

Lesson 5: Prepare The Way Of The Lord **Matthew 3:1-6**

Memory Verse: "... 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matt. 4:10).

Text: ¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.' " ⁴ And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him ⁶ and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

Monday

What does it mean for a person to say that Jesus is Lord? What does it mean when a Christian confesses Jesus as Lord?

Let me tell you what it means. It means that we trust His wisdom beyond all other wisdom. It means we believe everything He says and everything that is said about Him in the Bible is absolutely true, and anything that contradicts is wrong. It means that we desire to know His thoughts above all thoughts. It means that we give Him our lives both now and forever. We entrust Him not only with our time but with our eternity, believing firmly in a person and a reality that we have never seen.

It means we obey His commandments with joy. It means we love Him supremely, we love people who love Him, and we even love people He loves, who don't love Him. It means that we give our lives to proclaim His gospel, the gospel of salvation. To say that Jesus is Lord, which is the Christian confession, is to say that we receive Jesus as our absolute authority and source for all that is true. It means that we desire always to do what pleases Him, though we fail. It means we fear Him, we worship Him, and we proclaim Him above all others.

To confess Jesus as Lord means that no area of our life is unaffected by our relationship to Him; our relationship to Him defines what we think. It defines our attitudes; it defines our emotions; it defines what we say; it defines how we act in every area of life. Our relationship to Him pervades all our being. To confess Jesus as Lord means that we trust His purpose for our lives, and we trust His utter sovereign control over all aspects of our lives, including our failures and our successes, our blessings and our sorrows, our sickness and suffering, and even our death. To confess Jesus as Lord means that we count Him as the source of all that is good, all that is right and all that is blessed. Therefore He is to be thanked for everything.

To confess Him as Lord means we believe He created and controls the entire universe, and He

has pre-written history so that it is directed in its course towards the perfect fulfillment of His intended desire. To confess Jesus as Lord, to be a Christian, means we give our souls and our bodies to Him as living sacrifices; we give our minds to Him, our time to Him, our abilities to Him, our money to Him, our prayers to Him. It means we dedicate our children to Him, and we pray that those we both know and don't know might love Him the way that we love Him. To confess Jesus as Lord means we give our lives in service to Him in the fellowship of the church, and we engage ourselves in ministries for Him, to the honor of His name and the spread of His gospel. There are to be no bench warmers in his kingdom and none who ignore the gathering together of His body. To confess Jesus as Lord means that we are willing to live for Him no matter what it requires, and if asked to die for Him with an affirmation of His glory on our lips even as our life leaves us.

We have never seen Him, but we talk to Him every day. We have never heard an audible voice, but He speaks to us through His word every day. We haven't seen His face; He is to us invisible; His kingdom is not material; and the heaven He promises we have never visited, nor has anyone else in our lives who can tell us about it. Only two apostles had a glimpse and they struggled to explain what they saw. And yet, in Him all our hope is grounded; in Him and His invisible country is our joy. We long for it by faith, and by faith we cling to Him whom we have never seen, longing for Him, yearning for Him, and loving Him.

You want to know what it means to be a Christian, what it means to call Him Lord? It's about submitting everything to the Lordship of the unseen, glorious Jesus Christ, not just going to church. We live a very defined life. Jesus Christ is everything to us, and we are complete in Him. He is not some addendum to our lives. He is not simply some addition to our already crowded and cluttered living. He is not just part of our lives. He is not someone we merely think about and give a nod to on Sunday. True Christianity is not compartmentalized living. No, He is our very life itself. And, if you're going to be a Christian, you had better count the cost. It is striving to live a life, not about you, but a life that is all about Christ and always about Christ and only about Christ. Otherwise you're just playing games and fooling yourself. This description is not impractical, pie-in-the-sky talk, but it is the real goal, the real longing, the real heartfelt desire and cry of the one who is true.

One of the critical keys to being a true Christian is that you live a life of repentance, not just a one time deal when you came forward in church and repented on such and such a date 1, 2, 10, 15, or more years ago, but a life of ongoing, daily repentance. True repentance is at the very heart of the Gospel. It is at the heart of conversion and at the heart of what it means to be a Christian daily. As we continue this week in the Gospel of Matthew, this issue is once again brought before us by God in a very forceful way.

