

Let's resume our study now in Matthew chapter 3. We're skipping down to verse 13. We've covered the first 12 verses. You'll remember verse 12: "His winnowing fan is in his hand." This is not something left to chance or to the wind. Jesus is going to talk to Nicodemus about, "The wind blows where it wills," and comparing the spirit, the *pneuma*, to the *pneuma* of the wind. And I've talked about that before when we went through John 3, that you can safely stick with *pneuma* as spirit throughout that discussion with profitable results.

But winnowing fan—why is it a fan? What do you think of with a fan? It's something big. It's like a sort of a solid leaf rake, and you turn the thing upside down. If you're using a leaf rake, you would take that and pick up a bunch of harvested—it reminds me of that song my music teacher back in fifth grade, Mrs. Allen, taught us, you know, "Swing the shining sickle, cut the ripened grain." I found a hand sickle. Where was I? I was looking for something, and I found a—oh, I was looking for that tackle box out in the barn, and under Dad's bench there is a sickle, not a scythe, a little hand sickle under there. Hadn't seen it in 40 years, but it's under there, along with a lot of other things I haven't seen in 40 years.

At any rate, you swing that thing and cut the stalks with the heads of grain, and they haul—remember, gather them into bundles and bring them in. "Bringing in the sheaves, bring in the sheaves." Then you scatter them. You get the winnowing fan, and you start—you know, you trample those things to separate the heads from the stalks. And, you know, you can basically pick up the stalks at that point, but you're still left with the wheat and the husks, the chaff that surrounds it, and you want to separate that because it's inedible and doesn't help you.

So, once you get the stalks separated, after they would walk oxen around, they'd walk, you know, people around, depending on the quantities, and trample the—you know, the ox that treadeth out the grain type of thing. So then, usually multiple workers would take winnowing fans, and you do this outdoors, and you toss the grain into the air, and the chaff is light and is supposed to drift, to blow. And the funniest thing about Gideon is him trying to do this indoors because he was afraid of the Philistines there. But, you know, trying to winnow in—if you've ever, you know, worked indoors with something that's really dusty, in an attic with insulation or whatever—I think it's just a chokingly bad idea. But that's what he—he was going to get that grain winnowed one way or another. And, you know, good initiative, not so hot judgment maybe.

But the winnowing fan is in his hand. He will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. The grain has been threshed, and now it is going to be winnowed. So there's a process. And notice that part of the process is already complete. It doesn't say his threshing animals are on the lead here, he's got a rein around their neck. It doesn't say he's bringing the oxen into the barn to tread out the grain. The grain's been treading. His winnowing fan is in his hand. Part of the process is already complete. Part of the separation has already been accomplished. It's winnowing time. Winnowing is the last stage.

The seed was sown. It grew. It was harvested. Remember in Revelation, "Put in your sickle and reap," and the earth was reaped. Remember? Well, sowing is done, growing is done, harvesting is done, hauling is done, harvesting is done. It's not in the field; it's at the threshing floor. The grain has been moved. Think of Boaz. It's been moved. It has been threshed. The last stage before putting the wheat in the barn is the winnowing. This is the second-to-last thing, not the first thing. A lot of work and labor and analysis has already been put into this.

When you think of the Old Testament, "All day long I have held out my hands to disobedient and stiff-necked people." There has been plenty of work. Another figure that was used—remember the figure of the vineyard? "Let me tell you a story of my vineyard. Here's what I've done for it, and it still doesn't bear good grapes." So what's going to happen to the vineyard? Well, a lot of work has been put into this particular patch of grain, this field, and the final step is the winnowing. His winnowing fan is in his hand. This doesn't strike us the way it would have struck the people listening to John. They know that if it's winnowing-fan time, that's the last thing. This is the last part of the harvest. You're going to put the good stuff in one place, and you're going to utterly destroy everything that's left. That stuff does no good. Those husks don't even—it's like cellulose. It doesn't add anything back to the ground, so you don't plow that under for the next harvest. It doesn't do anybody any good. It is burned. Get that stuff out.

