May 31, 2015

“The Call to Repentance”

Matthew 3:1-12

**FCF**: “Repent” – a message we mustn’t ignore

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

(magnet) And so we must repent.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

When we are put off by the messenger, it can be easy to ignore the message. Which is understandable. But what if the message is worth hearing? Case in point, a doctor with poor bedside manner. Imagine the scenario. Your condition is hopeless without treatment. But his delivery is offensive, condescending, without feeling or sympathy. Okay, granted, the message shouldn’t have been communicated that way. But does that then mean it should be ignored?

Transfer that dynamic over to the call to repentance. Granted, often it comes through fire and brimstone preachers on TV or in public squares. But should it then be dismissed outright? What if it’s a caricature, a comical distortion of something real, something we need to hear?

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 3:1-12

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Great happenings demand great hearing. I don’t know if it’s any good but *San Andreas* just opened in theatres. Plot summary – “The great quake is coming. Get moving.” Or try something more everyday. The young wife returns from the doctor’s appointment. Her news to her young husband – “We’re expecting. Get ready.” Great happenings demand great hearing.

Which is what you find with John the Baptist. This is a stirring scene. There’s a 25 year gap between the events of chapter two and chapter three. More than that, there’s been a 400 year gap since the last time a true prophet came with a message from God. John is like another Elijah – not just in his appearance but in fulfillment of the prophecies. He has come declaring to the people and preparing the way for One who is the Lord. He is preaching in the wilderness. That is not just a geographical but a theological reference, harkening to Israel’s time in such a place.

His message? (READ Matthew 3:2) The kingdom of heaven is God’s reign breaking into God’s world – a reclamation from the usurper, a restoration of what was broken, a renewal of all things. This is John’s message. It would be Jesus’ message as well. We’ll dig deeper there when we get to that in the next chapter. But we need to consider the response called for here.

Great happenings demand great hearing. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. And so we must repent. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. And so there is the call to repentance. We’re going to look at this in two parts. First, what does it mean? Second, who needs to hear it?

1. **WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

So first, what is this call to repentance that John gives? What does it mean?

1. *The Definition of Repentance*
2. Not just partway

In terms of a definition, we need to see it is not something partway. It is not merely intellectual, a change of thinking. Nor is it merely emotional, just our being upset for what we’ve done.

1. But the whole person

This isn’t something partway but involves a radical transformation of the whole person, a fundamental turning that does involve our thoughts and feelings but then leads to action.

1. *The Marks of Repentance*

Which is key and takes us to the marks of repentance (READ Matthew 3:4-6).

1. Confession of sin

What does repentance look like? Our text clearly shows us that it includes confession of sin.

1. Acknowledging our sin

That is acknowledging our sin. Not hiding it, covering it up, or playing it down. But owning it. Being honest about how we have fallen woefully short of the first and second greatest commands to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves.

1. Despising our sin

Acknowledging our sin. And despising it as well. Going beyond worldly sorrow that stops at feeling badly for ourselves. We got caught. And we know there will be consequences – a guilty conscience, a broken relationship, financial hardship. That is but worldly sorrow and it is not enough. Godly sorrow mourns over how we have offended the Lord and done harm to others.

1. Change of life

So our text shows us that repentance means confession of sin. And then also a change of life.

1. Baptism

We see it in the call to baptism – a declaration of the need for cleansing, a washing of the stain. I should note here that John’s baptism was something new. Up to this point, Gentile converts were the only ones called to do this. But here we see the call for Jewish people as well.

1. Fruit

So this change of life is declared and symbolized with baptism. And then fleshed out in our lives (READ Matthew 3:7-8). True repentance goes beyond an initial declaration to an ongoing demonstration. Dead trees bear no fruit. But live trees do. And that’s what is called for here.

This repentance is to characterize the whole of our lives. It is not merely a once-for-all thing. It is a lifestyle of repentance. And the further we go, the more we will see our need for it.

*Illustration:*

What would you say are the marks of spiritual maturity? Regular time in the Word and prayer. Investing in others. A generous spirit. Sure, but there is also this lifestyle of repentance. I still remember David Jones, one of my professors in seminary and one of the wisest, most godly men I have ever known, speaking on this. He said that one mark of spiritual maturity is you know your need of grace in the present. And then, with tears welling up in his eyes, he said your heart is filled all the more with regret for the past. And you’re glad for a great Savior.

*Application:*

Of course, heeding this call to repentance presupposes an openness to the possibility that you’re off course and in need of change. It also demands a couple of things. First, examining the blind spots in your life. Luke tells us of John’s counsel here (READ Luke 3:12-14). These were the sins common to their trades. John is saying, “Take another look at what you assume to be okay, to the things you’re accustomed to justifying because it’s what everyone else is doing.” What might this look like for us? Subordinates want to snipe about their superiors. Parents want to be liked. Students want to get by. We all want to be served. These can be our blind spots.

We need to examine ourselves in areas like this. And to seek the Lord’s help. That’s the second thing. This command to bear fruit is a funny thing. On the one hand, there’s obviously the need for us to do something. But, on the other hand, it also means we need help doing it. We need to ask the Lord for His help in seeing our blind spots, turning from them, and bearing fruit.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. And this is what it means to repent.

1. **WHO NEEDS TO HEAR IT?**

But that begs a question. Okay, that’s the call to repentance. But who needs to hear it? Our text is helpful here too, showing us there were two groups of people coming to John.

1. *Those Who Know It*

First, there were those who knew they needed to hear this (READ Matthew 3:5-6).

1. Not literally everyone

Just to be clear, this was not literally everyone. Matthew is using a figure of speech. It’s not that the entire region had come but that masses from all over the region were gathering there.

1. But a dramatic movement

Word was spreading. It was a dramatic movement, a revival. God’s Spirit was at work. There was a longing for cleansing and renewal. Now likely, there was much confusion as to what John meant by “the kingdom of heaven”. But here’s the thing. Repentance is not usually a popular message. Yet people were thronging to hear this man. And responding with heartfelt sincerity.

1. *Those Who Don’t*

These were the people who knew they needed to hear this call to repentance and then did so. But then there were those who didn’t. These were the many Pharisees and Sadducees.

1. Who they were

Who are they? Let me simply read you this entry from the ESV Study Bible (READ quote):

**Pharisees**. A laymen’s fellowship, popular with the common people and connected to local synagogues, chiefly characterized by adherence to extensive extrabiblical traditions, which they rigorously obeyed as a means of applying the law to daily life. **Sadducees**. A small group who derived their authority from the activities of the temple. They were removed from the common people by aristocratic and priestly influence as well as by their cooperation with Rome’s rule.

1. Why they were there

These are the religious elite. Why are they there among this rabble? Likely as representatives of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council of the time, sent to investigate what was going on.

1. What John said

And what does John say? (READ Matthew 3:7-10) John is not the guy you want at your fund-raising dinner. He calls them a “brood of vipers,” alluding to the belief that there were some snakes who ate their way out of their mothers. So John’s not just saying they are as subtle, crafty, and dangerous as a venomous snake. He’s saying they’re among the worst imaginable.

1. Why he said it

But why? He knew they felt safe and secure because of their blood tie to Abraham. Their idea was that they were a chosen people because they were a choice people, misreading their own history and God’s purposes. They were relying on themselves – their heritage, lineage, record, and achievements. And so John speaks to them directly and with urgency. “You can’t see it but you too need to repent. These other folks may need to repent of their unrighteousness. But you, you need to repent of your righteousness. You need to be washed of it and all its filth.”

So, back to the question. Who needs to hear this call to repentance? We all do.

*Illustration:*

The worst thing is to be lost and not know it, sure of where you’re going and the path you’re on but, in reality, to be in a deep darkness. I have family that lives in Bedford, VA – within sight of the Peaks of Otter and Sharptop Mountain. There lies the wreckage of a B-25 bomber that crashed in February 1943. It was to be a cross country nighttime navigational mission. We’re not sure what happened. This was before the days of the black box onboard. Witnesses said the engines sounded fine but the plane seemed to be awfully low, not circling but flying straight toward the mountain. The fire was visible ten miles away. All five of the crew were killed in the crash. Whatever happened, it seems they lost their bearings but didn’t know it.

*Application:*

Which raises a question. How can I know if this is me? How can I know if I’m relying on myself, on my record and righteousness, instead of on Christ and His? Ask yourself some questions. How do you respond to criticism? Does it merely sting or does it undo you? If by someone else’s words you feel like your worth is threatened, that’s a danger sign.

How do you respond when things don’t go your way? Does it merely disappoint you or do you come apart? You may have fallen into the trap of thinking “live a good life, get a good life.” So hardship and suffering are not part of your equation. And now you’re bitter with God.

Do you get along with others? Are you humble or proud? Is there any joy in your prayer life? Or is it a struggle and a chore? These are all signs of a life infected with self righteousness.

My friends, we need to repent, all of us. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

**CONCLUSION:**

That said, there is a visceral pushback to this message. There’s something within us that resists this call to repentance. There’s our pride making it hard to hear that we need to change. And there’s our response to authority making it hard to align ourselves under another’s rule.

But whose rule are we talking about here? It’s certainly not that of a tyrannical dictator who cares nothing for our good. I read recently that Kim Jong-un, the Supreme Leader of North Korea, had his Defense Minister killed. The means of execution? Not just a firing squad but anti-aircraft artillery, in front of hundreds at a military school. The man’s crime? A blown arms deal with Russia and falling asleep at a high level meeting. So the Supreme Leader decided to send a message to his underlings – not just killing the man but killing all traces of him.

Understand that when we hear John’s message (READ Matthew 3:2), we are not being called to submit ourselves to a tyrannical dictator who cares nothing for our good but the rightful King, a compassionate Shepherd, who cares everything and has done everything for our good.

He made us and knows us. And though we rebelled, He determined to save us from our folly. John is telling us, “He has come, come for us.” Ah, my friends. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Let us repent and continue in our repenting, turning from ourselves to Jesus.

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

(magnet) And so we must repent.