

**Text:** Matthew 3:1-12

**Title:** Public Introduction of John the Baptist

**Truth:** The Gospel John preached—same as ours—is a message of repentance.

**Date/Location:** Sunday January 24 and Wednesday Feb 3, 2021 at FBC

## Introduction

When reading any passage, we want to observe all the details of the text, but at the same time avoid becoming caught up in those details and missing the main points.

John the Baptist appears in Matthew's gospel for the first time in chapter 3. Without the benefit of Luke 1, we are a bit in the dark about who this man is. Mark 1:1-8 presents John much the same way, without giving any introduction. John 1:6-8, 15, and 19-28 gives more detail.

### I. Preaching Repentance, 3:1-4

A. The method John used was preaching. He did not use a market-driven, felt-needs approach to gospel ministry. He proclaimed truth, and hard truth at that. The preaching is not exactly like what you might think of in the pulpit of a church, though it is similar. In this situation, John is making an official, public, out-loud declaration from God the King to His subjects.

We must recognize that our message of the gospel requires the same kind of announcement. It is authoritative, not wimpy. It is certain, not wishy-washy. It is strong, not apologetic. It is Christ-centered, not focused on social issues. It is convicting and comforting, not just a feel-good-about-yourself message.

Why the wilderness? Perhaps on a practical level he was not welcome in the population centers by the leadership. After all, he was teaching against some of them. The nature of wilderness is a fit picture for an outcast prophet, one who soldiers on despite persecution. It makes him like the prophets of old, who were likewise situated (Heb. 11:37-39).

B. The content of John’s message was repentance. He taught both *what* (repent) and *why* (the kingdom of heaven is at hand).

1. **What:** Repent. If you have never repented, think of the sinful life you are living. Now, what does God say about it? *Repent!* This is a command from heaven to men and women and children that they must turn away from their sin—all their sin. Each person must “change their mind” (meta-noia) about their course of life. That is elemental to what God wants us to do in this life. It is basic, kindergarten-level religion. It is where you start. It is how you continue. You turn your heart and desires toward God away from sin.

This is not just the message of John in history. It is the present-day Christian message also. Christians report the same command from heaven (Acts 17:30). We call people to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Repentance is not the change of conduct from bad to perfect—it is the change of mind *that leads to the change of conduct!*

Speaking very practically: if you are living with a person not your spouse, you need to repent. If you think that abortion is OK, or you happily have had one, you need to repent. If you are toying with transgenderism or suicide, or if you are hateful against other human beings, or if you are proud or a rebel against your parents or if you hate God or gossip or indulge yourself in whatever pleasures you feel like you want—you must repent. Period.

2. The reason **why** repentance is critical is stated explicitly: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. There are other important reasons for repentance—primary among them that sin leads to the consequences of death both physical and eternal. You do not want eternal death, trust me.

But in *this* text, the reason given for repentance is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In other words, God is about to show up. Jesus Christ is imminently going to make His entrance—which he does in verse 13. When He comes in his kingly glory, he will not tolerate rebellion (= sin) in His kingdom. He is gracious and forgiving right now especially, but rebellion

against the King is not allowed. Without holiness of character, no one will enter His kingdom. You cannot rightly be related to the king if you love sin more than Him. And that holiness grows out of a prior relationship begun with Christ through the new birth. Jesus said that unless you are born again, you cannot experience the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

C. John was a fulfillment of prophecy, Isaiah 40:3-5.

1. The text of 40:1-5 is this: 1 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God. 2 "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." 3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; 5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
2. The imagery here is of an advance party making way for a king to travel to an area. They precede him to make sure everything is in order, that the roads are suitable, there are no issues along the way. Making mountains low is a symbolic reference to the humility of repentance as opposed to the lofty pride of sin. Straight and crooked and rough are moral references as well. How the advance party (John the Baptist) was to make the road ready for Christ was to get people to come to repentance of their sins.
3. The glory of the Lord being revealed refers to the appearance of Christ on earth.
4. Jesus does not need the terrain of the earth to be changed so it is more convenient for him to travel on it. He demands the "terrain of your heart" be smoothly leveled, the contours of your mind be entirely altered, and the desires of your will be radically remade. In short, he calls for us to repent and believe the gospel.

D. Description of John’s garb and diet. This likens him to Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. In fact, John is a prophet (Luke 1:76; Matt. 11:7-13, 21:26) and he is a major link of continuity between the Old and New Testament sections of the Bible. He brings such continuity because he is not substantially different than those prophets, tying the entire Bible together into a unified single book.

Note that John was not Elijah resurrected (John 1:21). But he was the forerunner of Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). In fact, it appears that in a hypothetical way of speaking, in Matt. 11:14, Jesus said that John *would have been* Elijah, if the people had been of a mind to receive Messiah’s message. They were not, and God knew that in advance, so John was not in fact Elijah. But he was certainly closely aligned with him.

In fact, we could say that John had a similar message as Elijah. The latter would have been calling the people back to covenant faithfulness. The Law of Moses was in process of being superseded during and just after John’s life, so he was not calling the people technically back to it, but rather forward to Christ.