So he will gather the wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. So now we recognize that this is figurative language. Jesus didn't come down to the Jordan with an actual winnowing fan. There's not an actual pile of stuff that needs winnowing. What is he talking about? And if his winnowing fan is in his hand, this is a process of separation and fate. Separate. This is the sheep and the goats. This is the good

and bad fish. This is any one of a number of figures we'll see upcoming. But John prepares the way for Jesus' later comparisons and later warnings with this figure of winnowing.

So what is the wheat and what is the chaff? Are these two different categories of people? Your standard Sunday morning sermon is going to say, "Well, you know, the believers are going to heaven and the unbelievers are going to hell, lake of fire. They're burned with unquenchable fire. Lake of fire is unquenchable fire. There is unquenchable fire. The chaff is the unbelievers and the pile is humanity," or something like that.

Think about wheat, which everybody knew intrinsically in these days. How does it start out before it's threshed and winnowed? What's the relationship of the chaff to the wheat? This is not wheat and tares. That's going to be a different parable, very clear figure. There is wheat and there's not wheat. It's wonderful for people to think binary, computer people. It's this or it's not this. You know, it's a one or it's not a one.

Of course, quantum—by the way, if you want to read something that will twist your mind into a knot—and, of course, popular interpretation of these things is not always quite accurate—but they have, there's just been a thing done with quantum computing which breaks the binary limitation of something being ones and zeros. There's a zero and a one, but then there's something in between, and it can be almost anything between zero and one. It's a third state. It's a quantum state. But they've built quantum computing, and just in the past couple of weeks, they basically reversed time, kind of. That's the popular hook. When you look at it in the newspaper, it says scientists reversed time. It's not actually reversing time, but it's kind of like reversing time.

And, of course, I'm not a quantum guy. Ask my roommate. He understands physics; I don't. But what I did understand was the illustration they gave. There are certain things that are reversible. Turn a light on, turn a light off, turn it on, turn it off. You're just switching a state. It can go back and forth with no trouble. There's other things that only go in one direction. You take a china teacup and drop it on the floor, and it breaks. You can't take those pieces, toss them up in the air, and they become a cup and land back on the table. That's a one-way—you know, second law of thermodynamics—everything put together falls apart. You can't unrust a thing that rusted. You can't unwear a tire. You can't drive up and down the road and recollect all the rubber particles, and, hey, brand-new tire. I drove to Dallas and wore it out. I drove back home and it's like new. Certain things don't reverse.

Well, they effectively reversed what has always been thought to be an irreversible process. The example they gave in the article is, if you set up a pool table, like we've got in the barn, if we can uncover it, and rack the pool balls, go to the other end with your cue ball, get you a big stick and do the break, cue ball contacts the first ball and they all scatter and bounce around. Well, what if you could, as you can do with a video, play it in reverse, and the balls that are sitting still suddenly begin to roll and bounce and carry them off of each other and the sides of the table, and reassemble themselves into a perfect triangle, and then sit there? That's essentially what they did with this quantum process, and they are now going to refine it and improve it, and they think that it's going to have all kinds of applications that are beyond my grasp. My reach exceeds my grasp.

But we tend to think in binary terms, and we tend to think, when you look at the wheat and the chaff—you didn't think I'd get back there, did you?—wheat and chaff, that, well, we're going to burn the unbelievers in the lake of fire, unquenchable fire, eternal conscious torment, and all the wheat's going to heaven. But this is not wheat and tares. This is not, it's either wheat or it's not wheat.

The wheat grains and the chaff all come from the same plant, which grew from the same seed. Chaff is a part of wheat, but it's an unusable part. It's not profitable. So we're not talking about believers and unbelievers in this figure. We're talking about what is and isn't useful in the wheat, amongst the wheat, amongst God's people.

