

Series: From Israel to Everyone: Disciples who Demonstrate God's Presence (a study of Matthew).

Sermon Text: Matthew 3:1-10

(App to get lesson/slides, ask

questions. Color Pg)

The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy that reveals Jesus as heir to the redemptive promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12 and legitimizes His legal right to Israel's ancient throne once occupied by King David. Non-Jewish names in the genealogy serve as lasting reminders that God's presence is available to anyone considered an "*outsider*." Prophecies cited in **Matthew 1-2** reveal how God has been guiding the course of history and that the birth of Jesus inaugurated the arrival of God's kingdom rule on earth. As we unpack **3:1-10** today, we may be surprised to uncover this...

BIG IDEA: Faith is far more than a ticket to heaven.

We often think of **John** as just "*the baptizer*" but notice, as we read *verses 1-2*, that he was *preaching a kingdom: In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* To *preach* (Grk. Kerusso) is to proclaim a message (gospel) of any kind, not just a religious one. Back then, kings appointed folks to "*herald/proclaim*" how their *kingdom* rule (typically a takeover) was "*good news*" for their everyone (even if it wasn't). We typically view a *kingdom* as "*land ruled by a king or queen*", but it always starts as an idea--moods and mindsets must shift (by persuasion or force). Even brutal/pushy leaders need certain buy-in for physical aspects of their *kingdom* (real reforms) to endure! Modern ping-pong reversals of executive orders underscore how coercion differs from shared vision. Take note: Heart revolution must always precede true political revolution, which is basically the point of the "*Sermon on the Mount*" in **Matthew 5-7**. With this context, let's re-read **John's** good news in *verse 2: Repent* (have a renewed mind and let God rule your life), *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (near). We're being asked to buy into and proclaim the PAST arrival of a *kingdom* having real-world, socio-political ramifications + new standards for identity and purpose! Notice, he didn't announce a place to go after death, but rather the *nearness* of a new King and *kingdom*. See the difference? His

gospel calls for buy-in here and now, not merely there and then. This makes our gospel message less about “*greener grass on the other side*” and more about helping people see how God is transplanting the culture of heaven to earth (cf. 6:10). So, maybe ponder this discussion question: “If the kingdom of heaven is at hand, what present help do we withhold if our message is exclusively focused on our final destination?”

Let’s next read **Matthew’s** wild description of **John** in **verses 3-4: For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah (40:3) when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey**. Ancient **prophets** like Malachi (3:1 cf. 4:5-6) tied this person to the Lord’s coming: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple (any place heaven and earth overlap due to God’s presence).” **Matthew’s** shocking claim is as hard to fathom now as it was then, especially since we’re conditioned to think that the Lord and His kingdom will come much later! Much could have been said about **John**, but **Matthew** chose his words carefully to make Jewish readers recall 2 Kings 1:8, “They answered him, ‘He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist...It is Elijah the Tishbite.’” He was validating John as a prophet in a day when Israel had not heard directly from God in over 400 years! All this is later confirmed in **11:13-14** and **17:12-13** where **Matthew** quotes Jesus saying, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come... ‘I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him...’ the disciples understood he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.” The question is, “How should these facts about John the Preacher edit our vision of God’s kingdom?”

This last section presents a few impacts of the gospel (good news) we proclaim. **Verses 5-6** illustrate how buying-in is a commitment: **Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins**. In biblical history, passing through a body of water (like the Red Sea and the Jordan River) was a liturgical act of

transition. It's an act of identity marking the boundary between an old life of slavery or wandering and a new life of promise and identity. It's also a declaration of purpose--the ultimate "*buy-in*" moment where we leave one "*kingdom*" (the shore behind) and commit to another (the shore ahead). As we'll see next time, our *baptism* is more than a "*starting point*." Like a wedding day, our past act becomes an ongoing reminder of what we committed to--in this case, utter dependence on God and daily death to rival *kingdoms*. So, for example: Something like our *baptism* certificate is a physical reminder that, like our spiritual ancestors, we passed through water that continues to kill and revive (cf. 1 Corinthians 10).

