

December 27, 2020

“Called to Prepare”
Lesson 4 of Unit

Matthew 3:1-12

Intro

In order to fully understand and use what John the Baptist says in today’s lesson passage, we need to understand the religious set-up of his day.

Mainstream Jewish religious practice centered on the temple in Jerusalem (which was controlled by wealthy pro-Roman Sadducees) and also on local synagogues (often led by Pharisees and scribes who were experts in the Scriptures).

Both groups had become oppressive, hindering people more than helping them in their attempts to have a relationship with God. They placed heavy burdens on the average worshipper (see Matt. 23:4). This suggested to the average person that God was not really accessible to them. John helps to change that in two ways.

He physically baptized people. The Jewish leaders would wash themselves for purification, but they wouldn’t have touched another person for the same reason. Doing so would have made them unclean as well. But John’s actions connect exactly to his message. He tells people to repent and prepare themselves for what God is about to do.

This focus on second chances and emphasizing the reality of God’s presence set him apart from the Jewish religious leaders, and attracted people who had been alienated from connecting to God by those in religious power.

Read Matthew 3:1-12

1. vs. 1: Location

“In those days”—talking about the days of John’s ministry—about 20 years after the end of the second chapter of Matthew

“in the wilderness of Judea”—this is a large desert area east of Jerusalem around the Jordan River Valley. It was popular with people who wished to focus on prayer and meditation

2. vs. 2: Message

John’s message in a single word—repent

Repent means to be truly sorry for past sins and errors

Repent means to change how one thinks, and then to change how one acts

“for the kingdom of heaven has come near”

Repentance necessary to be ready

For the promised king—to many, that mean Israel ruling itself as in David’s time

God’s idea: not a change of king, but a change of heart is necessary

Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven” 32x in his gospel

Kingdom of God in Mark (15x) and Luke (32x) vs. Matthew (5x)

Using “heaven” instead of “God” indicates several things
Matthew is intentionally avoiding using God’s name
This indicates he’s writing to a primarily Jewish audience
They would have also avoided using God’s name in speech or writing

3. vs. 3: Message pt. 2

“the voice of one calling in the wilderness”

Part of the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3

Image: a great king being preceded by messengers to make people ready for his arrival

John sees himself as fulfilling this prophecy (John 1:23)

Calling people to repent would make them ready for the King’s arrival (Christ)

4. vs. 4: Messenger

His clothes: camel’s hair, leather belt

Shows his lifestyle; he doesn’t live a life of ease and comfort

Elijah wore the same exact clothing (2 Kings 1:8)

Malachi 4:5-6 says Elijah will return to call the Jews to repentance

His food: locusts and wild honey

Again shows his simple, non-fancy lifestyle

Both available in nature—living off the land

Honey is a descriptor of the promised land, indicating abundance

5. vs. 5: Audience

From Jerusalem, all Judea, region of the Jordan

Significant area at the time—everyone is either walking (most) or riding (wealthy ones)

Jordan River area extends north into Galilee

River connects Dead Sea to Sea of Galilee

What attracts them?

John didn’t do miracles

Attraction must be based on his message that brings them to God and God to them

John’s personal integrity and lifestyle are also likely attractor

vs. 6: Audience actions

Specific examples of sins confessed seen in Luke 3:10-14

No doubt all kinds common to us today were also confessed

Confession is admitting that one’s lifestyle isn’t completely committed to God

This confession is essential to the repentance John is calling for

Baptism

Shows a spiritual cleansing that affirms the repentance

Was done in the Jordan River

Joshua led Israelites across the Jordan to claim the Promised Land

John is preparing a people to claim a new promised land—heaven

6. vs. 7: Unrepentant Adversaries

Pharisees and Sadducees saw washing/cleansing as a personal cleansing

Likely came to see John with a “What’s he think he’s doing?” attitude

The challenge John’s authority to baptize—John 1:24-25

He calls them “vipers” or “snakes”

Satan appears in serpent form in the Garden of Eden; hence, snake = deceiver

Snakes are generally associated with being venomous and poisonous

In human terms, full of malice and envy, poisoning God’s principles

Christ also calls them vipers in Matt. 12:34, Matt. 23:33

John notes that there is a coming punishment (wrath)

How can the Pharisees avoid it if they don’t see the need for repentance?

Vs. 8: Fruits of repentance

John challenges them (and all who truly seek God) to produce fruits of repentance

“Fruits” are first correct, changed behaviors born of repentance

Fruits are next behaviors that reflect God’s standards of justice and mercy

The Pharisees were challenged by John to do this

Indicates they were not living repentant, God-honoring lives

7. vs. 9: Inaccurate claims

“We have Abraham as our Father”

To the Pharisees (and most Jews), this claim indicated they would receive promises to Abraham

Being part of his family means sharing in the “inheritance”

John challenges their thinking

Being a descendent of Abraham isn’t proof of a right relationship with God

This anticipates the idea that salvation is based on faith, not birthright

“God can put stones in your place if he wants—don’t feel you’ve got it made”

vs. 10: Consequences of holding an inaccurate view

Analogy: unfruitful trees get chopped down and burned

Unfruitful people will get removed and punished

John’s message is to Jews, practicing their faith

Message not for unbelievers, but to those who already believe in God

8. vs. 11: John’s Work

John preaches repentance, and the baptism is the evidence of that repentance

A plea to be cleansed, and a pledge to live differently

Christ’s work

John emphasize how Christ is greater

Will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire

The Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 shows this baptism

John feels unworthy to even take off Jesus’ sandals (the job of a lowly servant)

vs. 12: Jesus will finish the work that John started

Winnowing fork to separate the good wheat and the worthless chaff

Wheat kept, chaff burned

Message is clear: choose the fate you want while you still can

Application: “A voice crying in the wilderness” is one speaking truth before it is completely accepted. This person is frequently alone in their message. John is the model of this phrase. He calls people to repentance before Jesus’ ministry starts, asking them to change before they see the Messiah’s presence. And John gets attacked by those in religious power for doing what he was called to do.

We also need to prepare for Christ’s coming. Besides preparing ourselves, we are also called to be His witnesses, to perhaps be a “voice crying in the wilderness” where we live and work. As with John, our message is for all who will hear it, the believer and unbeliever alike.

Prayer: Father God, help us to continually seek You so that our lives are lived in a God-honoring manner. Help us to bear fruit for Your kingdom, and to be strong in the loving practice of our faith. In Jesus’ name, Amen.