

Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

New Year's Repentance * Matthew 3:1-12

Introduction

Good morning and Happy New Year. I hope that you all had a wonderful holiday season and that you are looking forward to a great year ahead. This morning we have a fantastic passage from Matthew 3 to begin 2013 with. So, please take your copy of the Scriptures and turn there with me.

As you are turning, let me ask how many of you have made a New Year's resolution? Let's go ahead and raise our hands. If you have made a New Year's resolution, even a small one, please raise your hand.

If you feel kind of left out, or wish that you had made one, I would encourage you to do so today. And if you are taking suggestions, John the Baptist has a great one in Matthew 3. Pick up with me in verse 1:

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, [2] "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [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.'" [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. [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.[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. [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. [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 3:1-12 ESV)

Now, the last time that we were in Matthew we finished chapter 2 with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus traveling from Egypt back home to Nazareth. At that time Jesus would have been somewhere around 9 months old. When we come to chapter 3, however, Matthew has fast-forwarded about 30 years to the time when Jesus begins his public

ministry, which we will begin to take a look at next week. Before we do, however, Matthew introduces us to one of the most important and interesting figures in all of Scripture, a guy by the name of John the Baptist. And this morning I want to break down our passage by looking at two things about John; I want to talk about the man – who he was; and his message – what he preached. So, you got that? Our passage today is about John the Baptist – the man and his message.

The Man

Let's start by talking about the man, and for that, I want to take you to the very last chapter in the Old Testament, Malachi 4. It should only be about 3-4 pages back in your Bibles. Look with me at how the Old Testament ends in verses 5-6:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. [6] 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." (Malachi 4:5-6 ESV)

So, the Old Testament ends with God promising that He will send Elijah before the coming of the Lord. Keep that in mind and now turn with me to Luke 1.

In Luke 1 we see the birth of two children foretold. One is Jesus, and the other, can you guess – is John the Baptist. In the initial verses of Luke 1 an angel appears to a priest by the name of Zechariah and tells him that his wife Elizabeth is going to have a son that he is to name John. And beginning in verse 15, the angel makes this prophecy about the child:

He will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, [17] and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:15-17 ESV)

So, in Malachi 4 God promises to send Elijah. Then, 400 years later in Luke 1, an angel says that John will come in the spirit and power of Elijah.

This all leads to Matthew 3. Look again at verse 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.'"

So, when we put this all together we find that John is not Elijah, but a prophet like Elijah who was sent by God to prepare the people for Jesus' coming.

The imagery in verse 3 is of a herald who would go ahead of a king and make all the preparations necessary for the king's coming. It literally speaks of repairing a road so that the king has a safe and smooth journey. Not too much unlike what the Secret Service does before the President goes somewhere. The main difference is that in ancient times a herald would not only make preparations, but also announce that the king was on his way. And that is John's role, to prepare for and announce the arrival of King Jesus.

Verse 1 tells us the primary way that John did this was through preaching. In fact, the basic meaning of the word *preach* is "to make known by a herald." And so John was preparing the people for Jesus' arrival by preaching that He was on his way.

Now, we will take a look at exactly what he preached in just a moment, but before that let's look at a couple of other things the text tells us about him.

Notice that verse 4 tells us that John lived simply. Look at the verse:

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Luke 1 indicates that for most of his life John lived in the wilderness, likely in a cave or simple shelter. His clothes were made of camel's hair, which was a cheap but durable fabric. I don't know if you have ever smelled a camel before, but I can tell you that it's an understatement to say that they don't smell good. And notice what he ate; honey probably sounds good to most of us, but I don't think grasshoppers were on any of our menus over the Christmas holidays.

Now, this probably sounds like a rather unappealing way to live, but we have to understand that John had a mission to complete and he wanted to make sure that nothing got in his way. John would not have done well in the 21st century because he had little concern for appearance or popularity. And I think there is something that we can learn from him. While Jesus never directly commends John's lifestyle, he does have this to say about him later in Matthew:

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? [8] What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. [9] What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a

prophet. [10] This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." [11] Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. (Matthew 11:7-11 ESV)

The point is that John was much more concerned with his mission than he was with his comfort. He didn't have time to worry about nice clothes, good food, and a warm bed, because he was involved in something much more important and urgent – preparing people for the arrival of the king. What we need to realize is that we have the same mission, and therefore we need to make sure that our comfort doesn't distract us from that mission. You do realize, don't you, that as believers we are all called to get people ready for King Jesus' arrival? We too are charged with calling people to repentance. We too have orders to make people aware of impending judgment.

