

John the Baptist's message was the Gospel of God's free and sovereign grace in and by the promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, which calls sinners to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works and idolatry. Both faith and repentance are gifts from God. Neither are natural to us in our unregenerate state as we will always refuse to believe and repent if left to ourselves (1 Cor. 2:14). God-given faith and repentance are both gifts from God worked within us by the Holy Spirit. They are intertwined; one cannot exist without the other. Faith is trusting Christ completely for all salvation and righteousness, and repentance is turning away from everything else and any other way (John 14:6; Acts 20:21; 17:30-31). John declared that the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah were all fulfilled with the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:29). He always pointed sinners to the Savior. He made it clear that we all were ruined by sin, and the only remedy is the Son of God and His redemptive work as Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer (Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:28).

(Matt. 3:7) - John's message and life-style set him clearly outside the religious majority who taught salvation by the works and the wills of men. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were the two main religious sects who led the people astray by their legalism and hypocrisy. Their false message was summarized by the apostle Paul in Romans 9:31-10:3 as seeking righteousness by works of the law (cf. Luke 18:9; Php. 3:4-6). Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees were opposed to Christ and His message of salvation by God's grace without the works of men. They perverted the Scriptures and encouraged the people to follow them rather than the Word of God (Matt. 23; John 5:39-45). Both were influential in having the Lord arrested, tried, crucified, and having His tomb sealed (Matt. 27:62-66). Normally these two sects hated each other, but they were united in their hatred for the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28; Rev. 13:9).

As John was a disciple of Christ, his message of salvation and righteousness by God's grace through Christ exposed the message of the Pharisees and Sadducees to be false. When they saw many people going out to hear John and many submitting to John's baptism, they went out to see for themselves. They came not to submit to John's message and baptism, but to satisfy their curiosity about this strange preacher. When John saw them, he boldly cried out, "*O generation of vipers.*" This identified them and their message with Satan who himself is called a serpent (cf. John 8:44; cf. Gen. 3:15; Rev. 12:9; 20:2). Like poisonous vipers, these religious teachers were full of the deadly venom of false gospels (Rom. 3:13; Gal. 1:6-9). Their message promised righteousness and life, but in reality it was nothing but sin and death to the souls of those who followed them. We need to understand that false gospels of salvation conditioned on sinners are in no way other versions of the truth. They are as deadly to the soul as snake venom is deadly to the body (Gal. 1:6-9).

"Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" - God must and will punish all sinners to whom sin is imputed, and He will punish them justly under the sentence of His wrath which is eternal damnation and death. This is the reward of all works that fall short of the perfection of righteousness that can only be found in Christ (Acts 17:31; Rom. 10:4). Justice was fully satisfied for God's people, to whom He does not impute sin, when Christ died as their Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer (Rom. 3:21-25; 8:33-34; Heb. 10:11-14). The Lord God has imputed Christ's righteousness to His people for whom He died, was buried, and arose. They are not under God's wrath because Christ went under God's wrath for them. For a sinner to go through life rejecting Christ and die in unbelief is to live and die in sin, under the wrath of God, no matter how he appears outwardly to others (John 3:36). All who are justified by God's grace in Christ and redeemed by His blood are given the gifts of faith in Christ and true repentance. They flee to Christ and flee from the wrath to come.

(Matt. 3:8) - *“Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance”* - The Pharisees and Sadducees came to John under the pretense of a true interest in his message and his baptism. However, they were hypocrites, and John declared here that if they were truly sincere in seeking the Lord and His truth, there would be fruits indicating true, God-given repentance - a change of heart, mind, and attitude (cf. Acts 26:20). These are the fruits of God’s grace and power in Christ Jesus, the fruits of righteousness found only in Christ, and the fruits of God-given faith that drives a sinner away from self and self-righteous works and drives that sinner to Christ for righteousness and life. Repentance is described by the apostle Paul in his own experience as recorded in *Philippians 3:7-9* - *“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”*

Repentance also evidences itself in Godly sorrow over sin that brings a child of God to engage in the warfare of the Spirit against the flesh, seeking to love and obey the Lord and to love the brethren. But this obedience and warfare are not motivated by legal fears of punishment or loss of earned rewards, and they are not motivated by mercenary promises of earned rewards. The one who has repented knows that his efforts to obey and love the Lord do not make him righteous or less sinful. He is motivated by grace, love, and gratitude to God for His mercy in and by the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Matt. 3:9) - Under the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the unbelieving Jews boasted of salvation from sin and a right relationship with God because of their physical connection with Abraham. They imagined that God could not fulfill His covenant with Abraham without them, but they were wrong. God could make children out of stones if all He wanted was to populate His kingdom. God not only wants to populate His kingdom with people, but He wants to do this in a way that glorifies and honors Him as both a just God and a Savior (Isa. 45:21-25; Rom. 4:1-6). Just because they were the physical offspring of Abraham did not mean they were Abraham’s spiritual offspring (those who, by the Spirit of God, believe the same Gospel that Abraham believed) (see Rom. 2:28-29; 9:8; Gal. 3:29). Our Lord told these religionists in John 8 that if they were the spiritual children of Abraham, they would have believed and rejoiced in Him as did Abraham (John 8:33-59).

(Matt. 3:10) - The King Messiah had arrived. He alone knows who are and who are not His. His Gospel is the great divider of people (John 1:11-13; 3:18-21; Rom. 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 1:18-24; 2:14-16). *“Trees”* represents all who claim to have hope of salvation. The Gospel reveals the only good hope and exposes all bad hopes. Christ will cut down every tree that does not bear *“good fruit,”* which is the same as *“fruits meet for repentance.”* This *“fruit”* is the result of God’s power, goodness, and grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not come forth by the power and goodness of men as we have no power nor goodness except what we have in Christ (John 3:21; 15:1-7; Php. 1:6; 2:12-13). This *“fruit”* is not merely human morality and outward reformation as judged by men, that which even false religion can produce (Matt. 23:27-28; Php. 3:4-6). This is a God-wrought powerful change within the hearts of God’s people that brings us to turn from sin and self and turn to Christ in submission to Him as the Lord our Righteousness and to His Word as our guide. Let all who seek righteousness by their works beware!