

The Messiah's Messenger

Matthew 3:1-12

18 Oct 09

Let's take our Bibles this morning and open up again to the gospel of Matthew. Matthew chapter three, as we continue our study through this gospel. And it really is a great joy for me week after week to be studying through this gospel and to be learning about our Savior as Matthew presents the account of His birth and His life and His ministry, His death and resurrection here in this gospel. And it's a real privilege each week to come and to share with you some of what I've learned as I've been able to study this throughout the week. And I'm excited about this passage that we're going to look at this morning. Matthew chapter three verses one through twelve. Let me read those verses for us as we come to God's word. Matthew chapter three verses one through twelve.

It says, "Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!' Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'"

Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is the King of Kings. Jesus is the Lord of Lords. That's the message that Matthew's been proclaiming loud and clear in his gospel and we've seen that message masterfully presented in the first two chapters that we've looked at so far. And today we come to this familiar account of this man named, or called, John the Baptist. This account regarding John is so significant that it's found in all four of the gospels. And all four point out that John came as a messenger preparing people for the ministry of Jesus. So John comes as the Messiah's messenger. The one who was to prepare the people so that they would receive Jesus as their Messiah, their king, and that, by the way, is the purpose for which Matthew has written this gospel, so that people would know Jesus as their Messiah, their Savior, their king. And no doubt, John's ministry was unique in several ways. He came at a specific time and place to perform a ministry that had been particularly designed for its time. But, it is true that as Christians, as individual Christians, and as a church, we too have the privilege of being the Messiah's messengers. And while our situation might be very different from John's, we can

learn from his example as the Messiah's messenger. So, let's look carefully at this account, familiar as it might be to many of you, let's look at it carefully. And as we do we are going to identify four characteristics of the Messiah's messenger. Four things that were true of John, four things that need to be true of you and me as Christians and as a church in order to be the Messiah's messengers.

First characteristic I want you to take note of is that the Messiah's messenger preaches the gospel. The Messiah's messenger preaches the gospel. Look at the first three verses again. "Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!'" Matthew starts off with that little phrase there in verse one, "Now in those days," but actually Matthew is fast-forwarding quite a bit here in the life of Christ as he records it in his gospel. He's actually skipping about 28 years in between the end of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three. Based on what we're told in Luke chapter three, the first couple of verses, we can say that this happened about 26 A.D. We're told it was in the 15th year of Tiberius Cesar so that helps us to identify the time. Twenty-six A.D. So this is quite a bit later than where chapter two ended. But when he says, "In those days," it's still in those days in the sense that Jesus had been living all of those years in Nazareth, which is where we left Him at the end of chapter two. His family had moved from Egypt up to Nazareth and that's where Jesus lived and grew up all those years. And it's during those times, those days when He's living in Nazareth, that these events occur.

"In those days John the Baptist came." He arrived on the scene. He began his public ministry. His given name was John. He was called the Baptist because of what he did. You know that wasn't his name. What do you want to name your son? John the Baptist. No, his name was John, he was called the Baptist because that's what he did. And we're told that he began his ministry in the wilderness of Judea which is a really barren stretch of land, west of the Dead Sea. It would incorporate even the southern part of the Jordan River Valley. That's where he sets up to do his ministry. And how did he start his ministry? Verse one says that he came preaching. His ministry began with preaching a message. What was the message? Verse two gives us a summary. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And he did this because, or as verse three says for, he's the one referred to in Isaiah chapter 40 verse three which we had read for us earlier, which is quoted here. He's the one that's referred to there. He's the voice crying out in the wilderness, preaching out in the wilderness. And his message is "Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." Now that's a significant statement if you understand the conditions in ancient times. In those days roads were very rare. So, a king would send a messenger on ahead of wherever he was going to go to not only proclaim that he was on his way, that the king was coming, but also so that a road might be prepared for him to travel on to get to that location. So, it was making ready the way of the Lord, making his paths straight. And in a spiritual sense, that's what John is doing. He's preparing the way in the anticipation of the coming king. That's what John was called to do. And that's what John did. And we as Christians, we as a church, have a similar calling. We're to prepare the way. We're to help people remove hindrances. We're to help remove those hindrances that people might have in their thinking, preparing the way for them to receive the king, to receive the Savior. And we do that by preaching the gospel.

