

# Christ and His Harbinger Compared and Distinguished.

by Edward Payson

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*The sermon compares John the Baptist's role as a herald of Christ with the transformative power of Christ's baptism through the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:8, Matthew 3:11, John 1:6, John 14:26, Acts 19:4, Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27, 1 Peter 1:22

**Topics:** "Holy Spirit", "Repentance"

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## Description

Edward Payson preaches about John the Baptist's testimony of Christ's superiority and the baptism with the Holy Ghost and fire. John humbly acknowledges his unworthiness compared to Christ, emphasizing the need for repentance and faith in Jesus for true purification. The sermon highlights the importance of true ministers preaching repentance, exalting Christ, and emphasizing the necessity of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. It challenges listeners to examine their thoughts and feelings towards Christ, urging them to seek true baptism by the Spirit for purification and salvation.

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## Transcript

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance; but he that cometh after me is mightier than I; whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire; whose fan is in his hand and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire"

Matthew 3:11, 12

words were uttered by John the Baptist with reference to Christ. On many accounts they richly deserve our attention. John was raised up, commissioned, and sent to be the harbinger of the Messiah. He Came, as we are told by the apostle, to bear witness of Christ the true light, that through him all men might believe, he was the morning star which preceded and indicated the approach of the Sun of righteousness. In the language of the prophet who foretold his birth, he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the Way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God, In a word, as it was in those days customary for monarchs to be preceded by a herald, who proclaimed their titles, their approach, and the object of their coming, so Christ the Prince of Peace, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords was preceded by John the Baptist, as a herald, who announced his approach, and turned the attention of them

that heard him from himself to his divine Master.

This being the case, the testimony which he bore in favor of Christ is fully entitled to belief, and well deserves our attention. This testimony is principally contained in the passage before us. Let us then attentively consider the import of the passage, that we may learn from it what we are to believe respecting Christ. The great object of John the Baptist, as it will be of all who preach Christ, appears to have been, to give his hearers high and exalted conceptions of the transcendent worth and dignity of his Master.

With this view he describes in the most energetic language Christ's superiority, he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. To unloose a person's shoes or sandals and bear them after him, was considered by the Jews as the most servile and degrading of all menial employments, and fit only for the meanest slaves. Yet John considered the performance even of this service for Christ, as an honor of which he was utterly unworthy. If we would feel the full force of this language and learn what conception it should lead us to form of Christ, we must recollect by whom it was uttered.

It was the language of no common person. It was uttered by one who was by birth one of the chief priests, an order of men who sustained a high rank in the estimation of the Jews. It was uttered by one whose appearance in the world had been repeatedly predicted for some hundreds of years, whose conception was foretold by an angel and accompanied by miracles; who was born contrary to the common course of nature; who was filled with the Holy Ghost from the moment of his birth, who was favored with the gift of prophecy, after that blessing had been withheld from the world almost four hundred years; who was admired, followed, and applauded, in an unexampled degree, by all classes of men from the least to the greatest, and who by many was thought to be the promised Messiah himself.

To say all in a word, it was uttered by one of whom the Son of God, the faithful and true witness has said, he is a prophet, yea I say unto you, and more than a prophet; for among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist. Yet even this illustrious personage, so favored, so honored, so distinguished, publicly declared himself, in the presence of his followers and admirers, not worthy to perform the most servile and degrading office for Christ.

What then must he have thought of Christ? Did he view him only as a man, as some others have done? To have used such language respecting any man, would have been the grossest flattery; and surely he who boldly dared reprove the tyrannical Herod in his own court, would never have stooped to use flattering words respecting a fellow creature. Is it not then evident, or at least highly probable, that he must have regarded Christ as divine? The prophet who foretold his birth represents him as saying, Prepare ye the way of the Lord ; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Another prophet represents him as going before the face of the Lord to prepare his way. Now if these predictions were fulfilled, it is evident that John must have considered Christ, whose harbinger he was, and whose way he came to prepare, as the Lord God who was to come as a shepherd with a strong hand, whose reward was with him and his work before him. On this supposition alone can we rationally account for the manner in which he here speaks of Christ. With a view to convince the people still farther of his inferiority to Christ, he next proceeded to show them how far the baptism administered by Christ would exceed his own.

I indeed baptize with water unto repentance, but he that cometh after me shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Though the church of God had been favored, from its first establishment in the world, with the influences of the divine Spirit, yet under the Old Testament dispensation these influences were

communicated, comparatively speaking, but in a small degree. Even after the coming of Christ, but previous to his death, we are told that the Holy Ghost was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified; and our Savior himself represents the gift of the Spirit as inseparably connected with his ascension to heaven; If I go not away, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, will not come; but if I depart, I will send him to you.

