

The Relevance of Repentance

Matthew 3:1-12

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3 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

4 Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:1-12).

Typically, I prefer to be told that I'm normal. For instance when I go the doctor for a check-up, a diagnosis that comes back as normal is what I'm looking for. When I take my car to the mechanic, normal is good. And when I go to the dentist, I'm just hoping that she won't make any sound that indicates that something isn't normal. Typically, normal is good.

When is normal dangerous? It seems to me that normal religion is usually pretty dangerous. The Bible seems to indicate that big groups of people who claim to be religious usually get it wrong. And in order to show them this, God sends them some radical people to wake them up.

Our text this morning introduces us to one of the most interesting and abnormal characters in the Scriptures - John the Baptist. His manner of living and his message could be described with one word: RADICAL.

We understand the word radical to mean something that is a change from the acceptable or traditional. To be radical implies that you are not normal. John the Baptist's message was essentially a warning that normal is not safe.

This morning I want to look at this man called John the Baptist to discover why he was radical and to determine how it is relevant for us today.

The Radical Messenger

John the Baptist was the son of a priest named Zechariah and Elizabeth, and a relative of Jesus through Mary. Luke 1 tells us that Zechariah, while serving in the temple, encountered an angel who told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would conceive a son who "will be great before the Lord...he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God...he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:15-17). His role was an Elijah-like in its proclamation and preparation.

Elijah-like

Elijah was known as the greatest of all the prophets, and he was marked by being radical. Elijah served during a day when Israel had wandered away from God and served many other gods. Kings were corrupt, the people were apathetic, and the worship of idols along with the worship of God had become normal. Elijah challenged that. At Mount Carmel he said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Further, he lived radically. He dressed in a garment of hair with a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8), and he lived in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:3, 19:9). His message and his manner were meant to challenge the spiritual status quo of God's people.

The book of Malachi indicated that Elijah would come prior to the great day of the Lord. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction" (Mal 4:5-6). And it was John the Baptist who fulfilled this role (see Matt 11:12-15).

John the Baptist modeled his life after Elijah. Verse four tells us that John wore Elijah-like clothes – a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt. His food was locusts and wild honey, and he lived in the wilderness of Judea, a dry, desert-like region to the west of the Dead Sea. Additionally, Matthew links John to the prophecy in Isaiah 40:2 – "the voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight", which is a reference to the preparations for reign of God through a coming Messiah. Matthew clearly wants to show that John the Baptist is fulfilling that kind of role – preparing God's people to meet with him.

Preparing the people

John the Baptist's role was to prepare the people to meet God, and we learn that his radical, desert ministry was growing in popularity. Verse 5 says, "Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all

the region about the Jordan were going out to him.” This is a fairly large portion of the nation of Israel.

His ministry involved three things: 1) a very direct message, 2) the confession of sins, and 3) water baptism. We will look at his message more fully in a moment, but we need to understand the connection between the confession of sin and baptism because it is unique to John and it is why he is called John the Baptist.

The word “baptism” means to dip or plunge in the active sense, to be drowned in the passive, and it was used of ships that sunk.¹ Leon Morris, in his commentary on Matthew, suggests that the word had violent imagery, and that it signifies death to a whole new way of life. Baptism was practiced by Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. It was a symbol of their new life. Their immersion symbolized a break from the past, a cleansing, and a newness as they rose out of the water. Baptism, prior to John, was limited to Gentile proselytes and cleansing rituals. Jews were not baptized because they were already a part of God’s family. They were born clean! Or at least that is what they thought.

John was bringing something new and radical. His baptism was directed toward the Jewish population and it was tied to the confession of sins. It was an acknowledgement that they were not okay. John’s baptism is made a bold and powerful statement. A Jewish person would enter the waters of the Jordan River, a sacred barrier between the wilderness wanderings and the promise land. This person would confess his or her sins, acknowledging that being born Jewish doesn’t make one right with God. And then John would baptize them. It may seem like a minor thing, but baptism was something that had to be done to them.

If you put it all together, this baptism was a humbling act of repentance and renewal. John’s baptism was a heart-felt preparation for the coming of the Messiah. It was a radical statement, an acknowledgement that spiritual preparation was needed. Don’t confuse John’s baptism with believer’s baptism. There are some similarities, but they are different. Two weeks from now I’ll explain how John’s baptism is different than believer’s baptism. For now, I simply want you to understand the radical nature and the popularity of what John was doing.

The purpose for this baptism was spiritual preparation. And there was another time when the people of God were told to prepare themselves. They were standing at the base of Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19 awaiting the Ten Commandments, and God told Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Ex 19:10-11).

¹ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew – Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 56.

John the Baptist was doing the same thing. He was calling the people to prepare to meet God. He was inviting them to acknowledge their sinful actions, and he utilized a Gentile proselyte symbol to drive home the point that God's people needed to prepare themselves to encounter God. He was a radical messenger, he lived a radical life, he wore radical clothes, and he called the people to with a radical message.

What exactly was his message?

The Radical Message

The baptisms and the confession of sin was a by-product of his radical message. Matthew 3 gives us a summary of his message, applies it directly to the spiritually religious, and shows us how the Messiah (Jesus) expands John's message even further.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"

John's message is summarized in verse 2 as being "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What does this mean?

