

Repent!

King of Heaven: The (Un)expected King

Matthew 3:1-17

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December 27, 2020

Resolve to Repent

The new year is fast approaching. It's the time for making resolutions, for making plans for needed change in our lives. Many planned for great things in 2020. They laid out a clear 20-20 vision. But nothing went as planned. Now that 2021 is upon us, we're all hoping and praying for a drastic change in our world. Even a revolution! Realistically, there's not much we can do personally to effect major change in our world. But we do have a personal responsibility to make changes in our own lives.

Our text this morning is Matthew 3. It speaks to a major change needed in the lives of each person in the world. The passage calls us all to repent. Repentance involves radical change. It's really a call for a complete revolution in your life. Repentance is not just about feeling sorry for your sins. It's not just a change of the way you think. Repentance is a complete about-face in our lives. A transformation of our lives. A change from serving the kingdom of earth to serving the kingdom of heaven. A change from living for ourselves to living for Jesus, the king from heaven.¹

Repentance is ultimately in God's hands, but the Bible teaches us that we all have a personal responsibility to make the change. God commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). And repentance is not just a one-time thing. It's something we do throughout our entire lives. So, as you plan your New Year's resolutions, let me challenge you. Resolve to repent.

Our passage this morning will teach us about why repentance is needed and give us a picture of what it looks like. This passage is divided into two parts. Both contain a voice. And both contain unexpected people who come to John for baptism.² The first voice is the voice of John the Baptist. The second voice is the Father. The first unexpected group who comes for baptism are the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The second unexpected candidate is Jesus.

These two voices and these two unexpected people teach us two truths: We are all sinners in need of a Savior; and Jesus is the Savior we need.

Matthew 3:1-17³

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³For 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.”

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary

D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary

R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

² Adapted from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary

³ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

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

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰Even 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 fire. ¹²His 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."

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Like I said earlier, the two voices and the two unlikely candidates for baptism teach us two truths. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. And Jesus is the Savior we need.

WE ALL NEED A SAVIOR. (1-12)

First, we're all sinners in need of a Savior. This section begins with the voice of John the Baptist preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew's details work to validate John's ministry and his message. He's the one Isaiah predicted: the voice of one in the wilderness who would prepare the way for the Lord (Isa. 40:3). And he's wearing camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey.

In other words, he looks and lives like Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), because he's the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy that Elijah would come to prepare the way for the Messiah (4:5). In fact, John the Baptist is the last and greatest prophet under the old covenant.

And he's here to prepare the way for God, who happens to be Jesus. To prepare the way for the Messiah who would bring in the new covenant. And how does he prepare the way? By calling people to repent of their sins.

God's been silent for four hundred years. He hasn't spoken through a prophet since Malachi. But now God's speaking again through a prophet. And so, people flock to hear him. And they respond favorably to his message of repentance. They are being baptized and confessing their sins.

But then some unexpected candidates for baptism show up—the Pharisees and Sadducees. What he says to them teaches us why his voice was calling for repentance. His words teach us three things about why repentance is needed and what it involves.

God's Coming Wrath

First, we need to repent because God's wrath is coming. When John sees the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism he asks them in sarcastic language, "You brood of vipers! Who warned *you* to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He knows they're not actually there to repent and flee from the wrath to come. They're probably there to undermine him. But in his sarcastic statement we find a very sobering truth.

John's message begins with an announcement that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And with God's coming kingdom, judgment is coming on all who rebel against the king of heaven. Justice will be served to all sinners. Those who don't repent of their sins will be judged for their sins. The axe laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into *the fire* (v. 10). He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with *unquenchable fire* (v. 12).

God's fiery wrath is coming against sin. That's why we need to repent and get right with God. The next thing we learn from the Pharisees and Sadducees teaches us what repentance looks like.

Repentance that Produces Fruit

Repentance will produce fruit. In verse 8, John says, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." Later, Jesus goes on to say that a tree will be known by its fruit. If a person is truly repentant, it will be seen in their lives (Mt. 7:15-20).

John came to baptize with water for repentance (v. 11). But his ministry was pointing to the Messiah who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (v. 12). John is the last prophet of the old covenant. But when the new covenant comes, God's people will be given new hearts (Ezek. 36:26; cf. Jer. 31:33). True conversion involves being born again. And those who are born of the Spirit of God will bear the fruit of the Spirit of God.

Those who truly repent and are truly saved will bear fruit. Their religious lives will not just be an external sham. It will involve internal change. And that leads me to the third thing we learn about repentance.

A Personal Response to the Gospel

Repentance involves a *personal* response to the gospel. In verse 9, John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father ...'" They were presuming they would be saved from the coming wrath of God simply because they were Jews.

But their presumption was unfounded. They were not the true offspring of Abraham. They were really the offspring of Satan. The offspring of the serpent. A brood of vipers.⁴ They were descendants of Abraham, but didn't share his faith.

John's baptism is really a remarkable event. He was baptizing Jews, people already in the covenant of God's people. He wasn't baptizing Gentile converts. The people he was baptizing saw their personal

⁴ Blomberg

need for repentance. They saw their need for a Savior. They made no presumptions. They personally responded to the gospel.

How many people here today are presuming they will be saved from God's coming wrath? Presumption is putting your confidence in any external religious behavior or affiliation. Whether that's confidence in a "Christian" country, being raised in a Christian home, responding to an altar call, or even baptism. Or being a part of a church or even serving in a church.⁵ All of these things may be good things. But we can't presume upon them. Only those who personally see their sin and their need for a Savior—those who personally repent of their sins, and then *go on* repenting of sin throughout their lives, those whose lives then bear fruit—only they can have any confidence of fleeing the wrath of God. Only they can lay claim to the kingdom of heaven. Let me urge you in this new year. Resolve to repent.

