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First Quarter.

Lesson VII. February 16. Luke 3: 7-22

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN.

GOLDEN TEXT.

"Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."—Matt. 3: 2.

EXPLANATORY.

I. THE PREACHER,—JOHN THE BAPTIST. (1) He was the son of a priest, Zacharias, and Elizabeth. (2) *A Nazarite*, pledged to drink no wine nor strong drink. (3) *His early life* up to 30 years of age was passed in the solitudes of the wilderness. (4) His *mode of living* was that which was natural and easy under the circumstances, consisting of the locusts and wild honey. (5) *His work* was to prepare the way for the Messiah, as foretold in the prophets (Isa. 40: 3-5. (6) *His character* was that of a man fearless, strong, who communed much with God.

II. THE AUDIENCE. 7. *Then said he to the multitude.* The numbers who went to hear John were so great that it is said (Matt. 3: 15) that "Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan" went out to him. Just as we say now, on the occasion of a great procession, 'All New York turned out to see it.'"

III. THE SERMON ON REPENTANCE.—FIRST, REPENT. This is what John preached,—*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (ver. 3; Matt. 3: 2). This was and is the first duty of all. The very act of believing on Christ implies repentance.

SECOND. BE BAPTIZED, CONFESSING YOUR SINS. *Came forth to be baptized of Him*: confessing their sins (Matt. 3: 6; Mark 1: 5. Ablution in the East is, indeed, of itself, almost a religious duty. The dust and heat weigh upon the spirits and heart like a load; its removal is refreshment and happiness. It was hence impossible to see a convert go down into a stream, travel-worn and soiled with dust, and in a moment emerge pure and fresh, without feeling that the symbol suited and interpreted a strong craving of the human heart.

THIRD. FOR THERE IS GREAT NEED OF REPENTANCE. *O generation of vipers.* Off-spring or brood of vipers. This was especially addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 3: 7), who came *to be baptized*, but not to repent; they were ready for a new ceremonial, but not for a new life. But all sinners have this deadly nature, often undeveloped, but real; and for all there is the same need of repentance.

FOURTH. AND YOU ARE IN GREAT DANGER. *Who hath warned you to flee.* What excites such lively indignation in the forerunner, is to see people trying to evade the duty of repentance by means of its sign, by baptism performed as an *opus operatum*. His question thus amounts to this: "Who suggested to you that you could escape from the just consequences of your sins by a mere physical act? *From the wrath to come.* The punishment which must come upon the guilty nation and the guilty individual, unless there be repentance and works meet for repentance. The Bible is full of declarations of the wrath to come for sin (Rom. 2: 9; Matt. 22: 13; Heb. 10: 27).

FIFTH. THE WAY OF ESCAPE IS BY SINCERE REPENTANCE. 8. *Bring forth therefore fruits.* They were to show in their lives the appropriate results of such a change. *We have Abraham to our father.* Or, *as our father.* "The boast seems to have been common, as in John 8: 33-39, and was connected with the belief that this alone would be enough to insure for every Jew an admission into paradise, no matter what their personal character. Natural descent was not enough. Christ afterwards told some of them that, if they were really children of Abraham, they must prove it by doing the works of Abraham. *God is able of these stones*, doubtless pointing to the stones that lay on the shore of Jordan, where He was baptizing. *To raise up children unto Abraham.* Thus, in fact, out of the most unlikely persons,—Gentiles, publicans and sinners, nations then in idolatry,—did God raise up children to Abraham.

SIXTH. A SOLEMN WARNING. 9. *And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees.* The figure is remarkable. This was true of the Jewish nation at that time. The influences which would destroy it were then at work in the nation. So it is with every sinner. The source of his punishment begins, within him and without him, with the sin. *Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit*; the fruit God rightly requires of it. *Is hewn down*, not *will be*, but *is*. The present form of the verb indicates that John speaks of a law operating in God's kingdom.

IV. THE PRACTICAL EFFECTS OF THE SERMON. This passage is not the report of a single sermon, but a summary of John's work.

FIRST. IT LED MEN TO REPENTANCE, AND THE FRUITS MEET FOR REPENTANCE. 10. *And the people asked him, What shall we do then*, to bear good fruits, and not be hewn down and cast into the fire.