What do you separate out and make use of, and what do you get rid of and destroy? In your life, it's easy to remember the gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and stubble. It's all in the same pile, and you're separating out what is eternal and what lasts from what is temporary and what is ephemeral. If you think about it, wood and hay—I'm not so sure about stubble—but wood and hay actually have uses, but they don't last.

Wood eventually rots. Hay doesn't last. We've got some hay bales out here that are full of mold and you can't even use them for chicken straw. It's temporary. It's a short use. Nothing intrinsically wrong with wood and hay, is there? If you look at your life and you see things and you say, "Well, there's nothing wrong with that," that's not the question. Is there something wrong with it? The question is, does it have eternal value? Does it count on the kingdom of heaven or not? He didn't say there's gold, silver, precious stone, thorns, and a bunch of harmful things. Wood and hay and stubble just means you've cleared the field and you're ready to plant the next crop,

right? Nothing intrinsically wrong with those. The reason they are judged and the reason they disappear in the fire is that they are not of the future. They're not of eternity. They're not of what lasts and what endures and what God values.

But we could look at it and say, "Hey, this isn't just any wood. This is mahogany." I was looking at a refinished piano I tuned this past week. The piano is over 100 years old. It's a Baldwin full-scale upright. You don't see those too often. Gorgeous piano, and it's been refinished. And I mean refinished by somebody that knows what they're doing. The grain in this wood just catches your eye as soon as you walk in the room. Beautiful, beautiful piano, and restored on the inside. Somebody did a wonderful job of restoration. This piano plays like a piano that's only 30 or 40 years old, and it's 100 years old. But it doesn't matter how nice the wood is. It doesn't matter how beautiful and appealing to the eye it is. When you're in a judgment that's looking for what's eternal, it's going to go up in smoke.

Wood and hay, think about it. It's not enough that you think it's useful or you think it's good. It's got to survive the fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he is separating from this wheat harvest that all came from a good field. It's not tares. It's not thorns. Go to Hebrews 6 if you want to see a field that is fit for burning and near to a curse. Rain comes on it many times and it brings thorns and briars. That's your Hebrews 6. This is not that. This grew in the wheat field. This came from the seed. But it's unprofitable, and it's going in an unquenchable fire. This is a judgment within, among, and about believers, the people of God. Not something other. The enemy didn't come and sow the chaff. It's just not useful for God's purpose.

So his winnowing fan is in his hand. He is going to thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. Why does it say that? Why can't he just say, you know, burn the chaff, gather the wheat? Why does he say he's going to clean the threshing floor? It is comprehensive. When the floor is cleaned, no grain of wheat is still lying in a corner somewhere with its little accompanying chaff. No escape. It is perfect. It is comprehensive. It is 100%. Nobody's missed. Nobody's overlooked. Nobody escapes.

There's people whose, you know, a lot of stuff, especially in Oklahoma, depends on your—I got asked on a trip. I went into the Choctaw market there. They got a gas station and a, you know, typical QuikTrip-type of market attached to the casino. And go in there, and I went up there to buy a snack. And the gal said, "Have you got your CDIB?" And I said, "I have a CDIB, but I don't think it's going to do me any good here because my certified degree of Indian blood card says I'm Cherokee, and we're in a Choctaw facility." So I guess you get some kind of discount or I don't know what. But she asked me for my—she took a look at my face and she said, "You know, show me your CDIB." And I said, "Well, it's not going to do any good. I'm Cherokee." And I said, "In point of fact, I'm probably four times as much Choctaw as I am Cherokee, and I'm in a Choctaw facility." What's my problem there? It's undocumented because my forebears with that particular extraction all hid out down in Alabama during the taking of the Dawes Roll a hundred-plus years ago, when all of the Native Americans—as no Indians call themselves. White people call Native Americans, Native Americans. Indians call each other Indians. It's a certified degree of Indian blood. It's, you know, it's the Indian. Indians have no trouble calling each other Indians. It's only people with a conscience who say, "Oh, the Native Americans." Everybody that's born here is a Native American. I mean, it's a very—I digress.

