

REPENT

Matthew 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:2

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

From today, we are beginning the study of Matthew’s gospel. From the beginning, through a long genealogy, Matthew introduces Jesus as the King who fulfills God’s promises to David. This king came to save his people from their sins (1:21). The Magi’s visit reveals that he is the King of kings who is worthy of the worship of all mankind. In 2:6 Jesus is called: **“a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”** To sum up, Jesus is the Messiah, the King of Israel, and the Son of the living God. Jesus is also the King of **“the kingdom of heaven,”** an expression Matthew uses frequently. Jesus’ kingship is not limited to a geographical location. Wherever Jesus is, he reigns as King. But he does not force his kingship on people; he reigns over those who willingly accept him as King. Though Jesus is King, his reign is not tyrannical. Jesus is a Shepherd King. As the rest of Matthew’s gospel testifies, Jesus shepherded many kinds of people. Especially, Jesus shepherded his twelve disciples until they grew to become shepherds like him. We all need Jesus as our Shepherd King. There are so many people who are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. We really need our Shepherd King Jesus. The people of our nation, including the president, need our Shepherd King Jesus. We pray that through Matthew’s gospel study our Shepherd King Jesus will rule over us, our nation, and the world, and use us to make disciples of all nations.

The title of today’s message is **“Repent.”** When we hear the word **“repent,”** we may feel that we are being judged. It sounds critical. So it is hard to say. But **“repent”** is really a wonderful word. It is God’s gracious invitation to restore a right relationship with him. The words **“repent”** and **“believe”** are usually used together. It leads to the saving grace of Jesus and the salvation of our souls. Let’s learn what it means to repent, how we can do so, and what blessings it brings.

First, John the Baptist prepared the way for King Jesus (1-12). Matthew begins by saying, **“In those days...”** (1a). This refers to the time right before the Messiah’s coming. Historically, it had been 400 years since the last

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prophet Malachi. There was no word of God. Without the word of God there was no direction; without the word of God there was no truth; without the word of God there was no vision or hope; without the word of God there was no light of life. People were living in the darkness and in the shadow of death, under the tyranny of King Herod. They might have felt abandoned by God. However, just as the dawn comes after the deepest darkness, so the Great Light was about to shine. According to God's schedule, it was time to send the Messiah into the world (Gal 4:4). Before his coming, God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way.

How did John prepare the way? Verses 1-2 tell us that he came preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** When we consider Israel's situation, it seems that a message of repentance was irrelevant, and they rather needed a message of prosperity and blessing. We might think that no one would listen to a message of repentance. But to our surprise, people went out to John from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River (5-6). It was a great spiritual revival. How could this happen? It was through John's message of repentance. It is easy to assume that the message of repentance is too harsh or outdated. This is not true. The message of repentance is always relevant because it is the way of salvation. When the message of repentance is preached sincerely, people will respond.

Then, who was John? Matthew explained in verse 3, **“This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”** John was the messenger sent by God based on Isaiah's prophecy. Through the words of John the Baptist, people realized that God was speaking to them. What made John's message so powerful? He was not speaking his own ideas and thoughts, but preaching God's words to them. How could he do that? Luke 3:2 says, **“the word of God came to John.”** John had received the words of God from above and was speaking these words to the people.

John also had a great shepherd's heart for his people. He had the spirit of Elijah, who turned the hearts of his people from idols to the true and living God. Like Elijah, John lived a simple life, wearing clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey (4).

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This kind of lifestyle helped him to live a Spirit-filled life, and gave his message great integrity. We can learn from John how to be fruitful and useful to God. When we hear his word, understand his heart, proclaim his message, and live accordingly, God can work mightily to bring revival, even in the wilderness.

