



The Herald of the King

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 3:1-12

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Think about what we have seen so far in the Gospel of Matthew...Now, today, we hear the voice of the herald of the King. John's title, the Baptist, can obscure what was the thrust of his ministry which was: to announce the coming and the ministry of Christ, to call the nation of Israel to repentance and administer baptism as a sign of that repentance, to confront the self-righteous and spiritually arrogant, and to declare the supremacy of Christ's ministry over his own, the saving and judging work of Christ. So let's look his morning at the ministry and message of John the Baptist.

1. A Bold Prophet With A Bold Message (v. 1-6) 1In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In those days is vague expression that conceals a lapse of about 30 years. Then in the midst of this wilderness of Judea -- which is not all desert but at best is rough and rocky land -- bursting on this scene is this bold and fiery and confrontational prophet...there has not been a prophet in Israel for some 400 years.

That his ministry would be located in the wilderness is not at all by mistake. John's ministry in the wilderness was both symbolic and practical. It was symbolic in the sense that John was calling the people away from the dead and decaying and moldering ruins of the religious system of their day -- away from ritualism and hypocrisy, worldliness and pretension which was centered in the cities, to something new. John's ministry in the wilderness was also very practical. God would not have John be corrupted by the contaminated religious system of his day and so he has him preaching far away from the influence of the religious leaders. Even more, preaching in the wilderness allowed those who were serious to listen, ponder, consider, and think about what they were hearing from John without the distractions and the deliberate misleading of the religious charlatans they were so accustomed to hearing. Out in this desolate place, they were free to be able to really hear the preaching of John.

Just like the Messiah he would proclaim, John's birth to Zacharias and Elizabeth was attended with the miraculous...announced to Zacharias by the angel Gabriel...like Jesus, Gabriel told his father the name that he was to name him...Gabriel explained to Zacharias the character and scope of John's ministry saying: (Luke 1:14–17, ESV)...practically nothing is known of John's boyhood, except that he "grew and became strong in spirit and was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel." (Luke 1:80).

The name John, which Gabriel commanded Zacharias to name his son, means, "God has dealt graciously" of "The Lord is gracious" and this is significant. We need to see that the message of John, a hard message, a strong message, a warning message, a decidedly not "touchy-feely" message, is a nonetheless an exceedingly gracious message from God. The call to repentance from God is a great grace. John's preaching was a great grace. God sent John preaching and in that, we can immediately see that the message entrusted to the prophets and proclaimers of Christ is not one to be discussed or dialoged or debated – it is to be preached. Preaching is a heralding, a proclaiming, a setting forth of the truth forcefully and passionately. It is speaking with certainty, under the power of the Holy Spirit, out of the authority of God, for the praise of His glory. John's anointed preaching first called attention to man's sin and then pointed to God's salvation in Jesus Christ. It was hardly "seeker-friendly" but it was gracious. Its aim was neither to entertain men nor to win man's approval. Its purpose was to expose man's sin and need for the Savior

The core theme of John's message loud and clear -- "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." More than calling the nation of Israel to feel sorry for their sins or to change their mind, the calling to repentance is a call to abandon their rebellion and to come back into covenant obedience to God.

That was the thrust of John's message...not unique to him. The very first words that Matthew records of Christ's public ministry are the same thing.(Matthew 4:17, ESV) Beloved, see with me that repentance is not a secondary or a minor issue in the Christian faith. It is fundamental, basic and essential to the message of John and of Jesus. The call to true repentance is distinctively Christian.

What is true repentance? What does that look like and why is it so vital to true salvation? The Greek word for repent is “metanoeo” and it means literally to change your mind but it means much more. It means to change one’s way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness, and with regard to the character and the nature and the command of God. In other words, true repentance involves the mind, the emotions, and the will and the actions that flow forth from them.

When John summonsed the Israelites to repentance, he did more than call them to feel sorry for their past sins. He did more than call them to feel bad for the way that had wronged others or even wronged God. He called them to more than feeling bad that they let themselves down and didn’t live up to their own expectations. Repentance is not self-condemnation. To wallow in self-accusation is just another form of self-centeredness. Repentance is more than that.

