



### Matthew 3 The Baptism of Jesus

So far, on our journey through Matthew's gospel we have seen Jesus' family tree and heard the story of His rather unusual birth to a virgin mom and adopted dad.

This morning, the story moves ahead almost 30 years and we find Jesus as a grown man about to begin His ministry. Here in Chapter Three we'll see his baptism, and then next week, His temptation by Satan in Chapter Four, and then, the famous Sermon on the Mount is coming up in Chapters 5-7.

I encourage you to read ahead, you know where we're going, why not make it part of your Saturday night or Sunday morning routine to read ahead and see what's coming – see if God speaks to you or raises any questions, and then come to worship with a sense of expectation and see what God does.

So, let's jump right in with:

**Matthew 3:1** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying:

*"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the LORD;  
Make His paths straight.'"*

4 Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John sounds a little wild, doesn't he? And people can get some crazy ideas about him based on this one short description. But the truth is, it was not unheard of to use a camel's skin for clothing, and even today some cultures eat locusts and other bugs. He's not meant to be a madman, but he is meant to be different.

Let me set the stage for you here. At this time, in Jerusalem, Herod, who we read about last week, had rebuilt the Temple, the center of Jewish worship. It was enormous, the largest building in the entire city and easily seen from quite a distance away. It was made of huge stones of marble and had accessories covered in gold. In fact, when you see pictures of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem today, that's actually just the foundation stones of what once stood there.

And running the temple and all of its business you had the Sadducees, a group of people we will become very familiar with in the gospels. They were the trendy, kind of left-wing liberals of the day, a religious class that held political power. Their theology was pretty weak, they didn't believe in things like the resurrection, but they came from the family line that produced the high priest, so they had some clout.

You also had a group called the Pharisees. These were your right-wing conservatives. They were focused on tradition and ritual – holding onto the way we've always done things. They had the support of the common people.

These two were the main religious denominations in Israel at the time, if you want to think of them that way.

But when God is ready to announce Jesus to the world, he doesn't use anyone from the either of these groups, He uses an outsider named John who shows up in the wilderness instead of the fancy temple, dressed in the clothes of the poor – a camel hide and a simple leather belt – instead of fancy robes. A man who eats things like honey and locusts – instead of drinking wine and enjoying feasts.

Why?

What was God up to? Well, as we'll see, people back then, just like people today, got set in their own ways of doing things and those ways weren't always the way God wanted things done. Their emphasis had shifted, their hearts had drifted, and now God was trying to call them back by doing something shocking, something hard to miss.

Friends, I have come to learn that this is often the way God does things. Because of His mercy, He often works in ways that are hard for us to miss. We can deny it, we can ignore it, we can try to write it off or block it out, but when God is at work, He most certainly knows how to get our attention and that's what He is doing right now with John.

John has come to stir things up, to make headlines, to provoke a reaction. Because God, through John, is asking the question: "Are you for Me, or against Me? Something, or better yet, some One, is about to come, and you'll want to make sure you're paying attention." So John comes to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy of a forerunner for the Messiah, the savior of men.

*"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the LORD;  
Make His paths straight.'"*

But again, he's not what you might have expected. He doesn't have an important title or position. He's not speaking at the most prestigious forum in town. If you want to hear John, you've got to go outside the city, out in the wilderness, and listen to a guy who seems to have nothing else to offer, because that's whom God was using.

And what is the message? What is the message of God that John is proclaiming?

Repent. [“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!”](#)

Now that’s not a common word in modern English, is it? Google has been digitizing books for many years now, scanning them into their computers. And you can search them. In fact, they have this fun feature called an ngram, which lets you enter a word, and track it’s use in books though the years. So, for example, if you type in “Internet,” you see nothing for the 1800’s or most of the 1900’s, and then it suddenly appears with a massive spike in the 1990’s and it keeps going up, because it’s a word that was recently invented.

But if you type in the word “repent,” you notice an opposite trend; you discover the word repent has been steadily disappearing from use in the English language for over 100 years. Friends, that is stunning. It’s something you may have suspected to be true, but now it can be verified in at least one form.

OK, but some of you are asking: what does it mean to repent? Well, repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of life a change in both direction AND behavior. Because you have heard this, or seen this, or know this, now you do that. You know something different so you do something different. You turn around; you head in a different direction. Your life is changed, visibly, tangibly, and perceptibly. There are things you stop doing, or things you start doing because of what you believe about God.

John was telling people – God is getting ready to do something new, something big, something all of history has been leading to – [the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!](#) Will you be ready when it arrives?