Even the Old Testament prophets were inspired to predict this truth. Addressing Christ, as if he had already come, the psalmist says, Thou hast ascended up on high, thou hast received gifts for men, yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them. This prediction the apostle expressly applies to Christ, and teaches us that it was fulfilled at his ascension. It was also foretold by the prophet Isaiah that Christ should sprinkle many nations. This must refer, chiefly at least to his baptizing them with the Holy Ghost, of which John speaks in our text for Christ personally baptized none with water.

All these predictions were literally fulfilled at the day of Pentecost, when there came from heaven a sound as of a mighty rushing wind, which filled the place where the disciples were assembled, and there appeared unto them cloven tongues, like as of fire, which sat upon each of them; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. another Similar instance of time fulfillment of these predictions was witnessed by St. Peter while preaching to Cornelius and his friends. The Holy Ghost, we are told, fell on all who heard him, and he remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John indeed baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.

From the account of the baptism administered by our Savior, it is easy to see how far it was superior to the baptism of John. John baptized with water those who professed repentance for Sin; but the baptism of the Holy Ghost produced in those to whom it was administered, repentance and faith and all the other fruits of the Spirit. John's baptism could only put away the filth of the flesh; but Christ's baptism by purifying the conscience from dead works, produced the answer of a good conscience toward God.

He was the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world, and whose blood cleanses from all sin. John's baptism could be applied to the body only; it could not reach the soul nor change the character of those who received it. But the baptism of the Spirit converted and purified the soul, and they who received it were washed and justified and sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God, however vile and abandoned they had been before. In a word, John could at most confer only the sign; but Christ gave the thing signified in his baptism, a baptism with which John, like all others of our fallen race, needed to be baptized as he himself ingenuously confessed.

Hence it is easy to see how much this testimony of John tended to exalt our Savior in the opinion of his hearers. It was as if he had said to them, He who comes after me can cleanse the soul as easily as I can the body, he can confer the thing signified as easily as I can confer the sign; he can pour out the Holy Spirit upon you as easily as I can apply water. This expression, like the former, intimates with sufficient clearness that the Baptist believed the Christ to be God; for who but God can pour out upon men the Spirit of God?

Who but he that possesses the Spirit can baptize sinners with the Spirit? As a farther confirmation of this truth, permit me to call your attention to another passage, which has not received the attention which it deserves. We are told by St. John that Jesus after his resurrection breathed upon his disciples, saying, Receive ye the Holy Spirit. That we may perceive the full force and meaning of this significant action, it is necessary to recollect that, in both the Hebrew and Greek languages, the same word signifies spirit and

breath.

Now if Christ could breathe the Spirit of God into the souls of his disciples, or, in other words, if the breath or spirit of Christ be the breath or spirit of God, then beyond all controversy Christ must be God; and by the action and the words which accompanied it, he most forcibly intimated that he was so. Still farther to enlarge his hearers' conception of the infinite superiority of Christ above himself; the Baptist proceeds to state the character which Christ should sustain, and the works which he would perform; Whose fan is in his hand and he shall thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

In these words there is an evident allusion to a prediction of the prophet Malachi, which foretells the coming both of Christ and of John his harbinger. Jehovah is there represented as saying, Behold I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me, and Jehovah whom ye seek shall come suddenly into his temple; even the angel of the covenant whom ye delight in. But who may abide the day of his coming, and who shall stand when he appeareth? For he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

In a similar manner the Baptist here represents him as purifying the church, which he compares to a threshing floor, the true members of which are as wheat and the false as chaff. When he calls the church Christ's floor, he plainly intimates that while he was himself only a servant in the church, Christ is the head of the church; and when he represents him as separating the wheat from the chaff and consigning the former to the garner and the latter to the fire, he evidently teaches us that he is the Judge of quick and dead, who will reward every one according to his works, and who is able with unerring certainty to distinguish characters, and search the heart.

As if he had said to his hearers, You may easily deceive me by false pretences, and by professing a repentance which you do not feel, may induce me to baptize you. But you cannot thus deceive him who comes after me. He will discern with infinite ease your true characters, and will purify, the floor of his church from all the chaff which I may ignorantly bring. Think not therefore that my baptism can avail any thing, unless you are baptized by him with the Holy Ghost as with a purifying fire.

