

Almighty God, whose righteous will governs all things and controls the destinies of men: Cleanse and sanctify Your Church, the living temple of Your Spirit, that we being cleansed from all self-contentment, all hardness and want of charity may worship You in spirit and in truth, so that we may be a beacon of hope for all nations. In turn then teach the nations of the world the things that belong to their peace; that they may find their freedom in obedience to Your laws, and serve their citizens in justice and peace. Amen.

[John] said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

In Christ Jesus, who was sent not to condemn, but to save the world, dear fellow redeemed:

Have you heard of *fire and brimstone* preachers? Some may think that John the Baptizer was such a preacher. Even some reading Jesus' words in His Sermon on the Mount or His litany of woes against the Scribes and Pharisees conclude that Jesus was such a preacher. Jesus' anger toward the buyers and sellers at the temple might have characterized Jesus in this way as well.

But there is a clear distinction between repentance preachers and judgment preachers. It is found in their ultimate goal. Jonah, the prophet sent by God to call Nineveh to repentance was in heart a judgment

preacher. James and John showed this tendency at first when they sought to destroy with fire the Samaritan village, which rejected Jesus. The last words of our text reveal that John, just like all true preachers of Christ are Gospel preachers who call all sinners to repentance. We read: “So with many other exhortations [John] preached good news to the people.” So let us acknowledge this proper working among us even today: **Cleansing through Repentance not Judgment Is Salutory.**

I

Jesus, who wept over Jerusalem desiring that they would repent and trust in Him, made a dramatic call to repentance by cleansing the temple. Obviously Jesus, who always had pure loving motives, wanted to save, not condemn through His words and actions. But to the unregenerate ear, any preaching of the Law sounds like harsh judgment.

John’s opening words in our text to the crowds seeking baptism had the flavor of harsh judgment: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. ... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Baptism is not some magical potion that spares the sinner from judgment apart from repentance and faith. We can develop that warped view of God’s gracious work among us today. The devil loves to convince those who confess Jesus as the Savior that they now have a license to sin; imagining that doing good works is optional.

Good works are necessary, my fellow believers. They are necessary, **NOT** for salvation; the works of Jesus alone save us wretched sinners. But good works are necessary just as the bearing of good fruit is necessary for a good fruit tree. Trusting in Christ alone for salvation results in our natural delight in the Law of God. This leads us to ask what is it that our gracious Lord would have us do.

Many in the crowd responded this way to John’s words of seeming judgment, they asked: “What then shall we do?” They came seeking the cleansing from God through holy baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John answered by giving specific examples of fulfilling the Law of God within their vocations: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked

him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

II

Hearing this instruction in the Law especially caused these repentant sinners to be on the lookout for their Savior. “As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, ‘I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”

Just as God the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ in the heart of the sinner, so it is that the Holy Spirit works repentance. It is not that we first do the work of repentance and then God does the work of creating faith as reward. No, God works both repentance and faith into the hearts of sinners. This is His ongoing activity upon us. We by His gracious working daily repent and believe.

The preaching of only judgment is not salutary. It has no saving benefit for us sinners. It can only work wrath and despair. We might compare judgment preaching to a wildfire destroying everything in its path, but repentance preaching to a controlled burn. Jesus baptizes us with such a controlled burn not for destruction but for protection and cleansing.

You and I, my fellow believers in Christ need daily cleansing from our sin, which God alone accomplishes through His Word. As a result from realizing that every morning God’s mercies are new for us sinners, we are called to new obedience striving to fulfill all that our Lord would have us do.

Are you an **employer**? Do not seek to enrich yourself by the hard work of your employees who can hardly sustain themselves and their families with meager compensation, but pay them fairly and adequately. Are you in **law enforcement**? Do not delight in catching those who are guilty of minor infractions, but rather seek to encourage law-abiding behavior with all cheerfulness. Are you a **husband or wife**? Do not spend your days in contention approaching each other like prosecuting attorneys. But as those united by God, strengthen your spouse where he or she is weak, offering your love and support at every turn. Are you a **mother, father or teacher**? Do not become frustrated by the repeated misbehavior

of the children under your care and lash out with personal vengeance. But rather lovingly and patiently instruct and set kind examples under all sorts of circumstances. Are you a **child or student**? Do not seek to rebel against authority or antagonize your siblings and classmates. Learn in respectful humility and interact with those around you as you would like to be treated, even in intense sports competition.

As sinners we need cleansing all our days as long as we remain sinners, which means until the day we die. But this cleansing is not our work, rather always and only the work of our Lord. He is the only holy One, who is able to make us holy, sanctify us. By His grace alone we like the crowd in our text seek relief from the judgment to come upon all sinners and are given it in the gracious working of a Lord who has produced the eternal holiness we so desperately need.

Your mind has been miraculously turned from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ. The preaching of the Law convicts you of your many sins to be sure. But since you trust in Jesus as the One who shed His holy blood in payment for all your sins, you rejoice in living according to His Law to His glory and the welfare of your many neighbors.

"[Jesus'] winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." You by His grace are the wheat ripe unto harvest waiting to be transported. Learn well to distinguish between preachers of repentance and those of judgment only. Mark and avoid the preachers of judgment whose words lead to destruction. Humbly obey the voice of the preachers of repentance and faith, then you are safe in Christ. In Him your sins committed in your many vocations are all forgiven and you are dressed in His perfect righteousness. You, for Jesus' sake, have been set free to fulfill the Law in a life of thankfulness and in the joy of service. Amen.