

Synopsis 014a Description of the Messiah

[Matthew 3:1-13] For the last few weeks, we've been looking at the appearance of John on the scene in the wilderness around Judea. He came preaching two things that we are told about: He came preaching the Kingdom of the Heavens and he came preaching a baptism of repentance.

John didn't spend a lot of time preaching the common salvation, as that was old news to the Jews. Even the teaching of the Kingdom was old news. But, the teaching of "repent!" became a stumbling block to many. They thought that as children of Abraham, they had automatic entrance into the Kingdom. But, Abraham had an earthly seed and a heavenly seed, and many people did not realize just how far they had drifted from God's law. They had taken to following man's law, and as such, they needed to change or repent; they needed to reform the way they lived and they needed to change directions.

We looked at a parable in Matthew 21 in which a householder planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, to keep out those who don't belong, he dugged a winepress to prepare the fruits thereof (wine is that which cheers the heart of God and man; Judges 9:13), he built a tower for those who would operate it, and he leased it out. (You will find that Uzziah did that back in 2 Chronicles, for he loved husbandry.)

Well, what happened in this parable? When the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen that they might receive the fruits thereof, and the husbandmen took the servants, and they beat one, killed one, and stoned another. He sent more servants, and the same thing happened. Finally, he sent his son, saying, "Surely, they will reverence him".

Did they? No. Matthew 21:38 says, "But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance." They wanted to take it by force. They had no legitimate claim to the vineyard. Then, verse 39 tells us, "And they caught him, and cast *him* out of the vineyard, and slew *him*."

Is anyone going to get an inheritance that way? In Matthew 21:43, in which he's talking to wicked men, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

John came preaching the Kingdom, and he came teaching a baptism of repentance. Despite the fact that this was a stumbling block to many of the Jewish leaders, what happened?

[Matthew 3:5-6] "And they were baptized." This is in the imperfect tense, which simply shows the repetition of the act of baptism, as the crowds from Judea and the surrounding country kept going out to him. "And they went out", in verse 5, is also in the imperfect, which means this was a regular stream of folks going out to get baptized. They kept coming and coming, and they got baptized. They didn't hide it behind closed doors.

This baptism symbolized their being bound to a new life; it did not cause it, as some people teach.

But, they were baptized in the Jordan River by John, and what were they doing? They were confessing their sins. The words imply that confession is connected with baptism. They were baptized while in the act of confessing. If you will notice, this is an open, public baptism, and an open, public confession, not a private confession made to John.

In [Acts 19], there is an event in which some charlatans were trying to exorcise some evil spirits in the name of Jesus. But, they were doing this falsely, and in [verse 15], we read. The evil spirit leaped on them, prevailed against them, and these charlatans fled out of the house naked and wounded. Then, in [verse 17], we read. But, here is what I want you to see: [Acts 19:18]. It was public. They showed their deeds.

[Luke 3] This confession was connected with baptism. They were baptized while in the act of confessing. This was an open and public confession, not a private one. James 5:16 says, “Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” But, it was also an individual confession, and possibly even a specific one. Not necessarily what we would consider a terrible crime, either.

[Luke 3:10-11] This is the inner and less necessary inner garment. It’s more like a shirt. Not the more valuable outer garment. The outer garment served as a covering for the night, and as such, could not even be used as a pledge overnight. If someone gave you their outer garment as a pledge, you were instructed to return it to him before the sun goes down, whether or not the pledge was fulfilled. (Exodus 22:26-27)

[Luke 3:12-13] The word for “publican” is a compound Greek word from “tax” and “to buy”. They were collectors of Roman taxes. The Romans hired out the direct taxes and duties to others, on their payment of a certain *sum in publicum, into the public treasury*, from which they were called “publicans”. Sometimes, this sum was too much for any one individual to pay, so a company paid it.

These people were often the dregs of society, and they were so notorious for their extortions that they were habitually included in the same category with harlots and sinners. They often extorted more than their legal and fair share, and thereby gained great wealth. But, if a Jew had trouble persuading himself that it was right to even pay taxes, think about how much more heinous it must have been in their eyes to become the questionably honest instrument for collecting taxes. If a publican was hated, think about how much greater the disgust aimed against a publican who was also a Jew. The word “publican” was even used as a term of reproach by Jesus in Matthew 18:17. Everyone despised them. There are even Gentile sources that state that all publicans are robbers.