Verses 7-10 illustrate the impact of not practicing our faith now: ***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? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Brood of vipers*** wasn't directed at all *Pharisees and Sadducees*, just those who couldn't grasp what God was up to. It's lost on us, but the awful ancient saying meant, "*You're like baby vipers who murdered your mom (parents) as you ate your way out of the womb.*" *Matthew* later wrote how people like them had missed the point and dishonored their Jewish heritage by proudly resting their blessing rather humbly realizing they had been blessed to be a blessing. That, after all, was the point of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3, "*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" For them, it had become about preparing people for a future *kingdom*. For John, it was more about getting God's *kingdom* into people, which had arrived with "*Emmanuel, God with us!*", a title *Matthew* affirmed in *chapter 1*. Israel's obsession with being good enough for the future left them impotent in the present. Instead of being a bright blessing to the world, they were on a dark path of navel gazing. In the words of an old hymn, they were "*standing on the promises of God.*" *Their ticket to heaven was guaranteed, or was it?*

Notice what John said about that in *verses 9-10: 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. 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. Jesus, you may recall, also mentioned healthy and unhealthy trees, vines, and branches (cf. Matthew 7; John 15). Clearly, they had missed the point, and to be fair, **Matthew 11:2-6** implies John was a bit thrown off by all this! Here's the point, which is backed up in numerous texts like Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 4, Hebrews 11, and James 2: Faith isn't merely about trusting that God's got you, it's about "*becoming fully convinced that God IS able to do what he promised Abraham.*" If you're not becoming God's empowered partner now, you should take a hard look at the fine print on that ticket to heaven you're clutching so tightly. Jesus came to bring joy and life, here and now, not just then and there. I wonder, "What would it look like for us to strive for that together?"

Now, having discovered that **John** was more than a **baptizer** and that **faith is more than a ticket to heaven**, next week we'll wade into the murky waters of his strange **baptism** to learn why sinless Jesus participated in it. For now, remember, wherever you are on your journey of trusting Christ, you need not work through anything alone. Reach out and let us help!

Sunday to Monday Connection: In Matthew 3, John the Baptist doesn't preach, "Get ready to go to heaven someday." He proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The King has arrived. The rule of God is breaking into the present. Faith is far more than a ticket to heaven. It is joyful submission to a present King and participation in His mission of bringing heaven to earth, here and now.

- **Question:** If someone observed you this week, your conversations, priorities, spending, media habits, what evidence would they see that God's kingdom is already ruling you?
- **Next Step:** Make a habit of spending time with other believers who will encourage you to embrace the joy of kingdom mission on earth as in heaven.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. How might John's message of "*kingdom now*" impact traditional methods we use to "*evangelize*" people into heaven (a future kingdom)? What are some

- ways that a present kingdom should be included in our gospel preaching (proclamation)?
2. How does preparing the way for Jesus differ from merely making a profession of faith, and what sorts of activities would this involve?
 3. John the Baptist and Jesus saved some of their harshest words for presumptuous religious folks who didn't grasp that physical lineage does not equal spiritual heritage. John refused to baptize them because they had not repented. What does this imply about becoming a Christian, the role of godly leaders in our lives, and what baptism means?
 4. Are there examples where your relationship with God has devolved into a "*fruitless, judgy, do nothing faith*"? How has God been nudging you to repent and change?
 5. What does it mean, practically, that the gospel has real-world, socio-political ramifications along with a new standard for identity and purpose? How is it more about "*bringing heaven to earth for present joy*" than it is about "*getting people to heaven for future joy*"?
 6. How does reading Isaiah 61:1-3 help you see what God might be up to now, rather than only in the future? In what ways has your faith been too future focused, and where could you grow as a disciple who demonstrates the kingdom's presence like Jesus, John, and Matthew did?
 7. Where did Matthew illustrate a mode of evangelism whereby people discover the already-present God through reminders of His past acts and insightful, probing questions? Why is this a better tactic than just getting people to superficially agree to truth statements from the book of Romans?
 8. What does 1 Corinthians 10 teach us about the ongoing significance of our baptism?
 9. The lesson asks: "*If the kingdom of heaven is at hand, what present help do we withhold from people if our message is exclusively focused on our final destination?*" Besides being the emphasis of the early church, how does it also impact things like faith and joy? Let [this article about negativity bias](#) aid your discussion.
 10. Matthew's description of John makes him sound like a wild animal, however it's reminiscent of prior prophets who protested unrighteous **kingdoms** by living on the outskirts of society. Godly individuals, like Daniel, also refused to eat certain foods to protest the ways of Babylon and display God's power. So, "*When might we implement a temporary or permanent lifestyle choice to protest unrighteousness or display the ways of God's **kingdom**?*"

