

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Let's turn to Matthew 3:1 as we continue our study of the Gospel of Matthew.

Father in heaven, You have given us Your Word as a lamp to our feet, that we may know You, love You, and trust You. Time has shown that everything around us shifts and changes, but Your Word does not change. All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. Grant us understanding, faith, and obedience this morning. For the sake of Jesus' glory and honor I ask this – Amen!

JOHN'S MESSAGE

1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, **2** “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:1–2, ESV)

We've already spent a sermon considering John's message and the proper response, so let me just summarize these two verses.

The message of John the Baptist, which is the exact same message that Jesus preached (Matthew 4:17), was both simple and compelling: the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. This is not a test. This is not a drill. This is real. This is actually happening. God's Kingdom is about to explode onto the earth.

When it does it will be good news for the righteous, and very bad news for the wicked:

10 Tell **the righteous** that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. **11** Woe to **the wicked!** It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have dealt out shall be done to him. (Isaiah 3:10–11, ESV)

Of course,

10 as it is written: “**None** is righteous, **no, not one**; **11 no one** understands; **no one** seeks for God. **12 All** have turned aside; **together** they have become worthless; **no one** does good, **not even one.**” (Romans 3:10–12, ESV)

So repentance is a message appropriate for every human being in every place at every time of human history. Sinners, repent! Men, repent! Women, repent! Jews, repent! Gentiles, repent! You who are rich, repent! You who are poor, repent!

TRANSITION: Let no one say when the judgment comes that God surprised mankind. He has declared both warnings of judgment and the promise of salvation for those who believe through His Son, His Word, His prophets, and His church. John had a significant role to play in that declaration.

JOHN'S ROLE

3 For 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.’” (Matthew 3:3, ESV)

Seven hundred years before John's ministry, the prophet Isaiah delivered these words to the people of Israel. God would send a messenger, a forerunner, who would announce the arrival of the Lord, and tell the people that they must take his message seriously. The people were to prepare themselves for the soon coming Savior by repenting of their sin.

The last Old Testament book, Malachi, closes with God's promise: **Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.** (Malachi 4:5). In Matthew 11 Jesus tell us bluntly that John was the promised forerunner, the coming Elijah.

John even took on Elijah's appearance.

4 Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (Matthew 3:4, ESV)

Second Kings 1:7-8 tells us that Elijah dressed exactly that way. This was no coincidence. John chose his clothes specifically because of his prophetic role in the manner of Elijah, a fast-moving, hard-hitting man of God who had no doubts about his role. There is a fascinating story about Elijah in Second Kings 1. King Ahaziah wanted Elijah to come to him, and so he sent a platoon of men with a captain. The captain said to Elijah, **the king says come down.** Elijah pronounced judgment on the troops, and fire came down from heaven and killed them. Ahaziah sent another platoon with another captain, who said to Elijah, **this is the king's order, come down!** Again, fire came down from heaven and killed them. Ahaziah sent a third platoon and captain, and that man said, please don't hurt us - let our lives be precious in your sight! And Elijah went with them to see Ahaziah.

Elijah was not a man to take lightly. Neither was John.

John's food was locusts and wild honey. Both locusts and honey were permissible for Jews to eat. But there is a picture here beyond John's diet. Locusts are often used as symbols of God's judgment against the wicked. The prophet Joel compares the judgment of God to a repeated plague of locusts that devastates the land. On the other hand, honey is a picture of God's blessing to the righteous, to those who trusted Him. In the ancient world honey was wild, not cultivated; it was a found blessing, an unexpected benefit. John himself, and certainly his ministry, was a reminder to Israel that the God was still the God who judges the wicked and blesses the righteous.

TRANSITION: John's message was received both positively and negatively.

POSITIVE RESPONSE

5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, **6** and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

This is a significant number of people who deliberately went out to a place in the wilderness, a place that was not on the way anywhere they were already going. Let's remember that there was nothing attractive about John's message. It was not designed to make people feel better about themselves. It was not intended to affirm self-righteousness. It was a clear, unmistakable warning that judgment was coming, but God would save those who turned to Him in faith.

John flattered no one, pandered to no one, curried favor with no one. He was eventually put to death because he criticized king Herod. Yet thousands of people flocked to hear him, and many responded with faith and repentance, in spite of the fact that John never performed a single miracle. There is no human explanation for this; it was a work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God persuaded these people that John was a prophet, and caused them to pay careful attention to his words. When John preached that the judgment of God was coming, they felt the weight of their sins, and knew the terror of those facing the holy judgment of God. They were like Isaiah in Isaiah 6:5, crying out **Woe is me! For I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips!** They were like those who heard Peter preach in Acts 2, **and when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do!?!"** (Acts 2:37).

John told them what to do – repent – and he gave them a means of immediately demonstrating their repentance to themselves and their neighbors: baptism.

TRANSITION: Some responded positively; others responded negatively.

