

GET READY CAUSE HERE HE COMES
MATTHEW 3:1-12

When I was in college I had a part time job assisting a man who owned and operated a party rental business out of his dilapidated garage in a low income neighborhood in Los Angeles. Every Saturday I would arrive at his home early in the morning, and we would sort through a cluttered stockpile of tables and chairs and outdoor heaters, and then load them into his old, battered pick-up and trailer. Then we would get on the freeway and drive through L.A.'s sprawling metropolis to the home of one of his clients.

My boss was as uncultured and uncouth a man as I had ever met—the way he looked, the way he dressed, the way he talked. However, his clients were rich and famous, and most lived in Bel Air or Beverly Hills. I've been to the homes of Jimmy Stewart, Jim Neighbors (Gomer Pyle), Sid Caesar, the Shah of Iran, and Hugh Hefner, to name a few.

One Saturday morning we drove to Palm Springs to deliver and set up equipment at the home of Gerald Ford, who had been president of the United States two years earlier. I must confess I was a little self-conscious driving past the secret service in his beat up '68 Chevy pick-up. But my boss didn't seem to mind a bit. He drove right onto the lawn where we were going to unload and do our set up, and then he walked straight to President Ford, who was talking to some other people, presumably, about how exactly he wanted to set things up.

When he returned, he told me who it was that was coming to this party—dignitaries and VIP's who were prominent in the political landscape of the time. But something about the former president's words or demeanor must have really impressed him, because he got very serious and said, "Look Stan, this is no ordinary party. We've got to make sure every piece of equipment is scrubbed and polished to perfection, and that everything is set up with absolute precision."

I must confess that when he said that my mind went back to the clutter and chaos I had seen in his garage earlier that morning, not to mention the deplorable condition of the cab in his pick-up—with empty cans, wrappers, and trash strewn everywhere. I wondered to myself, is he even capable of this quality of polish and precision that he was insisting upon.

But I never saw him work so hard. I never saw him be so thorough and attentive to his task. I never saw him take his job so seriously. And I think you know why. This particular party for this particular person demanded a quality that corresponded to his status.

Just before Jesus began His public ministry God sent a messenger to let the people of Israel know that His long anticipated kingdom was about to arrive. This messenger's name was John, and John's purpose was to prepare people *for* this kingdom—not merely to "know" that it was coming, but to get themselves ready. That's because *the dawn of God's kingdom demands a readiness and a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.*

Matthew tells us about John and his ministry in **verses 1-2**. *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

John the Baptist is an important enough figure in God's story that he appears prominently at the beginning of all four Gospels. Each of those Gospel accounts are a bit different, and Matthew's description of John and his ministry correspond to his purpose for writing and his particular audience. Matthew was writing to Jews who were familiar with Old Testament promises and prophecies, most notably that David's kingdom was an *everlasting*

kingdom, and that God was going to raise up a Deliverer from David's offspring who would rule and reign on David's throne. Of course, in the first century, Israel was under the thumb of Rome, which only intensified their longing for the fulfillment of these promises.

And so the emergence of this prophet-like figure named John was intriguing, to say the least. The people who heard him and saw him would have immediately made the connection between the promises and prophecies in the Old Testament, and John's message, style, and even appearance.

But who was he? Luke tells us that he was born of godly parents, both in the priestly line, who were beyond the age of child-bearing. John's mother was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus, but growing up in Judea John probably had limited contact with Jesus, who was raised in Nazareth. Luke also tells us that prior to his public ministry John lived for some time in the desert (Luke 1:80), and then began to preach in the Desert of Judea. This was probably in the lower Jordan Valley and the hills to the west of the Dead Sea.

John the Baptist had one central message: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Repent literally means "to change one's mind," and when used in Scripture it has to do with changing one's attitude toward God. Typically, the manifestations of this change were confession of sins, prayers of remorse, and abandonment of sin (Wilkins, 131). And so John's call to repent, essentially, was a call to get right with God—to align one's attitudes and actions with Him and His will.

