

## **His Winnowing Fork in His Hand**

Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Our Lord, January 13, 2019

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

John the Baptist declares, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes One mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand and He will clear His threshing floor. He will gather His wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

While John the Baptist probably said that on more than one occasion, Matthew and Mark record that Jesus was baptized immediately after John the Baptist said those words. This is a literary device that you see in movies where there are two scenes spliced together. In one scene they are talking about something in the very next scene they are showing that person.

So in one paragraph John the Baptist is telling you about the One in whose hand is His winnowing fork and who will clear His threshing floor and gather the wheat into His barn but burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. And in the next paragraph that same man is getting baptized. Therefore the Baptism of Jesus designates Him as the One about whom John was speaking. Jesus from Nazareth is the One who is mightier than John is. Jesus from Nazareth is the One who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus from Nazareth is the One who will clear His threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into His barn. He will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.

When John the Baptist talks about a winnowing fork, he is talking about an ancient threshing device. The reason that combines today are called combines is that they combine threshing and reaping together in one machine. The threshing is all done internally these days right there in the field inside the machine so that the grain can be hauled to the elevator immediately.

In the ancient world the grain was reaped and then gathered into bundles. The bundles were taken to a threshing floor. The threshing floors of the ancient world were large flat rocks or areas of concrete upon which the stalks of grain were placed. The farmer would then wait for a gentle breeze and then he would use a winnowing fork to throw the stalks of grain into the air in such a way that the grain would separate from the chaff. The wind would blow the chaff away and the grain would fall back down on the threshing floor. The farmer would continue this activity until finally all of the stalks of grain had been tossed into the air, the chaff had been blown away by the wind, and the grain was left in a heap on the threshing floor. Then the chaff could be easily burned

if necessary and the grain could be easily gathered into a granary which is what John the Baptist means when he says in translation, "barn."

John the Baptist is saying that the One who is mightier than He is has a winnowing fork like that only He is not going to winnow grain. He is going to winnow people. Just as an ancient farmer separates the wheat from the chaff on a threshing floor so the One who is mightier than John is going to separate people from one another. Some people He will set aside to be burned in the eternal fires of hell. Other people He will gather into His granary. In other words He will gather other people into everlasting life.

John the Baptist is explaining that the One who is mightier than he is is the One who will judge all of humanity. The One who will judge all of humanity is the One upon whom the Spirit comes when He is baptized and the One whom God calls His beloved Son.

Now, we all know that the One who is mightier than John the Baptist will do this. We all know that our Lord will return again in glory at the end of time. We have read the accounts of our Lord's return. He will sit on His glorious throne. He will gather the nations before Him. He will separate the nations one from another like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will welcome the sheep into the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. He will dismiss the goats into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. This is the fire with which the One mightier than John the Baptist will baptize. It is on the sheep that He baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

This is the final judgment at the end of time.

What is surprising about John the Baptist's description of the One who is mightier than he is is that John the Baptist does not say that His winnowing fork will be in His hand. John the Baptist says that His winnowing fork is in His hand. That means that not only does our Lord separate the wheat from the chaff when He comes again in glory. He was already separating the wheat from the chaff when He came the first time! So when John the Baptist accurately predicts that the One who is mightier than John the Baptist will separate the wheat from the chaff and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire and gather the wheat into His barn, John the Baptist is saying that the Lord will do this not only when He returns again in glory, but that He will do it at the time of John the Baptist!

When our Lord is baptized the voice from heaven confirms, "This is My beloved Son." When our Lord is baptized the Holy Spirit's descent like a dove confirms. The One on whom the Spirit descends and the One whom the Father declares to be His Son

is the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is the One who will separate the wheat from the chaff. This is the One who gather the wheat into His barn and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. And He will do it not only when He returns again in glory, but He will also do it when He comes up out of the water and proceeds with His public ministry!

Now, just how is it that the Lord during His earthly ministry separated the wheat from the chaff? Just how exactly did He gather the wheat into His barn and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire?

The Lord came up out of the Jordan River and began His ministry. In His ministry He delivered His judgments.

For example, on one occasion when our Lord was in a home in Capernaum teaching people, there were men who wanted to bring to the Lord a paralyzed man so that the Lord could heal him. They had heard of the Lord's healing power and wanted their paralyzed friend or relative to be healed. They brought him to Jesus. When they could not get to Jesus because of the crowd in the house, they took the paralyzed man on his mat, climbed up on the roof of the house, and found a way to lower him in through the roof. When they lowered him on his mat before the Lord and the Lord saw their faith He pronounced His judgment on the paralyzed man immediately. He said to the paralyzed man, "Son (He called the paralyzed man "son" to indicate His authority over the paralyzed man), your sins are forgiven." By pronouncing the judgment of forgiveness the Lord had baptized this man with the Holy Spirit and had gathered him into his barn.

