

## REPENT, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR

Matthew 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:2

“...and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

Today’s passage tells how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. John went before Jesus like a forerunner, proclaiming: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Sometimes the word “repent” scares us. Some think it is a harsh word. Yet everyone who accepted John’s message was abundantly blessed by Jesus. They received the joy and peace of heaven while living in this world. They received eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. We can have this too. Let’s accept God’s message through John and enjoy the kingdom of heaven.

First, John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus (1-6).

Look at verses 1-2. “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’” Matthew introduces John the Baptist. John’s parents did not name him this. They simply named him “John.” He became known as “John the Baptist” because he baptized so many people. Dr. John Jun performed 1,022 marriage ceremonies, and then he stopped counting. Once, he introduced a woman missionary to a man of God. But she did not like him, saying his nose was crooked. So Dr. Jun brought a ruler, measured his nose, and proved that it was straight and in the exact center of his face. After realizing this, she changed her mind and they married. Dr. John Jun has had a great career in matchmaking. Perhaps he could be called John the Matchmaker. In the same way, John was known as John the Baptist.

John’s main task was preaching. His message contents were: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” The word “repent” comes from the Greek word “metanoeo” which means to change one’s mind. This is not merely changing a preference, like changing the TV channel from sports to news, or changing hair color from brunette to blonde. This change of mind has to do with one’s attitude toward sin and toward God. To repent is to stop liking and tolerating sin, and to start hating and renouncing sin. To repent is to stop avoiding God, and to start acknowledging God. Thus defined, it may happen in different ways.

The prodigal son (Lk 15) repented. He thought he would be happy with his father’s money and unlimited freedom. Instead, he experienced shameful failure and loss. Then, while working on a pig farm, he became so hungry that he envied pigs because they had pods. Hunger helped him realize that he was a fool, and his father was wise and good. So he went back to his father. His repentance started with his hungry stomach. For many, repentance follows tragic failure or severe hardship.

Simon Peter repented. He had been living an ordinary, family-centered life as a fisherman. Then, Jesus gave him a miraculous catch of fish. Peter saw God in Jesus and his great purpose for world salvation. Peter, utterly ashamed of his selfish and petty life, cried out, “Go away from me, Lord, I am a sinful man.” Jesus did not go away. Instead, he said, “Don’t be afraid. From now on you will catch men” (Lk 5:10). Jesus helped Peter to live for God’s glorious purpose. Peter became a great shepherd for God’s children, the rock of Jesus’ church. Like him, many repent when they come into the presence of the holy Son of God.

King David repented. He had sinned greatly against God when he committed adultery and murder. As a king, David could get away with it. But God did not leave him alone. God sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke David. Then he repented with many tears and a broken spirit. God forgave his sin and restored his soul. Like David, some repent when they are rebuked with the word of God.

God is actively involved in bringing people to repentance by working through circumstances, through his servants, and through his words. But life-changing repentance happens when we willingly turn from sin to God. Every genuine Christian has repented at least once. But once is not enough. Repentance is a continual struggle to change from sinners into saints. It ends when we are just like Jesus. Until then, we must keep repenting. Sometimes, we feel hard-hearted and cannot repent. Then we must ask God for help. God can give us the spirit of repentance, which enables us to truly repent.

Look at verse 2 again. John said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Repentance leads us to the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is where God reigns. God reigns through his King Jesus. Whoever accepts Jesus as King can have membership in the kingdom of heaven. This is really good news. Most of us cannot expect membership in the U.S. Supreme Court. However, through Jesus we can be members of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ kingdom is not like worldly kingdoms that crush their members. King Jesus is not like worldly kings. Jesus is the King who saves. Jesus is the shepherd of his people. Jesus laid down his life for us. Jesus went to the cross and shed his blood to pay the price of our sins. Jesus can set us free from the miserable bondage of sin. Acts 3:19 says, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord....” Moreover, Jesus rose from the dead to give us eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. The Bible calls this a living hope. While in this world, we experience difficulty and trouble. We have sorrows and pain. But in Jesus, we have the sure hope of heaven. This gives us inner joy and peace in any adversity while on earth. Finally, Jesus will take us away from this world to be in heaven with him forever.

John’s message was the good news of salvation through Jesus. John came according to God’s plan. Look at verse 3. “This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”” God sent John as the forerunner of King Jesus. In America, we are familiar with the president’s advance men who go before him. They make sure that roads are clear, there are no dangers, and that people show respect to the president. Similarly, John went before Jesus to prepare people for the coming of the King. To carry out this mission, John fully devoted himself. His clothes were made of camel’s hair. And he only had one article in his wardrobe. John did not spend time at the mall shopping for clothes. John’s food was locusts and wild honey. Many people spend a lot of time planning delicious meals, shopping for groceries, cooking, eating, and then cleaning up afterward. But John just grabbed locusts and wild honey on the run. He lived a simple and pure life to focus his energy on preparing the way for Jesus.