My great-grandmother's people were largely Choctaw and hid out in Alabama during the Dawes Roll because you got put places and had things done to you if you were Indians. And so they hid out in Alabama and didn't get enrolled. And so it doesn't matter. I could be full-blood Choctaw. If you don't have an ancestor on the Dawes Roll, you don't get a CDIB for that tribe. I've got other ancestors that were Cherokee that were enrolled, and so there you go.

What is my point? The judgment on the threshing floor is comprehensive. Nobody hides out. Nobody escapes. There's no Alabama for the threshing floor. You are going to be enrolled, and you are going to be designated as one thing or the other.

Now, when I say you, what are we really talking about? Is it the quality of the individual or is it the quality of the produce? How do I—they're really the same thing when it comes to this judgment. If I am faithful, there will be the fruit of faith. If I am spiritual, there will be the fruit of the Spirit. It's me, but it's me in the production of my life. If God sows seed into the soil of my heart, is it 30-fold, is it 60-fold, or is it 100-fold? Well, that's the produce, but what kind of field am I? The field and the harvest are all intertwined, and it's basically all one thing.

I don't have to figure out, is the wheat good works or is the wheat good people? Yes. Yes. The wheat of good people. By good I mean having claimed by faith God's righteousness and having produced that fruit accordingly in their life. "I show you my faith by my works." This is the production.

So this is figurative language talking about what do you do with the rain falling many times on the field. If you produce that which is eternal in quality, that which is useful to God in its nature is going to be gathered into God's barn. All of the unfruitful works of darkness are going to be burned. And there's unfruitful works of darkness by God's people. We want to be mostly wheat and as little chaff as possible. We want to be gold, silver, and precious stones with as little wood, hay, and stubble as possible. Don't get enamored with the grain of the wood.

Anybody that knows me and knows Patty knows that we will mismatch all kinds of wood because we just like looking at it for the grain. Everything doesn't have to be mahogany. Everything doesn't have to be walnut or oak. We've got things of every shape, size, and description. We just don't want to paint it. We don't want to cover it because the grain is so beautiful. But you can't get enamored with the wood. You can't think, "Boy, I'm going to—look at all this hay I've got." It's not our standard. It's not what appeals to our eye. It's God's judgment. All of that is the winnowing fan. All of that is the threshing floor.

This is a part of John's message. The people of God were supposed to get this message, and notice they're getting the message when relative to Christ. Before. Before. He doesn't say, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Jesus doesn't say, "I am come that you might have life in heaven more abundantly. Oh, by the way, I've got a winnowing fan. The axe is at the root of the trees. There's a judgment coming." All of this is given by way of preparation. Before the Lord can come, the way has to be prepared. This is way preparation. This is message delivery. Voice crying. You need to absorb these truths and implement them and live in their light before the Lord can come and successfully accomplish the purpose for which He is coming. You have to know this first.

Many times we get stuck for an answer. We have a challenge, an issue, something is sticking in our craw somewhere or the other, and, "Oh Lord, look at this situation I'm in here. Look at this challenge that I or somebody close to me is facing. Oh Lord, I want to bring this before You in prayer. What are You doing? What is going on?" When is the truth supposed to be absorbed, and when is the way supposed to have been prepared so that God could do and accomplish in a situation? Beforehand, not during and not after.

You're not the train laying the track right in front of the cowcatcher. That railroad needs to be complete before the locomotive leaves Chicago or wherever it comes from. Lay the track. Make the way straight. God can crank that thing up to 90 miles an hour with no obstructions and no impediments. Don't wait until the train is there and say, "Oh Lord, can You hold up a minute? I need to lay another six and a half miles of track before You can arrive at the destination." All of this is preparation. All of this is ahead of time. Why? Ask yourself the question.