JESUS IS THE SAVIOR WE NEED. (13-17)

But repentance of sin is not the only way to respond to this passage. We also have to believe in Jesus. Conversion involves turning from sin and turning to Jesus. We all sin and therefore we all need a Savior. And Jesus is the Savior we need. That's what the second part of this passage teaches us.

As John is baptizing, a second unlikely candidate comes to him for baptism. It's Jesus! Their interaction and then the Father's voice from heaven teach us three reasons why Jesus is the Savior we need.

Jesus is Sinless.

John knows there's something wrong with this scene. The Pharisees and Sadducees were not worthy of his baptism because they weren't truly repentant. But this is very different. John doesn't believe *he's* worthy to baptize Jesus. "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (v. 14).

I think Matthew wants us to see something important about Jesus here. John's baptism was for repentance. But Jesus doesn't need to repent. So why would John baptize him? Why would he baptize him if he was without sin? I think that's what Matthew wants us to see in John's question. Jesus is sinless.⁶

Jesus answers him in verse 15: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." These are the first words of Jesus in the New Testament. The first red letters if you have a red-lettered Bible. And I think they're significant. God has sent his Son into the world on a mission—to save his people from their sins (1:21). And what's about to happen is critical to accomplishing that mission.

How does Jesus' baptism fulfill all righteousness? I think we get our answer from the voice from heaven in verse 17.

⁵ Blomberg

⁶ These three subpoints all come from Mike Bullmore, "[Operation Rescue Begins.](#)"

Jesus is our substitute.

First it shows us that Jesus is our substitute. As Jesus emerges from the water, the Spirit of God rests on him, and God the Father says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” We know that when the Gospels tell us that Jesus is the Son of God it means that he is God. John was preparing the way for the Lord. Preparing the way for God. And then Jesus came on the scene. He must be God. Also, Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. We see here in seed form the doctrine of the Trinity. There is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

But the title Son of God means more than Jesus is God.⁷

In the Old Testament, when Israel is in Egypt, God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh that Israel is his firstborn son, and to let his son go that they may serve God in the wilderness (Ex. 4:22-23). Now Jesus has come out of Egypt and enters the wilderness, and God calls him his beloved Son. David was also called God’s son (2 Sam. 7:14).

Both Israel and the Davidic kings failed to fulfill all righteousness. They failed to obey God. They sinned. But now Jesus, the sinless one, fulfills all righteousness. The Son of God takes on flesh. He identifies with sinners. He’s baptized in the same waters with repentant sinners. He lives in solidarity with them. He walks in the stead of Israel and David. He serves as a substitute for his people. He lives the life that they failed to live.

Paul later says, “For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). He’s our substitute.

Jesus is the suffering servant.

But he not only lived the righteous life that his people failed to live. He also died the death we deserve to die. He took the blame, bore the wrath, so that we can stand forgiven at the cross. And that leads us to the third reason Jesus is the Savior we need. Jesus is the suffering servant.

The voice from heaven says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The second part of this statement—with whom I am well pleased—comes from Isaiah 42:1: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

Do you see the parallels? God delights in his servant. God is well pleased with his Son. God will put his Spirit on his servant. And at Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit of God descends and comes to rest on him.

Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is the servant of the Lord.

Isaiah goes on after chapter 42, for many chapters, to speak of the servant and the ministry he will accomplish. His discussion of the servant comes to its high point in chapter 53, where we read that the servant will be pierced for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities (v. 5). God will put upon him the iniquity of us all (v. 6). Isaiah says the righteous one, my servant, shall make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities (v. 11).

⁷ What follows is adapted from Carson.

How does Jesus' baptism fulfill all righteousness? He lives the life we've failed to live in our sin. But then he dies the death we deserve to die for our sin. The righteous one makes many righteous through his life, death, and resurrection. And his baptism points to this ministry. It points to this mission to save his people from their sins.

In our sin, we face the wrath of God. God is not well pleased with us. We are sinners. But God is well pleased with his Son. He's without sin. He's righteous. He's obedient even to the point of death.

And if we repent of our sin and place our faith in Christ, then we are in Christ. And if the Father is pleased with him, then he's pleased with us.⁸

The coming of the kingdom of heaven brings with it either repentance or judgment. There is an urgent need for change in our lives. We need to be saved from our sin. We need our sins paid for. We need the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. We need to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. We need God to be well pleased with us. And the only way that will happen is if we repent of our sins and cling to Jesus by faith.

Without Christ, we are like chaff that will be burned in the unquenchable fire. But in Christ, we are like wheat that is stored safely in the barn.⁹ We have an inheritance that is kept in heaven for us. We have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. We are safe and secure from all harm.

Have you repented of your sin? Have you trusted in Jesus for salvation? If not, today is the day to make a change. Resolve to repent.

If you have trusted in Christ, are you bearing fruit in keeping with your repentance? The Christian life is a life of repentance. It's not a one and done thing. Sure, once we're born again, we're saved from God's wrath. But we continue to sin. And we need to continue to confess our sin, turn from our sin, and renew our faith in the gospel. If this doesn't mark your life, there needs to be a change. Resolve to repent.

I would also ask the believers here this morning if you feel the urgency of John the Baptist's message today? The kingdom of heaven is at hand. The axe is at the root of the tree. There are billions who have not repented of their sin and turned to faith in Christ. We are not John the Baptist, but we do have a responsibility to preach the good news of the gospel and call people to repent. We have the privilege to tell people that we are all sinners in need of a Savior and that Jesus is the Savior we need. He is without sin. He is our substitute. And he is the suffering servant who offered his life as a sacrifice for our sin. Let us go tell it on the mountain what Jesus Christ has done.

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, "[A Great Sermon by the Greatest Preacher](#)"

⁹ Bullmore