Such, my friends, in brief; is the import of the testimony borne by John the Baptist in favor of Christ; and we know that this testimony is true, because he was raised up, commissioned and inspired by the Holy Ghost, on purpose that he might bear testimony. To this testimony I have drawn your attention principally for the sake of many important reflections which it suggests, some of which it is now proposed to consider. 1. From this subject we may learn who are, and who are not the real preachers of the gospel, the true ministers of Jesus Christ.

You need not be told that among those who claim this title great differences prevail. Some preach one thing, and some another; and it is of infinite importance, of no less importance than your everlasting happiness, that you should be able to ascertain who are right; who are the true guides whom God hath appointed to conduct you to heaven. By attending carefully to the conduct and character of John the Baptist, you may learn how to do this. We know that he was divinely commissioned and taught; for we are told that he was a man sent from God; that he was a prophet and more than a prophet.

We may therefore conclude that all, who are sent of God to preach the gospel, will resemble John in their preaching. And what did he preach? I answer, he preached repentance toward God. I, indeed, says he,

baptize you with water unto repentance. In those days, says the evangelist, came John the Baptist preaching and saying, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. This he preached to all classes and characters alike. He also taught his hearers to manifest their repentance by a corresponding life: Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance; for the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.

But while he inculcated repentance, he taught his hearers not to trust to their penitence, nor to baptism, nor to any outward privileges for salvation, but to Christ alone. To exalt Christ and turn the attention of sinners to him, seems to have been the great object which he always kept in view. Especially was he careful to teach his disciples that he could not himself save them. All who came to him he sent to Christ. He seems to have considered himself only as a waymark, whose business it was to stand with extended finger and point to the Savior, crying, Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.

He told the people that they should believe on him who should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. In all his preaching still he held up Christ to view as all in all, and like St. Paul testified to all his hearers of every description, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. That they might know how repentance and faith were to be obtained, he taught them the necessity of divine influence, of being baptized with the Holy Ghost as a purifying fire; and informed them that Christ alone could baptize them in this manner; that without this they would be no better than chaff, and as such would be burnt up with unquenchable fire.

Thus he made Christ the whole subject matter of his preaching, and represented him as the beginning and ending, the author and finisher of our faith. Thus then will all preach who, like John, are sent of God. They will determine to know and to make known nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified, and will teach all men to honor the Son even as they honor the Father. They will not seek their own glory but the glory of Christ. They will strive to draw disciples not to themselves but to him, and will feel no apprehension of exalting or teaching others to exalt him too highly.

Nor will they fail to insist much on the necessity of divine influences, of being baptized with the Holy Ghost, saying with our Savior, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot see the kingdom of God. In the second place, all true ministers of the gospel will imitate John in their temper and conduct; especially in his humility. Highly honored and distinguished as he was, you see how meanly he speaks of himself in comparison with Christ. He felt his need, as a sinner, of being baptized with his baptism.

He felt unworthy to stoop down and loose the latchet of his shoes, a plain intimation of his readiness to cast himself and all that he possessed at his Savior's feet. Similar will be the temper of all who truly preach the gospel. They will learn of their Master to be meek and lowly in heart; and though, in consequence of his removal from this world, they cannot perform menial services for himself in person, yet they will be ready, in imitation of him who washed his disciples' feet, to perform the meanest and most laborious offices of kindness for the lowest of his followers.

Such, my friends, will be the mode of preaching, such the temper and conduct of the true ministers of Christ. When you find such you may safely follow them, for they are the followers of John, of the apostles, and of Christ; and those who refuse to follow such guides would have refused to follow Christ and his apostles, had they lived in their day. 2. From this subject you may learn, not the characters of Christ's ministers only, but your own. That you may learn this, permit me to ask, what think ye of Christ? and what are your feelings toward him?

What John thought and felt respecting him, you have already heard; and that his thoughts and feelings respecting him were such as they ought to be, we cannot doubt, since he was filled with the Holy Ghost even from his birth. Say then, my hearers, do your thoughts and feelings on this subject resemble his? That you are in any respect, unless it be in religious privileges, superior to the harbinger of Christ, you surely will not pretend. If then John felt unworthy to perform the meanest offices for Christ; if he thought, that to stoop down and loosen the Savior's shoe-latchet, when he appeared in the form of a servant, was an honor which he did not deserve; much more may we think and feel the same, now he is exalted to heaven in the form of God.