11. *He answereth.* John pointed out to the people some examples in their own conduct of the fruit which would prove their repentance to be sincere. *He that hath two coats*: tunics, inner garments worn next the skin. Two tunics indicate but small wealth. Even the poor can spare something for the still poorer. *And he that hath meat*: food. This command struck at the root of injustice and selfishness, besetting heart sins, and cherished the divine principle of love.

12. *Then came also publicans.* Tax-gatherers, collectors of the revenue.

13. *Exact no more than that which is appointed you.* They were to be just and righteous in all their dealings, no matter what other publicans might do.

14. *And the soldiers.* Omit "the." Probably not Roman soldiers, but "armed men acting as police in Judea,"—a perfectly legitimate business. *Demanded.* Too strong a word; rather, "asked." *Do violence to no man.* They had large opportunity for robbery, violence, harassing, and blackmail. *Neither accuse any falsely*; *i. e.*, in order to extort from him his property. *And be content with your wages.* So as not to be tempted to make gain in unjust ways.

SECOND. JOHN POINTED MEN TO JESUS. 15. *As the people were in expectation*; *i. e.*, waiting for a declaration of John respecting himself. *Whether he were the Christ or not.* This shows the deep impression made by John, as well as the general expectation that the Messiah would speedily come.

16. *John answered . . . I indeed baptize you with water.* I can only administer the outward ordinance, proclaiming what it signifies that you must do. *But One mightier than I.* "Possessing a power far beyond mine. *The latchet.* The lace or thong by which the sandals were fastened. *Of whose shoes* (sandals) *I am not worthy to unloose.* As stockings were not worn, the feet would become soiled; and when persons entered a house, the sandals were taken off and laid aside, so that the feet might be washed. This was the office of the lowest servants. *He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.* He would give the reality of which John gave the symbol. *And with fire.* The symbol of the Holy Spirit, consuming the evil of the heart, purifying the dross from human nature, bringing warmth, life, light, fruitfulness, comfort, purity to the soul. It is immaterial, but of measureless power.

17. *Whose fan is in His hand.* The fan is not a fan in our sense; it is a broad, light, wooden shovel, with which the grain is thrown up to the breeze, so that the wind may carry off the lighter chaff while the heavier grain sinks down clean. *And He will thoroughly purge.* Cleanse, separate the good from the bad. *His floor.* Threshing floor. *And will gather the wheat.* The fruit of His work on earth; those who, by believing on Him, become fit for His kingdom on earth and in heaven. *Into His garner.* Granary; the right place for the wheat; the kingdom of heaven; heaven. *But the chaff.* The refuse, the useless, representing all who continue in sin, unrepentant, good for nothing, harmful. *He will burn with fire unquenchable.* Symbolizes, apparently, final and utter destruction.

V. THE TEST OF THE PREACHER'S SINCERITY. 19. *But Herod.* Antipas (the son of Herod the Great). *Tetrarch.* Literally, "ruler of a fourth part." *Being reproved by him for Herodias his brother Philip's wife.* Herod Antipas put away his true wife, the daughter of Aretas, an Arabian king, and then stole the affections of his beautiful niece Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, and was at this time living with her in adultery. *And for all the evils which Herod had done.* His revellings, oppressions, murders, and a life full of sin.

20. *Added yet this above all, that he shut up John in prison.* At Castle Macherus, a dismal dungeon in Moab, in March A. D. 28. Herod tried to escape the stings of conscience and the consequences of his crimes by stopping the mouth of his reprover. But it was wholly in vain (see Matt. 14: 1-5).

VI. THE BAPTISM OF JESUS. We turn back again in the history to the sixth or seventh month of John's ministry, probably January, A. D. 26, at Bethabara, a ford of the Jordan.

21. *Now when all the people were baptized.* Either after the baptism of the great crowds during the early portion of John's ministry, or at the close of some day when John had baptized all the multitudes who desired it. *Jesus also being baptized.* Matthew says that Jesus was baptized in order "to fulfil all righteousness." (1) It was right for all good men to be baptized; and Jesus, as a man, was under obligations to do whatever was incumbent on other good men.

And praying. It is finely significant that the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus and His transfiguration came to Him during prayer. *The heaven was opened.* As this was visible not only to Jesus (Matt. 3: 16), but to John (John 1: 33), there may have been some supernatural appearance in the sky. But the significance was that what appeared came directly from heaven and God.