You'll notice that summary statement there in verse two. The first word is repent. An important word. A word probably not heard enough in our day. Repent is a word that speaks of an inner change. Most basically, it speaks of a change in your thinking. But it's always a change, an inner change, a change in your thinking that produces a corresponding outward change. It's a word that's definitely related to the issue of sin. It definitely includes the idea of sorrow over sin. And that sorrow over sin being a part of the change that's involved in what's called repenting. This word speaks of a radical transformation of the entire person from the inside out. But understand that it's not a result of self-effort or self-reformation. That's not what repentance is about. It's not about you kind of getting your act together. Repentance involves turning away from self, recognizing that self is the source of my sin. It's turning away from self and it's turning to the Savior who is the solution to my sin. In Mark's account, Mark chapter one verse four, he says that John came preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance isn't just getting my act together. Repentance is turning to the Lord who I have ignored, who I have rejected, who I have disobeyed, and humbly calling out to Him in faith that He might forgive all of my sins.

Well, on what basis do I think that He can or will forgive all of my sins? Well you might remember in John chapter one verse 29 we're told that John the Baptist one day pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus, as a sacrificial lamb, satisfied the demands of God for all who would repent and believe in Him. God demands that sin be judged. Jesus absorbed that judgment on behalf of all who will repent. Now that's the message. John shows up preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb of God. He came bringing good news. He came bringing the gospel. And in doing so He manifests a profound compassion for His people who were stuck in the mire of their sin. What was his motive for doing that? Well, the rest of verse two says, "For the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The motive for preaching the gospel is the truth about the kingdom and here he says the kingdom is at hand, or it has come near, and that's because the king there. The king is amongst them.

You'll notice that Matthew calls it the kingdom of heaven. Now get used to that expression, you're going to see it 32 times in Matthew's gospel. In Mark and Luke, you'll see them refer to it as the kingdom of God. So, what's the difference? Why is Matthew calling it the kingdom of heaven, and the other gospels call it the kingdom of God. Well, Matthew is writing primarily, remember, to a Jewish audience. The Jews were very careful about their use of God's name. Orthodox Jews are still to this day. And so he refers to it as the kingdom of heaven, heaven being understood as the residence of God. And, God's kingdom is a frequent topic amongst the Old Testament prophets. Jews were expecting a kingdom. They had many wrong ideas about what that kingdom was all about and Jesus will address all of those wrong ideas throughout His ministry. But, there is the promise of a kingdom with a king who would rule in that kingdom. Just to show you one example, it's not too far back in your Bibles. It's in Zechariah chapter 14 verse nine, just a couple of books back from Matthew. Here's just one example of a statement regarding a coming kingdom. It says, "And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one." Talking about a kingdom where the Lord will be the king. Now we've seen that the king would be a chosen descendent of David. We've seen that Jesus is that descendent. Jesus is that king. And that kingdom is drawing near. That kingdom is drawing near. That's a

motive to preach the gospel. Not too long from now Christ is going to come back to this earth and establish His kingdom. There will be a kingdom, He will be the king. Not too far from now. Now is the time to preach the gospel. And the Messiah's messenger does that. The Messiah's messenger preaches the gospel. We're to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins based on the work of the Lamb of God, Jesus Himself. If we as Christians, if we as a church want to follow the example of John as the Messiah's messenger, then we have to be committed to preaching the gospel. That's what the Messiah's messenger does.