[Luke 3:13] It doesn’t say, “Quit collecting taxes”. It simply says, “Exact no more than that which is due you. Take what you’re supposed to, but don’t take any more. Don’t use dishonest means to gain more than you’re fair share.

[Luke 3:14] He doesn't say, "Throw down your spear and quit the army". He gives them instruction on how they should behave as soldiers. There were many soldiers stationed in the area, and many of them helped the publicans, and as such stood to gain by immoral means. Even other soldiers, other than the ones helping publicans, often stood to gain by extortion through several means.

They ask him, "What shall we do?" The first part of his response is, "Do violence to no man". This is a common expression in ancient Greek, and in the LXX, but is found only here in the NT. The literal meaning of the word is to shake thoroughly, and in so doing, to thoroughly terrify. It came to mean to extort money or property by intimidating. It was a process of blackmail to which Socrates referred. This act was a constant temptation to soldiers, not only to try to get some loot from those being intimidated, but if they didn't pay up, the soldiers would turn them in for rewards offered for arresting those committing certain crimes. But, might does not make right in the eyes of God.

This ties in with the second instruction: "Neither accuse any falsely." The soldiers would often intimidate someone, using physical force, for monetary gain, but people would stand to gain by informing on those committing certain crimes. Accusing someone falsely could gain a nice little reward, or could exact revenge upon an enemy.

He doesn't tell the soldiers to quit soldiering, but he does tell them quit intimidating and quit falsely accusing people. But, he also told them something else: "And be content with your wages." Discontent with wages was a primary complaint of many of the mercenary soldiers. The word for "wages", "opsOnion", was originally anything cooked and bought. From "opson", which means "cooked food", and "Oneomai", which means "to buy". It was originally anything eaten with bread, such as broiled fish, and it came to mean whatever is bought to be eaten with bread, and then it came to mean a soldier's pay or allowance. "OpsOnion". "Rations"; "pay"; "wages".

This word is used in only four places in the NT. [Romans 6] 1 Corinthians 9:7 uses this word. It says, "Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges?" That word "charges" is the same word. In other words, "Who goes to war supplying his own rations or wages". Who provides our rations or our wages? God. In 2 Corinthians 11:8, Paul is speaking and he says, "I robbed other churches, taking wages [of them], to do you service."

What I want you to see is right here in [Romans 6:23]. Rations; pay; wages; food. Death (thanatos) is the diet of sin. It's the rations of sin. Is that what you want?

[Matthew 3] They came, and were baptized by John in the Jordan River, and they were publicly confessing their sins. I don't know that they were confessing every little detail to everyone, but they were certainly admitting to being sinners. This was an open, public testimony given while being baptized.

[Matthew 3:7] “Ye offspring of vipers.” It doesn’t get any meaner than that. (As a side note, I want to point out that Jesus used this expression more than once. Anyone who says that Jesus was a “nice guy”, doesn’t really know much about Jesus.)

Ancients thought that some kinds of vipers ate their way out of their mothers. Killing one’s mother was the most hideous crime conceivable in some cultures.

This term expresses the deadly influence of both the Pharisees and Sadducees alike upon the community. Both were antagonistic, and the religious principles and spirit of both groups are poisoning the nation.

By being offspring of vipers, it would seem that their ancestors were vipers, and they are simply like them; full of hypocrisy and malice. The viper is very beautiful, but is full of poison; it looks innocent, but its teeth cannot be seen, and it is a dangerous and deadly creature. These men are like that. They make pretences to holiness, but they are full of deadly poison: Hypocrisy, malice, and error.

Would you want to be greeted like this? “Why, hey there, you old child of a viper, you!” What do you think these men who wanted to be seen as being very religious thought about it? They boasted of their being the seed of Abraham, and they put a lot of stock in that fact; that’s what they thought their salvation rested upon. They thought they were children of Abraham, and who were they being told they are the offspring of?

Think of the proverb that says, “Like father, like son”. They’re being told they’re the offspring of vipers. They’re the seed of the serpent. They’re children of the devil. “Oh ye generation or offspring of vipers!”