Matthew 3:1-6 teaches us several critical principles about repentance, which are essential for us to understand, because the Scripture plainly says to us, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). So beginning tomorrow, let us see the principles of repentance contained in this text and apply them to our own lives.

Tuesday

The first principle we learn regarding repentance in Matt. 3:1-6 is this:

1. Repentance is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 2). Verse one begins, “In those days John the Baptist came preaching (Literally heralding. John the Baptist was the herald of the King) in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’” When John talks about the kingdom of heaven, here, he is not talking about the external future kingdom of heaven that has been prophesied and will one day literally come into being. He is not talking about the millennial kingdom or even the sovereign rule of God in heaven and on earth that has existed since the beginning of creation. He is not even talking about the inner rule of Christ that exists in the church and in the hearts of believers. These are all valid aspects of the kingdom spoken of in the Scripture, and they are all in some way implicated in this verse, but what He is specifically talking about is the kingdom of heaven manifest in the person and in the working of Jesus Christ, Himself. The Kingdom of heaven was at hand in a very unique and special way in the lives of these people, in that the King Himself was about to come and manifest Himself to them. He was at hand.

As Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:28, “...if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” And the plain truth of this verse is that in order to be acceptable to the King, in order to have a place in His kingdom, you must repent. This is the only way to enter into a right relationship with the King, Himself. In other words, you cannot meet Him simply staying the way you are. There must be a transformation.

Repentance isn't primarily about your conduct, beloved. Though if you do repent, your actions will be different. But repentance is really about your mind. It's about your thinking. This is why we are told by Scripture to bear fruits in keeping with repentance, because repentance is something that has already happened internally, a change which will then manifest itself by new behavior. A person's actions are not his or her repentance. They are the “fruits” of repentance, something that has happened in the person's heart.

To repent means to change the way you think about something, to change the purposes of your mind and heart, to turn around and resolve in your heart to go a different direction. It is not meant to be a simple regret and sorrow about the past, but a forsaking of the past coupled with a new resolve, a determination for the future. Neither is it a superficial change. Biblical repentance involves turning from a whole evil way of life to an entirely new kind of living, a turn from sin and self to God and His word.

Moreover, the aspect of the Greek command in verse two reveals that this repentance is an ongoing, continual activity. It is not a one time resolution that is later forgotten. It is not a momentary change, “I resolve to go on a diet this year. I resolve to exercise three times a week,” a resolution that is here today and gone in two months or two weeks or two days. No, it is a radical conversion of the heart that sticks and continues from day to day to day to day. And when

sin enters such a life, the repentant heart rears up and rebukes itself in anger at its own failure and confesses its sin.

So the lesson for us today is that we must repent with an ongoing repentance. If you would have any hope of pleasing the King, of having a relationship with Him and a place in His kingdom, you must be a person of repentance.

Linda Karburg was a hippy, radical feminist, abortion activist, was involved with drugs, and had other substance abuse problems. In her mind she was antagonistic, angry and very much against Christ and what He stood for. Eventually, though, she had a baby, and her baby was not born healthy, but had frightening problems with seizures. One day, one of Linda's acquaintances came to her home with a group of Christians from a local church. They asked if they could pray for the baby, and Linda said, "Yes." The group poured out their hearts on behalf of the child and Linda's own heart was touched, as she saw that these people really loved and cared for her and her child. She began investigating the Gospel and Scripture, and soon Linda let go of her old way of life, her old way of thinking and trusted in Jesus. She became a radical anti-abortion activist and her opinions and mind were changed 180 degrees as she readily submitted to the authority of Christ. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." (Is. 55:7).

What does it mean to repent? Describe it in your own words. _____

Have you seen this in your life? Would you describe yourself as a person of ongoing repentance? Why or why not? If not, what would this mean? _____

Are there any particular sins that you need to repent of today? _____

Wednesday

We come to a second principle regarding repentance seen in this text:

2. Repentance readies the heart for the King's rule (vv. 3-5). Verse 3 says, "For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.'"

In ancient times, it was common for a herald to precede a king and prepare for His arrival by announcing his coming and ensuring proper welcome. The herald would arrive and enlist the people along with any servants he may have brought to make sure that the roadway was quite literally as smooth and uncluttered as possible. Potholes would be filled up, rocks and debris would be removed and any unsightly litter would be burned or hidden. Places that were unnecessarily crooked would be straightened out, steep hills would be leveled. Everyone went to work to make sure that the king had a smooth and easy entrance to the area where they lived. What God does in Isaiah and in the Gospels is take this ancient practice and use it as an analogy for His entrance into the lives of men.