Let me show you a second characteristic of the Messiah's messenger and that is that the Messiah's messenger lives distinctly. The Messiah's messenger lives distinctly. Verses four through six. "Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins." So what do you think? Did John live a distinctive lifestyle? Not a very ordinary kind of guy. John's story is really an amazing one. He's the son of a Levitical priest. A man named Zacharias. You might be familiar with that in John chapter one. Zacharias had a wife named Elizabeth and we're told that they were a godly couple. But Elizabeth had never had a child. She was barren, unable to have children. And when they were well past the normal age for having children an angel appeared to Zacharias in the temple one day as he was performing his priestly ministry there, and this angel told Zacharias that he and his wife were going to have a son and that son's name was going to be John. And the angel said that this son was going to live a distinctive lifestyle. He would be a lifelong Nazarite. The Nazarite vow some spoken of in the Old Testament, normally it was practiced by people over just a short confined period of time. John the Baptist would be a Nazarite his whole life. And there were restrictions placed on Nazarites. One was which, which is mentioned in Luke 1:15, is that he would never drink any alcohol for all of his life. Not an easy thing to do in that day and age. Also, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. And, Zacharias was told that his son would have a unique prophetic ministry as the forerunner to the Messiah. So, while his birth isn't as miraculous as a virgin birth, it's still a miracle. In summing up his early life, Luke chapter one verse 80 tells us John lived in the deserts until the time of his ministry. It's quite possible that John's parents died when he was young because they were old when he was born. And it was believed he lived in the deserts from the time he was a teenager until the time he began his ministry which was when he was 30 years old. We know that from Luke 4:23 because we're told that's how old Jesus was when he started his ministry and we know that John was six months older than Jesus.

He would live in the deserts until the time of his ministry. He looked like a guy who lived in the deserts. Didn't he? He had a garment of camel's hair. It makes you want to itch just thinking about it. That speaks of a coarse kind of a cloth made from weaving camel's hair. Common amongst poor people of that time. You know in those days there wasn't a lot to accessorize your wardrobe. A lot of people wore robes of one kind or another. Everybody had a belt. Because you needed that belt to cinch up that robe and when you did work you'd want to pull up that robe and tuck it into that belt. So the belt was the major accessory. A lot of people went all out on that belt, because what else do you got? John didn't do that. His belt was just a cheap leather belt, very common. He ate locusts, which again was common among

the poor people, still eaten today in places where they are more common. Locust, in fact let me tell you how to prepare locusts. You want to remove the head and the legs and the wings and then you have your choice, you can boil them or stew them or roast them. Put that in your recipe box! That was for free. I just threw that in for you. You might want to have a lot of honey nearby if you're going to eat these locusts. Wild honey came from wild bees, common, abundant, again cheap. You didn't have to pay anything. You didn't have to pay anything for these locusts. You didn't have to pay anything for this honey. His lifestyle was appropriate for living in the wilderness.

But it was also appropriate for his ministry. His appearance was symbolic. Not only his message but his food and clothing was a rebuke to a worldly minded generation. A rebuke to the self-indulgent. Also, as we'll see as we go along, John is often compared to Elijah, and there is definitely a connection between him and Elijah. And he probably even looked like Elijah. If you read 2 Kings 1:8 you get the description of Elijah. He and John looked a lot alike. So his lifestyle was appropriate and symbolic for his prophetic role. Now, we're not commanded to follow John's example in living just like he did. Wearing the same kind of clothes, eating the same kind of food. But John's lifestyle does serve to remind us how much people allow to get between them and God. Because when we get to chapter 11, we're going to hear Jesus say that John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever lived. How many other people do you think had that opinion of him? A guy who lives in the wilderness, wears camel hair garments, eat locusts and honey, he's poor. He's the greatest man who ever lived? Yeah, that's what Jesus said. All the things people think they have to have aren't really necessary. And in fact in the case of many Christians, all the stuff that they think they have to have really just gets in between them and their ability to serve God.

John's life does remind us that the Messiah's messengers are to live distinctly. As Christians we're called to live like aliens and strangers in this world. Peter said that in 1 Peter 2:11. We're to live like citizens of another kingdom. This kingdom that we preach about, we're to live like citizens of that kingdom. And our lives are to reflect the values of that kingdom, not this world. And boy that goes contrary to the philosophy running through the churches in America today that say the church needs to be really cool and relevant if we are going to reach this culture. Then how do they explain John the Baptist? Because he was really different. Very un-cool. And he stood out. And the common people who understood what it was like to be oppressed and burdened by the expectations of their culture, well they found John and his difference to be refreshing and attractive. Here's a guy who wasn't hung up in all this stuff that everybody else is. Here's somebody who's really different. And look at verses five and six. It says, "Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins." Everybody is going out to check out this guy John. He had an enormous impact. Word about him spreads all over the place and just to get to where he was from Jerusalem would have been a twenty mile walk. And a lot of other people went much further than that. But, John attracted attention because he was so different than what they were used to from their religious leaders. And, the people were believing his message and they were responding by confessing their sins and being baptized. That's an absolutely amazing scene that's being presented. All these people flocking out to hear this guy who was so different and they're believing his message, they're confessing their sins and they're getting baptized. Amazing. Absolutely amazing. And this baptism that he's doing is a unique, unprecedented thing. And the people are submitting to it.