This is an appropriate reminder coming off a time when many of us, including me, have lived in the lap of luxury for a couple of weeks. Anybody here eat way too much food the last couple of weeks? I did. Anybody here get way more stuff than they needed or deserved these last couple of weeks? I did. I am not saying there is anything wrong with good food, nice clothes, and the latest gadgets. These are all good things when used rightly. However, we have to make sure that good things don't keep us from the best thing – and that is being prepared and preparing others for the arrival of King Jesus.

Now, there is one more significant thing I want to point out about John before we look at his message. And this, I believe, is his defining characteristic, and a rather amazing one at that. There is no doubt that the crowds were attracted to John and probably found him somewhat mesmerizing. He was a guy wearing camel's hair, eating grasshoppers, calling religious leaders snakes and commanding everyone to repent. Today we would make a reality TV star out of him in a heartbeat. What's more, he was the new Elijah; the most powerful and important prophet in the Old Testament. On top of all of this, Jesus said that he was the greatest man ever born. I think it is fair to say that John was a pretty big deal. But how did he consider himself? Look at v. 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.

The overarching characteristic of John the Baptist was humility. He possessed the correct view of where he stood in comparison to Jesus. He didn't consider himself worthy of even carrying Jesus' sandals, which was considered the most menial task a slave could perform.

We get an even better picture of his humility in John 3. Very quickly after Jesus bursts on to the scene people leave John and start flocking to Jesus. Jesus' fame takes off and John's star quickly fades. And when John's disciples start whining about this, he simply replies:

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30 ESV)

This characteristic of John is once again a challenge to us. You see, John perfectly understood his role. It wasn't to bring recognition to himself, but rather to Jesus. John was content with the fact that he was being used by God to direct attention to Jesus. Perhaps a little transparency on my part will be helpful here. I, like most of you I imagine, desire to see Jesus' fame increase. I am good with that part of the equation. In fact, that is the focus of our entire ministry here at HBC. We want more than anything for Jesus' fame to increase in SE Iowa and around the world.

But you know the other part of the equation, I have to admit, I am not so sure about. I am not so sure about the decreasing part. All things being equal, I would like to increase as well. I'd like to see Jesus increase and myself increase. The problem is that my increasing often gets in the way of Jesus increasing. And the truth of the matter is the way that He increases the most is when I increase the least. That's because as Paul says, 'his power is made perfect in my weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). When I am weak, he is strong.

You know, one of the things that I have learned over the years is that God doesn't work because of me, but rather in spite of me. Sometimes people will say, 'God is really working through you.' But my response to this, at least to myself from time to time, is, what could he do if I didn't get in the way so often? The truth is, friends, that God gets the most fame when we do our best to make sure that we don't get in the way. And that was John's attitude. He did whatever he could to make Jesus famous, even if it was to his own detriment.

So, that's John the man. And quite a man he was. The truth of the matter, however, is that like all great men, his message was much more important than who he was. And so let's turn to that now.

The Message

John's message was very simple and is summarized for us in verse 2:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Now, to get the full picture here, you have to imagine a wild-eyed guy in a robe of camel's hair, unshaven and smelly, perhaps with honey and a grasshopper leg or two hanging from his beard shouting over and over again *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*

Hopefully you can sense the insistence in John's proclamation, because his message was extremely urgent. It was urgent 2,000 years ago, and it is even more urgent today. Let me explain why. In a minute we will talk about what it means to repent, but for now let's discuss the kingdom of heaven. This is a phrase that we will see repeatedly in Matthew, some 32 times, more than any other book in Scripture. The word heaven is virtually synonymous with God, which is what the other gospel writers' use. And we will talk about this in more detail when we get to chapter 4, but for now we need to understand that *kingdom* refers to the rule and reign of the king. And by now, we should understand who the king is. Who is the king? It's Jesus. So John is preaching, you need to repent because the rule and reign of King Jesus is coming to earth.

Now, we need to recognize right away that this announcement of the kingdom is both good news and bad news. Actually, it is great news and horrible news. It is great news for those who repent and willingly receive Jesus. But it is horrible news for those who do not. Make no mistake this morning. John's message is either great news to you or horrible news. There is no in between. And you get to decide which one it is.

We are going to talk a great deal about various aspects of the kingdom of heaven in the days ahead – but John's focus here is upon the judgment that comes with the kingdom. And there are three things he wants us to see about this judgment.

First, this judgment is certain.

In verse 7 when the religious leaders come to check out what is going on with John's ministry, he asks them who has told them to flee the wrath to come. The word *come* indicates not only that the wrath is future but also that it is certain. It is an absolute given.

He then goes on to say that while this judgment is future it is also imminent. Note the word now in verse 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.