Obviously, John is speaking under different conditions than our own – he was pointing people forward to something about to happen. And now, we stand on the opposite side of history looking back at what did happen when the Kingdom of Heaven came through Christ, but the call to repent is still the fundamental call of Christianity. It’s found here on the lips of John the Baptist; it’s the call of Jesus, and of His disciples after Him. It’s the beginning of the Christian faith; it’s a gate through which you must pass if you wish to travel the road with Jesus.

And so, we have to ask ourselves the question – do I need to repent? When it comes to God and His kingdom, which team am I on?

I spoke with a young man this week who is struggling to answer that very question. He knew Scripture, he knew the verses I was trying to share with him, he understood the Christian faith, but he felt like God wouldn’t leave him alone – he was trying to run from God and live his own life, but God wouldn’t leave him alone, and he wanted to know why. He heard the call to repent, he understood it loud and clear, but he wasn’t so sure he wanted to obey. In fact, he was actively resisting the call.

I know that's true for some of you listening today. God is calling you to repent too, He's calling you to turn toward Him instead of turning away from Him, but you have to decide: how will you respond?

There are only two ways to live on this earth – we either live in the kingdom of God, or we live outside. It's very binary. It's black and white. You're either on the team or you're not. Either God has adopted you or He has not. You either have the right to call God Father or you do not. And the way to gain that right comes only through Jesus Christ who said:

**John 14:6** "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

That's very exclusive on the one hand, and it's meant to be, there is only way to God, but on the other hand, it's also very universal because anyone can take it. The call to repentance goes out to all humanity. Here among the people listening to John the Baptist you had soldiers, tax collectors, peasants, priests and professors, all classes and categories of people.

We all suffer the same illness; we all need the same cure. White people are not saved any differently from people of color. Rich people are not saved differently from poor people. Women are not saved differently from men. And God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to eternal life in Christ Jesus. And so, the call goes out to all humanity – repent!

God comes knocking on your soul; the Holy Spirit comes and brings you conviction. You know the things you're doing wrong, you know what you need to turn away from, you know what needs to change, the question is: will you do it? Will you respond? You're being called to repent, you're given a chance to repent, a path to repentance, but will you take it?

There were many in John's day who did.

**5** Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him  
**6** and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

But not everyone ... other people came out to see John too – religious people who acted like they had it all together, like they were doing fine. And it didn't go too well for them.

**7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?  
**8** Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, **9** and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. **10** And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

These guys thought they were on the right track, they were proud of themselves. They didn't see themselves as in need. In their mind, they weren't falling apart. They were good people. And yet, John said – even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Why? Because they weren't bearing fruit.

Now think about that – get the whole picture – they were like trees, full grown, mature trees – trunk, branches, leaves, the whole bit. So they looked good. They looked healthy. The problem wasn't apparent at first – in fact, they made a good first impression – they pulled it off well. To notice the problem you would have to observe them over time – and then it would dawn on you – they never bore any fruit. Seasons came and seasons went and this good-looking tree never bore any fruit.

Could that be you? Do you look good at first? Do you look like you have it all together? Do people around you think everything is fine? Are you likeable? Do you make a good impression? OK, but is there any substance, or is it all show? You may come to church, that's very well and good – the Sadducees and Pharisees came to hear John. But do you bear fruit in keeping with repentance? Are there things you are turning away from in your life in order to turn toward God and are you bearing fruit as you serve His kingdom? Is there evidence of change and growth in your life?

Because, trees that don't bear real fruit are eventually cut down and thrown into the fire. There's no difference, on the eternal scale, between as a total godless pagan, denying every form of godliness, indulging every desire, and living an upright, "good" life without confession and repentance to God. You can't bear fruit without allowing God to have His way in you, and if you don't bear fruit, you're going to be cut down. There's no way around it. There wasn't meant to be.

Remember repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of life.

Once your life is turned over to Christ, the Holy Spirit instantly seals you – God Himself comes to live inside you. You might know and experience that in a profound way, or you might not 'feel' much at first, but the Scripture is very clear – if you turn to God, repent, confess your sins, and ask for forgiveness, [He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness](#) (1 Jo 1:9). And as soon as you are cleansed, He seals you for salvation.

But now that you have repented, He wants to teach you a new way to live, new things to do, and things not to do.

Jesus used an analogy of Himself as a vine, and us as the branches – branches that bear fruit. That's what grape vines do, isn't it? They produce grapes, because that's what they are. Well, if we are branches, connected to the vine, you'll see proof in our lives. If you don't see fruit, you have to wonder: is this really a grape vine?

Now, some people will bear a lot of fruit, some people will bear less, but there's no such thing as a branch, connected to Jesus, that doesn't bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

So, when you look at your life, what would you say that fruit is? Where do you point to the evidence of fruit in your life? What is it about your life that you can say, with confidence: this is this way because of Christ in me; this is fruit in keeping with my repentance?