Who were these men about whom this was being said? Pharisees and Sadducees, right? These two rival parties do not often have anything in common, and John saw them coming for baptism. Well, who are they?

Alford speaks of “the Pharisees representing hypocritical superstition; the Sadducees carnal unbelief.” In order to properly understand the theological atmosphere of Palestine during this time, you have to have an adequate knowledge of both Pharisees and Sadducees.

The word “Pharisee” is from a Hebrew word meaning “separate”. After the ministry of the prophets ceased, godly men arose who sought to keep alive reverence for the law amongst the descendents of the Jews who returned from their captivity in Babylon. This movement degenerated into the Pharisaism during the time we are studying. This Pharisaism was a strict adherence to the letter of the law, but the law was overlaid with traditional interpretations, which was held as equal authority with the law itself. In other words, they put their law on a par with God’s law. The Pharisees were strictly a sect, and each member took an obligation to remain true to the principles of Pharisaism. (I suppose that some, such as Nicodemus could remain true to the original principles of Pharisaism, while denying what they became.) Pharisees were correct, moral, zealous,

self-denying, and self-righteous. They also had not sense of sin and need. They had good intentions, at least as their foundation, but how had it devolved? They became self-important, and became a burden to the people, but they were very powerful. (Scofield)

Sadducees, on the other hand, were not strictly a sect, but they were a group amongst the Jews who denied the existence of angels or other spirits, they denied all miracles, and most especially denied resurrection. They were the “rationalists” of that day and age, but were strongly entrenched in the Sanhedrin and priesthood. The Sadducees are not identified with any affirmative doctrine, but they simply denied the supernatural. They “rationalized” everything. I’m sure you’ve encountered people like that that. “Oh, that miracle was some sort of trick”, or “he wasn’t really dead”. That sort of thing.

There’s also a third major sect, called the Essenes, but they basically lived a life of the sort that Jesus espoused, but being hermits, probably would not have encountered Jesus. At least there is no mention of them anywhere in the NT.

Both groups followed the crowds to the Jordan. They wanted to jump on the bandwagon. They saw many people being looked upon, and they said, “Hey! We want some of that action!” Both groups wanted to be seen as being righteous in the eyes of men; they wanted to be esteemed by people. But, even though John had welcomed the multitudes, he exposed their hypocrisy right in the presence of the huge crowds.

“Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Why are you here? The “wrath to come” cannot mean spending the rest of eternity in the lake of fire; baptism can’t save you from that. But, true repentance, of which baptism is a symbol, could save them from some future calamity and destruction.

[Matthew 3:8] “Show me some proof before I baptize you.” John wanted more than lip service. God wants more than lip service. He wants repentance. A tree is known by its fruits, and true repentance is known by the works.

[Matthew 3:9] John touched the tender spot, which was their pride. They felt that the “merits of the fathers,” especially of Abraham, were enough for all Israelites. He probably pointed at the pebbles all over the place and said, “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” “Don’t flatter yourselves and think that God needs you in order to make good His promise of a seed to Abraham; for I’m telling you that, though you were all to perish, God is as able to raise up a seed to Abraham out of those stones.” Isaiah 51:1 says, “Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock *whence* ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit *whence* ye are digged.” God doesn’t need you; you need God.

[Matthew 3:10] Here, where it says, “The axe is laid unto the root”, the idea is not that it has already been used, but that it lies at the root of the trees. It’s there, and it’s ready for business. This tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down; it’s cut off! And who benefits from this? The Gentiles. We do. Matthew 21:43 says, “...The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”

[Matthew 3:11-12] We don't have time to really delve into this right now, but who is this talking about? This is talking about the Messiah. The Jewish leaders of the day were looking for a Messiah, but were they looking for the correct one? Will he one day be what they were looking for? Will it make a difference then?

What did the Messiah come to do? He came to save. Did he come to save everyone or just the Jews? (2 Corinthians 5:15; he died for all.) Did he come to save partially or completely? (1 Thessalonians 5:23) (Gentiles could always be saved; Isaiah 56:6-8)

He also came to give us life. James 1:12 says, "Blessed *is* the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him." This is the life that we can look forward to. What does that mean? We will pick up here next week.