Paul captures one of the most vivid descriptions in the Scriptures of genuine repentance in 2 Cor. 7:9-11. Turn there with me. (2 Corinthians 7:9–11, ESV) In worldly grief, the sinner feels bad for himself – his pain, his shame, his damaged reputation or relationships. The regrets that he got caught but inwardly they would still commit the same sin if they could do it and avoid the consequences. But in godly sorrow, the sinner feels the weight of his sin against the holy God and wants to see justice done and wants to restore relationships, first with God and then with his fellow man. The truly repentant man or woman grieves that he has offended God. He or she hates the sin that he has committed. They turn from their heinous sin – in mind, heart, and hands – to a gracious God. They know that God is merciful. They know that true repentance involves a constant endeavor to walk with God in obedience. Look at the words that Paul uses to describe the nature of Godly mourning and repentance that comes from it. Earnestness – an eager and aggressive pursuit of righteousness, indifference and complacency toward sin comes to an end. Eagerness to clear yourselves – a desire to clear the name of the stigma of sin. Indignation – that is anger over sin and what it does to the name of God in the world. Fear – reverence toward God, awe toward the God who demands payment for sin and offers it Himself in the blood of Christ. Longing – desire of the sinner to restore the fellowship with God that has been broken – to find comfort and joy in his presence. Zeal – passion for God and for God’s kingdom and His fame and His name based on the great forgiveness He has given and the comfort and fellowship He offers. Punishment – this is better translated as “avenging of wrong.” It is the desire of justice to be done. Innocence – It is the desire for purity and holiness.

We need to see that the reason that both John and Jesus began their public ministries with a call to repentance is because repentance is so fundamental to the preaching of the gospel and because true repentance must encompass the entirety of the Christian's life. Biblical repentance involves turning from our sins and turning to Christ, turning away from rebellion toward God and embracing Christ as our Savior and Lord. But the call to repentance is also a daily call to continual repentance from overt and obvious sins – theft, lying, lust – but also from such subtler sins as faithlessness, coldness, complacency, greed, thanklessness, self-indulgence, pride... Repentance is to be a way of life because given the range and the depths of our sins, sin fights hard. Habitual sins blind us so that a truly penitent person may battle for years to break deeply ingrained habits. Repentance is a way of life. Repentance is that pursuit of bringing our lives into conformity to the Word of God. That is the only standard. Repentance is the essential characteristic of Kingdom people.

It is true that only God can empower this kind of repentance. It is not simply moral reform that is at the core of repentance, but Spirit wrought, Spirit empowered, God directed change. Repentance is a gift of God but, beloved, it is also commanded of men and women. It is a grace-empowered response to the truth of God revealed in His Word. It is so clear that repentance is essential to having a relationship with Jesus Christ because He is the Savior from sin “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ” (Revelation 1:5, ESV)

So, John is calling them to repentance in light of the coming of the kingdom of heaven – the Christ Himself – sovereign over salvation and judgment. Jesus is shortly going to appear and the kingdom of heaven with Him. He calls the people to repent and to turn their hearts to God because his king, Jesus Christ, is coming. So John comes, boldly proclaiming the coming of the Messiah King and Matthew sees in his ministry the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah.

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.’ ” Matthew connects John with the prophecy from Isaiah in Isaiah 40: (Isaiah 40:1–6, ESV) Matthew clearly sees John as the forerunner of the Messiah to come -- the voice crying out to draw men and women to behold the Christ. The attention is not upon John, the glory is not for himself – it is all for Christ. And that is one of the chief things that sets John apart from the Pharisees and Sadducees – that they are glory stealers and he is not. It is the message that is important, not the messenger. And his message is to “prepare the way of the Lord,” that is, to make everything ready for the coming of the Lord's chosen one. John's announcement of the coming

of the kingdom and his call to repentance were John was a preacher of repentance, a proclaimer of the Messiah, and he was unconcerned with appearances. That much is made clear by the way that he dressed.

4Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Instantly we can see similarities in John and Elijah...his sudden appearance, solitary life, uncompromising message, and his eventual clash with the king and his wife are all reminiscent of the life and ministry of Elijah. This is not a coincidence. Jesus would say of John later, "and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." (Matthew 11:14, ESV) John the Baptist, in his ministry, was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi in Mal 4: (Malachi 4:5, ESV)

In a total contrast with the religious leaders of the day, who "(did) all their deeds to be seen by others, who (made) their phylacteries broad and their fringes long (the decorative trim on their robes), (who loved) the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others." (Matthew 23:5-8, ESV) – John dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey, unconcerned for finer things, not concerned with being well-esteemed, or being honored by others. He cared nothing for showmanship. Instead, truth was his calling card. There was nothing elaborate or entertaining about John – the goal of his ministry was faithful and uncompromising proclamation of the truth of God and the result of that faithfulness was shocking.

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. The effect of John's preaching was dramatic. The people flocked to him. They came from all over Jerusalem and Judea and the region around the Jordan River to hear what he was preaching and the reason they did was much like the reason they were drawn to Christ – he preached with authority and with power. They heard his message and were baptized by John in the Jordan River.

