

“One Extraordinary Life: Real Repentance”

Matthew 3:7-12

If we were to boil the life of John the Baptist down to just one sentence, we could simply say that his was a life that was spent pointing others to Jesus.

Any life that is lived in that way is an extraordinary life. As the followers of Jesus, our lives should reflect His life and be a perpetual reminder of Him in the eyes of a lost world.

From 3:1-6, we see three key elements of John’s life:

- The MAN that John was
- The MESSAGE that John preached
- The MINISTRY that John had

Beginning in verse 7, we are given more specific detail about the message of repentance that John preached.

John MacArthur - *“John’s preaching was simple and his message was limited to that which was most essential, but he faithfully fulfilled his singular calling as the herald of God’s coming great King. He performed his ministry with a boldness, courage, power, and single-minded devotion that caused that King to say of him, ‘Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.’”*

From verses 7-12, I want to point out three key truths about what real repentance is and what it looks like in a person’s life.

1. Repentance is a change in BELIEF that results in CONFESSION of sin. (3:7)

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’”

In verse 5, Matthew tells us that Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to hear John preach. His ministry was influential in that it touched multiplied thousands of lives.

Some scholars even estimate that upwards of a million people may have gone out to hear John.

Included in that number were many Pharisees and Sadducees and religious leaders of Israel. Their curiosity had been peaked by John, and they wanted to know what he was all about.

The Pharisees were a strict sect that rose to the forefront of Jewish society during the intertestamental period.

“Pharisee” - *means separated ones*

The Pharisees were self-righteous and legalistic. They considered themselves to be the spiritual elite of Israel, but their ‘spirituality’ was entirely external.

In the gospels, Jesus reserved His harshest words of rebuke for the Pharisees. And, no one opposed Him any more than did the Pharisees.

The Sadducees were another sect who were at the other end of the spectrum. While the Pharisees were strict traditionalists, the Sadducees were the religious liberals of the day.

The Sadducees were compromisers, though they claimed to adhere to the law of Moses, and they scorned the traditions held by the Pharisees. They cared little for religion, especially doctrine. They ruled out the supernatural. They denied the existence of angels and the doctrine of resurrection. They believed in human autonomy and the freedom of the will.

In the church, it is amazing at how easy it is to drift toward ‘Pharisee-ism’ or ‘Sadducee-ism.’ A Pharisee looks down on others who doesn’t dress like him, worship like him, or behave as he thinks one ought to behave.

On the other hand, a Sadducee looks down on all tradition and sets aside the Bible because it isn’t ‘relevant’ enough for today’s society. May God keep us from these extremes!

Matthew says that both Pharisees and Sadducees were coming out to John in order to be baptized by him. There was only one problem with that--they had not genuinely repented.

There had been no change in belief resulting in confession of sin.

Their worship was in PRETENSE.

From what we know about these Pharisees and Sadducees, they were much more concerned about the applause of men than they were the true worship of God.

Elsewhere, Jesus uses them as an example and instructs His followers to not be like them in the area of:

- giving
- praying

- serving

Their worship was all a show. They loved to sit in the best seats in the synagogue so that they appeared to be the most pious.

John refers to them as a 'brood of vipers.' A viper is a poisonous snake. Snakes capture their prey through subtle deception. Their bite spreads their venom and infects their victims. In a parallel way, these phony religious leaders had deceived Israel and spread their poison throughout the religious establishment of the day. John calls them out on it.

John asks, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" The implication is that they were expecting the baptism to be a kind of spiritual fire insurance to provide them with protection from wrath. Their approach was one of outward observance rather than inward repentance.

Their heart was full of PRIDE.

John calls them out on the fact that they were basing their salvation on their national heritage rather than their personal repentance.

v. 9 - "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."

Part of the preparatory work that John had been given was to rebuke this way of thinking so that people would be repentant and ready for Messiah's work on their behalf.

Matthew says in verse 6 that many were coming to John and were being baptized, confessing their sin. Nowhere do we read where the Pharisees and Sadducees were confessing their sins. Their belief system had not changed, and they didn't see the need for repentance.

Luke 13:3 - "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Salvation and discipleship means that a person has repented of their sin. That is, they have confessed and turned from their sin. No longer do they place their faith in themselves. Their belief system has changed. Instead of trusting in themselves and their own personal performance, they recognize that they are sinners who are desperately in need of God's grace.

Confession means that I agree with God about my sin.

2. Repentance is a change in BEHAVIOR that results in CONTRITION over sin. (3:8-10)

"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from

these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Real repentance goes a step further than belief that results in confession of sin.

Real repentance precedes a changed life. Repentance means that my belief has impacted my behavior.

First, John emphasizes the FRUIT of repentance (v. 8)

“Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance...”

“Fruits” - *refers to visible evidence*

Real repentance is always visible. If it has genuinely taken place in my heart, it will show up through the way that I live out my life.

John the Baptist’s words in Luke’s account is more detailed about the kind of fruit that results from true repentance.

Luke 3:10-14 - “So the people asked him, saying, ‘What shall we do then?’ He answered and said to them, ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.’ Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what it appointed for you.’ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, ‘And what shall we do?’ So he said to them, ‘Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.’”

This is akin to what James writes:

James 2:17 - “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

True inward repentance manifests itself through visible outward obedience. Our actions are indicators of our attitudes.

Baptism was an outward symbol of their inward change.

What is amazing in this text is that Matthew shows how Jews, not Gentiles, were coming to be baptized.

Platt - *“They were admitting that their Jewishness did not guarantee them a right standing before God. They realized that they needed to personally confess their sins and profess faith in God.”*

Baptism is an outward sign of our inward repentance. This is the pattern that is set throughout the New Testament. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said:

Acts 2:38 - **“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.”**

Repentance and faith always precede baptism in the New Testament. Thus, baptism is not merely some ritual that we observe nor is it a requirement for salvation. It is, however, necessary for our obedience as Christ-followers. It is the outward symbol of our inward change.

Baptism is a symbol of death and resurrection. It is an acknowledgment that there is nothing you can do to atone for your sins, but only that Christ can. It is a renouncing of your sin and self-dependence, self-reliance, self-righteousness, and self-accomplishment. It is turning your life entirely over to Jesus.

Second, John explains the ROOT of repentance (v. 9-10)

“...even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The reason that there is fruit of repentance in one's life is because there is a root of repentance in one's heart. The fruit will be no better than the root!

Repentance and faith inwardly is always reflected outwardly.

Erich Sauer - *“[Repentance is] a threefold action. In the understanding it means a knowledge of sin; in the feelings it means pain and grief; and in the will it means a change of mind.”*

It involves understanding our need for cleansing and change. It involves my emotions, feeling the need that my mind knows. Then, it involves right actions that result from what my mind knows and my heart feels.

- Repentance is more than recognition
- Repentance is more than remorse
- Repentance is more than reform

Notice that John uses a figure of speech and says that the ax is always laid to the root of the trees. The problem of a lack of fruit is traced back to a problem with the root.

Every problem in the world can be traced back to a problem with man's heart.

Jeremiah 17:9 - "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

Matthew 15:19 - "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."

Luke 6:45 - "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

The human heart is the most deceptive and wicked thing on earth. For this reason, a person must have a "spiritual heart transplant" take place in their life.

Real repentance is a change of heart resulting in a change of behavior. Instead of dealing merely with externals, it deals with internals which then takes care of the external.

Jesus is in the heart-changing business! He gives a new heart to those who turn to Him in sincere repentance and faith.

**3. Repentance is a change in BELONGING that results in CONVERSION from sin.
(3:11-12)**

"I indeed baptize you with water unto 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. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

After having singled out the Pharisees and Sadducees about their shallowness, notice how John points them to Christ. His baptism was a baptism of water, but the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

This speaks of both salvation and judgment.

Those who turn in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ are saved and are immediately spiritually baptized in His Spirit. This simply means that God's Spirit comes to take up residence in the heart of the one who was repented and placed his or her faith in Christ.

The 'baptism of fire' is a reference to judgment. A person will either be saved or they will be damned. There is no in-between. God's wrath is reserved for those who refuse to repent and trust in Jesus Christ.

"Fire" - *used throughout Scripture to refer to God's judgment*

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 - "...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power..."

But for those who belong to Christ, the future is bright:

1 Thessalonians 5:9 - "For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him."

John says that His winnowing fork is in His hand, and with it Jesus is thoroughly cleaning out His threshing floor.

Ancient farmers would pile heavy stalks of grain onto their threshing floor, and a team of oxen attached to a millstone would grind the grain, which would separate the kernels of wheat from the chaff or waste.

The farmer would then take his winnowing fan or fork, scoop up a pile of grain, and throw it into the air. The chaff, being lighter, would be swept away by the wind while the heavier grain would fall back to the floor. When repeated enough, nothing would be left but useful grain.

One of these days, the "chaff" is going to be swept away in judgment, and only the golden grain will remain.

In my life, have I truly repented? In other words:

- Has there been a change in belief resulting in confession of my sin?
- Has there been a change in behavior resulting in contrition over my sin?
- Has there been a change in belonging resulting in conversion from my sin?