

# Matthew

John the Baptist

January 28, 2024

## I. Introduction

A. **Matthew 3:1-12**, Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, [2] “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” [3] For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!’” [4] Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

[5] Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; [6] and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. [7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [8] Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; [9] and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. [10] The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [11] As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

B. Today, we will consider the public confession of sin, and the foolishness of putting confidence in your religious heritage or theology in relation to your standing before God.

C. Pray

## II. The Public Confession of Sin:

A. [6] and they were being baptized by [John] in the Jordan River, **as they confessed** their sins.

1. Though this was a public setting, we see that the confession of sins was just as much a public act as baptism.

- B. In talking about the public confession of sin, I am not wanting to start something new among us. Nor am I wanting to discredit believers who are unwilling to do this. My goal is to present what I deem to be a reasonable perspective of such an activity within a group of believers, because the public confession of sin can be spiritually profitable for both the individual and the group.
1. However, the public confession of sin is not for the regular Sunday church service. Such an activity would produce the kind of information that young ears, and immature ears, and unprepared ears should not hear. Hearing such things would harm them more than help them.
  2. Therefore, to make this kind of practice reasonable and safe for all involved, it should be done in a closed meeting –
    - a. where those in attendance know each other,
    - b. where everyone in attendance knows that the public confession of sin will be part of the meeting,
    - c. and where there is a level of maturity that is able to deal appropriately with what is shared.
  3. Without question, it takes some serious Christian maturity to do this well. And by that, I mean, those in the group ought to be mature enough to be honest enough to publicly expose sins committed without either becoming proud of doing so, or feeling so worthless that they act as if they can no longer be a meaningful part of the group. And those listening ought to be mature enough not to feel proud that they are not as bad as the one confessing.
  4. Those in the group ought to be mature enough to know what details to include and what to exclude so that the sharing does not titillate or stir ungodly thinking or feelings or passions in the listeners.
  5. Those in the group ought to be mature enough to go from publicly admitting sin to following through in taking the action necessary to seriously decrease or bring to an end the sin or area of sin confessed. The reality is, public admission of sin is not the remedy, but it can be a path that can help individuals and the group make serious progress in putting an end to sin and putting on Christ-likeness.
  6. Those in the group ought to be mature enough to ask good questions, make helpful observations, and provide the kind of suggestions that help the one confessing move forward.
  7. Those in the group ought to be mature enough to hear confessions of sin without denigrating the confessor or becoming proud that they have never done what has been confessed.

8. Those in the group ought to be mature enough to keep what is said during the meetings, in the meeting. Nothing confessed in the group is to be repeated – in any way – outside the group.
9. And someone in the group ought to know the Bible well enough to keep those in the group, and the practice of public confession, grounded in the Word of God.

C. John Wesley incorporated the public confession of sin in the **method** he developed for promoting spiritual growth among those who attended his Band Meetings. For example, those who took part in these meetings were to publicly answer the following questions during each meeting.

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, which you are not sure is a sin or not?

(Reference: John Wesley's Class Meetings: a Model for Making Disciples, by D. Michael Henderson, Evangel Publishing House, 1997, pp. 118-9.)

D. It was John's method that became the Methodist movement and eventually the Methodist denomination. However, as it is wherever sin exists, what began as good and godly has lost a lot of its goodness and godliness. Sadly, the same can be said for the Christianity Jesus started.

### III. **Misplaced confidence in our religious heritage or theology in relation to our standing before God:**

A. [7] When [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [8] Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; [9] and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. [10] The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

1. John begins his comments to the Pharisees and Sadducees by saying, "You brood of vipers." What John is implying is that just like vipers who are often unseen until they bite, so the Pharisees and Sadducees were inconspicuously poisoning the religious sincerity of all who came under the influence of their beliefs and practices.
2. Then John says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

- a. What John is implying is that such a warning couldn't come from within their group because they saw themselves as too godly to need repentance.
  - b. And the warning couldn't have come from outside their group because they saw themselves as so religiously superior that they deemed everyone else as unworthy to be listened to.
3. Jesus went further than John in condemning the insincerity of the religious leaders by giving examples of their hypocrisy. We read this in **Matthew 23:29-33**, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, [30] and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' [31] [By doing this] you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets (*How so? By going after Jesus to destroy His ministry and kill Him.*). [32] Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers (*complete what you intend to do so as to become as guilty as your fathers*). [33] You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?"
  4. And we saw in Paul's letters to Timothy and the Thessalonians, the great harm done to the message, to the people of God, and to the advancement of true godliness by religious leaders who make a show of their religiosity and their importance, yet their lives and ministries include open hypocrisy, blatant insincerity, and obvious pride. Ungodly religious leaders have done and are still doing more harm than good.
- B. John continues his comments to the Pharisees and Sadducees by saying, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance."
1. We talked about this last week, but let me remind you that true repentance (*change of mind*) includes a change of life, or a progressively changing life, that verifies the sincerity of the repentance. Without at least a progressive and verifiable change of life, there has been no true repentance (*change of mind*).
  2. John was asked for examples of a changed life that would verify true repentance. We read this in **Luke 3:10-14**, And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" [11] And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise" (*show care and compassion toward those in need*). [12] And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" [13] And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have

been ordered to” (*say no to selfishness and greed*). [14] Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, “And what about us, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages” (*don’t abuse your power for personal gain and to the harm of others*).

3. Matthew provides us with many more examples of living out true repentance by giving us a detailed account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**).
  4. Coming back to what we are talking about in **Matthew 3**, we see that John begins by (1) openly exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders (*calls them a brood of vipers*), (2) then he tells them that if they are going to repent, it will only be genuine if they proceed to live accordingly, and finally, (3) John warns them about the foolishness of placing confidence in their ethnic and religious heritage regarding their standing with God.
- C. We read this in **vs 9**, “and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.”
1. The Jews of Jesus day believed that they were God’s chosen people because they were descendants of Abraham. And as descendants of Abraham, they were part of God’s chosen people.
    - a. The first time this truth is clearly stated about the Israelites being God’s chosen people, is in **Deuteronomy 7:6**, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”
    - b. Therefore, the Jews of Jesus’ day were right in declaring they were members of God’s chosen people. The problem was not in knowing this truth, the problem was in confidently relying on this truth to justify them in the sight of God – in spite of how they lived.
    - c. Many Christians and church attendees in our day follow this same pattern of thinking and believing. They point to the theology of grace coupled with the theology of eternal security to feel confident that they are fully justified and guaranteed eternal life – in spite of how they live.
  2. John proceeds to clearly say that such confidence is a false confidence, because it is a misplaced confidence. The reality is, neither ethnic heritage, nor religious practices and customs, nor the predominant theology of the day are sufficient to guarantee salvation. The

guarantee of salvation is found in the grace of God coupled with a repentance and faith that produces a progressive, maturing, and verifiable life of godliness.

- a. Let me give you a real-life example of the reality that words promising action must result in the promised action to be authentic.
- b. How many of you who are married, found out – after several years of marriage – that the words of love and commitment spoken in the marriage ceremony did not fully match what you were experiencing in daily life?
- c. And how many of you, after experiencing repeated times of disappointment, believed you were fully loved because of the words spoken in the ceremony?
- d. My point is simply this. You don't really believe that words equal behavior. You believe that behavior either affirms or contradicts the words spoken. And is this not what God is telling us about repentance here in **Matthew 3**?

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. John concludes his comments to the religious leaders with a warning about God's coming judgment. This is found in **vs 10 and 12**.
  1. [10] The axe is already laid at the root of the trees (*it may not be chopping yet, but it ready to begin chopping – so beware*); therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [12] His (*Jesus*) winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor (*no one will be left un-judged and therefore able to avoid the consequences due them*); and He will gather His wheat (*the righteous*) into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff (*the unrighteous*) with unquenchable fire.
- B. May we be among those who intentionally, thoughtfully, and with perseverance bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. And if you have the courage and want help in growing faster, consider joining a group of serious-minded believers that include the public confession of sin in their small group meetings.