

FPFWC Christian Development



The Beginning of the Call

December 2020

Winter Quarter

December 26, 2020

Lesson #4 – Called to Prepare

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Matthew 3:1-12

Key Verse - This is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.—Matthew 3:3

ICE BREAKERS –

1. What does it mean to repent?
2. What plan can you make to get rid of the chaff in your life?

LESSON BACKGROUND

In Jesus' day as before, mainstream Jewish religion centered primarily on the Jerusalem temple (which was controlled by wealthy pro-Roman Sadducees) and secondarily on local synagogues (which often were led by Pharisees and scribal experts in the Jewish Scriptures). As Jesus himself pointed out, both had become oppressive, actually hindering people in their relationships to God (example: Matthew 23:13–39). The religious authorities placed heavy burdens on the average worshipper (23:4). This implied that God was not readily accessible to common people. Those authorities had developed a complex system of rules and regulations that people could not keep.

Aside from the fact that these approaches made God largely inaccessible, they also were closely tied to the efforts of the Jewish elite to maintain peace with the Roman Empire (John 11:48). Reacting to this situation, some Jews turned to monastic movements. Others adopted an ascetic lifestyle and sought God through seasons of meditation in the wilderness. Still others were drawn into fringe prophetic movements that promised deliverance from Roman oppression; these sometimes led to rebellion (example: Acts 5:34–37).

John the Baptist's work was familiar within this religious landscape. But it was unique in two significant ways that made him a popular figure. The first of those distinctives is evident from the epithet we still use for him today: he was "the Baptist" (Matthew 3:1, today's text) or "the Baptizer." While Jews regularly washed their hands, feet, and household items for purposes of religious purification—including full-body washings on many occasions—they washed only themselves, never other people.

Such washing was viewed as a way of removing sin and impurity (compare Ezekiel 36:25). In standard Jewish thinking it was not possible for one person to remove another person's impurities. No priest or rabbi would wash someone else, not least because doing so would make the one giving the bath unclean as well! John, however, was different. His hands-on baptism served as a powerful symbol of the content of his message.

That message was the second distinctive of John's ministry. He did not tell people to withdraw into the wilderness, nor did he promise freedom from Roman rule. Rather, John the Baptist told them to repent in preparation for a great work of God that was looming on the horizon.

John's focus on second chances and emphasis on the reality of God's presence made him a popular figure with Jews from a wide range of backgrounds. Both the New Testament and the ancient Jewish historian Josephus (about AD 37–100) attest to John's popularity (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2). His refusal to compromise and his commitment to speaking the truth ultimately led to his death at the hands of Herod Antipas, Rome's client-king (Matthew 14:1–12).

LESSON COMMENTARY –

The Messiah's Forerunner (3:1–12)

3:1–4. Matthew shifts his narrative about 30 years into the future to the start of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist's attire (3:4) is strikingly similar to Elijah's (2Kg 1:8), and Matthew makes that connection explicit (Mt 11:14; see Lk 1:17). Matthew thus consistently uses the phrase **kingdom of heaven**, not "kingdom of God" as in the other gospels, probably because his Jewish audience might have been offended at the excessive and overly-familiar use of God's name. What is the **kingdom of heaven**? In Luke's gospel, the initial announcements of the kingdom were made to Mary regarding her Son, of whom the angel Gabriel says, "God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end" (Lk 1:32–33). Gabriel appeared to reiterate the Davidic covenant found in 2Sm 7, in which God promised David a son who would rule and reign over His kingdom Israel forever. Of importance are the verbal parallels between Lk 1:32–33 and 2Sm 7:13–16 (both passages referring to and using the words "son," "house," "kingdom," "throne," and "forever"), which indicate that Jesus has come, among other things, to fulfill the role as the ultimate Son of David. These points suggest that the gospel writers had an apologetic purpose, to argue for Jesus fulfilling the promises regarding David's seed ruling over David's kingdom. It makes the best sense to see this kingdom as the same one promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a literal geopolitical kingdom in which there was a ruling king, replete with authority that is exercised over a literal people and a literal land. Matthew calls it the **kingdom of heaven** *not because it exists only in heaven*, but because it will come *to earth from heaven*.

3:5–12. The connection between the baptism administered by John and the confession given by those baptized is disputed. The preposition **for** (*eis*) in the phrase **for repentance** (v. 11) can carry the nuance "because of" or "on the basis of" (see Mt 10:41, where the phrase "in [*eis*] the name of a prophet" could be translated "on the basis of the name of a prophet" or "because one is called a prophet"), so that the baptism in water by John is "because of" or "on the basis of" the prior repentance of the people. John's blistering words for **the Pharisees and Sadducees** (v. 7) indicate that there was an element among those who came whose actions were hypocritical. **We have Abraham for our father** (v. 9) indicates

that their ethnic and religious background was presumptuous and gave them false security. To be **children to Abraham** was wrongly restricted to Jewish people in their thinking, and would depend upon one's repentance (a change of mind regarding one's sins). True repentance was to be demonstrated by the production of **good fruit** (v. 10), the absence of which negated the baptism and showed the repentance to be spurious. For Matthew, it is **good fruit** that provides the evidence that one is in right standing with God (i.e., "saved"), not the supposed presence of life without good fruit (Mt 7:16–20; 13:3–9; 18–23).

John declares that the baptism Jesus will bring will be **with the Holy Spirit and fire** (v. 11). Jesus is the "baptizer" and the Spirit is the element into which the believer is baptized (Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:33; Ac 1:5; 11:16, and even 1Co 12:13). The Spirit does not do the baptizing. **With the Holy Spirit and fire** indicates that everyone will experience *both* aspects of this baptism, either a baptism in the Spirit that is a "refining fire" (strengthening through trials or growth in sanctification; see Zch 13:9; Rm 8:12–14; 1Pt 1:7) for those who embrace Christ, or for those who do not embrace the Messiah, a "fiery judgment" (Gn 19:24; Ps 21:9; Ezk 22:20; 2Th 1:7–8; Heb 10:27) eternal in duration.

LESSON NUGGET – John the Baptist was not intimidated by people, nor was he afraid to preach about judgment (v.12). He was obedient to his Lord and magnified Him in all things. Some people heard God's Word and confessed their sins (3:5-6), while others heard it and covered their sins (vv7-9). The first group became children of God, but the second group were children of the devil.

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary