

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with<sup>[a]</sup> water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

### **What'd You Call Me?**

Believe it or not I used to mess around with people. If someone mumbled I'd feign insult and ask accusingly, "What'd you call me?" If they didn't get the joke they'd repeat louder and more clearly. Of course I'd have to up the ante and respond, "What'd you call my mother?" At which point I hope they understand I'm messing with them. We don't like conflict. We don't want to insult anyone intentionally. People just want to be understood and get along with those around them.

But how would you react if someone did insult you? What if someone really did say something about your mother? Imagine if this insult were more than just Bugs Bunny saying she wears combat

boots or Monty Python's, "She's a hamster." How would you respond? We are fairly protective of our parents because what is said about mom or dad is often true for us. We're just like our parents.

Not only that but family is everything. Since the time of John family was life, social security, community... so when John begins with, "*Brood of vipers... who warned you to flee from the coming wrath,*" you've got to wonder how many people were thinking, "What did you call me?" Moreover, "What did you call my mother?" Brood of vipers isn't a message that oozes with joy. It doesn't seem like the gospel fits. You're just like your parents. Snakes... Why did it have to be snakes.

Probably because John was trying to get a point across to these people and us. That we shouldn't be so quick to find comfort in family. We shouldn't be so quick to defend ourselves or others. That although we don't like conflict - bible says some harsh things about what we deserve. There indeed is a poison coursing through our veins, a poisonous inheritance that makes us eligible for execution. And yet we can rejoice because while brood of vipers may be the beginning it's not the end. We can rejoice because John points to one greater who removes the poison

John the Baptizer was quite the character. He was a prophet. Camel skin coat, leather belt, ate locust and wild honey. He was a voice crying out in the desert. Many came to him and the Pharisees and Sadducees recognized that and they didn't want to be left behind. But John didn't hold back. He spoke up, "Brood of vipers, who warned you?" You don't usually gain too many friends by calling people a group of snakes. That's isn't a term of endearment, no euphemism used, he's straight up calling them children of the Devil, a pack of liars, with poison on their lips. In so doing he was insulting their parents as well. This wasn't a carefully aimed insult intended only for the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This was how he greeted the crowds, one and all, who came to him.

He calls to them, "*Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*" In farming it was common to harvest and then to burn. Slash and burn in order to prepare the field. John is saying, "You're like snakes before the fire is set, fleeing from the field. Like it or not Judgment is coming even for those of you who are fleeing. Anticipating their reaction, "But we're children of Abraham," John responds, "*God is able to make children of Abraham from these rocks.*" It's not about who's your daddy, it's not about blood born relationships, it's not about what you do for God. it's about what he has done for you.

He reminds them, "*I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of show sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" This is the one who will gather the wheat into his barn. He will thoroughly clear the threshing floor. He can see through your hypocrisy and false piety. He is the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, faith, and with fire, punishment. God's wrath is coming. The time is fast approaching. The axe is already at the root of the tree to chop them down and throw them into the fire.

Who warned you? Some pastors are quite the character, some parents and teachers are too. They stand out in our minds having left an impression in our minds like John. So many have faithfully gone before us proclaiming who we are, what we deserve, and giving all glory to God. Christianity cannot be fulfilled with our works or traditions but it's so easy for us to turn our eyes away from our Savior and toward ourselves. It's only natural for us to think, "I'm not that bad." John's word comes to us as well. The heart with which we were born, and still troubles us to this day more than we'd like to admit, traces its ancestry from the poisonous liar and father of lies.

But then the excuses start, "I've been a member... I've never... Don't you know who I am?" John anticipates our excuses, he cuts them off, "*God is able to make children of Abraham from these rocks.*" Sit an hour in church on Sunday to excuse our sin the other 167 hours of the week? Do we really think that years of service will somehow make up for the years of sin and injury we've done to others? Do we think that belonging to a conservative, bible believing church will somehow serve as an escape from the coming wrath? It couldn't hurt, right?

It can hurt. It could lead us to believe that what we do is truly of importance. We need to listen to John and realize that he is not lying, "*the ax is already at the root of the tree.*" Right now. The most difficult thing for us to believe is that we really are as bad as the bible describes.

Rejoice? Over what? That's terrifying. John's sermon doesn't begin and end with, "*Brood of vipers...*" John invites the people to the only real way to avoid the wrath of God. While there are some who left in a huff over what John said about their ancestry, traditions, temple. There are those who listened, confessed their sins, and found comfort and healing from the poison flowing through their veins.

That baptism for the forgiveness of sins produced fruit and as they came out of the Jordan River they asked, "*What should we do?*" John's word worked. God's Word worked. There they heard of their savior from sin. The one who was so much greater than John. They asked, What would it look like to live as the brood of a gracious and merciful God rather than the brood of vipers?

Those voted least likely to succeed in life, the dregs of society, the tax collectors and soldiers (those working for the enslavement of their own people) step forward and ask, "*What should we do?*" John gives them specific examples of things they can do. He urges them, "*Don't collect any more than you are required to!*" to the soldiers, "*Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely, be content with your pay!*" John doesn't direct them to flee from their work. There is no, sell everything give to the poor and follow me. Not camel skin clothes grasshoppers for everybody but return to your work reflecting that grace and mercy that God has shown you.

This gives us plenty to rejoice over. John was great. The greatest ever to come but there was one he pointed toward, one he proclaimed, "*I'm not worthy to untie his shoes.*" John spoke more than

just, “brood of vipers.” He encouraged them with many words. He confessed he was not the Christ but that he was coming. His message prepared them for Jesus. The one who would deliver his people. The one who is both Savior and judge. He came pouring out the Holy Spirit. He will come to deliver judgment.

Jesus saved us by being burned up. By living the perfect life, by giving his life for ours - Just as John said, “*Look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” You don’t need to be worried that he hasn’t paid for your sin because you are part of the world. He’s taken every last sin of pride and arrogance to the cross. Look at the patience of God that he doesn’t drive us away from him but rather drives us back to your baptism. Look again at the welcoming arms of your savior and rest in his grace rather than feeling the edge of his ax. Jesus came just as he promised to do away with sin and make us God’s people. We are branches that have been grafted in. We are rocks made into children of God.

And what should we do? Not, What should I do to save myself? but, Jesus has saved me, so what should I do now? What can we do? In response to this we ask, “What can we do?” It’s just what we do, not forced labor, not grudging obedience. It’s not slavery. It’s your new life. God allows us to serve him and he even commends such service. “*Well done, my good and faithful servant.*” John gave specific examples to specific people in the crowd. Each one of his answers depended upon the situation in life and the gifts God has given. Not everybody is going to be able to climb a ladder and put up Christmas lights. Not everyone can handle working with kids for 2-3 hours straight. Not everyone has the same financial gifts as others. But we use what have.

And if you can’t find anything. Maybe you feel insulted, overlooked, unthanked, and burnt out on life. Christ died for you too! Wherever that offspring-of-a-viper reveals itself, when the devil throws your sins in your face and tries to remind you of your past, who you were, whenever he declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: “I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know one who suffered and made satisfaction for my sins. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and where he is there I will be also. (Martin Luther - Bondage of the Will) Until then, What should we do? That’s easy. Rejoice! Your sins are forgiven. Amen.