

Matthew 3:8-10

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John continues his rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees with a stern warning.

The parallel account of this rebuke is found in Luke 3:8-9.

After his startling insult calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers,” John offers them a path to reconciliation. He makes an allowance for them to repent by way of a fruit tree metaphor. The tree represents the individual person. The fruit represents the works of that individual. John tells them to *therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance*. It seems John is making it clear that the focus is not on the baptism ritual. As religious leaders, they would have been baptized often as a part of Jewish purification rituals. John tells *the Pharisees and Sadducees* that what they really need to do is change their behavior.

Repentance requires a change of heart. The Greek word that is translated as repentance in this verse is a form of μετάνοια (G3341 – pronounced: “me-ta-noi-a”). It is a compound word consisting of “meta” meaning “change” or “transformation”, and “noia” meaning “mind” or “perspective. Repentance is a decision that the old way of living was not a good path forward, therefore a new path must be followed. John admonishes the *Pharisees and Sadducees* to make choices, to *bear fruit*, that makes it clear they have charted a new course. He is insisting their current way of living is corrupt, and needs to change. John next anticipates a likely objection they might raise.

He warns them: *do not to 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 Jews properly had a very strong belief that they were God’s chosen people. God stated this clearly in many places, including in His statements to *Abraham*. God told *Abraham* he would father a great nation and bless all nations, and that He would bless those who bless and curse those who curse Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 12:2-3). It seems the *Pharisees and Sadducees* had concluded from this that they enjoyed some sort of immunity from being judged by God for their behavior.

However, the *Pharisees and Sadducees* seemed to ignore the reality of God’s covenant with His people. Although He accepted them unconditionally as His people, because of His love for them, He still required obedience for blessing. This is the essence of the law set forth in the book of Deuteronomy, where God makes clear that He did not choose Israel because of their righteousness (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). Rather, it was because God loved them and their fathers (Deuteronomy 4:37; Deuteronomy 7:7-8). That was an irrevocable reality. God’s acceptance of them as His people was unconditional. He will never reject Israel as His people. However, that did not guarantee God would not discipline them. God would always keep His promise to Abraham, but it didn’t have to come through any particular sons of Abraham. John says, *for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham*. There is no basis for them to believe they won’t be held accountable by God for their behavior.

The *Pharisees and Sadducees* were well-educated in the Mosaic law. God made clear in His covenant with Israel that obedience was a condition for them to be blessed experientially and remain in the land (Deuteronomy 11:8-32). John resumes his metaphor of the fruit tree, and makes clear that God's judgment, His discipline, is not only certain, it is imminent. He warns of the negative consequences of failing to repent and prepare for the *Kingdom of Heaven* which is *now at hand*. John warns: *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 picture John paints is that God has already taken out His *axe* and begun the first chop on the *trees* He will strike. The judgement is impending. If the Pharisees and Sadducees don't repent soon, God will cut them at their *root* so that they will be removed. The *trees* to be *cut down* are ones that do *not bear good fruit*.

This phrase could indicate that the *trees* either produce rotten *fruit* or no *fruit* at all. The end result of these chopped trees is that they are *thrown into the fire*. *Fire* in the Bible is typically a metaphor for judgment. The trees in John's metaphor are chopped down and *thrown into the fire*. A fruit tree that produces bad or no *fruit* needs to be replaced. The owner of the orchard desires a tree that is productive. So the owner will chop down the unproductive tree and use it for firewood.

John's admonition to *repent* calls the *Pharisees and Sadducees* to change their behavior and not act unfaithfully.

If we take only John's statements specific to the metaphor (skipping over his parenthetical remarks about Abraham), we see a syllogistic warning.

The syllogism starts with the conclusion (A.) before announcing the premises (B) and (C.)

- A. *Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance*
- B. *the axe is already laid at the root of the trees;*
- C. *therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Westerners might be more inclined to arrange it this way.

- B. God is ready to call you to account because you have been found wanting, lacking *fruit*.
- C. If you are found wanting by lacking *fruit*, you will be removed, cut down, and thrown into the fire.
- A. Therefore Repent (change your mind and your actions) so this will not occur

How should the *Pharisees and Sadducees* have interpreted John's warning? What was John attempting to convey?

The *Pharisees and Sadducees* know their Bibles. They know from Deuteronomy that God is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24). They also know that God warned their forefathers to repent or they would be exiled from the land of Judah. God spoke through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The

leaders did not listen, did not repent, and the nation was exiled. This can be seen many places in the Old Testament, but a passage that seems similar to John's metaphor from Ezekiel follows:

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any wood of a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Can wood be taken from it to make anything, or can men take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel? If it has been put into the fire for fuel, and the fire has consumed both of its ends and its middle part has been charred, is it then useful for anything? Behold, while it is intact, it is not made into anything. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it still be made into anything! Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I set My face against them. Though they have come out of the fire, yet the fire will consume them. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I set My face against them. Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully,’” declares the Lord GOD”(Ezekiel 15:1-8).

Ezekiel prophesies before and during Judah's exile to Babylon, roughly 600 years prior to Jesus' advent. In this passage, Ezekiel warns that Jerusalem will be consumed in judgement fire and made desolate, because they had acted unfaithfully. They are as useless to God as a dried grapevine is useless to the vineyard owner. It isn't even fit to make a peg to hang something from. It can only be used as kindling to start a fire.

Jerusalem was put under siege by the Babylonians and destroyed in 586 BC. Many of its inhabitants died, and many were taken to Babylon. It seems likely that this is the sort of picture John intended to convey. *The Kingdom of God is at hand*. As leaders, the *Pharisees and Sadducees* will decide whether to shift their allegiance to Jesus, the King of the Jews. The way they would do this is to *bear fruit in keeping with repentance*.

In a great irony, the *Pharisees and Sadducees* will later agree that Jesus must be assassinated in order to prevent Rome from taking away their nation (John 11:48). About 40 years later Jerusalem will undergo another tragic destruction at the hands of the Romans, and again go into exile. Instead of welcoming the *kingdom of God*, the *Pharisees and Sadducees* will place their trust in Rome. It will have the same result as when a prior generation of leaders placed their trust in Egypt to protect them from Babylon, contrary to God's direct instructions. As a result of their unfaithfulness, Judah was defeated and exiled to Babylon. The entire books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were written to restate the history of Judah to explain the exile as God's discipline and enforcement of His covenant with Israel (1 Chronicles 9:1).

Biblical Text

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