The baptism of John really had no parallel at all in his day and time. This baptism was a baptism of preparation, a baptism of repentance involving the confession of sins and preparation for responding to the coming of the Messiah. The only kind of washing that was even remotely similar to this baptism was the one-time self washing that was performed by Gentiles who

became proselytes – followers of the Jewish religion. They would wash themselves all over signifying that their coming as outsiders into the Judaism. Seen in that light, Jews that submitted to John's baptism were confessing that they were outsiders to the people of God – though they were descendants of Abraham and members of God's chosen race, they came to John to be baptized like a Gentile seeking entrance into the kingdom of heaven. This act of submitting to John's baptism confessed that they realized that their ethnic Jewishness or even their knowledge that the covenant was first given to the nation of Israel could not save them, that Judaism was inadequate to save them, that they needed to be made ready for the coming of the Messiah who alone could deliver them from the wrath to come. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation. For that reason alone, you can see the humility that would be required of the Jews to come and to be baptized by John. Humbled they came. John's ministry was not without opposition, however and Matthew records for us his

2. Confrontation With the Self-Righteous (v. 7-10) John fires the first salvo at the Pharisees and Sadducees. John takes the fight to them. Clearly, John can discern their motives and their motive is not to seek repentance and baptism for themselves but to observe the ministry of John. They are not there to listen in the sense of receiving his words, not to repent, but to examine and investigate John's activities. We need to know who these guys are.

The Sadducees name came most likely from that of Zadok, the high priest of David's day from whom the high priests were descended. Ironically enough, theologically, the Sadducees were classical liberals who were anti-supernaturalistic – that is they did not believe in the bodily resurrection of God's people from the dead, did not believe in heaven and did not believe in miracles. Most members of the Sanhedrin, the central judicial authority of Jewish people, were Sadducees. These guys were the political power brokers, allies with the Herods and the Roman rulers, but they were not greatly respected by the people themselves. Still, the Sadducees were the main political force among the Israelites responsible for keeping the status quo.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were the main religious leaders and they had greater respect among the people. The Pharisees, whose name means separate ones, were THE authority when it came to religion in Israel. They were known for insisting that the law of God be observed as their scribes interpreted it and for their special commitment to keeping the laws of tithing and ritual purity, Sabbath regulations, ritual washings, dietary restrictions, and the like. They were masters of self-righteousness and self-promotion. They would use the broadest possible leather straps to bind phylacteries -- leather boxes that contained pieces of parchment

with Scripture verses written on them -- on their arms and foreheads. They lengthened the tassels on the corners of their robes so that they could be seen as especially devoted to God. I know this sort of thing seems kind of strange to us – phylacteries and tassels -- but the point is that the Pharisees were self-promoters and self-righteous and loved to put their supposed devotion to God on display.

Their religion was their life. It took precedence over everything, even God. John MacArthur says of them: “The Pharisees had devised a slick disguise, concealing their self-righteousness and hypocrisy under a veneer of religious zeal. They were careful to maintain the appearance of— but not the reality of—sincere devotion to God. More than that, they had so thoroughly blended their manmade religious traditions with the revealed truth of God that they themselves could not even tell the difference anymore. Despite all their studied expertise in the unique variety of Old Testament scholarship they promoted, they insisted on viewing the Scriptures through the lens of human tradition. Tradition therefore became their primary authority and the governing principle in their interpretations of Scripture. Under those circumstances, there was no way for Scripture to correct their faulty traditions. The Pharisees thus became the chief architects of a corrupted brand of cultural and traditional (but not truly biblical) Judaism. By Jesus’ time it was already a monstrous, burdensome system of rule-keeping, ritual, superstition, human custom, sabbatarian legalism, and self-righteous pretense—all closely supervised under the critical eye of the Pharisees. The Pharisees who blindly followed the party line in the name of tradition were false teachers, no matter how pious or noble they might have appeared to the superficial eye. They were the worst kind of wolves in sheep’s clothing—corrupt rabbis wearing the wool robes of a prophet and devouring the sheep of the Lord’s flock under the cover of that disguise. They were in fact determined rebels against God and His Anointed One, even though they covered themselves with such a cloying (that means nauseating), pretentious display of external piety. Even when confronted with liberating biblical truth, they stubbornly carried on being skills for legalism. No wonder Jesus dealt so sternly with them.” (John MacArthur, *The Jesus You Can’t Ignore*) In fact the truth about all of this is the Sadducees and the Pharisees were at theologically and politically opposite ends of the spectrum and the only thing they had in common was their opposition to both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

