

January 25, 2015

FLY FROM THE WRATH TO COME

Matthew 3:7-12

In early Methodism, the only qualification necessary for coming to a Methodist Class meeting was a desire to “*flee from the wrath to come.*” The warning was out. God’s Judgment against sin and evil was something about which most people had been made aware. They all knew that, for each soul, at some future time (probably death) there would be a moment of judgment. (Do we even think about that fact anymore???) The moment of judgment was a moment of dread for more than it was thought of as a moment of homecoming.

Are you fleeing from the wrath to come? Is that the reason you try to be faithful? Fire insurance? It can be a good initial motivator, but once we experience a sense of assurance about God’s saving grace; once we feel justified by grace; it is grace, a ministry of grace, a life of grace that should be what motivates us. I would rather love people into heaven than scare the hell out of them. Being scared out of hell does not equal an entrance into heaven, though.

“*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!*” (v.8) You see, repentance is not just a change of mind, or, a change of heart. It is a change of ways. You can’t count on your heritage for your salvation, the way the Pharisees and Sadducees claimed to be descendants of Abraham. You can’t say, “My grandmother was a pillar of this church. She was a devout worshiper and the sweetest soul that ever lived.” That’s great! How are you living up to her example? How is your service making you a pillar of the Church? How devout is your worship? ...You don’t get into heaven on someone else’s credentials!

The Pharisees and Sadducees had hearts of stone. So, likewise, God can create children of Abraham (like the Pharisees and Sadducees) from the stones along the Jordan River. You’ve probably heard it said that “God has no grandchildren.” Each one of us is a child of God and must relate to God directly. Not only that, but John the Baptist says, The axe is already at the root of the trees that bear no fruit. And those trees “*will be cut down and thrown into the fire!*” (v. 10) The wrath to come.... Has an axe!

It also has a winnowing fork!

It comes in the form of a person! “*I Baptize you with water for repentance!*” (11a) I’m just helping you to get ready. Repentance and water Baptism are only a beginning! “*After me will come One who is more Powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will Baptize you with the Holy Spirit.... And with FIRE!!!*” (v.11b) The challenge of confession and repentance is nothing compared to the challenge of being a disciple! But the Holy Spirit will be upon you. It will set you on fire! You will be ignited! You will be light! You will be heat! You will really cook!!! Your righteousness will exceed that of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Change your ways!

“*His winnowing fork is in His hand!*” (v. 12a) The image is of harvest time. And harvest time comes at the end of the season of growth. And growth means change! But...how do we change? The parallel passage in Luke has a dialogue between John the Baptist and the crowd. “*What should we do then?*” “*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*” *Even tax collectors came to be Baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked Him, “And we, what should we do?” “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”* (Luke 3:10-14)

Repentance is not just feeling sorry for our sins. It’s not just grieving over our indiscretions. Repentance is change – changing our ways. Repentance includes not only a cessation of wrong behavior, but the practice of what is right and good and true. Repentance is making amends for our evil deeds, making up for the wrong we have done, and, even going beyond that. Repentance can make us new people altogether! We are no longer discouraging or counterproductive, we become encouragers, we become productive; we build rather than tear down; we add light rather than pour cold water all over the fires of the Spirit! We start to change the whole world around us!

Never rest on your laurels. There is always some good deed to be done. We should always be producing some good fruit! The warning has sounded! “*His winnowing fork is in His hand...!*” Change your ways!

Warn others!