His 12 disciples and was well into His earthly ministry, John was not certain about who Yeshua was. Therefore, no doubt John's own flock wasn't certain either. And the story in Acts 19 says that as much as 30 years after Yeshua's death and resurrection, there remained groups of John's disciples who still didn't understand who Yeshua was, and what it meant to receive the Holy Spirit in Yeshua's name. Even so, were these disciples of John saved? No they were not. Because it is the receiving of the Holy Spirit that is both reward and proof of our salvation.

We'll begin Matthew chapter 4 next time.