Just step back from this whole thing. Nothing has been said or done in Israel prophetically for 400 years. We talked about the significance of numbers. I didn't include that when I was talking about 400 on Thursday night in Psalm 37, the acrostic. I didn't talk about this because it's not specified in the Bible, but I think Elizabeth brought it up afterward. Isn't it true that the gap between the Old Testament and the New Testament is 400 years? That's right. Your last biblical revelation is about 400 years before. You have the Septuagint midway between diversifying the Old Testament revelation and making it available to a lot more people. But there's a 400-year gap.

Then why doesn't Jesus just appear? Why do you need John? Why did God prophesy it in the first place and say, "I will send you Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord"? Why not just send Jesus? Can't Jesus deliver this message? Can't Jesus talk about axes and wheat and winnowing fans and fires and judgment? Why John? Ask yourself the question.

The answer to it is similar to why Bible study. You don't develop a big problem this past week and then say, "Well, let me get to church on Sunday and I'll get the answer." We come to Bible class and we listen to the voice in the wilderness encouraging us and directing us and filling out our conscience and our perceptions and our judgment so that we are prepared. "Prepare in the wilderness away." Preparation.

Now, I've told you this, but it's been a while, so I'll tell you again. When I was in Okinawa as a young second lieutenant artillery guy, I had two battery commanders. I had one of them for half a year and the other one for

half a year. The first one was just a first lieutenant, but he was a really smart guy. I admired him a lot. I enjoyed working for him. His name was Lieutenant Holman. You'll never find him. It won't hurt to use his name.

Lieutenant Holman was organized. When we were going to the field, he sent us in advance to order ammunition and arrange for picking it up. He thought ahead. We had planning sessions. We mapped out exactly who was going to do what, where, when, and why, how, for how long, how we were going to come back. It was all organized in advance. It was a thing of beauty, well-oiled machine. He rotated back to the States halfway through my tour, and we got a new battery commander whose name I won't give. He was a captain, more experience, more stuff under his belt, but the guy couldn't plan his way out of a wet paper bag. He was a guy that would wait for something to blow up in his face and then try to get the egg off before the next thing blew up.

We didn't plan ahead. We were unprepared. We were unready because we were so busy dealing with the current crisis that we couldn't look ahead and plan. We were in the South China Sea. We went to Thailand and Singapore and Hong Kong and the Philippines twice. It was a nightmare because there was no forward look. Because there was no forward look, there were constant immediate crises that came out of nowhere, blindsiding us, and were trying to do damage control and leak plugging instead of looking ahead and saying, "You know, maybe we ought to paint this ship so it doesn't leak. Maybe we ought to polish this brass before the real brass show up to inspect. Maybe we ought to be ready. Maybe we ought to do some—" None of that. It was just all, you know, it's like a juggler with one too many balls in the air and, well, which one do I let fall to the ground? It was a nightmare.

Prepare the way. Be prepared. John came ahead of time. You've got an opportunity here to be ready. Pay attention to the message. You're going to need it soon. The kingdom is at hand, so be ready. Preparation is a characteristic feature of faithful people. The faithful believer does preparation. The faithful believer plans ahead. It is an intrinsic part of God's plan.

Look at it. God prepared a garden. He prepared it, and then He put the man in it. It's interesting to think, you know, Adam wasn't created in the Garden of Eden. Adam was created and got a chance to kind of look around and say, "You know, this is kind of a scary place." The guy says, "Hang on, I'm preparing a garden. I've got it. Now I'm going to put you in it, and you will tend it. I'll bring you the animals and you can name them from the safety of the garden." It's interesting to look at the sequence there and how long it is before Eve comes along. Preparation.

Now, quickly, Jesus came from Galilee, verse 13, to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. That's what it says in our passage in Matthew. Notice, Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized. That's a purpose. Jesus came. This, by the way, that's *paraginomai*, came alongside, came into the present location. It's the very same verb that is used in verse 1 of chapter 3. "In those days John the Baptist came preaching." He came preaching. Jesus came to be baptized. That's what it says.