Because of who God is and who we are before Him repentance is appropriate for any time and any circumstance. But there was a much greater sense of urgency in John's message, because he declared that the kingdom of heaven was *near*.

This was the news that Jews had been anticipating for centuries. And John was now informing them that *they* were the privileged generation. They would get to see with their own eyes God's intervention and God's deliverance. All the pieces of the prophetic puzzle were coming together, including the prophecy from Isaiah about one who would come as a forerunner just prior to the dawning of the kingdom.

That prophecy is quoted in **verse 3**. 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.' "*

Preparing the *way* for the Lord and making straight paths for Him is a metaphor. In the ancient world, when a king decided to visit a territory, many preparations would be made in advance. For example, a road crew would be dispatched to do any necessary construction and repair—to make sure the road wasn't washed out in any places, to fill in the potholes, and to straighten it out if it were too crooked, to level it if it were too bumpy or hilly. It was imperative that the king's journey be as smooth and as pleasant as possible.

What is more, while the king was en route to his destination an emissary would be sent ahead of him to announce his imminent arrival. His message was: "Get ready, cause here he comes." And so the people of that city would remove any debris, sweep the streets, tidy up their homes and businesses, wash their garments, bathe themselves, line the streets with palm branches, and then stand on either side as in a parade and await the king's arrival.

That kind of preparation demonstrated the people's appreciation and devotion to the king, but it was also a way to show him honor and respect. It communicated to the king that they thought he was worthy of their best.

John the Baptist was Messiah's emissary. He was the man sent ahead to announce His coming. And the preparation that was worthy of this King, the preparation that was

necessary for this King, was not external, but internal. It was moral and spiritual. John was calling people to clear out all their spiritual obstacles, to clean up all the moral debris from their lives that might dishonor the Lord and hinder their reception to Him. In other words, *the dawn of God's kingdom demands a readiness and a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.*

Look now at **verse 4**. *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.*

Locusts and wild honey, as strange as it sounds to us, were a common diet for those living in the desert in this day. Locusts are migratory grasshoppers that usually appeared in swarms, and thus were plentiful. They were collected, dried, and either eaten whole or ground into flour and turned into bread. They are rich in protein and, even today, are an important food source in many parts of the world.

Garments made of camel's hair were typically worn by poor, nomadic desert dwellers. They were virtually waterproof, and could protect its wearer in inclement weather. But they were not particularly comfortable—they were scratchy and itchy—and they were not particularly attractive either. Often in this day those who were mourning would wear a camel's hair cloak as a sign of their distress, and it is likely that John's garment symbolized his solemn message of repentance.

But the real significance of John's clothing was that it was exactly the same as Israel's revered prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). This was not lost on John's audience. When they looked at him they would have immediately made the connection, and it would have also stirred up recollections of Malachi's prophecies about Elijah's return to prepare the way for God's judgment (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6).

Verses 5-6. *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.*

It wasn't easy to make the journey to the Jordan Valley from places like Jerusalem. It is very rugged terrain, it is desolate, water was scarce, and people had to journey by foot, which took at least a couple of days. The fact that *throng*s of people went to check him out meant that they took him and his message seriously. This was evident in that many of them formally and solemnly identified with his message by being baptized by John in the Jordan River.

Of all John's activities and characteristics it was his baptism that was the most strikingly unique and reminiscent of his ministry (Wilkins, 134), so much so that he was even nicknamed, "the Baptist." Baptism was a common practice in the Jewish community at this time, and John's baptism was similar to other forms of baptism in that it was symbolic of purification (water being a cleansing agent). However, the baptisms of Pharisees and other religious groups were rituals that were repeated regularly, sometimes daily, similar to the way Muslims "baptize" (ceremonially wash) their hands and feet before they pray each day. But John's baptism was a one-time event that was specifically and directly associated with preparing for the imminent arrival of God's kingdom. Again, that preparation had to do with aligning one's heart and mind with God and His will, and it was evidenced by confession and abandonment of sin, and a life of holiness. Because *the dawn of God's kingdom demands a readiness and a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.*