A communion thought: Today we addressed how passing through a body of water (like the Red Sea and the Jordan River) was a liturgical act of transition. Well, communion is very similar! It's not just a random habit but a meaningful weekly ceremony. We aren't just doing something, rather we're enacting a truth and declaring our identity. We're marking the boundary between our old life of enslavement to the rulers of this world and our new life of being ruled by God's kingdom. Communion, like **baptism**, is a regular reminder that trusting Christ is an ongoing commitment as we die daily to whatever kingdom we face and depend on

Him to sustain us. If you have trusted Jesus as Savior, you're invited to partake in this powerful meal when you are ready!

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- Bible Project - Gospel of the Kingdom [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Heaven and Earth [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Temple [Videos](#).
- Bible Project – Day of the Lord [Podcast episodes](#).

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Why 4 Gospel Writers:** "Each of the gospels present Jesus through varying lens and may seem opposite (King/Servant; Man/God) but all work together to give us a richer vision of who Jesus is. Matthew's lens is "Jesus as King", Mark – Jesus as Servant, Luke – Jesus as Man, John – Jesus as God." The Bible Recap
- **A More Biblical Gospel:** "The summary of Jesus' message may also be the summary of Mark's Gospel, or good news (1:1): people should turn their lives over to God (on repentance, see comment on 1:4–5) if they believe the good news that God is getting ready to fulfill his promises to his people (see Is 52:6; comment on Mk 1:1). The Jewish people recognized that God ruled the universe in one sense now, but they prayed daily for the day when his kingdom, or rule, would be established over all peoples of the earth. Because the Gospels affirm that Jesus must come twice, they recognize that the kingdom comes in two stages: God's future rule is already established when Jesus dies as king (15:26), but over all the world when Jesus returns. John, however, was not yet in a position to make this distinction." (Keener, 130)
- **Herald:** "One who makes public proclamation. The only notice of this officer in the Old Testament occurs in Daniel 3:4. The term 'herald' might be substituted for 'preacher' in First Timothy 2:7; Second Timothy 1:11; Second Peter 2:5." (Dennison, 684)
- **Kingdom of heaven:** "With this phrase, Matthew introduces his central concept for communicating God's restoration work. According to Old Testament theology, God is ruler of all and reigns in the heavens (e.g., Pss. 97:1; 99:1). Yet the expectation is clearly expressed, especially in the prophetic books, that a time is coming when God will fully reign over all

creation (e.g., Isa. 24:21–23; Mic. 4:1–8). For Matthew, the arrival of God’s kingdom—God’s reign—is signaled by the arrival of Jesus the Messiah.” (Brown, 29)