If you look at the parallel, you don't have to turn there, but in Mark chapter 1, verse 9, it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized. It's more passive in Mark. Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized. If you go to Luke chapter 3, verse 21—that was Mark 1:9—if you go to Luke 3, verse 21, when all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized. It doesn't talk about Him coming from Galilee or from Nazareth in Galilee. It says, "When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized." He's last. And while He prayed, the heavens were opened. It doesn't talk about the prayer in Mark. It doesn't talk about the prayer here in Matthew.

You really get a full, wide-angle, three-dimensional view of this particular episode. When you go to John, the Gospel of John, who are eyewitnesses of this baptism? Who is standing here watching when Jesus gets baptized of the disciples? Andrew, James, and John, right? We know for sure those three. Andrew goes and gets his brother Peter, Simon. John is an eyewitness, but if you go to John chapter 1, flip over real quickly to John chapter 1, the baptism is not even depicted. The baptism is not even depicted. It's always interesting to me what is not said as much as what is said.

John 1:19: "This is the testimony of John." The Jews sent priests and Levites to Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" Confessed and did not deny. They asked him about being Elijah. You've got the quote, as all four Gospels have, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord." Then verse 29: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the

world. This is He of whom I said, after me comes a man who is preferred before me. He was before me. I did not know Him, but that He should be revealed to Israel. Therefore I came baptizing with water.”

I came baptizing with water so that He should be revealed to Israel. I came, the baptism is preparation for the revelation. You see it? You say, why was John dunking people in the Jordan? He says right here, this whole baptism ritual, my whole message out here is to reveal the one coming after me. That's why I came baptizing with water. John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove.” When? John doesn't say. John says, John the Baptist said, “I saw the Spirit descend.” We know from the other three Gospels when he saw this, but at this point here, baptism is done, and John doesn't even record it.

Back to Matthew chapter 3 now. Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. There's a lot more intentionality in that statement than there is in Jesus showed up from Galilee or from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized. We get the when of it from Luke: when all the people were baptized. Jesus is the last or one of the last. It appears from other accounts that maybe John continued to baptize for a while, but at least on this day, Jesus is the last. He's the final one according to Luke. Mark is the one that tells us that He came directly from Nazareth. He hadn't been circulating elsewhere in Galilee. He came from His hometown of Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. It's fascinating to look at all three.

John prevented him, or prevents him. A lot of these are historical presents. It gives you a sense of immediacy. You notice “tried to” is in italics there, but John refuses. Jesus came to be baptized, and John says no, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” Jesus answered and said to him, and this is one of the most discussed statements in all of Scripture, “Permit now.” Notice “it to be so” is all in italics. It just says, “Now permit,” and that's how it ought to read because it's a strong command here in the Greek. I'm sure they were talking Aramaic to each other, but the Greek here is pretty strong. He says, “Now permit.” This is not the only time that Jesus is going to give a pretty strong rebuttal or a pretty strong command to someone. Basically, not quite to the point of testy, but this probably represents a longer conversation, and this is the summary.

Jesus says, “I'm here. Let's baptize me.” John has got objections, and the summation of it, pretty much the end of it, Jesus says, “John, permit.” Once you get the command, you do the command. Discussion is over. Debate is over. You know that this was a longer conversation. We have summary statements like this. The Sermon on the Mount—you can read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 5, 6, and 7. You can read that in about 18 minutes. Do you seriously think that Jesus gave an 18-minute Sermon on the Mount and was all done? He preached for hours. It's a summary. It's a distillation. It's the essentials. It's the highlights. It's the main points. It's like your notes from Bible class. I can talk for 36 minutes. Your notes, you can read them in 36 seconds. That's what you've got here. These are the highlights. These are the notes.