But not everybody was supportive of John. **Verse 7.** *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?"*

Incidentally, here is another feature that was reminiscent of Elijah. Remember the way Elijah spoke to King Ahab? Remember his abruptness and inflammatory language? John is equally as curt to the religious VIP's of the day, which most certainly shocked those who were present, for the Pharisees and Sadducees were the most esteemed people in the Jewish community. Nobody talked to them like this.

Here's why: "Pharisee" means "separated one," and they were a very strict sect within Judaism that meticulously followed not only the written Word of God (the Old Testament) but the oral traditions that had been passed down over the years. Pharisees bent over backwards to make sure all their moral and doctrinal t's were crossed and i's dotted. They were precise, fastidious, and disciplined. Thus, they were highly respected by most of the Jews in their day.

Sadducees, on the other hand, were what we might call theological liberals. They were not literal in many of their interpretations of Scripture which served to strengthen their political influence. Since most Sadducees were from aristocratic and priestly origins, they derived their authority from their spiritual pedigree and the activities of the temple. And even though they were a small group, they held the majority membership on the ruling religious body in Jerusalem called the Sanhedrin.

These two groups normally opposed one another and were rarely on the same page when it came to theological or political issues. But here they are united in coming together to check out John and his baptism. They are coming as the official leadership of Israel, and so they are presumably vetting John so as to either validate or reject him and his message.

But John sees right through their hypocrisy. He calls them a "brood of vipers," a reference to the dozen or more small, dangerous snakes that can emerge from a mother snake (Wilkins, 135). Vipers are proverbial for their subtle approach and attack. The comparison to these religious leaders is that they are pretending to ingratiate themselves with the crowd, but are really trying to find fault in John.

John's message to the Pharisees and Sadducees is that they, too, are personally responsible to prepare themselves for the coming kingdom, and they must do exactly what everyone else is required to do—repent! Because the coming kingdom is going to bring wrath on those who do not repent. And then John goes on to clarify what he means so that there can be no misunderstanding. He says in **verses 8-9**, *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.*

Remember, repentance is a change in one's attitude toward God, but it always results in a changed life. That's the fruit of repentance. And John wants to make sure everyone knows that the call to repentance is not merely for those living in blatant sin. This is a call for every person in Israel, including those who *think* they have their act together, those who are self-proclaimed Bible experts, those who excel in religious activity, or those who have a spiritual pedigree. None of these things exempts a person from the need to repent. That's because *the dawn of God's kingdom demands a readiness and a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.*

As we will discover when Jesus begins His ministry, that kind of righteous is different than the righteousness of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He said in His Sermon on the Mount, *"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 5:20).

That's why they are in need of repentance, because their righteousness is not real fruit. It's fake. It's hollow. And spiritual pedigrees are worthless, too. You cannot rely on your connection to spiritual VIP's like Abraham for your entrance into the kingdom. We must come to God as repentant individuals. And that repentance is validated as being real by the fruit in one's life. If there is no fruit, one can expect God's judgment.

Look at **verse 10**. 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.*

The decisive, identifying mark of a living tree is the fruit that it bears. Likewise, the decisive, identifying mark of the kingdom of God is a life that has repented from sin and bears the fruit of repentance (Wilkins, 136-137). Incidentally, this is not just John's message. Jesus uses almost identical language in His teaching, and it is reinforced throughout the New Testament in the writings of the apostles. "Those who do not receive spiritual life will receive God's wrath. They have rejected His call to repentance, they have not received the life of the kingdom of heaven, and they therefore will receive the full penalty of God's judgment on their sin" (Wilkins, 137).

John describes God's judgment by using the metaphor of an axe that is laid to the root of that deadwood, which is then thrown into the fire. And he goes on to tell us that the Messiah, the One of whom John is a forerunner, is the One who will wield that axe.

Look at **verses 11-12**. 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"* (ESV).

John has an important place in God's story, but even he has only a bit part compared to the main character. His role is simply to introduce Him. John is the messenger; Jesus is the King.

And as John puts himself and his ministry alongside Jesus and His impending ministry He wants people to know that there is really no comparison between the two of them. John is a servant to the King, and is not even worthy of carrying His sandals.

He also says that his baptism, while necessary and important, will be superseded by the coming baptism of Jesus. John's was a baptism of repentance to identify with the coming kingdom. Jesus' baptism is one that actually determines the identity and the eternal destiny of individuals. Those who receive Him get the Holy Spirit; those who reject Him get the judgment of eternal fire.

Finally, John tells his audience that the coming Messiah already has a winnowing fork in His hand, signifying that the harvest, the souls of people, is ready to begin. Most of you know this image. At the end of harvest, the farmer brought the harvested wheat into the threshing floor. He then took a large pitchfork and tossed the wheat into the air, where the wind blew the lighter chaff away, leaving only the heavier grain to fall back to the threshing floor. The wheat was then stored in the granary to be ground later into flour, while the chaff was raked into piles and burned.

The point John is making is simple. Inside the kingdom is life; outside the kingdom is death. And the King Himself is the Judge.

That's John's message. It's blunt, but it's blunt for a reason. Preparing for this kingdom and receiving this King is *the* most consequential thing in life. Because it determines

not only who you are in relation to the King, but whether or not you will spend eternity in His presence with His blessing.

The good news is that the story of this king who is the Judge of all the earth is just beginning. The very king that John was introducing showed up a short time later at the Jordan River to be baptized by John (verses 13-17), but through His life and ministry, most notably His death, He made provision for us to enter His kingdom. And it's not by cleaning up our own lives and trying to get our acts together so that we would be worthy of Him. He made provision by experiencing the wrath of God for our sin in our place (as a Substitute) and experiencing the punishment we deserved, so that we wouldn't have to be judged.

Then He made His own righteousness available to us, offering to transfer it to our account, making us worthy to be in His kingdom and live in His presence. That's because God's kingdom demands a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.

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MAIN IDEA: THE DAWN OF GOD'S KINGDOM DEMANDS A READINESS AND A RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT CORRESPONDS TO THE KING'S CHARACTER.

COURIER OF THE KING (1-6)
JOHN'S MESSAGE (1-2)

JOHN'S MISSION (3)

JOHN'S DISTINCTIVE FEATURES (4)

JOHN'S POPULARITY (5)

JOHN'S BAPTISM (6)

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS OF THE KINGDOM (7-12)
WARNING TO THE SPIRITUAL ELITE (7-10)
PHARISEES

SADDUCEES

THE FUTILITY OF SPIRITUAL PEDIGREES

FRUIT THAT CORRESPONDS TO REPENTANCE

COMPARING JESUS AND JOHN (10-12)
JESUS' POWER IS FAR GREATER

JESUS' BAPTISM IS FAR SUPERIOR

JESUS' ROLE IS FAR MORE CONSEQUENTIAL

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

Get Ready Cause Here He Comes

Matthew 3:1-12

Main Idea: The dawn of God's kingdom demands a readiness and a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.

1) John's message was that since the kingdom is dawning people needed to get themselves ready to encounter the King. He called them to repent, because the readiness he was describing was ethical and moral in nature. The lives of kingdom subjects must correspond to the King's character. Is this kind of repentance still necessary? If so, what does it look like today?

2) John says (in his address to the Pharisees and Sadducees) that theological knowledge or spiritual pedigree is not the means by which a person gains entrance into the kingdom. In fact, they can be hindrances. How do theological or biblical knowledge and spiritual pedigree still hinder a person from gaining entrance into the kingdom today? Is it a hindrance for you? How can this hindrance be overcome?