



Matthew 3:11–12

11 “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

In the first 10 verses of Matthew 3 we’ve been

introduced to John the Baptist and in today's passage John introduces us to Jesus. But before we turn to Jesus, one final observation about John – John's humble. In today's passage in verse 11 he says that he's not even worthy to carry Jesus' sandals. Now in the ancient world carrying someone's sandals – imagine the dirt and dust from walking around everywhere – taking off someone's sandals and carrying them was the job of the lowliest servant in a household.

Now to fully appreciate how humble it is for John to say this we have to remember where John's come from and what he's done. We had a look at Jesus' miraculous birth in the first couple of chapters of Matthew but did you know that Luke records similar circumstances around the birth of John. The angel Gabriel who came to Joseph in a dream to

tell him about Jesus also came to John's father. Only John's father wasn't a carpenter, he was the Jewish High Priest, and Gabriel came to him not in some backwater town like Bethlehem but in Jerusalem, in the holiest part of the temple in Jerusalem, on the holiest day of the year. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, John was filled by the Holy Spirit even when he was still in his mother's womb. Jesus and John are each about 30 years old at this point in time, and no-one knows who Jesus is, but John, in less than a year of ministry, has become a sensation. They're calling him Elijah returned, he's preaching to thousands, and many of them are being cut to the heart and turning back to God. People from all over, from every level of society are coming out to him, he's the greatest prophet to ever walk the earth, he's at the height of his powers and yet when he speaks of Jesus, well he says he isn't

worthy. He isn't worthy to even to bend down and untie his dusty sandals. John's humble.

And he goes on to tell us why, so let's move from John to Jesus. John's saying, 'After me comes Jesus, he's more powerful than I. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.' And there's so much here. You see in Old Testament times only God's prophets, and judges, and kings received the Holy Spirit – and they went on to do great things for God's people. But that was in the Old Testament under the Old Covenant, under the old promises. In the New Testament, under the new covenant, the new promises God had said through his prophet Joel that he would pour out his Holy Spirit on all his people. And here John is saying that this is going to happen through the baptism of Jesus. John's baptism is symbolic, he uses only

water – but Jesus will baptise people with the Holy Spirit, which will mean they will go on and do great things as part as God’s mission here on earth.

But that’s not all John says. Did you notice he says that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire, with one or the other, which is a frightening image. The Holy Spirit or fire. And John, great preacher that he is, goes on to expand on this image with an illustration. See in verse 12, it’s an agricultural illustration, farming illustration, which means it would have been clear as day, instantly understood by his original hearers. It’s harvest time, the wheat has been harvested and brought in by the farmers to the threshing floor. Think of a pile of wheat outdoors on ground made of stone or of hard-pressed dirt with a low brick perimeter fence around it. And then of farmer

with a pitchfork tossing the wheat up in the air so that the chaff, the husks, could blow away in the wind, and the heavier heads of wheat drop to the floor. The wheat is then gathered up and sent off to be ground into flour and made into bread. And the chaff is swept up with brooms and thrown into the fire.

It's a powerful picture isn't it. Jesus has come to divide us. A baptism of the Spirit or a baptism of fire. The Holy Spirit or eternal fire. Jesus is coming to divide the world. There'll be no middle-ground. You'll either respond to him with repentance and faith and be baptised with the Holy Spirit or turn your back on him and remain in your sins and receive the judgement of eternal fire. A baptism of Spirit or baptism of fire.

And so John the Baptist introduces us to Jesus.

And tomorrow Jesus comes. But for today, take a few moments now to meditate over this passage of Scripture. Were you struck by John's humility when he compared himself with Jesus? There's arguably no greater character in the bible than John but he sees himself lower than the lowest servant standing alongside Jesus. Is your view of Jesus too small? Is your view of yourself too big? How large is your life in comparison to his life? How large are your goals for you, in comparison to his goals for you? And is there a more attractive character trait than humility? I don't know that there is. How can we be more humble, you and I?

But let's not forget the main thrust of this passage. John's stark parallel – the Holy Spirit or fire – which will it be for those you love? It's awful to think about isn't it? We wish there was an alternative, we want there to be a mid-

dle-ground, if only there was another way, but God's word is clear and final. The Holy Spirit or fire. It's awful to think about, if it doesn't reduce you to tears thinking about it then something's wrong because it's so awful. But in the same breath it's so important to think about. Because it drives us to prayer and it drives us to action. So pray now and think about how you can act today, and remember that God doesn't want anyone to perish – he wants everyone to turn and be saved. He says so clearly and passionately in Ezekiel 33 and 2 Peter 3, in the Old Testament and the New.

Well that's all for me today, and tomorrow Jesus arrives, and it changes everything, so until then.