But when Jesus says, “Do it,” and He gives the distillation of the reason, “Now”—and you've got to reverse it in English—“Now permit,” now allow, now suffer it to be so. It sounds like it's some kind of a nebulous thing that's just going to sort of happen. Don't get in the way of what's about to happen. No, He's telling John, you've got to make this happen.

John says, Moses at the mount, slow speech, slow tongue, I can't go to Pharaoh. God pretty much says, your mouth is working pretty well right now. You're giving me all these objections. I'll send Aaron with you. Now go. He pretty much cuts the discussion off. Why is John to now permit? “For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

Let me ask you a question. We're getting ready to wrap up here. The way the English reads here, “Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Let me ask you this. When John complies and baptizes Jesus, has all righteousness been fulfilled? Was that all it took? Behold, Jesus came up from the water and avoided the flood and was saved. Now the voice from heaven said, now mankind is saved. Now redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation have been accomplished. Now all of my children can come to heaven and enter the New Jerusalem.

Does the baptism fulfill all righteousness? And is that what Jesus is telling John here? Or is this one of an innumerable collection of things that it is necessary for us to fulfill all righteousness? This is one example. But the baptism of Jesus in no way, shape, or form fulfills all righteousness. If it did, He would have never gone to the cross. He would have never gone about preaching and healing for three and a half years. So what does it mean? Why is this even included in Scripture? Why doesn't it say, Jesus says, “Now permit,” and John dunked Him and etc.? Why is this rationale given? It's red ink in my Bible. “For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

All of us have righteousness that we are supposed to fulfill. John is the baptizer. Jesus is the baptizee. For Jesus to fulfill the baptism, to be baptized, fulfills righteousness. They are doing two different things. But whatever righteousness is assigned to you, or to me, or to John, or to Jesus, or to Paul, or to anybody else who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ in particular, it is fitting, it is incumbent on us to fulfill whatever righteousness is assigned to us.

John has an assignment to baptize, and that includes baptizing the Lord Jesus. He is fulfilling that righteousness in announcing the coming of the kingdom, that the kingdom is at hand, and imploring the people to prepare the way of the Lord. He is fulfilling and continues to fulfill that righteousness when he baptizes people in the Jordan. And to make sure he fulfills all righteousness, he can't stop short at the Lord Jesus. That is also a part of his assigned righteousness. It is necessary for us, John, Jesus says, you and me, you as the baptizer, me as the baptizee, to fulfill the righteousness that is assigned to us.

Jesus has a lot of assignments in His earthly ministry. This is one of the first at the outset of His formal ministry. He has already told His parents 18 years earlier, "Wouldn't you expect me to be about my Father's business?" That was part of Jesus' righteousness, to be at the temple, to be disputing with the scribes. He fulfilled that righteousness. He's fulfilling it here.

So instead of being sort of a unique baptism, and we look at it from afar, and it's a beautiful frieze, it's a wonderful stained-glass window, Jesus being baptized by John, there's a dove up on high, what is the application for you and me? I've not been assigned to baptize. I haven't been assigned to be baptized. But do I have assignments that are fitting to fulfill all God's righteousness? God has righteousness that He wants to evidence and manifest. There's fruit that needs to be born, right? You've got some, I've got some. And if the Lord Jesus submits Himself to the plan of the Father, where is this righteousness coming from? It's the plan of the Father. If you know the plan, if you listen to the voice, and it says prepare the way, this is part of the way preparation, then you do it. So that's our application.

When you think of Jesus and John at the Jordan, before you get wrapped up on the Holy Spirit descending like a dove—and by the way, that's your homework for next week—why does the Holy Spirit descend like a dove here, and descend like fire at Pentecost? The same Holy Spirit. We're the body of Christ, body of Christ. Holy Spirit descends on it like a dove at the Jordan, descends like fire at Pentecost. What was a part of John's message, the one coming after me, up in verse 11? He will baptize you with what? The Holy Spirit and fire.