Do you think and feel thus? That some of you do, I doubt not. You love, like Mary, to sit at Christ's feet and hear his word; or like the woman, who had been a sinner, to lie at his feet and wash them with the tears of unfeigned repentance, and feel unworthy even of this privilege. You feel that much has been forgiven you, and therefore you love much. Happy souls! you have chosen the good part, and it shall not be taken from you. But are there not many present, who do not feel thus?

Your conduct, my hearers, compels us to fear that this is the case. It proves that you are ashamed of Christ and of his words, ashamed to confess him before men. Many of you would, I fear, be ashamed to have your acquaintance suspect that you worship him in your closets; and many are evidently afraid or ashamed to worship him in your families. But why is this? You are sufficiently fond of what you consider as honorable. If then you felt as did the Baptist, if you thought it would be an unmerited honor to perform the most servile offices for Christ, you would certainly feel it a much greater honor to be allowed to address him in prayer, to be enrolled among his followers and friends, and to commune with him at his table.

God forbid, you would exclaim, that I should glory save in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ. But since you disclaim this cause of glorying, since you refuse to accept the honors which Christ offers, we must conclude that your views and feelings respecting the Savior are dissimilar to those of John the Baptist, or in other words, that they are entirely wrong. 3. Did Christ come to baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire? Then surely, my friends, it becomes you all to inquire whether you have ever been baptized by him in this manner.

The importance of this inquiry will fully appear, if you consider our Savior's words to St. Peter, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me; i. e. If thou art not baptized with my baptism, the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and sprinkled with the blood of sprinkling, which cleanses from all sin, thou hast no share in the blessings which I bestow. Say then, my friends, has the Savior baptized you in this manner? Have the influences of the Holy Spirit, like a penetrating, purifying fire, melted your once stony hearts, purified them from the dross of sin, caused them to glow with love to God and man, and prepared them to receive the impress of your Savior's image?

Has the Spirit of truth taught you to know the truth? Has the Spirit of adoption taught you to cry, Abba Father, with the feelings of a child? Has the Spirit of grace and supplication, who, we are told, helps the infirmities of Christ's people in prayer, taught you to pray? Are you led by the Spirit of God as, we are told, all the children of God are? Do you find in yourselves those dispositions which compose the fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, long suffering, meekness, goodness, faith, and temperance?

If so, you have indeed been baptized with the Holy Ghost as with fire. Christ has washed you, and you have a share in all his blessings. But if not, you have no part nor lot in the matter. You have not the Spirit of Christ, and therefore, as the apostle asserts, you are none of his. You have received the grace of God

in vain, and Christ has profited you nothing. Whether in the church of Christ or not, you are no better than chaff; and as such you will, unless speedy repentance and faith prevent, be burnt up with unquenchable fire. 4.

From this subject, my Christian friends, we may learn how to estimate the favors which we receive from our Savior's condescending love. John, than whom a greater was never born of woman, thought it would be too great an honor for him to perform the most menial service for Christ. What then ought we to think of being admitted to his church and table; of being called, not his servants, but his friends; of enjoying communion with him as members of his body, and of sharing as fellow heirs with him in the heavenly inheritance!

My friends, did we realize, like John, the infinite dignity of him who confers on us these favors, we should be continually in a transport of gratitude and praise; and the love of Christ would constrain us, as it did the apostle, to live not unto ourselves, but unto him who died for us. To conclude, is Christ's fan in his hand, is he determined thoroughly to purge his floor, and to burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire? Alas! then, for those who are at ease in Zion; for those false professors who are empty, and light, and worthless as chaff it is true that for a time, the chaff is of use.

It serves to shelter, protect, and ripen the grain, while it remains in the field. But a separating time must come; the chaff is not for the garner, where it would be worse than useless. So wicked men and false professors may, for a time, be useful to the church in various ways, while it remains in the field of this world. But in heaven they will be of no use. To heaven, therefore, they shall never come. Their doom, their portion is unquenchable fire. My friends, I cannot without trembling think of the day, when this separation is to take place, when this church and congregation will be visited with their final reward.

I tremble to think how many of you I shall miss in heaven, should I ever arrive there. How many whom I have heard singing the songs of Zion in this house, I shall never hear there; how many with whom I have here sat down at Christ's table, I shall look for in vain at his table above. Then not one hypocrite, not one particle of chaff will be left in this church, or in that part of this assembly which will be blessed with a place at God's right hand. This numerous assembly now resembles a fair and flourishing field; but when death cuts us down, when the wheat and chaff are separated, when the last tempest arises to drive the latter into the fire, how much will your numbers be diminished, how many of my flock shall I lose forever!

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