

Groundwork (John the Baptist) | 3.1-12

Grab your Bibles and open them up to Matthew 3. As we started the series on Matthew we asked the question: who is Jesus? We promised that through the study of this gospel you would get a clear picture of the character and person of Jesus. So far, He has been a secondary character in the story. Not in terms of importance, but in terms of screen time. Jesus has been the baby promised, the king worshipped, the focus of hatred and scorn, but He has been in the background. He has not uttered a word (in the story, He could talk in real life). Last week, we looked at how this fits the humility of Jesus. How His relative obscurity plays into how we understand the Savior of the world turned suffering servant. We looked at the first two chapters of Matthew, which represents the first 30 years of Jesus life, as a picture of love: *thinking not only of your own interests, but also of the interests of others.*

Today, we take a step forward into Jesus' ministry years. Jesus doesn't actually step on to the screen yet, but in His cousin John the Baptist (or JtheB, as I like to call him), we are introduced to a change in the life of Jesus. Not a change of character, but a change of purpose. In the last 3 years of His life, Jesus goes from being identified mainly by His humanity, to being identified primarily with His divinity. For 30 years, He has lived a normative life, now His life becomes much less normal/like ours. This transfer in His ministry is announced to us through JtheB. Who is this guy? Why is he so important that he shows up in all 4 gospels? Let's see, 3.2 (we are going to be a bit out of order on verses today):

WHO IS THIS GUY?

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.'"

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 2-4

This was not your run-of-the-mill guy. John doesn't disappear into a crowd the way that Jesus does. He is that eccentric guy who you think is crazy, but also can't help but look at (but not stare because you are afraid of what he might do if he sees you staring at him). The Bible describes his bizarreness in a few ways:

One thing it tells us is that he ate locusts and wild honey. I find it amazing how far people are willing to go with this point. I have seen this used to describe his manliness (he wasn't afraid to take on bees) to his veganism (the word translated locust is actually a cake made from carab, and the honey is crushed dates). I read this week about how it is meant to see God's servant devouring the devourer (locust) and restoring His land (flowing with milk and honey). I think the guy just had strange eating habits. This is not a lavish lifestyle he leads. This is a man who does not feel the need to dine, he just eats. There is something in his simplicity, his stripped down way of living that allows him to be about one thing: pointing away from himself to Jesus. This is the man who later in his life proclaimed: *I must decrease so that He may increase.* He gives of himself for something greater.

Another thing it tells us about him is that he lived in the wilderness. It may seem as you read your Bible that a lot of people live in the wilderness, but this was not the case. The climate of the desert (which is the wilderness we are talking about) makes it a pretty horrible place to call home. The first 4 letters of wilderness spells wild, so you can imagine. As we read the Bible, we see the repetitive theme of God calling His people to His work in the desert.

Abraham was an idol-worshipping nomad until God came to Him in the desert and called him to be the Father of Israel.

Jacob was living a self-centered life until the angel of God came to him in the desert, wrestled with him, and then told him about what he was going to do.

Moses was on the run from the Egyptians, in the desert of Midian tending sheep, when God called him to be the voice of His people.

On a much larger level, God brings the nation of Israel into the wilderness in order to give them His law and to call them His priesthood, His voice to the nations.

Once again, God is calling someone in the wilderness to rise up and do His work.

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.'"

This prophecy from Isaiah 40.3 is used to describe John in 3 out of 4 gospels and he actually uses this verse to describe himself in the fourth. It is important because this prophecy identifies John as a continuation of God's work, one more in a long line of those God has brought from the wilderness into His plan. God takes the wild, the chaotic and gives it focus. In the lives of all of these mentioned, He is not only calling them into His work, into His mission, but God is taking lives lost and making them found. He is taking people who are living for nothing specific and giving them a purpose.

John's purpose is to: *prepare the way*. He is called out of the wilderness to do the groundwork for the ministry of Jesus. He goes from being a person whose life is defined by craziness, to one who has a peaceful assurance of what his role is. In his calling, we see the redemptive purpose of God shining through, to take what is broken and lost and to make it refined for His purposes. In this case, God takes John's uniqueness and uses it as a means to draw people to the message of the Kingdom.

But that is not all the God is doing here. I left out a pretty major OT character with ties to the desert: Elijah. He was a prophet who spoke out for God against King Ahab and the worship of the false god Baal. His courage put his life at risk and he had to flee into the desert to live. God made water spring from the ground and the ravens fed him, and he was sustained to return to Ahab and announce the greatness of God...as a voice out of the desert (obvious parallel). Elijah's connection with John goes much farther, even to how they dress. In **2 Kings 1.8** it describes Elijah like this:

"He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist."

That sounds exactly like the description of John that we get here; Matthew does not want to give us any chance of missing what is going on here. He is saying: this is Elijah come again. Jewish readers would have lept out of their seats at this! The last words that God had spoken to Israel, through the prophet Malachi, the final promise given to them before the long silence was:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. Malachi 4.5-6

The coming king and kingdom were going to be ushered in with the return of Elijah. The Messiah was not just going to appear, but would be preceded by the great prophet coming to announce His arrival.

In the short introduction that we are given to JtheB here, it is clear that he is the fulfillment of prophecy (the coming Elijah), the forerunner to the Messiah, the voice in the desert, called from wilderness to clarity, to prepare the way for the Lord. What does this preparation look like, **1, 5-6**:

WHAT IS REPENTENCE?

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

*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. **1,5-6***

This is John's message: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* Get ready, here He comes. In verses 5-6 we see that a lot of people heard what he was saying and travelled into the wilderness in order to prepare themselves. The preparation that they were called to was repentance. But what is that? How are we supposed to repent?

We are accustomed to seeing people 'repent.' Famous people often get on TV and tell us how sorry they are and how they will never again do whatever it is they did. They let down their friends and family and ultimately let down themselves. We have seen this play out, but if we are honest it often rings shallow. Are we ever really convinced these people feel bad or will never do it again? It often feels like a publicity stunt (and often is). The reason why this so often seems strange is because the whole spectacle seems to be organized around the person sinning. It is about their image, their forgiveness, their tears, but they aren't the focus of repentance. And neither is the person that they sinned against. When the people coming out to John are confessing their sins, it isn't about being sorry, it is about recognizing that all sin is aimed at God. As David says in **Psalms 51**:

*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.**4***

In the same way that sinned is toward God, true repentance is also aimed at God. Repentance begins with a recognition of what our sin really is, an attack against the goodness of God. The world was designed to function, to be held together, by this very same goodness. All good things come from God, and it is His goodness that produces anything wonderful that we experience in this world. Our sin is not only picking a fight with God (which is never a good idea), but also creating all of the difficulty that we experience. We all have to deal with the very real results of our sin; it is destructive. Too often, what we pass off as repentance is nothing more than exasperation from dealing with our mess; I'm tired, I'm done. There is a difference between godly grief and worldly grief, which Paul explains for us clearly in **2 Corinthians 7.9-10**:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

He says there is good grief, it leads to a true repentance and salvation; there is a worldly grief which produces death (so you want to be sure you know the difference). Both of these situations contain grief. Both people here are sorry, but what are they sorry for?

Those with worldly grief are sorry for the results of their sin. They are sorry for the damage that they caused, the relationships that were broken, the situation that they are in. The reason why this leads to death is because this grief will never be relieved. You will continue to be sinful, people will continue to be affected, and you will struggle with your identity, the fairness of God, and the cruelty of other people. Worldly grief seeks a peace within a broken world, and it will never find it.

Godly grief seeks peace as well, but it is a peace with God rather than this world. Godly grief sees sin as God sees it, and recognizes how offensive it is, how damaged our relationship with God is. It recognizes the sin and responds with repentance. Our sin should grieve us. It is not just a part of the human condition, a part of everyone that we should just get used to, it is the bad part of us. It is the part that keeps us from a God who loves us.

True repentance is feeling the grief that you have caused God. All of the bad we experience on this earth has flown downstream from our broken relationship with God. That is where it all begins, with us deciding not only that we don't need God, but that we should have the honor, glory, praise that is His. He is absolute good and love and offers it to us, and we say: it isn't enough, you are not enough. You created us, but you don't really know me. You created everything good, but I can't trust you to know is best for me. God created us to be in relationship with Him, but we decided from the beginning that He wasn't worthy of being in control of us. We rejected Him and ran headfirst into destroying his perfect world. Godly grief contains worldly grief. It isn't that understanding sin makes the results of sin easy or even bearable sometimes. What Godly grief does is makes it clear that we are not going to be able to do anything to make it right. We are up a creek without a paddle.

Which brings us to another concept of repentance we might be familiar with is the Catholic version; the confession booth. Come in, confess your sins, REPENT, do six hail Mary's and you are good to go; you have paid your penance. Repentance becomes the process by which we can get rid of our sin. I confessed it, I get it out, then I do something to cleanse my conscience of the burden. This carries over into Evangelical churches through the accountability group. We no longer have the booth or the priest, but we are looking for a place to go to do the work necessary to feel better about ourselves. If I confess these things to other people than I can feel like have done my part to make myself better. We experience the worldly grief of sin, maybe we even feel the weight of our offense to God, then we do our part to fix it.

True repentance sees the debt of our sin as irreconcilable. There is nothing that you can do to undo what you have already done. As the people come out to John confessing their sins, they are stating their position in relation to God: dead. Not struggling, not suffering, dead. Repentance is knowing that we have no hope without God.

I was reminded this week in conversation about the picture that God gives to Ezekiel of who we are. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is taken by God to a valley of dry bones. Not just dead, but dead dead. God tells him to preach to the bones. He does, and the bones come together and create the great army of the Lord. God tells Ezekiel that this is a picture of what He will do, v.13:

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord. 13-14

You will know that it is me when the dead are made alive. You will see the Kingdom of heaven when the Spirit comes and brings life where there has never been anything but death.

True repentance is aimed at God, grieving the anguish that we have caused God, and recognizing that we are helpless to do anything to make it right again. We need God to fix this. We see here how John was preparing the way for Jesus. John makes it clear that this was his intention all along, v.11:

WHY SHOULD WE REPENT?

“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. 11

He says: I have come to get you ready, to bring repentance. I baptize you into need, but it is Jesus who brings the Spirit. I can help you to find you recognize that you are dead, but only He can bring you to life. I am here to get you ready to see who He is. Repentance sets the table for salvation.

It is necessary to be repentant, because otherwise the truth of God will sound unfair and terrifying. John’s description of Jesus here sounds like the grim reaper:

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. 12

Jesus goes around separating the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad. He puts the wheat into the barn and the chaff gets burnt. If we think that all people are good and deserving of happiness, then the fact that anyone receives hell seems unjust. If we are repentant, however, it is not the chaff that is receiving receiving what they do not deserve, it is the wheat. This is the crazy thing about how salvation works: it is only available to those who recognize they do not deserve it. Repentance is necessary for us to see Jesus as good, otherwise He is just a judge.

The Pharisees show us what it is to look at Jesus without repentance, v.7:

A LIFE OF REPENTANCE

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. 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.7-10

The Pharisees and Sadducees come out to watch people repent, feeling they don’t need it themselves. John calls the out: *Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* He is saying, you are not repentant, you don’t recognize your need, you don’t feel the urgency. What are you doing here? Before they can answer, he calls them out again: don’t pull the Abraham card. I don’t care, it means nothing to me. We are talking here about the God who has promised to make dry bones alive, He could turn these rocks into believers. He says:

Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

If you are not bearing fruit you will be thrown into the fire, you will be the chaff left at the end of the day. That seems to go against everything we have been saying. Think about who he is talking to. He tells the Pharisees, the guys who have rules for their rules, that only those who bear fruit will be saved. I have heard people use this verse as a defense for works-based righteousness, the idea that people get to go to heaven based on their own merit. The problem is, John would not be affirming the position of guys who he just referred to as: brood of vipers (which is not a positive term). So what is he saying?

The answer is right there in v.8: *Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*

The fruit that determines our value is not a work that builds us up, makes us worthy, but it is work that comes from repentance. Rather than: be good and Jesus will pick you for His team, we see, if you recognize that you are nothing, yet Jesus picks you for His team, you will respond with good works. The Christian life is not an opportunity for us to prove ourselves, but to marvel in the miracle that Jesus has performed on us. If you begin with repentance, then you will be drawing from an endless well. If we are dead without Christ, the any life that we have is His, all work that we do is for Him.

This understanding of a life of repentance is what sparked the Reformation. It was on this issue that Martin Luther began his 95 theses, his critique of the Catholic church:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent", he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Repentance is not something that we need only before we become a Christian. It is not just something we do when we sin really bad. It is not something that you do as much as it is something that you are. Repentance is coming to Jesus, to His cross, and seeing your sin, but also seeing His grace. Repentance is allowing your love for Jesus to continually change you, into someone who cares less and less about yourself and more and more about others. In being repentant, we are able to recognize our good as an overflow of the work of the Spirit in us.

What this does in our lives is removes the need to always be perfect, striving for some idea of who we think we are supposed to be. We can freely acknowledge our shortcomings. We can joyfully confess our sins and admit our faults, because we know that we are no longer defined by our death, but by the life that Jesus gives. We can give up thinking that we have to be something, achieve some level of morality before we are going to be acceptable to Jesus, and we can believe that it was *when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ.*