



# Prepare the way for the Lord!

Matt 3:1-12

[based on the sermon preached on 4.12.22 – available on the [church app](#) or at <https://lwac.org.au/sermons>]

## KEY IDEAS

1. John the Baptist is a prophetic voice out in the Judean wilderness in the spirit of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, preaching confession of sins, repentance, and the production of fruit resulting from a changed life to demonstrate the sincerity of that repentance.
2. People came to John, responded to his message, confessed their sins and were baptized.
3. The Pharisees and Sadducees also came, not to repent and be baptized but to judge and condemn others, so John accuses them to their face of being insincere hypocrites.
4. John also declares that the baptism of the one who will come after him (that of Jesus) will be far superior to his as it will be a baptism of and by the Holy Spirit, resulting in purification, cleansing and restoration.

## CONNECT

- John's call to repentance and baptism was challenging. What was the most challenging thing anyone ever asked you to do? It could be spiritual or not. Did you do it? Did you follow through? What was that like? If you did follow through, how did it feel to go through with it? If you didn't follow through, why not? How did it feel to not go through with it?

## STUDY

### Read Matthew 3:1-4

- Matthew tells us that John was preaching in the "Desert of Judea," which means he did not find it comfortable to preach in the city of Jerusalem nearby. In other words, John was an outsider, he did not fit in very well with the established crowd; he looked like an outsider, he dressed like an outsider and the message he preached was that of an outsider. Yet, though an outsider, people flocked to hear him and to be baptized by him. Why do you suppose this was the case? What was it which made John and his message so attractive to people?

- Do we need people like John (proclaiming from outside the establishment, even established churches) today?
- John's message was pretty basic: repent. Repentance here is the Greek word *metanoeo*, which means to sorrowfully change one's mind regarding sin and unbelief, turning from them in your heart to God. It is a radical change of character, nature and action; a literal about face.
- John's message to the people was not only that they needed to repent, but the reason they needed to do so was that the kingdom of heaven was near. As the kingdom of heaven is most certainly a reference to Jesus, putting these two ideas together reveals that repentance, or sorrowfully turning away from our sin and toward God in our heart and mind, is a necessary precondition of saving faith and a necessary prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
- Matthew invokes three Old Testament images or passages when it comes to the person of John and his message. First is the allusion to the prophet Elijah by the reference to his clothes as a "garment of hair and a leather belt", as this is similar to a description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. Second is the words of the prophet Isaiah in 40:3, referring to a prophet who would call from the desert to make straight paths to prepare for the coming of the Lord, a reference to the need to straighten and level roads for the coming travels and passage of a king or ruler. And third is the implied image of Elijah again, from the last words of the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, who wrote at the very end of his book (Malachi 4:3) "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." Together these are three powerful allusions or references which Matthew's mostly Jewish original readers would not have missed. Indeed, Jesus himself, in Matt 11, uses Malachi to explain that John is, in fact, the Elijah who is to come, to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.
- Given all of this regarding who John was and his purpose, does his message of repentance make more sense? How does this message translate to and for us today? Was his message of repentance just for Jews of Jesus' day or is it for us, too? Of what things do we in our modern society need to repent, both corporately and individually?
- Is repentance like this easy or difficult? If difficult, what makes it so?

### **Read Matthew 3:5-6**

- Matthew tells us that people came from all over the region to hear John's message of repentance and, when they heard it, they confessed their sins and were baptized by him.
- Thus Matthew introduces the idea of confession of sins. How do you see the relationship between sin confession and repentance? Does one come before the other? If so, which one? Are they both necessary or is one or the other optional? Do they mean the same thing? Are they synonymous or do they convey different yet related and complementary ideas?

- In your own words, explain how confession of sins and repentance go or work together.

### **Read Matthew 3:7-10**

- Upon seeing the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to hear him along with the people, John became quite angry. John calls them a “brood of vipers (snakes),” literally “sons of vipers,” one of the worst possible insults you could hurl at someone at that time. Calling someone a “viper” was to identify them as a killer (as vipers are poisonous killer snakes); to call someone a son of a viper was to label them as a killer of their parents, which was just about the worst possible crime in antiquity.
- Why do you think John was so upset about the Pharisees and Sadducees showing up? It seems apparent that John did not think their motive was confession of sin and repentance. If not, what may have been their motive for being there?
- What does John’s challenge to them to produce fruit in keeping with repentance indicate about his thoughts concerning their sincerity?
- What were the Pharisees and Sadducees appealing to in their defense (in the words of John)?
- What was John’s opinion of this defense? When John declares God can raise up sons of Abraham from any old stones, what does this indicate about the value he places on their heritage and lineage of being Jewish, as the sons of Abraham and Israel, to by itself justify their place in God’s Kingdom and be recipients of God’s blessing and mercy?
- What does John warn is going to happen if they don’t change their ways and begin producing good fruit? Is this warning relevant to those who are trusting in their “religion” or their rituals or their pedigree today?
- Like the Pharisees, have you ever looked down on others who were not as religious or as spiritual as you? Have you ever felt superior to others who may not have known as much about the faith as you? Have you ever resisted the urging of the Holy Spirit to repent because you felt that it was undignified or even unnecessary for someone who has been a Christian for as many years as you?

### **Read Matthew 3:11-12**

- When John says that he is not fit to even carry the sandals of the one who will come after him, he is saying that he is not even fit to be a slave for this person, as carrying sandals was the job of a slave.

- John goes on to contrast his baptism of repentance with the coming baptism of Jesus which will be with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Some biblical scholars see these two (the Holy Spirit and fire baptism) as synonymous, others as opposites. The text is not entirely clear on this. All agree baptism with the Holy Spirit is a baptism of cleansing, restoration and new life. But because fire purifies some things (like gold and silver) yet consumes other things (like chaff and weeds), it is not certain to which aspect of this baptism of fire John refers. The threshing metaphor which involves separating the wheat from the chaff then storing the wheat but burning the chaff, indicates that part of Jesus' coming and his message involves judgment.
- Either way, the overall contrast is still clear; John's baptism of repentance mainly looks backwards and prepares us to move forward; Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit actually moves us forward as it restores us to wholeness, reconnects us with God the Father and changes us by giving us a new heart and a new spirit.

## **APPLY**

- The concept of repentance which John preached was not a one time act, it was to be an ongoing occurrence. With this in mind, what might ongoing repentance look like in your life? This does not necessarily mean repenting for the same thing every day, but it does mean daily searching your heart, making a regular moral examination of your life to see if there is any act or speech or attitude which is displeasing to God for which you need to repent.
- How does sincere repentance in our hearts prepare us to find peace with God in Christ, peace with one another in our relationships and even peace within ourselves? If we don't repent, will we ever truly know peace?
- Which other aspect of this study has struck you the most and why? What are you going to do as a result ?
- Identify one or more truths from this study which speak to and can be applied in your life.
  - 1.
  - 2.

## **PRAY FOR OUR CHURCH AND FOR ONE ANOTHER**

- According to need.