Repentance literally means to change one's mind. It comes from two Greek words: meta – meaning against and noeo – meaning the mind. The nuance of the word implies a complete turning of the whole person which engages the mind, emotions, and the will. Therefore, John's call for repentance was an invitation for people to turn from sin to God, from disobedience to obedience, from rebellion to faithfulness. "Biblical repentance always requires a recognition of need, a sorrow for sin, a decision to turn from sin to God, and a subsequent obedient lifestyle."² John's call for repentance is not just a call to feel bad about their sins or a commitment to do better. He is calling them to a radical conversion from an old to a new way, the kind of change that the Jews would associate with a Gentile who converts to Judaism.³

The reason for this repentance is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand or near. The concept of the kingdom is a central theme for the book of Matthew (used 32 times), and it is first used here. Matthew is the only writer who uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven." Other gospel writers use "kingdom of God," and Matthew does as well (5 times).

I take kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God to mean the same thing, and they both refer to a dynamic life-changing reign of Christ that is both present and future, now and not yet. I believe that there is a future kingdom that we are waiting for; I don't think that our present world or the church is the kingdom. Yet, there is a spiritual sense in which spiritual reign of Christ has been inaugurated. A new king is in the castle, but the land is not fully under his rule.

² David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 106.

³ Turner, 107.

Therefore, when John says that the kingdom of heaven is at hand he is saying that God is near or his rule is present morally. The close proximity of God creates the call for repentance. The presence of God's authority and his power create the call for repentance. You might think of it in terms as a child when you saw Dad's car pull into the driveway and you remembered the words from your exhausted mother, "Your father will deal with that when he gets home." John called the people to repent because God was near. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near is a call for personal renewal in light of the authority and reign of God.

"You brood of vipers!"

Verse seven specifically directs John's words toward the Pharisees and Sadducees who were also coming for baptism. Matthew doesn't tell us about their motivation for coming but the text seems to imply that that they too were coming for John's baptism. No doubt they had heard about John's message, its popularity, and maybe they wanted to be part of this new religious revival.

However, John doesn't view their actions as genuine. His words are caustic.

- **He assaults their spirituality** - "You brood of vipers!" (v 7). He accuses them of being the offspring of snakes.
- **He identifies that they not real converts** – "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v 7) John believes that they are objects of judgment not mercy.
- **He calls them to prove that they are real** – "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (v 8)
- **He attacks their security in their ancestry** – "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (v 9).
- **He suggests that judgment is imminent** – "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees" (v 10). The judgment is ready; it is only a matter of time before God picks up the axe.
- **He warns them of fierce consequences** – "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." This is clearly a picture of total destruction.

These are heavy words and urgent words. John is attacking the most spiritually minded people of the day and telling them that their spirituality, rooted in the birth and fed by pride, is not only worthless – it is under judgment right now!

This is really important – don't miss this. John is not just saying that judgment is coming. He is saying something more. The kingdom of heaven is at hand and so is the judgment of God. The axe (v 10) is already laid at the root of the trees and those trapped in spiritual pride are

already under judgment. The judgment began, not with consequences, but with a misunderstanding of what real religion is. And a failure to repent from fruit-less religion was the beginning of judgment.

A lack of fruit is the first sign of judgment! The judgment begins by the cutting of the source of nourishment, the fruit dries up, the tree is cut down, and then it is destroyed.

What a stunning statement this is! It is a stern warning about the dangers of a kind of religion that focuses on the family into which you were born, the information that you know, and all the things that you have seen. But without fruit – you are already under judgment. Do you see the relevance of John's call for repentance?

He is calling for a radical break from institutional, historical, dry, and fruit-less religion. He calls the most religious people in his day a brood of vipers because, in the end, a life devoid of spiritual fruit is a life under judgment.

But John is not done. He ramps it up even further, point people to the coming Messiah.

"He is mightier than me"

Some people thought that a radical man with this kind of message must be the Messiah. But John sets the record straight. He's not the One. The Messiah will be even greater. Notice what John says:

- **He will be mightier (v 11)** – The messiah will be both savior and judge. He will not only proclaim a message of repentance, he will enact it, and require it.
- **He is more worthy (v 11)** – John describes himself as not even worthy to carry the sandals of this coming King. He clearly wants the people to know that they haven't seen anything yet!
- **He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (v 11)** – John's baptism was important but a symbol; the Messiah's baptism will be supernatural and purifying. John could only call for repentance and cleansing; the Messiah can actually do it!
- **He will separate the real from the fake (v 12)** – John says that the Messiah has the winnowing fork in his hand. To harvest wheat the farmers would pile up wheat stalks, and allow the oxen to trample it. They would then take a winnowing fork, throw the wheat into the air, allowing the wind to blow away the worthless husks as the wheat fell to the ground. The Messiah would do that with people, demonstrating who was real and who was fake.
- **He will gather the good and destroy the bad (v 12)** – the conclusion is that the Messiah would gather up (save) all the good wheat and burn (judge) all the chaff. The implication is perfectly obvious.

John calls for radical repentance but just in case anyone thought that he was powerful, he wanted them to know that they had not seen anything yet. Repentance should be all the more relevant when you understand what the Messiah is all about.

John is calling for us to wake up! He is calling us to realize that the kingdom of God is at hand. Judgment is already beginning. This is serious stuff. And it is only more serious when you understand who the Messiah really is.

The Relevance of Repentance

A radical man preaching a radical message: to repent because the kingdom of heaven is near. Do I even need to explain to you why this is still relevant?

Jesus was the full and personal embodiment of the presence of God in the world. He defined for us the very heart of God and called human beings to recognize their need to turn back to God.

The call to repent is a call to change one's mind about your life and your relationship to God. It is a call to look carefully at your life, to ask yourself some hard questions, to look at the fruit on the tree, and consider if judgment has already begun.

Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand is a call to wake-up. It is a call to turn radically to God – right now!

And that, my friends, is wonderfully relevant!

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