22. *And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove.* The dove was the symbol of peace, innocence, gentleness, and love. *And a voice came from heaven.* This was the inauguration of Jesus, His divine anointing, and it was well to have direct testimony from His Father, and from heaven His home. *Saying, Thou art My beloved Son.* The very words addressed to the Messiah in Ps. 2: 7. *In whom I am well pleased.* This voice from heaven assured Jesus that He was indeed the Son of God, and had God's help and approval in all His difficult mission.

Paying Off.

"I'll pay him off! I'll pay him off first chance I get, if 'tisn't till I'm as old as Methuselum, now!"

Tony's two brown fists came together with a thump. His eyes flashed, and his face was like a blaze. Mamma looked up, surprised and grieved at the outburst, but she didn't say a word; she only waited for what would come next.

"I will!" cried Tony, "I'll have to, mamma! He's the worst boy that ever lived! He's—he's—I'd like to pound him all black n' blue, so!"

Whack! came his fists together again, poor Tony! and the fire in his eyes was all at once put out by tears. Mamma spoke then.

"Tell mother all about it," said she.

And Tony sat down on a little cricket at mamma's feet, and laid his head against mamma's knee, and told, which was just what he wanted to do.

"He's kept plaguing me ever since first I begun to go to school, mamma, Johnny Spratt has, every way he could, and he's the biggest, too. I wouldn't plague a boy littler than I was, would you, mamma?"

"No, dear; I don't think I would."

"But he does, and calls names, too," Tony went on, beginning to grow rosy again. "He calls me 'Tony George,' because I always lift my cap to old Aunt Dinsmore—and that's right, isn't it, mamma?" as he thought he saw a sly little twinkle in mamma's eye.

"Quite right, Tony," she answered, quietly.

"'Cause it pleases her so much, you know. And sometimes I carry her basket for her a ways. And he makes fun. And this morning,"—Tony's breath came fast and he doubled his fists—"this morning I was the least bit late to school, and when I went in they all commenced to laugh, easy, of course, so Mr. Blake wouldn't hear, and look at the blackboard. And I looked too; and there was a picture of a boy lifting a hat bigger'n he was and bowing real low—an awful-looking boy, mamma, and 'Tony George' was right under it. I knew who made it quick enough, and my face got hot as fire; and just then Mr. Blake saw it, and he said, 'John, rub that thing out!' cross as anything. He knew who made it too, you see. Mamma, if I was big enough, I'd—I'd thrash him all to pieces! I'd just like to pay him off so he'd stay paid one while, mamma!"

Mamma didn't even smile. She felt that this was a serious matter.

"I don't blame you a bit," she said soberly. "I think I would want to pay him off if I were you. I think, dear, I would kill him."

Tony jumped from his cricket, he was so astonished.

"Why, Mamma Walters!" he cried. "Why—Mamma—Walters!"

Mamma smiled then, she couldn't help it. But she was quite in earnest.

"It would be a great deal better than thrashing him all to pieces, Tony," she said; and Tony hung his head and blushed. "Suppose you try it?"

"I don't know how," said Tony.

"I think you can guess, dear. And now we won't say another word about it for a week."

"I s'pose," said Tony, slowly, with his face puckered into a dozen wrinkles over this new idea, "I s'pose, mamma, you mean the way that old Quaker man did that gran'pa used to tell about. But I can't be kind to Johnny Spratt, mamma. How can I? 'Sides, I wouldn't have any chance."

"Make one," said mamma. "Now—no more for a week, my son, and then——"

Tony knew what that meant. It meant that at the end of a week he would be expected to tell mamma just how much he had done toward killing Johnny Spratt with kindness.

"I'm 'fraid it won't be much," he thought, with a little discontented pucker between his eyes. "It'll be pretty hard, I s'pose."

And so it was. Why, it did seem as if Johnny Spratt grew worse every day. Tony had to bite his tongue hard a good many times to keep from telling tales out of school about him. And as for being kind to him—that seemed quite out of the question, though Tony honestly did his best, and didn't get angry more times than he could help.

At the end of the week his birthday was coming, and Washington's; and the night before he rushed home from school all out of breath with his hurry and delight.