The core of John's message was, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** What does it mean to repent? Why do we have to repent? How can we repent? What blessings come when we repent? To **“repent”** is to change one's object of worship, which has captivated our hearts and minds. As a result, our thoughts, attitudes, desires and behavior also change. **“Repent”** is one of the key words in the entire Bible. In the Old Testament, the prophets urged the people to repent. It meant to turn away from idols and to worship the living God. Idolatry is a serious problem. Why? Idols are man-made gods. They cannot understand or hear; they cannot see or think; they have no power to help anyone in the time of need (Isa 44:18). Yet there are so many idols. In the Greco-Roman world, there were more than 200,000 idols. In India today, there are more than 330,000,000 gods in the shapes of animals, people and weird creatures. Many North Korean parents force their children to worship before the statue of Kim Il Sung. Idol worship is not limited to such places, but happens everywhere, including the United States. In our secularized culture, many worship the idols of money, fame, power, love or knowledge. Christians are not immune to the influence of idol worship. It is easy to be fascinated by the tempting images of movie stars, athletes or musicians. These lead us to the idolatry of greed, immorality, pride, and self-glory. Many Christians are like Jacob and his family. Though they believe in the one true God, they also have many “household gods” that they secretly enjoy, including psychics, astrologers, or magic charms. Anything we love more than God is an idol, be it a marriage candidate, a child, or our own dreams and success. When God called Jacob to return to him, Jacob said to his household, **“Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you.”**

To repent is to cast out all our idols and to invite the one true God into our hearts. This is the message of the Bible from beginning to the end. Jesus' first message began with, **“Repent”** (4:17). Peter also urged people to repent (Ac 2:38-41). Paul summarized his preaching by saying, **“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in the Lord Jesus”** (Ac 20:21). Paul challenged the Thessalonians to

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repent and believe the gospel. They turned from idols to the true and living God (1Th 1:9). Then they were truly free and full of joy and hope. In our time, too, people really need the message of repentance.

Why do we have to repent? When we think of idol worship, it seems irrational and harmless. However, behind idols there is the power of demons. Apostle Paul said, **“Do I mean then that...an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons...”** (1Co 10:19-20). When people worship idols, they become enslaved by demons. Though they begin to worship an idol out of their own free will, they cannot escape by themselves. They are caught by the power of demons. They degenerate from the human level to a sub-animal level. They are full of fear and engage in all manner of bizarre and wicked behavior under the control of demons. We hear of these things happening every day. As the result of idolatry, our nation is becoming more and more like Sodom and Gomorrah. Billy Graham’s daughter Ann recently said that God seems to be removing his hand of blessing from America and that his wrath will come. Who can solve this problem? Politicians? Psychologists? Rich businessmen? Scientists? No! Only Jesus can. The only solution is to repent—to turn from idols and accept Jesus as our King. When we do so, God will surely bless us.

How is repentance possible, and what blessings does it bring? Repentance is a response to the word of God. When we respond to the word of God with repentance, God sends the Holy Spirit, who enables us to turn to God from idols. The Holy Spirit drives out all the power of darkness and fills us with peace and love. The message of repentance is a great blessing to those who receive it. It is the way to enter the kingdom of heaven. Colossians 1:13 says, **“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves....”** Let’s turn from idols and accept Jesus as our King. Let’s pray that the people of our nation may repent and turn to Jesus in this critical time.

When the message of repentance was preached, a great revival movement spread throughout the nation Israel. Then many Pharisees and Sadducees came to where John was baptizing (7a). The Pharisees were legalistic separatists who strictly kept the law of Moses and the traditions of the elders. The Sadducees were priestly, aristocratic, and politically minded. Usually these two parties were enemies with each other. But now they got

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together against John, whom both considered a threat. They came to find fault and discredit John's ministry. They hid themselves behind their elegant robes and fixed their beady eyes on John, with arms folded on their chests. But John was not intimidated at all. Rather, he said: **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"** (7b) John rebuked their arrogant elitism and poisonous influence. They were proud of their religious pedigree as Abraham's descendants (9). Because of this pride, they thought they did not need to repent. Pride is indeed the greatest hindrance to repentance. John challenged them to produce fruit in keeping with repentance (8), and taught the importance of bearing fruit. He said, **"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"** (10). God judges people based on their fruit. How can we bear good fruit? By **"keeping with"** repentance. Repentance is not a one-time act, but an ongoing process. We need to continue to repent until we bear good fruit. Bearing fruit is not a matter of emotion, but an ongoing transformation of our entire lives. Sometimes we feel good and think we don't need to repent. Still, we should examine our lives before the word of God to see if we are bearing good fruit. Fundamentally, this fruit is to become like Jesus (Col 1:28). When we bear good fruit, we can please God, and be happy, and be a blessing to others.