NEGATIVE RESPONSE

7 But 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? **8** Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. **9** And 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. (Matthew 3:7–9, ESV)

The Pharisees and Sadducees were very different men.

The Pharisees were conservatives, fundamentalists. They used the Old Testament as a starting point for their own religious practices, but frequently violated the Scriptures in the process. The Pharisees would have denied the need for repentance, because they were already righteous.

The Sadducees were liberals, the aristocrats of Israel, dominating the leadership of the priesthood and Sanhedrin. They denied life after death, resurrection, angels or spiritual beings, and taught that the soul perishes when the body dies. The Sadducees would have denied the point of repentance, since there is no life after death, and therefore no judgment.

The two groups were very different, and yet very much the same. Neither had any place for repentance. The Pharisees saw no need for it; the Sadducees saw no point in it. They were children of Abraham, and that was enough. Fine; so, why were they coming to John? To repent? Obviously not. But there was no other legitimate reason to come to John. Like many people today, the Pharisees and Sadducees rejected John’s call for repentance, and, it seems, tried to create their own application of John’s preaching.

Many, many people come to Jesus for reasons other than forgiveness of sin and eternal life, but none of those reasons is legitimate, and they still face judgment.

John doubled down on his message, warning them to **bear fruit in keeping with repentance**. The common people needed to repent of their sins. These religious men needed to repent of their sins, and their dismissal of repentance as necessary. There is no time for them to waste:

10 Even 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. (Matthew 3:10, ESV)

Someone might say, “Well, that was 2,000 years ago.” Yes it was, but for those men it might have been the last day of their lives. The announcement of the Kingdom of Heaven was given to the men and women of Israel, some of whom did not survive that year, perhaps even that month. The world might have until the end of time, but you and I don’t. We only have until the end of our lives, and none of us knows when that will be. The same was true for them. Now that the Kingdom had been announced, there was no time to waste.

TRANSITION: Who is the agent of this judgment and redemption? Not John, but the One he came to announce.

THE MIGHTY ONE

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. **12** His 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.” (Matthew 3:11–12, ESV)

There is something very modern about this. It's common to hear people say that you and I have no right to judge anyone else; we aren't God; we can't say whether someone else is going to be right in His sight or not. And that's exactly right. John the Baptist acknowledged his own role: **I baptize you with water for repentance.** But he also had a responsibility to pass on the message of the Kingdom accurately, without any editing. When John spoke these words Jesus had not yet come forward publicly, but He was about to. As we talk here today Jesus has not yet returned, but He is about it. He could come at any time. A thousand years from now? Yes. A minute from now? Yes. And just as John describes, Jesus is coming to separate the righteous from sinners; wheat from the chaff; the sheep from the goats; the children of God from the children of wrath.

John gave three pictures of that final judgment.

First, **the axe is laid to the root of the trees.** Trees is plural, because it refers to every human being. **Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.** Those who do not bear good fruit – whose lives remain wicked and unrepentant – will be eternally condemned. Nothing is said at this point about trees that bear good fruit.

Third – yes, I know, it's out of order; trust me – the **wheat harvest.** The Lord is coming to clear His threshing floor; that's a picture of the world, which belongs entirely to Him. He is going to gather up the wheat into the barn – His children will receive eternal life – and throw the chaff into unquenchable fire – the wicked face eternal judgment.

And **second** – yes, I know it's out of order – **baptism.** Why take them out of order? Because so many think that baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire are both good things; they aren't. In these verses fire refers to the judgment of God. John's baptism gave sinners an opportunity to demonstrate repentance through a public declaration. But Jesus was coming to carry out a very different kind of baptism: **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**

Baptism with the Holy Spirit is a picture of receiving eternal life from God, of being born again and joined to Christ. **Baptism with fire** is the judgment of God.

In each of these pictures the Lord Himself separates the righteous from the wicked. John wasn't the judge; you and I aren't the judge, either. But Jesus IS the judge, and He is going to judge the wicked, and we have an obligation to deliver HIS message as He has given it to us in His Word. Anything less is unfaithful.

BRINGING IT HOME

Let's bring this home.

The message of the Gospel is really the same as the message John preached: the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand; repent, and believe the Gospel. Jesus Christ died to save sinners. Those who repent of their sins and put their faith in Him will be saved from the judgment to come. They are precious to Him; they are His own people, His own children.

Many people are like the Pharisees. They don't see a need to repent, because they think they are already good enough, or religious enough, or meet God's standard, or they have created a god in their own image who approves of their sin, or who doesn't care about sin. They are wrong.

Many people are like the Sadducees. They don't see a point in repentance, because they think that when they die, that's it; they're gone, and not coming back. They are wrong.

Our task is to proclaim Jesus Christ and His Gospel, and that means calling people to repent of their sin and believe the Gospel. Here's the thing: it's the Spirit's job to persuade those who hear us that they are truly sinners in danger of judgment. It's the Spirit's job to grant them repentance from their sins, and give them faith in Jesus, and save them.