Now the Jews had practiced a kind of baptism, a proselyte baptism. If a Gentile wanted to become a Jew there were a number of steps they had to go through one being if they are a male they had to be circumcised. And it included somewhere along the way a baptism but it was way different from what John was doing. John's doing something unique. In Matthew 21:25 it says that John's baptism was from heaven. In John 1:23 it says God sent John to do this baptism. He's doing something unique. He's doing something new. He's doing something different. And the people are submitting to it. People are attracted to this man with this distinctive lifestyle. A man who just lived a simple life that was focused on the Lord. I think people today are attracted to Christians and to churches who are like that. Where there is a refreshing difference. Where the people and the church are real and authentic and there's an integrity between their message and their life. People are attracted to the reality. People who are burdened with the hassles of life are attracted to people who have been set free. The Messiah's messengers have an impact because they live distinctly. They preach the gospel and they live a life that matches their message. They live like people who have been set free from the demands of sin and this world. They don't live like everybody else. They live like people who have been set free. So that begs the question, doesn't it? What do people see in you and me and in our church? What do people in your family see? Do they see somebody who's been set free from sin? They know you're a Christian, you say you're a Christian. Are they attracted to what they see in your life? What about the school that you might attend. Do people there even know you are a Christian? And do they see something attractive about your life? Do they see that you live distinctly, that you're not burdened and pressured like every other student there is, who's all worried and freaked out about how well they are going to do in school and what kind of job they're going to get and all that kind of stuff? Do they see you as somebody who's been set free from all of that?

We could keep going down the list. What about the place that you work? Do they see a difference in you? Somebody's who's been set free, who doesn't think about things the way the rest of the world does? Somebody who's headed in a different direction? Somebody who's not all hung up on the desires of the world? People who have an impact for Christ live distinctly. The Messiah's messengers, they lived distinctly.

Thirdly, the Messiah's messenger denounces false religion. The Messiah's messenger denounces false religion. Verses 7-10. "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, We have Abraham for our father; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'" The Messiah's messenger denounces false religion. That only makes sense, doesn't it? It only makes sense. If you are the Messiah's messenger and if you believe salvation can only be found in Jesus Christ and if you have a compassion for those who are burdened by sin and the demands of the world, including the religious demands of this world, then you're going to expose any error. You're going to draw a clear line between what's right and what's wrong, what's true and what's false. And, here come the teachers of error to John, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Now, they didn't come to be baptized. They came to check out the baptism. They came to where John was baptizing in

order to check it out. In fact in John chapter one verses 19-28, the picture there is that they sent a delegation to represent the whole group. They sent a certain number of them out there to check out this guy John and report back on who does this guy think he is. But, they rejected John and they rejected his baptism. In Luke chapter seven, let me just read you a couple of verses that state this clearly. Luke chapter seven verses 29 and 30. It says, "When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John." They rejected it. They didn't submit to it. They didn't acknowledge John's message. They didn't acknowledge that he was from God. In fact, Jesus challenges them on this in Matthew chapter 21 verse 25. Jesus says, "The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men? And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven', He will say to us, Then why did you not believe him? But if we say, 'From men', we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.' And answering Jesus, they said, 'We do not know.' He also said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'" They would not acknowledge that it was from heaven. In verse 32 Jesus wraps that conversation up by saying, "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him." They rejected him. They didn't believe that he was from God. They didn't believe his message. They didn't submit to baptism.