The heart is the road, and God is coming along the road to rule and to reign. What must you do to get the road ready for Him? You have to fill in the holes and get rid of the rocks and debris. You have to burn the litter and make the crooked paths straight. In other words, you must repent of your sin and get it out of your life, so that you will be ready for the arrival of the King. When you begin your day with repentance of your sin, then you are ready to pick up your Bible, hear His word and submit to His authority. When you begin your morning in confession, then you are ready to come to church and receive the presence and the message of the King. The way is prepared. There are no obstacles to the Holy Spirit's moving freely through your life. There is nothing to grieve or to quench; there is nothing to hinder His entrance and rule. Repentance is the key to living a God-empowered, Spirit-filled life. Make His paths straight, get ready for His coming.

The way to do this practically is different for each person's situation and circumstance, I suppose. But one thing stands out from this text, simply begging to be mentioned: Repenting and making His paths straight involves **embracing simplicity for the cause of Christ**. Look at verse 4, "Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey."

Often, when we consider what makes a person great, we think about it from the world's perspectives. A person is admired and thought of as great if he is famous, wealthy or influential. A person may be considered great if he has certain academic degrees, expertise in some field, outstanding athletic ability, artistic talent, high political or military office, extraordinary business acumen and financial ability. The world admires all of these things. But by all of these measures John the Baptist would not have been considered great. Even his influence was short-lived by the world's standards. He only ministered six months, and though all Judea went out to see him, most quickly abandoned his teaching. And yet the Lord says, "among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). In God's eyes John's life was a life of true greatness.

Now there are several reasons for this: 1) He was filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit; 2) He was obedient to God's word, even from childhood; 3) He was incredibly humble; 4) He courageously proclaimed the truth and was faithful to the end; 5) He loved not his own life even to death; 6) He readily abandoned an important Levitical position, living, and inheritance as

Zecharias' son for the cause of Christ; 7) He always pointed people to Jesus. He lived to point people to the Lord.

And beyond all of this, we simply cannot ignore the fact that John purposely chose a simple and austere manner of living over comfort and self-indulgence. Compared to the other priests, and the other religious leaders: the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, John's lifestyle was an incredible rebuke. His lifestyle was also a rebuke to most of the people, who, though they may not have been able to indulge in the privileges that John gave up, they nonetheless admired and longed for those same material advantages and privileges in their hearts.

Now John's purpose was never to turn other people into hermits and ascetics. He never called people, not even his own disciples, to live and dress as he did. Nevertheless, his manner of living was a profound testimony to **his priorities, his desires and his single-minded devotion**. His manner of living was a dramatic reminder of the many loves and pleasures that actually keep people from repenting and exchanging their own way for God's way. Even for people to hear him preach, they had to leave behind the city with all of its distractions, busyness and luxury and go out into the wilderness to sit and listen.

I think that John had grasped the command in Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God." And I believe that he found in simplicity the way to have an undivided heart, devoted to God. For John, embracing simplicity was an important way to make his paths straight and to ready his heart for the rule of his king. So I commend that discipline to you today, to meditate and pray on. It may be that God will call some of you today to repent of the distractions and clutter that divide your heart from the devotion to Christ, that you know you should have.

Why do you think that John lived such a seemingly eccentric life? How would it impact you spiritually if you embraced the spiritual discipline of simplicity? _____

What would you need to do to make this happen? _____

Some people think they need to thoroughly clean up their lives before they commit their lives to Christ. Is that even possible? Do these verses teach that? Why or why not? _____

Thursday

We come today to a third principle concerning repentance in our text for this week. It is this:

3. Repentance involves specific confession of sins (v. 6). Verse six tells us that the people were being baptized by John while confessing their sins. Confession means literally “to say the same thing as,” that is to say the same thing as God says about your conduct, that it has been wrong. Confession acknowledges that particular actions and behaviors have been wrong and admits that we are personally guilty before God and deserving of punishment. Confession demonstrates a positive response to the light of God’s word. Notice also, verse 6 says they were confessing their “sins,” plural. That tells us that the people were making specific confession of their wrong thoughts, words, actions and attitudes. They weren’t just making a general statement, “God forgive me of all the things I’ve done wrong. Amen.” They were enumerating and admitting specific sins, including the good things that they should have done, but failed to do either purposely or through neglect, and the wrong things that they had done.

