

Newspapers called it the "Dance of Danger"—bridge construction on top of swaying catwalks and high towers, sometimes hundreds of feet in the air, blown by ill winds. This dance had even yielded a calculated fatality rate: For every one million dollars spent, one life would be lost. That was what officials could expect.

Engineers on the Golden Gate Bridge, however, believed the risks could be lowered. When construction began in 1932, numerous safety measures were put into place and strictly enforced: mandatory use of hard hats, prescription filtered eye glasses, no show-boating (cause for automatic firing), tie-off lines, and an on-site hospital helped to greatly reduce the casualty rate. After nearly four years of construction and \$20 million spent, only one worker had died.

The most effective safety device, without question, was as new to bridge building as it was old to the circus: the use of a trapeze net. This large net cost \$130,000 and draped sixty feet below the roadbed under construction, extending ten feet to either side. So effective was the safety net that the newspapers began running box scores: "Score on the Gate Bridge Safety Net to Date: 8 Lives Saved!" Those men whose lives had been delivered by the net were said to have joined the "Halfway to Hell Club."

It freed many of the workers from an often paralyzing sense of fear.

Today there are many people who have manufactured their own safety net ... so that they can live their lives productively... without an often paralyzing sense of fear – about dying. *"I was born into a Christian home... my parents are strong believers... so I'll be OK when I die..."* ... *"I am a pretty*

good person... better than most. I'll be alright... ... *"I was baptized..."* ... *"I prayed the sinner's prayer..."* ... *"I walked down the isle one Sunday at the end of a sermon..."* ... Our safety nets might look very different from others.

In our passage this morning... we will see a mighty prophet call these safety nets worthless. John the Baptist called people to more than words or ritual... he told them to change their behavior. ... If we have really turned from our sins and turned to God... our words and religious activities must back up what we say. ... God judges our words by the consistent actions... not one time emotional behaviors... or rituals.

This message hasn't changed since the Old Testament... or John's message to prepare people for the Messiah. ... True belief changes behavior... and therefore... people will be judged for their unproductive lives. ... God calls us to be *active* in our obedience. ... As we are about to see... John compared people who claim they believe God but don't live for God... to unproductive trees that will be cut down. To be productive for God... we must actively follow Christ... constantly relying on His presence and His supernatural... divine... enablement... for obeying Him.

Our text this morning will ask each of us - How productive are you for God?

Many people today are assuming that they are living productive lives with a safety net beneath them. They are confident that they can only fall "half-way to Hell." Our passage today removes the illusion of the safety net that people today falsely rely on... thinking they are protected.

In order to understand Matthew 3 (our passage this morning)... and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry... we need to remember the context... including how the Old Testament ended. ... Just a few pages before Matthew's Gospel... in the last two verses of the Old Testament... the prophet Malachi predicted the following:

Malachi 4:5-6 (ESV)

“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 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.”

God announced through Malachi that He would send Elijah the prophet before the Day of the Lord. This Elijah would call the people to turn back to one another... but (look at the last part of verse six)... there also exists the possibility for a decree of destruction... through their non-compliance.

After this prediction there were **four hundred years** of silence... and then John the Baptist came on the scene. ... For over 400 years... the nation had not heard the voice of a prophet. Then John appeared and a great revival took place.

Matthew 3:1-2

John's ministry was not in good days. *“Those days”* were days of much evil. Bloody... brutal evil ran the government of Rome which ruled over Palestine where John lived and ministered. ... And the religious leaders of the Jews were a wicked bunch who used their position for their own personal prestige.

The first word of John that Matthew recorded was "Repent"! ... The silence of the centuries was broken by an appearance... a proclamation... and a ministry as startling as Elijah's had been. ... With that one word... all distinctions were destroyed. ... Priest and commoner... rich and poor... Pharisee and Sadducee... learned rabbi... tax collector and ordinary soldier... all were placed on common ground... as sinners... everyone needed to repent.