"O mamma!" he cried, eagerly, "we're going to have the best time to-morrow! We're all—all of our class, you know—going to put in twenty-five cents apiece and hire Mr. Baker's great big, big cutter, and Mr. Blake's going to take us to—to some kind of a lake that the last of it's 'guntie, and his sister lives right close side of it; and we're going to skate and fire at a mark, with just arrows, you know, mamma, and eat dinner at his sister's house. And we've got to meet at the school-house real early—and won't it be grand, mamma?"

Mamma smiled and kissed both glowing cheeks; for though Tony was half past nine, as he would have told you, he hadn't grown away from his mother's kisses yet.

"I hope you will have a very nice time," she said.

She said it again next morning, when she had helped him into his ulster, and tied his muffler carefully, and settled his fur cap snugly on his brown head.

"And now, Tony," she said, looking down into his clear brown eyes, "I want you to remember whose birthday this is—and all about it, dear."

"Yes'm, I'll try," Tony said. And then he darted off to join the merry little crowd at the school-house.

John Spratt was there, too, but somehow he didn't look so merry as the rest. His eyes looked almost as if he had been crying.

But before Tony had time to wonder much about this, Mr. Baker's big, four-seated cutter was at the door, the bells jingling and the horses breathing out little puffs of steam on the clear, frosty air. Then what a scramble there was! It didn't seem longer than a minute before all of the laughing, merry company had piled in, and were tucking the robes around themselves.

Not quite all. There was one lonely little figure left on the platform.

"Come, Johnny!" called Mr. Blake, kindly.

But Johnny Spratt shook his head, and looked down at his feet. There were tears in his eyes, and he did't want to cry before them all—a great big boy, almost eleven years old!

"I—I ain't going," he said. "I only came to see you off. I ain't got no—no twenty-five cents."

There was a stir in Tony Walters' heart just then, and he felt a funny little warm rush all over him. He thought of mamma—he remembered whose birthday it was. His cheeks grew cherry red and his eyes grew misty. In a flash he was out of the cutter, pressing his silver quarter in Johnny Spratt's hand.

"Here, Johnny, take this!" he cried; "you—you want to go more'n I do."

Poor Johnny Spratt! he looked at Tony and then at the sleigh-load of boys, and then at Tony again, and his face turned very red.

"I—I'd look pretty," he said, "a-taking your money after I've—O Tony Walters! I won't!"

But the more he wouldn't the more Tony insisted.

"Because its my birthday, as well as George Washington's you know," he said with a little laugh, "and I'd most as 'lievrs stay to home with my mother. Come Johnny!"

And then Mr. Blake, who understood all about it, said, "Come Johnny, jump in!" and Johnny obeyed, nearer to crying now than he had been before.

And all at once came a voice from the driver's seat—a voice that had a little choke in it as well as Mr. Blake's.

"Crowd in yourself, little chap!" it said. "I don't believe you'll weigh half of twenty-five cents worth. All aboard, now! Off we go!"

And off Tony went with the rest—and Johnny Spratt. If he hadn't, I think I could not have told the story with half so good grace. And he never was so happy and never had so good a time before in his life as he had that day. It was a good time all around; and as for Johnny Spratt—

"Why, mamma," cried Tony, "I b'lieve he's going to be one of the best boys you ever saw—one of the very best ones!"

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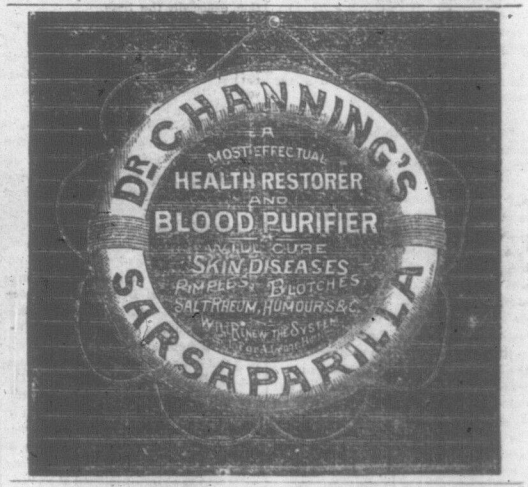

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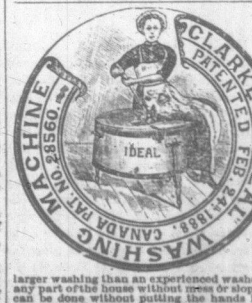

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