## **II. Baptizing the Repentant, 3:5-6**

A. Many people were responsive to his message. Verse 5 indicates that the whole region round-about Jerusalem and the Jordan heard about John’s message. They did not have TV news or social media to promote the message either—think about that!

B. They confessed their sins and were baptized in the Jordan. The order is confession, then baptism. It may be that they also confessed *as* they were baptized, but the reason they were there in the first place was that they heard John’s message and recognized their need to repent. They were thus prepared for the coming of the Messiah. In their lives, they had smoothed out the rough places and straightened that which was crooked.

The evidence of repentance is confession. What is confession? It is “saying the same thing” as God. It is agreeing with God that what you have done is wrong (Psalm 51:4).

### III. Preaching Judgment, 3:7-10

A. Pharisees and Sadducees are called out for their sin, v. 7. A major problem with them was they pretended to be righteous, but inside they were as filthy as could be. They were self-righteous, haughty spirits that did not think they stood in need of God's forgiveness. This is more dangerous than someone who has sinned in a kind of "common" or "vulgar" way and then comes to realize that and humbly repent.

John calls them a brood of vipers—which does not translate in a friendly way in any language! He wondered why they came to him. They should have come to flee from the coming wrath—when the King arrived—because that is what everyone else was doing. But these guys were not even hedging their bets. They did not come to hear him and repent. They came to see what was going on, to see who was stirring the pot, to question, to criticize.

B. John called them, like everyone else, to repent and then bear fruit out of that repentance. True repentance abounds with evidence—in words and in actions. Again, it is not the fruit that saves. It is the repentance (and corresponding belief, which is integral with repentance) that saves. The fruit is a side effect—and a very important side effect.

C. John warned them about a false sense of security in their ancestry. Jewish parents, Jewish religion, Jewish diet, Jewish law, Jewish God, Jewish anything is all insufficient as a way to wash away sins. Abrahamic lineage does not save anyone. God can create sons of Abraham out of rocks. And we know from Paul's writings that not all who came out of Abraham are actually children of Abraham in the sense that they share Abraham's faith (Rom. 9:6). "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."

Judaism offers no way for sins to be cleansed—no way that is authorized by God and described in the Torah or New Testament. There are no sacrifices, no offerings, no altar, no temple, nothing. It is a religion that has become decoupled from its written foundation. John's message was that we must repent, and then

that there was one coming who would make atonement for our sins (John 1:29).

- D. Judgment is imminent. The ax is being laid to the root of the trees. This is like what a lumberjack does before his first swing. He “lines it up” to get his aim just right, then starts chopping. If upon inspection he finds that the tree is actually good, he will not cut it down. But trees that are not producing are taken out to make room for whatever project is in the works. Repentance is urgent not only because the kingdom of heaven is at hand, but because of the related reason that judgment is also “at hand.” The coming of Christ to establish His kingdom is associated with judgment (Rev. 14:15-19).
- E. Good fruit indicates true repentance (v. 8). You know the quality of the tree by the quality of its fruit. You know if someone is a follower of Jesus by their life, not just their words.

#### **IV. Pointing to Messiah, 3:11-12.**

Still in the context of judgment, but Matthew highlights judgment by introducing the soon to arrive ultimate judge.

- A. John’s baptism uses water as the medium to indicate identification with his message of repentance. It is a “ritual washing” that does not actual “wash” sin away. It is a picture, like Christian water baptism.
- B. The Messiah will come with two greater baptisms: one of the Spirit and one of fire. The first one is good; the second one is terrifying. *Neither* of these baptisms is the same as Christian water baptism!
- C. A sorting process will occur in which the Lord will judge the world. The “winnowing fan” or better “winnowing fork” was the tool used to separate the heavier and lighter parts of the wheat that has been beaten or treaded out to split them apart. Picture a large pitchfork being used to throw a pile of grain+chaff into the air, one fork-full at a time, until all of it is sorted. The wind is used as a tool to blow the chaff away while the heavier wheat would fall straight down to the ground and could be gathered for use. This kind of thing is what God will do at the end of the age when the wheat and

chaff are separated, or under a similar metaphor, when the wheat and tares are separated (Matthew 13:30).

- D. “Gathering the wheat into the barn” is an image that reflects the truth that Jesus will gather those who believe in Him into His kingdom. To be in His barn is to be welcomed and at rest and peace. This is associated with being baptized by the Spirit in that those who are so baptized are those who are saved, and they will live in the future heavenly kingdom (the barn).
- E. The chaff is a picture of those who reject the Messiah. Their “baptism with fire” is a picture of eternal judgment because the fire is one that is never extinguished and cannot be put out. In the Bible, fire is very often used an expression of judgment (John 15:6). Chaff evokes<sup>1</sup> Psalm 1:4.
- F. Notice that the threshing floor will be cleared. There are only two kinds of people: wheat and chaff. There is not a third kind who are “neutral,” who can remain behind and avoid the judgment. A decision will be made in every individual’s case, with no exceptions.

## Conclusion

Matthew describes the introduction of John and Jesus, *and their common message*, to the Jewish people and in turn to the world. He wrote some time after the events occurred to young churches. This would establish them in showing how the Hebrew Bible and its Jewish faith underlies and is connected to the new message of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> To evoke means “to bring or recall to the conscious mind.”