Now you need to understand that the Pharisees and Sadducees, they weren't friends with each other. They represented the opposite extremes on the religious spectrum. The Pharisees were on one far end. They were the legalists, the ritualists, the traditionalists, and they were absolutely fanatical in their zeal for purification so they developed lots of rules and taught them as laws. They taught their traditions as though they were laws from God. They separated themselves from the common people because they didn't want to be made impure by contact with people who weren't as spiritual as they are. But even though separated themselves in many regards, they had a great influence over the people because there were so many of them and they were so active in teaching zealously presenting their views. Sadducees were the other end of the spectrum. They were the liberals. If the Pharisees are the legalists, they are the liberals. If the Pharisees are the ritualists they are the rationalists. They rejected the traditions of the Pharisees. They rejected and supernatural spirits. They didn't believe in angels. They didn't believe in a resurrection. They only held to the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. They were much smaller in number than the Pharisees but the Sadducees were really wealthy. And they exercised a lot of political influence. You know, we have both these extremes today. The traditionalists, the legalists, and the liberals, the wealthy liberals who are into politics and all that kind of stuff. They were opposite from each other, Pharisees and Sadducees, but they were absolutely united in their opposition to the truth. And when they came to John, he rebuked them. "You brood of vipers." How would you like that? We have a greeters table out front. You're a first time visitor, you come strolling up, and they say, "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Pretty straight forward. A viper, it's a small, very poisonous desert snake. John was probably very familiar with vipers. Jesus is going to call these religious leaders vipers also in chapter 12 verse 34, chapter 23 verse 33. John obviously doesn't see them as truly repentant, and even though they are not repentant they do want to

escape the wrath that is coming, the judgment that is to come. The picture that John presents here is a bunch of snakes abandoning a field that has been set on fire.

Now one thing you need to take note of is that both John and Jesus were very compassionate towards sinners. Tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, they were attracted to John. They were attracted to Jesus. And John and Jesus were very compassionate towards them, very patient with them, but they both were very hard on religious hypocrites. Very hard on religious hypocrites. You brood of vipers. Is that hard enough for you? Very hard on religious hypocrites. But even in the rebuke there is the grace of a warning. Because he says in verse eight, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance." Bear or produce fruit. There's hope even for these hypocrites if they have real repentance. Again, notice that true repentance is not just a matter of words or a matter of a ritual but it is a real change of life that's evident by its fruit. Notice there, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And take note of the fact that the word fruit there is a singular. It's not fruits. It's fruit. He's not looking for a pile of good works. The Pharisees had that in abundance. What he's looking for is a change of direction in their hearts. A change of affection in their hearts. The Pharisees loved themselves, not the Lord. In verse nine, he addresses a common hindrance amongst their religions, or religious, even today this is common to rest in their religious heritage. They thought they were in because they were Jews and Abraham is their father. So, we must be in. All Jews thought that they would escape God's wrath because they are descendents of Abraham. That was just a sign of their own pride, an indication of their self-righteousness. And John's rebuking that here. He's clearly saying that not all of Abraham's physical descendents are going to be saved. In fact he goes beyond that to say, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. No doubt he pointed to stones along their river bank there at the Jordan. There are stones everywhere in Israel. This isn't a hard illustration to make. He's saying from these stones God can raise up children to Abraham and no doubt there's a play on words there too, because the word for stones there and children is similar. He attacks the pride of these religious hypocrites. He tells them that God can raise up people any time among the most unpromising material. And he warns them that they need to repent of this self-righteous approach they are taking because a judgment is coming. Verse 10, "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." There's a judgment coming, the axe is already laid at the root. It's imminent. There's a sense of urgency. This is about to happen. There needs to be repentance now. This axe is laid at the root of the tree. When you take your axe to the root of the tree that means you're completely eliminating the tree. It's a final removal. And every one that doesn't bear good fruit, even the ones who are the most honored religiously, if they do not bear the true fruit of repentance, they are going to be cast into the fire of judgment. This is a warning. This is warning those in a false religious system that judgment is coming. God is being patient. God is being gracious. But eventually time is going to run out. The Messiah's messenger addresses all forms of false religion. We understand the eternal consequences and make sure that there's no blurring of the line between what's true and what's false. False gospels have to be addressed and denounced. People have to be warned that that kind of a system is going to lead them to fire. We're going to see Jesus doing this constantly throughout His ministry because He's going to be constantly attacked by these false religious leaders. This is all the more reason to have compassion for those who are burdened by the error of false religious systems. All the people that are in those

systems. Messiah's messengers should have compassion for them, should warn them, should call them to repentance.