Because God wants to move in and through you. The holy God of all the universe, wants to work through you, wants to help you change, wants to do things, real things in the real world, through you. He wants to breathe eternal significance into your life, if you will let Him. But too many of us are satisfied with far less than God wants to give.

What could God do through you if you would let Him have His way? What change would it make in your friendships, in your marriage, in your family? Who might God reach through you? How might the world change? If you would let Him produce ALL the fruit He wants to bear through you?

John was telling people the Kingdom of God was at hand, but for us today, the Kingdom is here and we have the chance to be at work within it – living in connection with God, living each day on mission for Him, knowing there is eternal significance in our actions, decisions, and conversations – no matter where we have them or who we have them with, because we want our whole lives to be in keeping with the values and direction of our God.

So, back at the bank of the river, John is proclaiming this message to people and some of them respond, they come forward to be baptized as an act of identification with John's message. Saying, "Yes, that's me, that's what I want. I want to be available to God and His kingdom." And John tells them: this is only the beginning. John was announcing the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the King of that kingdom would baptize as well:

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto 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 fire. 12 His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Fire is often in the Bible used as a picture of judgment and refining. It consumes things that can be burned like wood, hay, and stubble, but leaves behind things like gold, silver, and precious stones. And even for something like gold, fire is used to heat it up and separate the pure gold from the impurities that will float on top and can be skimmed off.

There are two coming judgments. First, the judgment of the righteous and the condemned. At that judgment, everyone who has been born again, who finds their identity and forgiveness in Christ will be passed over – their debts have been paid, they have been sealed with, filled with, baptized into the Holy Spirit. God is in them, and they are in God. And everyone who has not, everyone who resisted, those who would not repent or confess, will be sentenced to eternal suffering.

The second judgment is for the righteous and it is a judgment of reward – what did you do with the new life you were given? How did you serve and honor the God who saved you? That is where the Bible says your works will be passed through a fire and what is good will remain.

This is the destiny of all humanity. Every one of us will face the first judgment, between the righteous in Christ, and the condemned. The wheat will be gathered, and the chaff will be burned. Friends, we must see the fact that eternity is stake. There is more going on in this life than we immediately realize. There are consequences coming and they are severe – severely good, or severely bad. We must confess, we must repent, we must seek the Kingdom of God and we must pray for others and encourage them to do the same. This is not a story, this is real.

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. 14 And John *tried to prevent Him*, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?”

15 But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit *it to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed Him.

The time has come, John has been preparing the way, and now it’s time to reveal why – Jesus is ready to begin His public ministry and make Himself known. So He comes out to where John is, and asks to be baptized. It’s not a baptism of repentance for Him, He has nothing to repent of, but He’s endorsing John’s message and identifying with the people who responded to the call – publically saying, “Yes, I want to be set apart for God’s purposes.”

16 When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. 17 And suddenly a voice *came* from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

God speaks from Heaven, and says, “This is right. This is good. This is true.’

We hear the Father, see Spirit and the Son, all three working together for one single cause – the salvation of men and women who are willing to turn, and bear fruit, to allow God to rule in their lives. John had it all right by calling people to confess, and to repent.

And the clock is ticking now, the days and weeks will roll into months of ministry and preaching for Jesus and in just about three years He will hang on the cross as a sacrifice for all those who desire forgiveness.

Put yourself there on the banks of the Jordan River, hearing the things John has to say. What do you need to repent of? What conviction do you sense? What does God bring to your mind and press into your soul? What sins do you need to confess?

Friend, this is the place for that. This is the place to get things off your chest. This is the place and now is the time to lay it all out there before God.

There are things in our lives that can feel like a heavy load, and the Bible tells us we are to lay them down at the feet of Jesus. There are things that can feel like they have trapped us or that we're stuck in, and Jesus offers to cut them loose. What do you need to confess to God today? Do it. He knows anyway, but agree with Him, talk with Him, stop trying to hold it all in or deal with it on your own – confess the crimes of your soul, confess your weakness, confess your need and let God meet you there. And let Him begin to plant things in you that will grow and bear fruit.

If you want to change, if you want forgiveness, it is here and it comes to you through the grace and mercy God and through the sacrifice of His Son in whom He is well pleased.

The worship team is going to come up now and lead us in a closing song, but as they do, some of us need to take a minute and reflect: what do we need to confess, what do we need to repent of? And to ask: am I bearing fruit?

God has started something – He sent someone to proclaim His kingdom – they heard it by the river, we've heard it from the pulpit. They looked forward to the salvation that would come through Jesus, we look back on what has already been done. God Himself is opening the door for us, making us an offer, inviting us in. Let us take Him up on it, and thank Him for it today.

Let's pray.