In other words, judgment could come at any time.

Finally, in verse 12 he says that judgment is eternal.

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.

Now, one of my farmer friends lent me a prop to help illustrate this point. This is known as a winnowing fork. Before the days of hi-tech machinery, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, wheat would be laid on a threshing floor and the farmer would have oxen walk over it to separate the grain and the chaff. Then a winnowing fork would be used to toss the wheat into the air, whereby the heavy grain would fall back to the ground and the chaff would be blown away by the wind. And once the winnowing was completed, the grain would be stored in a barn, and the chaff would be collected and burned. John is proclaiming that the result of the king's coming will be the separation of those who have repented from those who have not. And the end for those who have not will be an unending experience of God's wrath in hell.

Now, there are few doctrines of Scripture that are under more attack today than the doctrine of eternal conscience punishment in hell. No one likes this doctrine because it is scary and hard to fathom, which has lead many to try and explain it away. The problem is that the Bible talks about it a lot, and Jesus talks about it more than anyone else, particularly in the gospel of Matthew. In fact, other than money, another topic we don't like very much, Jesus talks about hell more than anything else. This means that whether we like it or not, we have to come to grips with the fact that the Bible clearly teaches that there is a hell, and that those who do not submit to King Jesus will suffer there for all eternity.

Now, I am sure there are many questions and perhaps even objections that are running through your minds, many of which we will try to address throughout our study of this gospel. For now, however, let me take a stab at the biggest one; how can a loving God send people to hell?

To comprehend this, you first have to understand that God is not only loving, but also holy. And because he is holy, he requires that sin be punished. One of the things that many people don't consider in this discussion is the fact that they actually do want a holy God. We all want a loving God, but you know what, we also want a holy God. Pretty much everyone I have ever met wants a God who punishes injustice. In fact, if God didn't punish injustice he wouldn't be God because holiness is his defining characteristic.

Furthermore, we also have to understand that every single one of us deserves God's judgment. We all deserve to be punished for our sins. And yet God sent his Son to take

that judgment for us. Listen closely here friends. Everyone who goes to hell chooses to do so. God makes his gracious offer of salvation available to all. That's the whole point of what John is preaching. You see, you may look at this passage and say where is the grace? Where is God's love? And I say to you, it's all over this passage. John preaches, repent...because if you do God will lay aside his wrath and receive you into his kingdom.

You see, in this passage we have a preview of what happened at the cross. At the cross God's wrath and grace met in one awesome display of holiness and love. In his holiness God required that sin be paid for, and so in his love he sent his Son to pay the penalty for that sin. That's why Paul can say in Romans 3:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26 ESV)

Now, let me tell give you two reasons why the doctrine of hell is so important. First, without it, there is no need for the gospel. If there is no punishment for our sin, there is no need for Christ to die for our sin. If there is no hell, there is no need for the cross. And if you take away the cross, you pretty much take away everything we believe. Listen, it doesn't give me joy to think about, let alone preach on hell. But if we give up doing so, we might as well close up our doors because eventually we will give up on everything else that matters also. If you don't believe me all you have to do is go to Burlington one Sunday morning to see how once vibrant churches that gave up this doctrine years ago are doing today. The end result of not preaching hell is irrelevance.

Second, the doctrine of hell is critical in providing us with the proper motivation to live the Christian life. You see, the more we understand what God has saved us from, the greater our appreciation will be towards Him, which will in turn produce a greater desire to live for Him. Go with me on this for a minute. If hell is real, which it is, and if I deserve hell because of my sin, which I do, and if God sent his Son to die for me so that I can avoid hell and spend eternity in perfect fellowship with Him, doesn't that give me every motivation in the world to spend my life living for Him? Absolutely. So, yes, it's not fun to think or preach about hell, but it is absolutely essential, and we ignore it at our and other's peril.

So, John's message is a message of judgment. But it's also a message of repentance. Let's now talk about how we respond to the fact that God's judgment is certain,

imminent, and eternal. What do we do? Well, we heed John's admonition. We repent. You may remember that we talked about this way back in our Jonah series. Or maybe you don't. Either way, since it is such a critical component of the Christian life, let's make sure that we understand what biblical repentance truly is.

In the New Testament, the word repentance means a radical change in mind and heart that leads to a complete turnabout of life.¹ Let me say that again. Repentance is a radical change in mind and heart that leads to a complete turnabout of life. And as we saw in Jonah, true biblical repentance has three components: confession, contrition, and change, what are known as the 3 C's of biblical repentance. Let's talk about each of these briefly.

