

Introduction

Two and a half decades ago, I was having a conversation with a favorite aunt of mine. We were talking about the kind of preaching we liked. She mentioned a specific well-known preacher of the day and said, "I really like him because he always lifts me up. He always makes me feel good." Like many she didn't care for fire and brimstone preachers who always make you feel bad. That being the case, I dare say she would not have appreciated the preaching of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was not a soft, fuzzy preacher. He was direct and he pointed people to their sin, and that never makes us feel good about ourselves. Those who recoil at such preaching think it mean-spirited. But the fact is the mercy of God coming to sinners must first present to people an honest picture of themselves or they will never see their need to fall on the grace of God.

[Read Text and Pray]

Silence. The heavens had been silent for 400 years. The children of Israel had gone down into Egypt and had lived there for these 400 years. Israel prophesied on his deathbed, but after that there was silence. Belonging to the Israelites was the promise of God to give them the land of Canaan, but it appeared that perhaps God had forgotten. Seemingly out of nowhere, however, the Lord raised up Moses to bring them out. Similarly, the last of the prophets to prophesy to Israel of a coming Messiah was Malachi. His last recorded words were these: "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." Again, however, the heavens were silent. For 400 years there had been no prophetic word from the Lord. But the Lord had not forgotten. In those days John the Baptist came preaching. Silence was broken and the 400-year-old prophecy was being fulfilled.

This week as I was studying and praying over how to present the message of this text, I woke up one morning with three divisions on my mind—the

man, the method, and the message. Later that same day I opened up David Platt's commentary on Matthew and began reading. I noticed he divided up the text according to the man, the message, and the method. And I thought, well, I'm not going to scrap my plan, I am just going to accept what they say about great minds. So, first, this morning I want you to consider . . .

I. John the Baptist – The Man (1, 4)

A. Let's begin with his name—John the Baptist. John was the name heaven gave this man. The angel who appeared to Zechariah while ministering in the temple gave him the wonderful news that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son and they were to name him John. The name means "The Lord is gracious." It was the intent of God to demonstrate his grace through this man. What many reckon to be meanness is actually the demonstration of God's mercy.

He was also called the Baptist. He was not the founder of the Baptist denomination. But he was a baptizer. Multitudes were going out and being baptized by him. This was a part of his ministry. Those who submitted to it were publicly declaring their sins and seeking God's forgiveness and cleansing.

B. Next, let's notice his emergence. Matthew tells us "In those days John the Baptist **came**." The word for came speaks of an official arrival. The same word announces the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem. It is like when a play moves to the next scene and suddenly there appears a major character in the plot. We may have heard of him before but now here he is. Obscurity keeps from us the details of John's upbringing for some 30 years. But here he is, and this is what is most important about him.

C. And what is important about him? Well Matthew thinks it is important that we know where he lived, what he wore, and what he ate. He was living in the wilderness. He was out of the way. He was preaching in a location people would have avoided without some compelling reason. Verse 4 says he wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. His diet was locusts and wild honey.

All of these aspects set before us a man who was not living it up in the world. He was greatly distinguished from the religious leaders of the day. They were in the middle of the action, dressed well, ate well, and lived well. The public wanted to have what they had. Meanwhile, here is John. He was out of the way. He was rugged and perhaps appearing a bit eccentric. He dressed the part and ate what he could find. Clearly he was not seeking to be named the best dressed man in Israel, and he wasn't going to win any cooking contests. Nor would there be a story about his dwelling in the latest edition of Middle-Eastern Living. His circumstances did reflect a likeness to Elijah, the first major prophet of the OT in whose likeness he had come. 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as wearing "a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist."

Without saying a word John, by his living, proclaimed a message to the people of the day. It was a message of rebuke to the way in which they sought the goods and pleasures and status of the world. Seeking God means not seeking those things. We get caught up in the major pursuits of things of infinitesimally less value than God. It will worry us to death if our car or appliance breaks down, our cell phone quits working, or for some reason we can't play our video game. But how do we respond if the day comes to an end and we have not spent quality time with God—time in prayer and time in the Word? Oh that we can handle. It barely ruffles our feathers. John shows us what is really important in life. It is not stuff, not pleasures, and not conveniences; it is God!

II. John the Baptist – The Mandate (3)

A. The mandate was to fulfill God's purpose. For what purpose was John doing what he was doing out in the wilderness? Well, verse 3 tells us. Matthew actually is pointing out that John fulfills prophecy. He specifically cites a word given by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40. There the prophet had indicated that there would be one in the wilderness who would cry out to prepare the way for the coming of the glory of the Lord. That is the purpose John is fulfilling. That was his purpose, his divinely entrusted mandate.

B. The picture here is one that would be recognized in the day. It called to mind a herald who would go before a king proclaiming his impending arrival

and making certain the way was smooth and welcoming, that the way was fit for the king. John was getting the people ready for the arrival of the king, Jesus. The fact that he was fulfilling prophecy connected with the arrival of messiah would also indicate that the one to whom he pointed would indeed be THE Messiah.

C. This mandate is shared by all disciples of Jesus. It comes out in his last words to them in Acts 1:8. "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." As sure as John proclaimed the imminent coming of Jesus the first time, we need to be preparing the way for Jesus' return when he will gather his people to himself but consign everyone else to eternal judgment.

III. John the Baptist – The Method (1)

A. We use the word method to answer the question "How?" If the mandate was to prepare the way of the Lord, what was the method by which John fulfilled the mandate? The text gives us a one word answer—preaching. John came preaching. He was a voice CRYING in the wilderness.

B. It is a curious thing to me. How did he get the first congregation out there? All good strategists seem to know that if you want to reach people, you go to the people. But John went away from the people and the people came out to the wilderness to hear him. Here is my answer to my curiosity. There is within the hearts of men and women who truly seek God a hunger for truth. They do not want to simply be made to feel good. They want to know truth. They do not want to be blinded by worldliness. They do not want to waste away quietly while turning their ears from cries of warning. They are driven to lay hold of what is real and what is right. And when they hear it, their hearts cleave to that truth. They rejoice in it even when it uncovers the darkness of their own hearts. For 400 years no word of prophecy had been heard in Israel, but after the long silence a man was speaking up. He was speaking forth. Spiritual thirst was being quenched and spiritual hunger was being satisfied. The word spread like wild fire. Great revival had started. People's lives were being changed. And people came. Verse 5 says, "all Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him."

C. Here John's method speaks to the contemporary church. It speaks to our methods. Of first priority, what should characterize the church? Should we strive to be attractive to the world on the level of what the world seeks? Is it where we are located? Is it how we are organized? Is it the kind of building in which we meet? Is it having plenty of programming and entertainment so that worldly comforts and enticements are imitated and we can draw them in? Not if we look to John's example. Not if we are looking to present the gospel in all its power and purity.

Of first priority, what should characterize the local church? Here it is—preaching truth. And that means preaching Christ. And that means preaching. John the Baptist came preaching. Jesus Christ was also a preacher. The apostles were preachers. Paul told Timothy with all seriousness and conviction to “preach the word.” There is no substitute for it. Preaching may seem like foolishness to the world. But it is in preaching that the wisdom of God is made known.

Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1: Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel. ...the word (the message, the preaching) of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ...it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

In Romans 10, Paul asks, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” He later concludes, “So then faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

If we don't do anything else in this place, let there be preaching, the preaching of the word, the preaching of Christ in order to prepare the way of the Lord.

And this brings us to . . .

IV. John the Baptist – The Message (2)

A. The message which John preached is condensed in verse 2 to 9 words. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” These nine words express

the content of the sermons of John. It was this message which was preparing the way of the Lord. His message was not a man-centered message. It was a Christ-centered, Christ-exalting message. It was a message which focused on preparing the way of the Lord. It determined to make the paths of the Lord straight.

B. His sermons had two main points.

Point 1 was the need for repentance.

Point 2 was the reason repentance was needed.

Point 1 is REPENT. It focuses on a personal response. It is a personal response that is demanded to prepare the way of the king. It is a personal preparation for the fact of Point 2 that the kingdom is at hand. The king of that kingdom is at hand. The coming together of that kingdom is at hand. And the rule and reign of that kingdom is about to be exerted. And the kings and kingdoms of this world will not be able to withstand it. This sermon could not be more Christ-focused. The coming of the kingdom is the coming of Christ and repentance is our right response to him.

C. I need to say a word about the kingdom of heaven. All through the gospel according to Matthew, he refers to the kingdom of Christ as the kingdom of heaven. It happens thirty-two times. Meanwhile, Mark and Luke use the designation, "the kingdom of God." What's up here? There are those who assert that two different kingdoms are in view here. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are different kingdoms, they say. But this is not the case. These are two different ways of referring to one kingdom. Matthew himself uses the two designations interchangeably in 19:23-24. Both emphasize the sovereignty of God. The Father rules the entire universe from heaven in the person of the Son, who is Messiah.