It is a comparatively easy thing to admit that you are a sinner in a general sort of way. Many people will say, “Well, nobody is perfect,” “Sure I’m a sinner,” and let it go at that. Or to say as kind of a blanket prayer, “Lord please forgive me of my sins.” But it is a completely different thing to sit down and deal honestly, openly and specifically with the sins you know you’ve committed before God. It’s an entirely different thing to sit down and make a list. That kind of confession is getting honest and serious before God; that is the mark of a truly repentant person, rather than someone who is just dealing with matters superficially.

Most of the great revivals in the world have begun because the people of God decided to take seriously the responsibility to confess their sins. Many examples could be given. My favorite, though, is the great Shantung Revival in 1900, in which missionaries in that Chinese province had been faithfully sharing the word but had seen little fruit among the people. Becoming disheartened they gathered together and began asking God what was wrong. The Lord revealed to them that there was hidden unconfessed sin in their lives. The missionaries agreed to go separately to private prayer places with a pad and pen to list their specific sins and deal with them before God. After they had dealt honestly before God, the power of God was almost overwhelming. Their praying and witnessing took on a strength and power they had never felt before. The Holy Spirit flooded the region and the unresponsive Chinese of Shantung flooded into the kingdom, their cold hearts melting before the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

Confession is one of those things that seems odious before you begin. I guess because it is so humbling, but afterwards it feels absolutely glorious. I can tell you honestly that some of the happiest days I have ever spent in this life took place after I spent serious time in confession before God. I remember a day in seminary when after a morning class, I went into a practice room at the back of the chapel, lay on the floor in the dark and just wept before God confessing my sin. As I recall, that was one of the happiest days in the Spirit I had during those three years. I wonder, what might happen in this church, if we as a body decided to take the confession of sin

seriously. If nothing else, I can tell you this, if **you** do it sincerely, **you** will bring revival to **your** own heart.

Are you more prone to make blanket confessions of sin, or even worse, no confession at all, just blanket requests for forgiveness, or do you get down into the nitty gritty details of what you've done before God? _____

Which requires greater humility? Which honors God more? Which is more spiritually profitable? Why? _____

Why don't you give it a try? Spend some time today in specific confession.

Friday

So far this week we've see three different principles related to repentance from our text: Repentance is necessary to enter into the kingdom of heaven; repentance readies the heart for the King's rule; and repentance involves the confession of specific sins. There is a fourth principle:

4. Repentance acknowledges unworthiness and dies to self (v. 6). Though this principle is an obvious implication of repentance, you might ask, "Where in the text do you get that?" I get it from the words, "and were baptized by him."

Let me see if I can explain that. Baptism signifying repentance and conversion to a new life before God was not an alien or even a new thing in Judaism. They used it on one occasion: when a Gentile came, an outsider to the covenant people of God, and converted to the faith of the Jews. You see Jews were considered part of the people of God, the covenant community by birth, and the rite of circumcision for males was the sign of the covenant. But a Gentile who came to faith in Yahweh was baptized before he was admitted into the covenant community and also considered part of the people of God.

So an amazing thing happened when the Jews came to John at the Jordan and were baptized. They were saying, in effect, "We are also outside of the people of God. We are not members of the community of grace." Such an act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent from Abraham, and even their calling as God's chosen people through Moses, could not save them. But they as individuals still had to repent, forsake their sin and come to God by faith. This is why John said to the religious leaders in verse 9, "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." The Jews had to overcome the false idea that simply being descendents of Abraham and members of God's chosen nation somehow made them spiritually secure, and they had to learn that only those who repent and share Abraham's

faith would be saved. Through the ministry of John the Baptist they were seeing this; they were repenting and coming to be baptized.

Those, who were being baptized by John in sincerity of heart and not just riding the wave of the newest religious fad, realized that they were personally unworthy, desperately in need of mercy and forgiveness. They repented, dying to themselves, taking themselves off the throne of their hearts and submitting to God. Such people would then be looking for the promised Messiah, the one that John came to herald and point them to, and they would receive Him as their own Lord and King.