John takes the fight to them first and the statements he makes regarding them are John’s statements are both inflammatory and insightful and I want you to notice that like His Master who will come after him, John is not gentle with the Sadducees and the Pharisees at all. He is not nice to them or try to look for opportunities to affirm them or engage them in a discussion

group or understand where they are coming from or come alongside of them and show them unconditional love in their rebellion against God. Instead, John calls it like it is and calls them what they are. He calls them a brood of vipers. Vipers are shrewd, deceptive, and venomous and these men were all three of those things. He demonstrates great insight in calling them to bear fruit in their lives in keeping with repentance, knowing that the Pharisees and Sadducees were masters of hypocrisy and appearances, concerned with the outside of the cup but retaining all manner of filthiness and wickedness within. Don't miss the very obvious point. It is possible for one to hear all the preaching and still be a viper. It is possible to attend all of the meetings, to hear the ministry of the Word of God and be totally unresponsive to it, to be involved in ministry, to have grown up in a Christian family...and the whole time never having truly repented which is necessary for a saving relationship with Christ. That was these guys to a T. For that reason, it is not surprising to hear John say "bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

Knowing them as he does, John anticipates their typical defense – their appeal to their lineage and physical heritage as the ethnic children of Abraham. But John says in effect, "Your heritage means nothing. These rocks are as qualified to be the sons of God as you are." And wanting to press the urgency of repentance to their hearts he says, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees." John is making clear the judgment of God has already begun and that judgment would extend even to the root. In other words, there would be no reversing it. If it seems that John is being too severe, it would be wise to remember that if there is no judgment then there is no need for a gospel. The urgency of John's preaching is made clear when we see the reason for it.

3. The Inescapable Reality (v. 10-12) Again, notice that like the true prophet that he is, John points away from himself to Jesus Christ. That is, in fact, the common characteristic of every true prophet of Christ – they point away from themselves and to Jesus. He knows his place. This greatest prophet is only a voice, but Jesus is the Redeemer. Next to Jesus, no preacher, no prophet, no leader is anything more than a voice. How we need to hear that in this day of celebrity preachers. Take heed beloved, whenever a man obscures the message, whenever a man becomes bigger than the message, when it becomes about hearing a certain Christian "superstar" preach, be careful lest you have veered into idolatry. John did not cast himself in such a light at all. Instead by contrast he sees himself as the lowliest of the low.

He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. John felt himself unworthy to do for Christ even the lowliest work of a servant. That is how he viewed

the gulf between himself and the Messiah that he was announcing. He also saw the massive difference between his ministry and the ministry of the Messiah to come.

John understands the limitations of the baptism that he performed. I baptize you with water for repentance -- John's baptism was simply a testimony of repentance, a confession of the need to forsake sin, a preparation for the coming of the Messiah. John baptized people with a view to their repentance. They came to Him confessing their sins in anticipation of the soon coming King; and they did so in order to prepare their hearts for Him through genuine repentance. And as an outward sign of this, he baptized them in water. What John was doing was preparatory but minor compared to what the Messiah would do. The Messiah will bring the baptism that saves or the baptism of judgment. Christ will either baptize them with the purifying work of the Holy Spirit by which they will be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ or they will be baptized with the fire of judgment. Speaking to the religious, John says that the coming of Christ will separate mankind into two groups – wheat and chaff.

Prophets had long looked forward to the purifying outpouring of the Spirit of God in the Messianic Age: (Ezekiel 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29, ESV) John knew that his baptism was, like the water in which he immersed, cold, and incapable of giving life. It symbolized, but did not produce soul cleansing on its own. But the King would come, bringing with Him the gift of a mighty Spirit, whose enlivening power would transform men's hearts and do all that this outward baptism only shadowed.

But he also declared the Messiah's baptism of fire. The chaff, separated from the wheat, would receive a baptism as well, a baptism by unquenchable fire, the thorough, fierce and complete judgment of God which would not be mixed with mercy and from which there would be no rescue. He uses an agricultural picture to describe the difference between the people of God and the unbelieving. He said it is like wheat and chaff. The wheat is the righteous, those baptized by the Messiah unto salvation. Their repentance is true and sincere, their faith living and active, their devotion to God genuine and real. The wicked, on the contrary, whether they be merely nominal Christians or hypocritical professors, are like chaff; their lives are unsubstantial and worthless. They may, to a superficial observer, appear like solid grain: but they will not bear examination. Examine their repentance: it has no depth in it: they have never known what a broken and contrite spirit means. Examine their faith: it has nothing beyond a bare assent to certain truths: they have never fled to Christ; they have never been grafted into Christ by faith. Examine their obedience too: it is external only; while their hearts, instead of

being given to him, are set upon the things of the world. The Lord Jesus Christ, in the Day of Judgment, will distinguish between them. 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.

4. Principles to Take Away From the Ministry of John The Baptist

1. The simplicity of a singular devotion to Christ.
2. The vital necessity of true repentance.
3. We desperately need Jesus Christ.
4. The certain judgment of unbelief.
5. The certain promise of the ingathering of God's people.

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