

There seem to be two types of people who were coming to see and hear John the Baptizer.

The first group was comprised of Sons and Daughters of Abraham, and assorted others. All of these people resonated with John's message.

The second group was comprised of people that John calls "sons and daughters of vipers. Snakes in the grass. People that are poisonous and can hurt or even snuff the life out of others.

Wow. Pretty harsh. It's interesting—that second group is made up of leaders of the faith, and believers who think that merely calling oneself a descendant of Abraham means they don't have anything to worry about.

These Jews came to John with the mistaken notion that God's promise to be faithful to Abraham's children guaranteed their salvation no matter what. Their pedigree was all a person needed.

I'm sure there are people like that in every faith in the world. And Christianity is not immune. Some sincerely feel that as long as they get baptized—they don't have to do another blessed thing; that's all that is needed.

I've witnessed more than a few baptisms where the parents were all gung ho to get their kids baptized, but it was clear that they never intended to speak about faith to them again—because now their kid was "safe."

It sure would be nice to think that we can act any way that we want after we are baptized, that we have immunity from all our actions from then on. But John, and then Jesus – assures us that it isn't that simple. And here's why: we really believe is always followed by how we act.

Think about your own lives—not your "spiritual" life, right now—but your everyday life.

If you, for example, we believe in the way of capitalism, we support the free market, spend to improve the economy. Our actions show that we believe that individual profit is the driving force of our country. Here is the dictionary definition of capitalism: "*an economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in a way that can serve the best interests of society. The essential feature of capitalism is the motive to make a profit.*"

If – on the other hand-- we believed instead in communal living, we might find like-minded people who believe the same, everyone would share their goods and funds, in order to build a society where everyone shares what they have for the good of all.

Just pointing out here that I'm not advocating for either one of these life choices.

All I'm saying is that what we believe is followed by choices we make—how we act—both in our secular and our spiritual life.

Here's the difference between John and our society today: John would have seen no differentiation between our *spiritual* lives, and our *secular* lives. John believed that these two aspects were one in the same—and that everything people internalized would determine their acts in ALL parts of their lives— and would bring about fruits of their beliefs.

He was teaching about and preparing everyone for a whole new way of being in the world.

If a person felt that being a child of Abraham was all one needed, then probabilities were that we would not be too concerned about anyone who wasn't a child of Abraham.

*This was the old way of thinking.*

If, however, we saw everyone as fellow travelers in life, *and* we were willing to throw aside the things that kept us from flowering and growing and becoming- we would suddenly see brothers and sisters everywhere.

*That is the new way of thinking.*

But it isn't easy. How does a person get there?

By allowing God to work on us.

How many of you know what a threshing floor is? In Jesus' time it was a specially flattened outdoor surface, usually circular and paved. Most of the time it was in the center of every village, so everyone could use it when they needed it.

Threshing loosened the hull from the grain kernel. The grain was the fruit, the edible part—and the hull was the inedible outside covering. Once the grain was loosened, the hull was winnowed, or removed from the grain, sometimes by hand, sometimes by the wind.

Winnowing can't happen without threshing to first loosen the constricting cover of the grain. And wind helps the unpalatable outer layer – the chaff—to blow away harmlessly.

That's the metaphor here.

We don't speak in metaphors all that often these days, preferring stone cold logic and science.

But metaphors were used often and well in Jesus' day. In John's day. Here we have the threshing floor and wheat and chaff metaphor.

This metaphor it isn't a matter of wheat vs. chaff—wheat is GOOD, chaff is BAD—not at all. *Every* piece of wheat has a hull—chaff. But wheat only becomes bread if the chaff is loosened and either burned or blown away.

Like many crops that grow—sometimes we have to be shaken up a bit—shake loose of old worn-out patterns of behavior that no longer serve either us or the world. This loosens the hard outer shell, so that the wind of the Spirit can clear the old away which leaves us to become good grain that can become the bread of the world.

This story on the face of it can seem threatening. The chaff is burning with unquenchable fire. We don't want to be chaff!

But everyone is like the grain on the threshing floor—made of good grain and inedible, hard chaff. And we all need to be processed—if you will—by experiences that make us more vulnerable as our outer hulls become loosened, until we finally can finally become healthy whole, unencumbered grain. See? It's not a threat at all: it's a promise, and a *new way* of thinking for those who will allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to believe it.

And only if we allow our hulls, the chaff, to be removed can we be the bread that feeds the world. Amen.