The Old Testament is filled with God's commands to His people to repent of their rebellion. ... It has always been unacceptable to God for His chosen people to live in a way that defied Him. ... However, there is a subtle difference in what John now calls for. ... The repentance that the prophets demanded was generally directed at the nation... as a whole. ... Here... John the Baptist would no longer demand ONLY repentance of the nation ... but was now calling for repentance of individuals to turn from their sinful ways to embrace God's way.

But what does it mean biblically to "repent"? ...In the Greek... this word "repent" (metanoeo) describes a change of one's mind... and one's entire thought patterns. It means to change of one's point of view. ... It is thorough enough that it always produces something – a changed life. Before repentance... our point of view is completely preoccupied with self. Repentance makes a change to a concern now... to live responsibly before God... and to love others.

Is it possible to confess your sin... but not repent...? ...YES! In several different places in Scripture we read about people who merely acknowledged their sin but went no further. In Exodus 9:27 Pharaoh

acknowledged his sin against the Lord before Moses and Aaron... in Joshua 7:20 Achan admitted his sin to Joshua... in 1 Samuel 15:24 an insincere Saul confessed to Samuel his sin of keeping back what the Lord had commanded him to destroy. The examples of Pharaoh, Achan, and Saul teach us that repentance and confession... are both necessary.

Biblical repentance means such a deep regret that we have offended God... that it causes us to make a 180 degree turn... from such actions as lying... cheating... stealing... gossiping... taking revenge... abusing and indulging in sexual immorality. ... Later in Matthew, we'll see the rich young ruler who walked away from Jesus was sorrowful but not repentant (Matthew 19), for he didn't want to part with his possessions. And later we read that Judas was sorrowful for betraying Jesus, but he wasn't repentant (Matthew 27).

John told his audience why this kind of repentance was so urgent.

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand..." *"At hand"* - These two words put urgency in the message of John. *"At hand"* speaks of opportunity and warns of the peril of being slack. *"Repent" now...* or you may be doomed... is the meaning of *"at hand."*

The call to repent is no less urgent today... It is the same message as *"Now is the day of salvation"* (2 Corinthians 6:2) and *"How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation"* (Hebrews 2:3).

Matthew 3:3

Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40... Here is Isaiah's complete statement...

Isaiah 40:3-5

Isaiah's prophecy envisioned all obstacles being removed from the path of the oncoming conquering Christ. "*Preparing the way*" and "*Make His path straight*"... The imagery here is of ancient times when a herald would go before a king... announcing the king's coming and making sure the road on which the king would travel was smooth and ready. ... John used them to picture the need for moral change. ... This call for leveling mountains and filling valleys was moral. ... And the hundreds of people who came to hear John—the sophisticated suburbanites and the rustic provincials—came to be leveled by the preacher.

Matthew 3:4

When the people arrived they saw a self-denying man,,, clothed in camel's hair. The coarse hair of the camel (in those days) was usually used for making tents and rough blankets. Only the poorest of the poor used it for clothing. ... Around his waist John wore a leather belt... which is what the common laborer wore. ... The influencers of Jewish society all wore girdles of costly linen or silk... often adorned with silver or gold. John scorned such embellishments.

Elijah wore such clothing as a protest against the Phoenician luxury that in his day was sapping Israel's character. ... John wore it as a protest against the pervading influence of Greek culture, which was sapping Israel's character.

He was an Elijah-like prophet who contented himself with eating locusts and wild honey. ... John's days were spent in fasting and prayer, and such food as he ate—the humble fare of the very poor—was another protest against the opulence of the ruling class.

He had been born into the priestly family of the house of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. John, with his drive and convictions, could have forced his way to the top, to the position of high priest of Israel. But early in life he forsook the schools of the rabbis and the rigorous apprenticeship for the priesthood. He decided that what Israel needed was not another priest after the order of Aaron, but a prophet after the order of Elijah. And such he became.

Matthew 3:5-6

It has been estimated that at least a million people turned out to hear him. ... The response to John was truly sensational.