John’s message touched the hearts of people of his time. Look at verses 5-6. “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” Many sophisticated city dwellers as well as rural folk came to John. His message appealed to all people. It was because all people were burdened with sin and really wanted to solve their sin problem. In fact, they were waiting for the message of repentance. This is true in our time too. Last week, Missionary Sarah Chung met a girl student at UIC and invited her for Bible study. The girl responded, “Bible study! I have been looking for a Bible teacher. Yes, I will study the Bible with you.” Immediately, she sat down and studied lesson one. Afterward, she made another appointment. People long for God’s deliverance from sin. We must not be discouraged by a few rejections. Many people really want to repent before God. Now many Americans feel spiritually sick because of an easygoing mentality. Many are burdened with guilt after indulging in immorality. Many are weary of life, feeling that everything is meaningless. Through recent natural disasters, many have realized that what they need most is faith in God and the kingdom of heaven. Now is the time for us to share God’s message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Second, John rebukes unrepentant people (7-10).

Many sincere people confessed their sins, shedding tears before God and his servant John. News of God’s work spread. Then, many Pharisees and Sadducees appeared. They were professional religious leaders. They had not come to repent; they did not think they needed to repent. To John, they were enemies of God’s life-giving work. He spoke to them sharply: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

In this part, we learn several things about unrepentant people. Unrepentant people are as poisonous as vipers. They give a bad influence to young believers that can be as deadly as the bird flu disease. John rebuked them openly to help young sheep discern the danger. Unrepentant people are unfruitful. God made man to grow in the image of God. God wants us to be full of the love of God, spiritual joy, the peace of God, and all the fruits of the Holy Spirit. God wants all of us to be just like Jesus in our inner person. The religious leaders had social positions, gorgeous garments, and well polished manner. But their hearts were corrupt. They were arrogant, selfish, and greedy. They could bear inner and outer fruit only through repentance. Repentance produces the fruit that God wants.

Unrepentant people are self-righteous. The religious leaders thought they were okay because they were physical descendants of Abraham. So they did not struggle to repent their sins. Like them, many are self-righteous because they grew up in a Christian home, or because they have a good spiritual heritage, or because of past spiritual achievements, or because of a position in God's work, and so on. But there is no excuse for avoiding repentance. In the end, self-righteous people become as hard and lifeless as a stone. Unrepentant people are on the verge of God's judgment. John uses a graphic image of an ax at the root of the tree to cut it down. The religious leaders were in a perilous condition. They had enjoyed the privilege of being richly nourished by God's root. They had received all the blessings that God could give. To maintain these blessings they had to bear fruit to God. They had to bear as much fruit as God wanted. But they were not bearing fruit. So they would be cut down and thrown into the fire. From those who have been given much, God requires much. We must examine our lives in regard to the fruit God requires. Let's ask God's mercy that we may be repentant people who bear much fruit.

Third, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit (11-12).

John's message did not end with his scathing rebuke of the religious leaders. As a conclusion, he pointed everyone to Jesus. Look at verse 11. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Many people admired the great spirit of John and the power and influence of his ministry. But John said that he was just a forerunner; the main figure in God's history was still to come. He is Jesus, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. John's water baptism had been mere preparation for the coming of Jesus. Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit is God coming to dwell in the hearts of people. The Holy Spirit has the power to truly change people on the inside. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us from within. The Holy Spirit changes our sinful desires into holy desires. The Holy Spirit changes our weaknesses into strength by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Ro 8:11). No matter what our inner problem may be, the baptism of the Holy Spirit can change us into holy people of God.

Jesus also baptizes with fire. This refers to the coming judgment of God. Look at verse 12. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Regardless of appearances, Jesus discerns precisely between those who are fruitful and those who are not. No one will fool Jesus at the time of judgment. Jesus will gather the fruitful and take them to his everlasting kingdom. But those who are not fruitful will be punished. In this passage Jesus' criteria for judgment is not the fine details of our daily lives. Rather, it is whether or not our lives bore the fruit he wanted to find. Some people have many weakness, but they bear spiritual fruit to God. Other people have impeccable human credentials, but no spiritual fruit. No matter how we may feel about this, it is the fruitful who are gathered into the kingdom of heaven. John proclaimed that Jesus is the Judge. At the thought of Jesus' coming, John trembled. John was earnest in warning of Jesus' judgment. Many do not like to think about this. But God's judgment is a Biblical constant. Like John, we must accept and teach that Jesus is the Judge.

Fourth, Jesus was baptized by John (13-17).

Look at verses 13-14. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" John was a great spiritual leader whose message of repentance led to a national spiritual revival in Israel. But he knew the truth about himself that he was merely a sinner before Jesus. He confessed that he needed the baptism of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Jesus was the Son of God and promised Messiah. John could not conceive of baptizing Jesus.

However, Jesus insisted on being baptized by John. Look at verse 15. "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented." Jesus taught that his baptism by John would fulfill all righteousness. That means it was the proper thing to do in the sight of God. Jesus' baptism was different from others. All other people were baptized as an act of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. But Jesus had no sin. What then is the meaning of Jesus' baptism? Jesus' baptism expressed his decision to obey the will of God. By being baptized, Jesus was stepping into the flow of God's history as the Messiah. In doing so, Jesus humbly acknowledged those who had gone before him, including John the Baptist. It was Jesus' respect for God. We can learn from Jesus here to humbly acknowledge those who have gone before us out of respect for God.

Look at verses 16-17. "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said,

‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” Just like that, the kingdom of heaven touched earth in the person of Jesus. It was the beginning of conquering the whole world with the love, joy and peace of the kingdom of heaven.

In this passage we learn that the kingdom of heaven is near because Jesus is here. Let’s turn our eyes upon Jesus and welcome him as King and enjoy the kingdom of heaven in our hearts.