- **Not a new religion:** It is noteworthy that Yochanan was not calling Israel to convert to a new religion but to return (t’shuvah) to the source of any religious Jew’s faith, the God of Abraham. The problem in the first century was not a faulty Torah or Temple service, but that so many in Israel had turned away from that spiritual relationship with the Lord. Some modern commentators have questioned Matthew’s use of the term ‘Kingdom of Heaven.’ Some even wonder if Matthew is speaking of a different, spiritual kingdom versus the earthly kingdom (Kingdom of God) alluded to by the other gospel writers. From Matthew’s perspective, the answer is rather simple. As a traditional Jew writing to a Jewish audience, it would be common to refrain from pronouncing or writing the holy name of God (YHVH). As the Talmud clarifies, ‘In the Sanctuary the Name was pronounced as written, but beyond its confines a substituted Name was employed’ (Tractate Sotah VII.6). A solution still common today in the Jewish community is to use substitute terms for YHVH such as ADONAI (LORD) or HaShem (the Name). In the Talmudic writings, we often find the word ‘Shamayim/heavens’ as a substitute for the name of God since it refers to the entire universe that he has created. When Matthew uses the term ‘Kingdom of Heaven,’ then, he is not speaking of a different kingdom but is simply using a very Jewish way of referring to the Creator. For such traditional Jews of the first century, the Kingdom of Heaven is, in fact, the Kingdom of God.” (Kasdan, 28-29).
- **Citing the Prophets:** “1:2–3. Jewish teachers often combined several texts or parts of texts, especially if they had a key word or words in common (here, ‘prepare the way’). Because they were so learned in the Scriptures, they did not have to say which texts they were quoting and often assumed the context without quoting it. Thus Mark cites both Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1) here, although he names only Isaiah. Isaiah refers to preparing the way for God, who is coming to restore his people; Malachi refers to God coming in judgment to set matters straight among his people. Mark applies these texts about God to Jesus (cf. also 1:7).” (Keener, 129)
- **Discerning John’s Baptism:** “The exact background to the purposes of John’s baptism is debated, given that Jewish sources do not provide a single, definitive answer for understanding how John’s baptism of fellow Jews would have been perceived. Certainly, baptism would have had general associations with various Jewish ceremonial practices of washing for ritual purification (e.g., Num. 19:12; bathing pools for ritual cleansing were commonplace in first-century Israel). The question is whether Jewish ceremonial washings provide the primary lens for interpreting what John was doing, given that John’s baptism seems to have been performed upon a person only once. Instead, John may have been mirroring proselyte baptism, the practice of baptizing Gentiles upon conversion to Judaism. The difficulty in definitively supporting this idea is that there are no references to proselyte baptism in pre-AD 70 sources, although Craig Keener notes that proselyte baptism does

appear in early Palestinian Jewish texts. John's baptism also seems to have differed from other Jewish washing practices in its explicit connection to repentance and forgiveness and its focus on eschatological cleansing. The sum of these various rather unusual elements suggests that John's baptism functioned as a call to the people of Israel to return and embrace a life of covenant loyalty in preparation for the coming reign of God." (Brown, 28-29)

- **Pharisees and Sadducees:** "Two sects within first-century Judaism. The Sadducees were a priestly group of the Jewish aristocracy whose focus was temple service and administration. This means that their role in Matthew is mostly limited to Jerusalem and so to the beginning and ending of the narrative (e.g., here and 22:23, 34). The Pharisees were known for their careful interpretation of the Jewish law. They are Jesus' central opponents in Matthew (e.g., chaps. 12; 15; 23). Narratively, this is because Jesus is portrayed as the right interpreter of the Torah in contrast to them (15:1–20; 23:1–24). It is important to distinguish between this narrative portrayal and the always more complex historical situation. For example, we hear in Acts that some Pharisees became followers of Jesus (Acts 15:5 [note also Nicodemus in John 3:1; 19:39]). Matthew focuses on scribes and Pharisees who challenged Jesus' claims and identity, providing a monolithic group of antagonists for his Gospel. Readers will need to be careful, however, not to assume that this portrayal represents the entire reality about scribes and Pharisees in first-century Judaism." (Brown, 29-30)
- **Brood of Vipers:** "An ancient tradition suggested that some kinds of vipers ate their way out of their mothers (see, e.g., Herodotus, *Plutarch). It was bad enough to be called a viper, but to be called a viper's child was even worse—killing one's mother or father was the most hideous crime conceivable in antiquity." (Keener, 52)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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