The Messiah's messenger is someone who preaches the gospel, someone who lives distinctly, someone who denounces false religion, and fourthly, the Messiah's messenger exalts the Messiah. The Messiah's messenger exalts the Messiah. Verses 11 and 12, "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." John's making it real clear here that he is not the issue. His role is rather insignificant compared to the one who's coming after him. John baptized with water for repentance. That was important but it was preliminary and it was external. Just clearing the way for someone and something that was much greater and which affected people internally. He says, "One's coming who is mightier." One's coming who is more powerful. One's coming who is greater. In fact, John says, "I'm not even worth to take His sandals off," which is the most menial job you could have. What do you do for a living? I take people's sandals off. You have to notice John's humility even though he was the most sought after preacher for centuries. There hadn't been a prophet for 400 years. John shows up, the crowds come out, multitudes of people, and yet John is humble.

John repeatedly denied that he was anything more than just a simple messenger. In fact, let's look at that passage in John chapter one. The passage about the delegation from the religious leaders came to check out who this guy is, who does he think he is. He's going to tell them who he thinks he is. John chapter one verse 19, it says, "This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' They asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' And he said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said.' Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, and said to him, 'Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' John answered them saying, 'I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.'" Who am I? I am just a voice. I'm nobody. There's One coming. I'm just telling you about Him. And compared to Him, I'm not even worth to untie His sandals.

Verse 30 says, "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" Very interesting statement. John was physically born to Elizabeth six months before Jesus was physically born to Mary. So when he says that this One is mightier than him, this One who's coming, this One who I'm not even worth to untie His sandals, he says this One existed before me. He acknowledges the eternal existence of Christ, that He is the Son of God. Exalting Christ, exalting the Messiah, means I have to have a humble view of myself. I have to have a humble view of myself. Now, we have a picture of John, John the Baptist. Kind of a stern, harsh, fiery preacher. "You brood of vipers!" But the reality is, John was a humble man, and in his humbleness, listen to this, in his humbleness he knew exceeding joy. Look at chapter three of John's gospel if you are still there. John chapter three

verse 28. It says, "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom." Who is the bridegroom? Jesus is the bridegroom. "But the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full." Hey, I'm nobody. This One Jesus, He's the bridegroom. I'm just His friend. But I'm really happy. I'm really happy that I'm His friend. I'm really happy that I get to hear His voice. I have joy that's been made full through this One. And then he makes that great statement there in verse 30. "He," speaking of Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Exalting the Messiah means I have a humble view of self and I magnify His work, which is what John did. Going back to Matthew chapter three, he magnifies the work of Jesus. My work is relatively insignificant. Not that it's unimportant or unnecessary, but it pales in comparison to His work. He says, I baptize with water. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now the Old Testament spoke of the coming work of the Spirit. You can see it in Isaiah 32, Isaiah 44, most significantly in Ezekiel 36 verses 26 and 27, and Ezekiel 39:29, about the Spirit coming and Jesus is the One who's going to fulfill that ministry. He's going to baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This work of the Holy Spirit is going to bring about a radical change. That passage in Ezekiel 36 talks about giving people a new heart and cleansing them.