So you get the Holy Spirit here, descending like a dove. Acts chapter 2, it's tongues of fire. Why not doves? People love to set doves free at a wedding or some event. Why isn't there a big flock of doves? It's like those pool balls I was talking about earlier. Instead of the doves all scattering, all of the doves come from the four winds and come and one alights on each believer at Pentecost, the 120 or however many there were. All of the doves come and everybody gets a bird on their head. It descends. Seriously, there could have been a flock of doves flew over. Why is it fire there and it's a dove here? That's your homework for next week. I'll tell you what I think from Scripture.

But here's our point, here's our conclusion for this morning. Look at verse 17. When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And notice your New King James text note says, it says HE, and you've got a note that says, "or he." What's the difference in the HE above and the he below? The HE above is capitalized. They've chosen to capitalize it in the text, but they say, "or it could be small-h he." Meaning, who was it that saw the Holy Spirit descend? Was it Jesus, or was it John?

You look at the immediate context. When he had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And then you have the voice. So you would think, well, the nearest reference is Jesus, the nearest noun, so the pronoun should be Jesus, and that's what they thought, and that's why they capitalized it.

The difficulty is, if you've come up from the water, and you're standing there, you know, in the Jordan, wet, and the heavens open and the Spirit descends, who's more likely to see that? Somebody standing and watching the dove land on you, or you, carefully, looking straight up? And, you know, it says, other places it says, he saw the Spirit descending like a dove. Here it says, "and alighting upon Him," and alighting upon Him. How easy it is for you to see a bird land on you.

I saw an assembly at our high school where a guy brought a full-grown eagle, bald eagle. Our mascot was the Eagles at Sequoia, and the guy brought an eagle, and so the guy put it on the coach's arm. They took pictures. You know, here's our basketball coach, Coach Callahan, and he's got this big eagle perched on him. But the coach couldn't really see the eagle; he's too close. The eagle is up on his shoulder, and there's a picture of him in the yearbook, you know, with this eagle stuck on him. It's pretty tough to see a bird that has landed on you.

What does John himself say in the Gospel of John? "I saw the Holy Spirit descend." I suspect that both the Lord Jesus and John saw it, and that's why it doesn't matter if you capitalize or don't capitalize. But we're going to look at this notion of the Holy Spirit descending next time, and your clues are what symbols are used for the Holy Spirit in Scripture. You can think about several of these off the top of your head. I can give you at least nine. We'll look at those next time.

The other one is, what's the purpose of this? Is it an anointing? If so, why does it take this form? John's prophet, kings in Israel were anointed by the prophet. How? How did Samuel anoint Saul, and later David? Dove? Fire? If Jesus is the king, why isn't He anointed with a horn of anointing oil by John instead of baptized? And this dove appearance. We'll look at all of that next time.

But our application for now is preparation. Preparation is the key. Be prepared. Everybody is more successful on a test when you are prepared. So I'll note on my computer, if I'm going to take the GRE, GRE themselves, the GRE website says, "Will help you add seven points to your score. Click this link." I'm not going to take it, so I didn't click it. But they say, if you prepare, you can improve your score by a minimum of seven points. Here's how to do it. Here's how to prepare and get seven points higher than you would otherwise.

Preparation is the key. We know there's a test. We know there's a winnowing. We know there's a judgment. What's the nature of the preparation? That's the question to answer. That's the word of the day for us.

Let's close here in a word of prayer. Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word. Thank You for the clear message that we receive that reminds us how important it is to be prepared, to be ready, to be found when the Lord appears as a thief, that we are not overtaken as those who are overtaken by thieves in the night. We are not of the night or the darkness. We are of the day. We want to be prepared. We want to be ready. We want to be useful. We want to reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus and Your own glory as we enter into these future days and future opportunities.

This is our time of preparation. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will minister these truths to our hearts so that we can be prepared, so that we can bear that fruit that is in accord with faith and the presence of Your Spirit and be found without spot, without wrinkle or blemish, and ready and fit and useful for Your service. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.