There was also a tax collector names Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a short man. He climbed a tree just to see the Lord as He was passing by. When the Lord saw Zacchaeus in the tree, He told Zacchaeus, "I would like to have dinner at your house today." When Zacchaeus heard that the Lord had invited Himself to dinner in Zacchaeus' home, Zacchaeus immediately responded, "Lord, today I sell my possessions and give them to the poor and if I have cheated anybody, I will restore it fourfold." When the Lord heard this the Lord pronounced His judgment on Zacchaeus, "Today, salvation has come to this house for this man also is a son of Abraham." Notice the Lord did not pronounce Zacchaeus righteous because of his good deeds. His good deeds were simply the fruit of his repentance. The Lord pronounced Zacchaeus righteous because Zacchaeus was a son of Abraham. This is the Lord's judgment. At this point the Lord has baptized Zacchaeus with the Holy Spirit and has gathered Zacchaeus into the Lord's granary.

The Lord's judgments are not limited to Israel. Once a Roman centurion came to the Lord and requested aid for his servant who was suffering terribly. When the Lord

offered to go to the centurion's home the centurion responded by indicating that he was not worthy to have the Lord under his roof. This indicated that the centurion knew about the laws of holiness and realized that the Lord of glory would be defiled if he came under the roof of a Gentile. Then the Roman centurion said this. He told the Lord, "I too am a man under authority with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Do this,' and he does it.' So just give the Word and my servant will be healed." The Roman centurion has heard the reports of the Lord's authority to heal. He believes those reports and has come to the Lord to appeal for his servant's relief. He understands authority and that the Lord has it. Then the Lord renders His judgment on the centurion, "Not even in Israel have I seen such faith." At that point the Lord had baptized the centurion with the Holy Spirit and had gathered him into His granary. In fact our Lord says, "Many will come from the east and the west, the north and the south, and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. The Lord is including the Roman centurion among those who have come from the east and the west, the north and the south and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

On each of these occasions there are Pharisees or scribes or chief priests or elders of the people who object to the Lord's judgments. When the Lord declares that the sins of the paralyzed man are forgiven, the Pharisees are there to object to such a judgment. When the Lord declares that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham, there are Pharisees there and others who grumble about the Lord's judgments. When the Lord heals the servant of the Roman centurion and praises the centurion for his faith which is not found even in Israel, there are Pharisees and others there who object to such judgments. In fact they object so strenuously to the mercy with which the Lord conducts His judgments that they bring a judgment of condemnation on themselves.

The Roman centurion is the first of such judgments with more to follow. The Lord tells them, "Many will come from the east and the west, the north and the south, and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. By saying this the Lord has declared His judgment. These people who begrudge the mercy of the Lord are now among the chaff. He has consigned them to eternal fire. And while they have not yet been cast into the fire they will be because the Lord has declared His judgment against them.

The Lord will declare His judgments against those who replace the Word of God with their own traditions and make their own traditions more important than what God has actually commanded. He tells them that Isaiah had prophesied about them when Isaiah said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They teach the doctrines of men as if they are the commandments of God." In quoting Isaiah,

the Lord pronounces His judgment on those who do such things. By doing so He is baptizing them with fire. Even though they are not in the fire when He says it, when He says it, He is consigning them to the fire. He has declared them to be the chaff.

And the final and most devastating condemnations that the scribes and the Pharisees received were the ones that the Lord pronounced on them just before He was crucified. He has rebuked them for their many sins and they have remained in opposition to Him and His judgments. Hating the mercy with which the Lord was judging people and wanting to claim their own righteousness the Lord finally pronounced His final woes on the Pharisees and the scribes. "Woe unto you, hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the dish and the plate but you fail to clean the inside. Clean the inside of the cup and plate and then all will be clean for you. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. You travel across land and sea to make a single convert and when you have made him you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, all beautiful and decorated on the outside, but on the inside full of dead man's bones and everything unclean. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin, but neglect the weightier portions of the Law, like justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you should have done without neglecting the others. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you build the tombs of the prophets and you say to yourselves, 'If we had lived in our fathers' days we would have not have taken part in killing the prophets,' and so you testify against yourselves that you are the sons of the ones who murdered the prophets. Yes, all the righteous blood shed on earth from the righteous blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple vestibule and the altar, shall come upon this generation!" And when the Lord pronounces His woes against the scribes and the Pharisees He consigns them to eternal damnation. They are the chaff and even though they do not instantly go into the eternal fire, they will go into the eternal fire. The Lord has declared it so.

His winnowing fork is in His hand.

And so it has been ever since the Lord ascended into heaven. This is why we have the Gospel accounts. It is so that we may know the Lord's judgments. So if you are like the paralyzed man and his friends, or you are like the Roman centurion, or you are like Zacchaeus, then the Lord will pronounce the same judgment upon you that He pronounced upon them. And if you are like the scribes and the Pharisees then the Lord will pronounce the same judgment upon you that He pronounced upon them. This is why the Gospel accounts are so important.

The Lord has not laid down His winnowing fork. He still has it in His hand even right now. Right now the Lord is still separating the wheat from the chaff. Right now the Lord is still burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire and gathering the wheat into His barn. If you want to know how the judge of all the earth who is mightier than John the Baptist judges people, both now and at the end of time, it is all recorded for you in the Gospels.

This is so that you may take warning and take comfort. This is for your faith so that you know the outcome for you on the Last Day when the One who is baptized by John returns again in glory.

You now know the judgment in advance. Your Lord has brought it to you. This way your faith has His judgment upon which to rely. And He is the judge of all the earth. His Father designated Him so, when He was baptized.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.