Why did John attract so many people? For one... He was the first true prophet in 400 years. For over 400 years the Jewish culture had learned to tolerate more and more corruption over them... as though nothing would or could be done about it... But then John the Baptist bursts onto the scene. He publicly blasted both Herod and the religious leaders... with daring words that fascinated the common people. ... (Who does that sound like?) This same kind of attraction is what has so many people enamored with Donald Trump today. ... But John also had a strong message for his audience: They, too, were sinners and needed to turn from their sins. His words were powerful and true.

Baptism was not common in Old Testament history. ... In fact, the only people who were baptized were Gentiles who decided to become followers of Yahweh. Baptism was a way of saying, "*I am an outsider, renouncing my former ways, and embracing faith in the one true God, the God of Israel.*" Therefore, it is astonishing that people from Jerusalem and Judea—*Jewish* people—came to be baptized. They were admitting that their Jewishness did not guarantee them a right standing before God. They realized that they needed to personally confess their sins and profess faith in God. Here, for the first time in Scripture, we begin to see the significance of baptism.

Here is one significant factor: To be baptized is to **renounce your dependence on self** and to acknowledge that there is nothing inherent in you that can save you before God, including **your family heritage**. Ethnicity was extremely important to Jews, many of whom believed that simply being an Israelite meant that they were right before God.

With all due respect to brothers and sisters from traditions where infant baptism is practiced... the New Testament picture of baptism indicates that **no one** is born into God's family by physical birth. ... It is dangerous for people to believe that because they were born into a Christian family... and baptized as an infant by Christian parents... that their status before God is secure. This kind of thinking is rampant around the world, where "Christian" is a family or social identification. However, in Scripture baptism is not a sign that you have been born into a covenant family; instead, it's a sign indicating that regardless of what family you've been born into, you must personally repent, confess your sins, and put your faith in the Lord.

Here is another significant factor: In baptism you not only renounce your family heritage; you renounce **your personal righteousness**. The Pharisees, in particular, were known for their extensive study and attentive keeping of the law. They based their lives on Jewish laws and traditions, working to attain righteousness before God. Yet, as we've already seen, baptism is an admission that you are not righteous and you need to renounce your sinful ways.

Third: Baptism also means renouncing **your worldly success**. This applies especially to the Sadducees, who were known as rich landowners and beneficiaries of profits at the temple. They lived for present reward in this world, but baptism is a confession that we are living for future reward in the world to come.

Baptism indicates that you are going to **rely on the mercy of God**. It is a confession, a profession, that there's nothing you can do to save yourself from your sins; you need the Lord to do that.

Having described the coming of John and the coming of the Jews to hear him, Matthew paused to give us a sample of John's message.

Matthew 3:7-9

John the Baptist called people to "Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins." ... Only when your heart is right with God can you claim salvation. Your birth, race, country, or church is no substitute for a change of heart.

Matthew 3:10

The vividness of the picture is heightened by the words “even now,” which depict the chopping down of unfruitful trees as a process that is presently occurring. As the Kingdom message is preached, those who reject it are already being marked out for judgment, even though the full force of that awful judgment has not yet been felt.

No one had any trouble understanding this language in those days. When a tree or vine did not bear fruit, it was eventually cut down to make way for a tree or vine that would bear fruit. Lacking in fruit, judgment was imminent for them. They would soon be cut down and cast into the “*fire*” of hell.

God's message hasn't changed. ... People will be judged for their unproductive lives. God calls us to be *active* in our obedience.

Matthew 3:11-12

John brings out two ways of comparing himself with the coming Messiah. The first... is how much greater the Messiah will be to himself. He used a common image of his day for the lowest of low slaves. By comparison... John says I am not even like the most abject slave who loosens and removes the sandals of his master. The task of loosening another person's sandals was thought to be beneath any Jew... even if he was a slave. It was reserved for Gentile slaves.

The second comparison is the baptisms John does and the baptisms the Messiah will do. ... This comparison is potentially confusing on a couple of different levels... so a brief explanation may be helpful.

First... when John talks about Jesus coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit, he isn't saying that water baptism won't be important once Jesus comes on the scene. ... We know that because Jesus tells His disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel to go and baptize people in all nations (Matthew 28:19), and that's exactly what we see the followers of Jesus doing in Acts (2:41; 8:12). Baptism with water... would be an outward symbol of an inward reality (the inward reality of the baptism of the Spirit.)

A second clarification may also be helpful here... related to this baptism with the Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit is not a special baptism for a few select Christians (that some associate with speaking in tongues)... Rather, baptism with the Spirit... is a way of referring to Jesus' transforming work of putting His Spirit in us... and changing our hearts from the inside out. This baptism with the Spirit happens at the point of our salvation.

Titus 3:5-7 (ESV)

he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

John is telling us that Jesus will transform your hearts. The Old Testament prophesied about this new work of God. ... Jeremiah tells us that God's law would be written on the hearts of His people as a part of a new covenant (Jer 31:33). ... Ezekiel likewise speaks about God giving His people a "new heart" and a "new spirit" (Ez 36:26), while Joel speaks of a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all His people (Joel 2:28-29). Jesus will transform your heart.

Now... here is a third necessary clarification: The baptism "*with fire*" is sometimes thought to be part of the baptism associated with believers. In Acts chapter 2... we see when the Holy Spirit fell... the believers had cloven tongues of fire above their heads. ... But in the context of this Matthew text... fire is associated with judgment. The very next verse makes that clear.

So here is the clarification: Baptism with the Spirit and baptism with fire are two different baptisms that Christ will do. Either you will be baptized with the Spirit... where Jesus will transform your heart... or you will be baptized by fire... which is described in the next verse. There is no middle ground. Christians are baptized with the Holy Spirit. Unbelievers are baptized with fire. Everyone will be baptized by Jesus. ... Here is John's description of being baptized by fire...

Matthew 3:12

This imagery of winnowing may not be familiar to us, but it refers to the process of separating *grain*, the seeds, from *chaff*, the hulls that cover the seeds. A farmer would take a winnowing fork, toss both the grain and the chaff together into the air, and the grain, which was heavier, would fall to the ground, while the chaff would blow to the side. The farmer would then keep the grain, and he'd sweep all the chaff together and throw it into a fire. This winnowing process is a vivid picture of the judgment of God. Jesus' ministry means not only that God's salvation is near, but also that *His wrath is imminent*. ... Unrepentant people will be judged and discarded because they are worthless in doing God's work.

Jesus refers to the "fire that never goes out." ... He is making clear that His judgment is eternal. He announced to the people that though they were condemned in their sin... destined to receive the imminent wrath of God... John's message was "there was a way out. The Savior King had come."

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus had no need to renounce Himself and no sin to repent of... so why did He need to be baptized? ... That's exactly what John wondered. ... So Jesus responds in verse 15...

Matthew 3:15

Jesus fulfilled all righteousness (first) by fulfilling the OT pattern and prediction about the Messiah. ... (Second) He and John fulfilled the OT... by introducing the Messiah to Israel... in a tangible way that they should have understood. ... This baptism... is an inauguration of Jesus' ministry to Israel.

Isaiah 11:1-2 (ESV)

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

And in Isaiah 42:1 we not only see this prophesied again... but we also see the pleasure of the Father on this coming One.

Isaiah 42:1 (ESV)

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.

The Lord's baptism was intended to do three things. 1) to announce and inaugurate Jesus' ministry... 2) The Lord's immersion in the cold waters of Jordan foreshadowed Jesus' eventual immersion in the icy river of death. And just as a person being baptized today is brought back up out of the water... so we will rise from the dead. ... 3) It identified the Savior of sinners... with those He came to save. He Himself was sinless... but by accepting a baptism of repentance at the hands of a sinful man... He deliberately identified Himself with Adam's ruined race... And by submitting to baptism by one of lower rank (which John openly confessed)... Jesus also models humility for us... Jesus reminds us of a higher mission and purpose for our lives. ...

Then... after Jesus submits humbly to others in God's plan, God publicly acknowledges Jesus' own rank.

First, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and came upon Him. This was Christ's anointing for His public ministry. The same Spirit had brooded over "the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). And ever since the fall of man, He had been hovering over the sons of men and looking for one on whom He could rest. Noah, after the waters of judgment had abated, sent forth a dove that flew to and fro across the face of the still-receding waters but, finding no rest, returned to the ark. Similarly over centuries of time the Dove of God found no home in the restless seas of humankind until He alighted on God's true Ark, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In coming to rest on Christ, the Spirit anointed Him for the work that now lay ahead. Christ uttered not a single word, took not a single step, made not the slightest move in His public ministry until this holy anointing took

place. There never was a time when the Lord Jesus was not filled with the Spirit, but He was anointed at His baptism. ... The meaning of the name *Messiah* or *Christ* is "the anointed One."

The second part of the twofold confirmation of Jesus' rank... was the announcement of the Father. The announcement from Heaven looked back over the past thirty years: "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*" It was God's public endorsement of the hidden years in that Nazareth home.

As a toddler clutching Mary's robe... as a boy playing with His toys... as a youth at the local synagogue school... as a man at the carpenter's bench... He had brought nothing but joy to His Father's heart. ... In what He did... in what He said... in what He thought... in what He was - Christ had lived in perfect harmony with Heaven. ... And God announced that He was "well pleased."

Millions of people had already lived on earth and passed under the all-seeing eye of God... but the Father found none other than His Son to be the One in whom was all His delight.

Jesus is God's beloved Son in whom He is well pleased, so unite your life to Jesus by faith. Then, when the Father looks on you, He will see His Son and be pleased in you. It is amazing to think that we are right before God, not by trusting in anything we have done, but simply by trusting in Christ, by resting in His righteousness.

... ..

John had completed his mission at the baptism of Jesus. ... In many ways the ministry of John the Baptist was unique, but there are also many ways in which the church's ministry today is similar to John's. At least two ways in which we should imitate John's ministry are worth highlighting.

First, we must tell people to repent and be baptized. ... Clearly, the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus is the message of the Bible to every single person in the world today. You must turn from your sin, which means renouncing dependence on yourself... your family heritage... your personal righteousness... and your worldly accomplishments. All of these things will burn up when it matters most, at the day of judgment.

If you have repented... (changed your point of view and turned from your sin)... you should be baptized. I am always shocked to see how many followers of Christ have never taken the next step after repentance and been baptized. ... If that's you, don't wait another minute, because you are living in disobedience to Jesus Christ. And you're missing out on the joy of identification with Christ... the King.

For those followers of Christ who have been baptized... live your lives as the overflow of faith in Him. The essence of following Christ, as initially displayed in baptism, is death to self and to every effort to improve yourself by obeying God in your own strength and resolve. Don't look to yourself; trust in Christ. Then ask Him to work in you so that you might trust Him more with every aspect of your life—your marriage, your family, your schedule, and your possessions. Ask Him to do things in and through you that you could never do on your own. That's what it means to bear "fruit consistent with repentance" (3:8).

After repenting and being baptized... just as John the Baptist warned of impending judgment... we must do the same. ... We must tell people that imminent wrath and eternal punishment are coming. You may think, "I can't tell somebody *that*," but in reality, there's nothing more unloving than *not* telling people that. Proclaim the good news to friends, coworkers, and everyone else you meet. Tell them about the Savior who has come... to spare us from this wrath.

On July 4, 1854, Charlie Peace, a well-known criminal in London, was hung. The Anglican Church, which had a ceremony for everything, even had a ceremony for hanging people. So when Charlie Peace was marched to the gallows, a priest read these words from the Prayer Book: "Those who die without Christ experience hell, which is the pain of forever dying without the release which death itself can bring."

When these chilling words were read, Charlie Peace stopped in his tracks, turned to the priest, and shouted in his face, "Do you believe that? Do you believe that?"

The priest, taken aback by this verbal assault, stammered for a moment then said, "Well...I...suppose I do."

"Well, I don't," said Charlie. "But if I did, I'd get down on my hands and knees and crawl all over Great Britain, even if it were paved with pieces of broken glass, if I could rescue one person from what you just told me."