To say the kingdom is at hand is to assert that the king is here. You need to prepare your hearts to receive him.

D. How must people prepare their hearts for the arrival of this king? John says, "Repent!" We really need to hear the imperative, the command, that comes from the preacher John.

1. This is the first word of the core of his sermons. Repent. This is a confrontational word. It is a strong word. It is an insinual word. It is a declarative word that acts with the assumption that the one to whom it is directed is a sinner. How different this sounds from "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life". It sounds more like this: God has got some terrible plans for your life if you do not turn. Was John unschooled in the ways of interpersonal decorum? Did he just grow up on the wrong side of town? Did Elizabeth just not teach John the importance of winning friends and influencing people? Or was this warning suitable to the situation?

Well, John was called by God as a prophet and given the word he was to preach. "Repent!" is not primarily a warning from John. It is a warning from God himself. The coming of the kingdom did not mean that gentle God soft and easy is here to solve all your problems and make your life easy. The coming of the kingdom means that holy God, righteous and uncompromising, is here, and sinners, all of which we are, dare not presume upon him. They dare not fail to be repentant before him. The fact that the kingdom is at hand also means that judgment is at hand. As he says in verse 10, "Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

2. I want you to realize that John is not alone in the Bible in preaching repentance. The greatest preacher ever to walk the earth, the Lord Jesus Christ himself, did the same. Matthew 4:17 indicates that the message John preached was also the message Jesus preached. "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." At the outset of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches on aspects of repentance to show that those who repent are those who are blessed. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." And on it goes. On the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came in power and Peter was preaching to the people, they were cut to the heart. And they interrupted the sermon to say, "What shall we do?" And Peter replied, "Repent!" And Paul, when speaking to the philosophers of the city of Athens, told them, "God commands all people everywhere to

repent.” He summed up his preaching to the people of Ephesus as preaching repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus again in the letters to the churches in Revelation says 3 or 4 times to them Repent!” The concepts of faith or belief and repentance are inseparable. Where you find one that is genuine, you will find the other.

3. So what is the importance of this word? What does it mean to repent? We must know if we would be prepared to meet the king. To repent means to change your mind. Specifically as represented in this text it is to change your mind about your sin. You see the result of John’s preaching. The way that the multitudes responded to the preaching of John was that they were being baptized confessing their sins. Repentance comes to God as David went to the Lord in Psalm 51. Have mercy on me O God! Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. You are just in your judgment and right in your words. I cannot bring you anything that will satisfy except a broken and contrite heart. God, I am sorry. God, I hate my sin. God I love you and I want to be restored to you. God, cleanse my record, cleanse my heart, and change my life.

I can’t do better than to quote Steve Lawson for you:

Repentance is a change of mind, but it is far more than cognitive although it begins there. One now has a totally different perspective on God and himself: holiness of God and unholiness of self. Deep conviction, grief, sorrow, and shame over one’s own sin and guilt floods the heart and soul. After the change of heart there comes a change of will whereby one chooses to turn away from a life of sin and selfish pursuit and a turning to God and the Lord Jesus Christ which merges together with saving faith. Repentance involves a repudiation of the old life and a redirection of one’s life away from sin and towards God and Jesus Christ, a turning around, a turning away from a self-centered and a sin-centered life to Jesus Christ to be one’s own Lord and Savior.

According to John the Baptist, right here, you cannot have repentance without a changed life. In verse 8, he urges his hearers to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. You cannot have this kind of change in your heart and in your mind without a change coming to your life.

This text declares to us that this is how you respond to the presence of the king. And this is the response that accords with salvation. We talk about believing. Believe. Believe. Believe on Jesus Christ. And that is right. But you cannot separate true believing from repentance. These are two sides of one reality. Just like heads and tails of one coin. We just need to use the word repent a whole lot more. We must be clear that there is no salvation without it. It speaks of the entirety of conversion. If we squash repentance we squash the gospel.

The fact is that if you have not repented, you are not saved. This is how you respond to the presence and the person of Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

It is not meanness to tell folks they need to repent. It is mercy. If you come to people with a cushy message, the truths of the gospel are meaningless to them. We must not be hateful, but we must be clear. Without repentance, men and women will not be reconciled to God. They will face his judgment in the form of unquenchable fire. Believers, this is how we need to respond to him and those who have yet to respond to him, this is how you need to come to him as well. Don't delay and do not wait, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.