John became very popular among people. People thought that he might be the Messiah. John did not relish his moment of fame. Rather, he introduced Jesus as the one far superior to him. John did this in two ways. First of all, he taught the superiority of Jesus' person, power and work: **"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"** (11). Though John was a great man of God, he was just a human being. Jesus is the Creator God. Though John was very influential, he could not help anyone really change on the inside. Jesus has power to transform people. Jesus can burn our sins away and purify us with the fire of the Holy Spirit. John knew very well who he was and who Jesus was. When we know who we are and who Jesus is, we can be humble and effective witnesses of Jesus.

Secondly, John introduced Jesus as the Judge of all mankind: **"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**

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unquenchable fire” (12). Winnowing is the process of separating valuable grain from useless chaff. John uses it as a metaphor for Messianic judgment. Unquenchable fire refers to the everlasting punishment of the wicked. Jesus is the one who decides each person’s eternal destiny, based on their fruit.

Second, Jesus was inaugurated as the Son of God (13-17). After John the Baptist prepared the way with the message of repentance, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John (13). This event marked the transition from John’s ministry to Jesus’ ministry. Though Jesus is the Son of God, he humbly requested baptism from John. John was surprised and did not understand. He tried to deter Jesus, saying, **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** (14) John knew that he was a sinner who needed to be baptized by Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus replied, **“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”** Then John consented (15). There is deep meaning in Jesus’ baptism. It was to fulfill all righteousness. What does this mean? First of all, Jesus consecrated himself to God to begin his Messianic ministry. When he was born, his parents dedicated him to God by offering a sacrifice at the temple (Lk 2:23-24). This means they would raise him in obedience to God’s will. Now Jesus made his own decision, dedicating himself to fulfill God’s will. Secondly, Jesus succeeded John’s ministry. Jesus began his ministry by acknowledging what God had done throughout history until John’s coming. Many people try to start their own ministry without recognizing what God has done before. Basically, this comes from pride. But Jesus was very humble to recognize all that God had done before he came. Jesus had a sense of God’s history. God is the God of history. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We should have a sense of history and humbly follow what God has done. Finally, Jesus identified himself with humanity. As the sinless Son of God, Jesus did not need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. But he identified himself with us, indicating his willingness to bear our sins as the substitutionary sacrifice. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** This is the amazing grace of our humble Lord Jesus. Thank you, Jesus!

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 alighting on him (16). When Jesus was humbly baptized, what happened? The Greek word *“idou,”* which means “behold” is repeated two

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times—once in regards to heaven being opened and again in regards to a voice coming from heaven. This means that Jesus' inauguration was the most important event which we should pay attention to. The Triune God participated—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It was like a king's family celebrating a royal graduation ceremony—but much more than this. The Spirit of God descended like a dove and came to rest on Jesus. The Spirit of God was the power source of Jesus' ministry. Symbolized by a dove, this reveals the character of Jesus and his ministry: peace, meekness and purity. Jesus himself became our peace, destroying the barriers between God and us and between people. Jesus took up our infirmities and bore our diseases (Mt 8:17). Jesus is gentle and humble in heart; he gives us true rest for our souls (Mt 11:28). Jesus is full of mercy and compassion; he does not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick (Mt 12:20). Rather, he heals and restores.

A voice from heaven said, **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”** (17). The Father confirmed Jesus as his Son. Jesus' ministry was not merely a human ministry, but God's divine ministry. Jesus must have been greatly encouraged by the Father's expression of love and pleasure. This would be his source of strength as he faced hardships in carrying out his Messianic ministry. We seem to have many problems personally, nationally, and globally. But our real problem is idol worship. The solution is to repent, to turn from idols and accept Jesus as our Shepherd King. Let's repent.