And here He says that He is going to baptize you not only in the Holy Spirit but with fire. Now some people think that this fire is another reference to judgment because fire is often referred to judgment, but grammatically it's linked to the work of the Spirit. And so this fire here most likely speaks of the purifying, refining work of the Spirit of God in a believer's life. He's going to do something. John says, I can baptize you in water which symbolizes purification. He's going to do something inside through the work of the Holy Spirit that really is going to purify you and refine you like a refiner's fire. That's the One who's coming. A Messiah who's going to do a mighty work, a Messiah who's going to do a saving work that will change people on the inside. And, His mighty work involves that of judging, verse 12. And He's the judge. It says, "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Talks about a winnowing fork and a threshing floor. Typically they would have a place, a hard place where they would bring all the wheat. They would have an oxen walk over it to kind of thresh it, tear it up, separate the kernels from the chaff. And then they take this winnowing fork and they usually would have these threshing floors on a hill so you get a breeze blowing. You take your fork, you throw it all up in the air. The wheat, the heavier kernels fall back down. The wind blows the chaff away. That's the picture that he's presenting here. And what he's saying there is that the Messiah does a dividing work between those who are His and those who aren't His. The wheat, which are His people, believers, those baptized through the Holy Spirit, all of those are gathered into Him. But the chaff, those who reject Him, they're burned in unquenchable fire which speaks to what the whole Bible speaks to as the eternal punishment of those who reject the Messiah. It's an unquenchable never dying fire. It's an eternal punishment. Those are the only two possible destinies. One with the Messiah forever or one in eternal judgment. And the Messiah is the judge. The messenger exalts the Messiah. He points people to the Messiah. Let's people know they have to deal with this One, this Messiah, this One who is the judge. This One who does the mightier work. This One who is eternal. This One who is the Son of God. Parents, you need to help your children understand that the ultimate issue in their life is between them and this

person, Jesus Christ. It's not ultimately between them and you, it's ultimately between them and the Messiah. You're to be the Messiah's messenger, exalting the Messiah, pointing them to Him.

I'm nothing more than a messenger. He's the mightier one. He's the greater one. And everybody will answer to Him. You can receive Him and know full joy, or you can reject Him and enter into the unquenchable fire of judgment. The messenger of the Messiah, he preaches the gospel, he lives a distinctive life, he denounces false religion, and he exalts the Messiah. John did. Question is, do we? We want to follow John's model. We want to be faithful messengers of the Messiah. You know, perhaps there's some here today who need to hear this message of the gospel. Maybe you're tired of the weight of sin and the world. You're burdened by the weight of your joyless living. In fact, maybe you've lived the life of a respectable Christian. You've kept the rules, honored the traditions. You've lived the life of a respectable Christian, but you don't know anything about the life of a repentant Christian. You don't know freedom from your guilt. You don't know a fullness of joy. That's because you don't know the Savior, the Messiah. Well, there is good news for you today. Good news. The Savior bore that burden for you and takes it away. And as a messenger of the Messiah, I encourage you to turn to Him today. Say goodbye to sin. Say goodbye to self. Say goodbye to the world and ask Christ to forgive you and cleanse you. He won't deny you. But if you deny Him, you'll go into unquenchable fire. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is the King of Kings. Jesus is the Lord of Lords. Everybody who calls on His name will be saved. What a privilege to be the Messiah's messenger. Let's pray.

Father, we're encouraged by this familiar account, this man we know as John the Baptist. Lord, we see the critical role that he played in the unfolding of your redemption plan, now he was the one appointed to come and to prepare the way for the coming of the messiah to announce His arrival to the people, and we see how he faithfully filled that purpose that You had for his life. Lord, I pray that You'd help us to see that as Christians and as a church we have a purpose to be Your messengers as well. Our circumstances, our situation is different from John's, but in many ways it is the same. We have the same message to preach. We have a life to live that needs to be consistent with that message. We live in a world that is full of false gospels that need to be confronted and shown where they're in error. People in those systems need to be called out to repentance and we need to exalt the Messiah, to exalt the Savior, to be humble about ourselves and to show that He is the mighty One. He is the greater One. He is the One who can save. He is the One who will judge. We need to point people to Him. Lord, help us to do that. Help us Lord, each one of us here to examine our own lives today. Perhaps we're Christians, we've been in the church, but the reality is we live a lot like the world. We need to make changes, live like we're citizens of another kingdom. Lord, perhaps there are some of us here today, well, we're not like the world because we're very legalistic and we've established superficial rules that we think justify ourselves. Help us Lord to see through that and to repent, recognizing that we're sinners who cannot save themselves. Lord, help us to be alert and aware of error that's all around us, helping people to see what's true and what's false. Lord, help us to deal with our own pride. Help us Lord to be humble like John. Help us Lord to say what he said. We must decrease, He must increase. Lord, we pray that You'll be exalted. We pray Lord that we as believers and as a church might be faithful messengers for You, just like John was. May he be an encouragement to us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.