

MATTHEW 3:1–12. (EHV)

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” [Isa. 40:3]

John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

“Repent. The end is near.”

What do you think of when you hear those words? Usually when you see them in a movie or on a television show, they are printed on a large placard being worn or held by some man in a big city who has a distant look in his eyes and looks like he might be homeless. The message is subtle, but clear: If you think that you need to repent and that the end is near, you’re a few fries short of a Happy Meal.

Now imagine if that man wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, his food was locusts and wild honey, and he preached out in the wilderness. You would definitely think he was looney.

But even though people may have gone out to see a spectacle, most of them didn’t return home laughing. John the Baptist’s message hit home. But it wasn’t just a message of doom and gloom, as “Repent. The end is near.” tends to be portrayed. It was also a message of forgiveness and hope. Today we want to listen as **the Baptist calls us to repent.**

1. Reasons to Repent

There is an element of urgency in light of impending doom in John’s call to repentance. There would be no need to repent if sin were no big deal. But it is a big deal. Every sin, from the seemingly smallest to the seemingly greatest, deserves eternal damnation. John talks about “the coming wrath,” and talks about every tree not producing good fruit being “cut down and thrown into the fire.” Yes, later he says that Jesus will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn, but burning up the chaff “with unquenchable fire.”

The message of grace is *not* that God doesn't think sin is a big deal anymore. The message of grace is *not* that God just waves his hand at it and chuckles, "Humans will be humans." The message of grace wouldn't mean anything if that were the case. Every little sin is a violation of God's very existence, his very being. He isn't just holy; he is holiness. So he must punish sin. John talks about a twofold punishment—the punishment of being on the receiving end of God's wrath and the punishment of being on the receiving end of eternal pain. Obviously the two are related, but they can also be distinguished, just as a parent's disappointment and displeasure with you and a spanking from them can be distinguished. You know how uncomfortable it is when you can tell that your husband or wife, your dad or mom, is angry with you. Their angry gaze or their ignoring silence seemingly bores a hole into you. It is infinitely worse when the God of all the universe, in whom you live, move, and have your being, aims the full measure of his wrath and displeasure against you, and does so irreversibly. On Judgment Day, people will be able to feel that, even apart from the unquenchable fire. But then there is the unquenchable fire, the punishment that comes from his wrath, fire that cannot be put out, fire that continues to consume and burn away but is never spent.

So why do *we* need to hear this? We need to hear this because, no matter who we are, we have sins that deserve eternal punishment, sins of which we need to repent. John makes it clear that that's true whether you're outside or inside the church. John preaches out in the wilderness, so that everyone has to go out to the wilderness to listen to him. The whole scene is a metaphor: Even if everything is going well for us outwardly, we are all by nature wandering in the wilderness of sin and death.

Many need to repent as those outside the church. They are all living in sin—very often sins of the flesh, but even if not those sins, the sin of unbelief, the sin of living life to some god other than the true God.

But we who are inside the church also need to repent. What John told the Pharisees also applies to us: "When [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, 'You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance!'" If you are truly repentant, if you truly trust that you're a damnable sinner and that Jesus has made you a saint bound for heaven through his blood, then you aren't just going to go back to your old sins willy-nilly. You aren't going to say, "Okay, well I'm glad that's taken care of!" and then ignore his word.

In the Pharisees' case, they thought they could ignore the call to repentance because they had Abraham as their father. God had made promises to Abraham, and they were Abraham's descendants, so they simply trusted in that external connection. "We have Abraham as our father." What does that sound like today? "My ancestors founded this church"? "My husband or wife goes to church"? "I was baptized and confirmed here"? It's one thing to trust what God says he actually gave you in your baptism. It's another to just trust the fact that you're on the books as someone who was baptized here, so everything is hunky-dory.

And how do you know if you're one or the other? Look at the fruit. If there is truly repentance, then there will be fruit. You will care about God's commandments and your violations of those commandments. You will care about maintaining a constant connection with God's saving word and sacraments. You will care about living in a way that reflects his eternal love for you. Picture everyone who calls themselves a Christian as a tree in God's orchard. God

doesn't want dead trees taking up space and using up the rich soil of his orchard. So he's going around with his axe and examining the fruit. If there's fruit on the outside, that tells him and others there's life on the inside. If there is no fruit on the outside, then there cannot be any life on the inside, even though the dead trees are surrounded by all sorts of apple trees.

Paul tells us in Galatians 5: "Now the works of the sinful flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, complete lack of restraint, idolatry," that is, putting other things above God and his word, "sorcery, hatred, discord, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, orgies, and things similar to these. I warn you, just as I also warned you before, that those who continue to do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." He says basically the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6.

In other words, if this is the way you're living without regret or desire to change or effort to change, then don't think you're a repentant believer and that you're going to escape the coming wrath. If there's no fruit, then there's no faith. If you just get through the hour here every Sunday, but then it's right back to the bar, right back to watching the movies and shows that are going to arouse your lust or your jealousy or your bloodthirstiness, and scrolling for posts and pictures on the internet and social media that are going to do the same, then you need to feel the air of God's axe as he lines up his stroke.

Think of those Jews who heard John. Jesus was about to arrive on the scene. We are in very similar shoes. Jesus is about to arrive on the scene. Only he isn't about to win salvation. Salvation has already been won. The cornerstone has been set in place. He's coming to separate the wheat from the chaff, those who took his first coming seriously from those who have not.

2. Invitation to Repent

So, because all of us are naturally in the wilderness of sin and death, John calls us to repent. "In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!'" We should review what repentance is and what it is not. Some people will describe repentance in terms of four Rs—recognition, remorse, resolution, and restitution. Others add more. Basically, many people falsely think of repentance in terms of action. But the word for repentance in Greek captures the fact that repentance takes place in the mind and the heart, not in our actions. Yes, as we just talked about, if there is repentance, there is also the fruit of repentance. But the fruit is the result of repentance; it is not what makes repentance.

Repentance really only has two parts—contrition, or sorrow over sin, and faith in the forgiveness of sins on the part of God. When John says, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!", "the kingdom of heaven is near" isn't just a threat meant to scare his audience into repentance. It isn't like when your mom says, "Are you sure you don't want to tell me the truth? Your dad is almost home!" No, "the kingdom of heaven is near" means that the opportunity to repent couldn't be better. So it's more like when a friend tells you, "Now is a great time to have that problem checked out, because the clinic is putting on a free health fair right now." "The kingdom of heaven" sums up all the Messianic prophecies and gracious promises of the Old Testament. John is saying, "Those prophecies were talking about this time. Now is the time they are going to be fulfilled!"

Matthew bears that out when he says that John was the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.’” In other words, the Lord himself is coming. The Lord himself is going to arrive on the scene, the Lord who preached about himself that he is “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin” [Exod. 34:6–7]. This is why John also preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. “They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.” Go back to the people gathering in the wilderness. The only life out there was in the Jordan River. Same here: The only thing that can cleanse us is God’s forgiveness in the name of his Son in the waters of baptism.

Now is the perfect opportunity to repent, before it’s too late. Now is the time of God’s favor. Now is the day of salvation. Christ has come and paid for all your sins. He joins his forgiveness and salvation and power to his word and to the waters of baptism and to his Holy Supper. So repent. Stop treating sin, stop treating your sins, as if they were just a fly on the wall—annoying but ultimately harmless. Be sorry for your sins. Confess them to your Savior. Receive his forgiveness in his word and sacraments and trust in it.

That’s the Baptist’s call to repent. That’s your Savior’s gracious call to you and to me. Amen.