Confession

The first step in repentance is confession, which simply means agreeing with God, and is the intellectual aspect of repentance. Take a look at verse 6 one more time:

And they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Confession means agreeing with God that we have sinned. It's not excusing our sin, diminishing our sin, defending our sin, or blaming our sin on others. It is recognizing that God says that something is sin, and responding, yes God, you are right, this is sin, I have done it and I need you to forgive me. End of story. Easy to say, hard to do, but that is where repentance begins.

But that is not all that is included in repentance. It isn't simply admitting that you are wrong. True repentance also includes contrition.

Contrition

Contrition is sincere penitence and remorse, and is the emotional aspect of repentance. It is a heartfelt sorrow for sin and its consequences.

True repentance includes feelings and emotions. It often includes tears. And while people are different with their emotions, this is one of the easiest ways to know if repentance is genuine. Is there hurt? Is there pain? Is there sorrow for having sinned against God as well as against other people? That's true contrition.

Paul describes this aspect of repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:

¹ William Hendriksen, Pg. 197 (207). *New Testament Commentary – Matthew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. (2 Corinthians 7:10-11 ESV)

When there is true repentance, there is a deep desire to change and make things right with those you have offended, first and foremost with God.

Change

Finally, and most significantly, true repentance includes change. While confession is the intellectual aspect of repentance, and contrition the emotional, change is the volitional component. Change incorporates the will and is what repentance is primarily about, which is what John is trying to get across to the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 3. Take one more look at our text, specifically verses 7-9:

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."

John is pointing out to these religious leaders that true repentance requires a real change in life. He says to them, 'no change, no repentance.' Verse 8 is the key verse in the entire passage. True repentance is evidenced by a radical change in life.

And we need to see the danger that John is pointing out to the Pharisees and the Sadducees in this passage. You see, they came not to be baptized by John but rather just to check out what was going on. John the Baptist was the latest thing on the church scene and they wanted to be in the know. They came for the show. They didn't come to repent and be baptized, because they didn't think that they needed to. Their reliance was upon their spiritual heritage. But John makes it clear that this won't cut it, because God can make believers out of rocks if He wants to. Therefore, repentance, evidenced by a change in life is necessary for everyone.

What we need to beware of here is that we can't rely upon the fact that we grew up in a Christian home, or went to a Christian school, or have been in church our whole lives, or if I can say it, even prayed a prayer and were baptized at some point as the evidence

that we are truly a child of God. The true evidence of salvation comes from a changed life.

I think one of the big problems for us is that we have come to equate repentance with saying a prayer where we ask Jesus into our hearts, which gets us into this club we call heaven, and then we go merrily upon our way. But John, as well as the rest of the New Testament, is clear that repentance always includes a radical change in the way we live. What's more, repentance is not only a one-time event; it is a way of life.

One of the primary issues that led to the Protestant Reformation was a battle over the right understanding of repentance. A key part of this battle was Martin Luther's 95 theses, which were primarily a commentary on true repentance versus false substitutes for repentance such as indulgences and the confessional. In fact, Luther's first thesis summarizes the position of the Reformation well: "When our Lord and master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent, he wanted the whole life of believers to be a life of repentance.'"²

So, here is the fact of the matter friends. Every single one of us needs to repent. We all need to make it a New Year's Resolution. For some of us this means truly repenting for the very first time. It means recognizing that we are living under God's wrath but that He has offered us a way out from under that wrath if we confess our sin and turn from it. And I want to urge this morning if this is you, don't wait a single moment. Do it right now, right where you are. God's judgment is certain, imminent, and eternal. But you know what? His grace is also. So, receive His grace today. In just a moment we are going to go into a time of reflection and prayer. And if you would like to talk or pray with someone about this I would encourage you to get up from your seat and join me here in the front or talk to someone sitting near you. There are lots of people who would be willing to do so this morning.

If you are here and have received God's offer of grace, I would urge you to take time to evaluate your life and consider areas where you need to repent. What are some things in your life that need to change? As we start a new year this is a great time to go to the Lord and ask Him to help you address things in your life that are not in conformity with His will.

And so I want to ask the band to come, and they are going to play quietly as we go to the Lord and spend some time in quiet reflection and personal time with Him. In a few minutes I will close us in prayer, but if you want to take this time to get out of your seat

² Frederick Dale Bruner. *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (p. 99). Kindle Edition.

and come forward, or pray with someone near you, or just bow and pray in your seat, do so. Once I am done praying we are going to sing two songs. One will be a prayer for healing from the Lord. The second will be a celebration of the fact that He promises to do so when we ask Him to. So, let's go into this time with heavy hearts, but come out of it with joy as to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

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