

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Theme: Series-Prepare for the King: The “R” Word - Repent

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 04/12/2016 at 10:30am

In Matthew chapter 3, verse 1, we read, "In those days came John the Baptizer." And he hit the silent sky like a comet. He was the first prophetic voice in 400 years and his message was the most anticipated of any message that could ever be delivered. His message was the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the King is coming, the thing for which Israel had hoped, the anticipation of the kingdom, the One which they had longed to see - the King Himself - was nigh, was near. And we've learned in our study that John the Baptist was the herald of the King. He was the announcer. He was the forerunner. And so, we have met him because this fits Matthew's plan.

Matthew wrote his entire gospel to present Christ as King. And Matthew well knows that all kings have a herald. All kings have an announcer. All kings have a forerunner or someone who straightens out the path, who gets things ready for his arrival. And, consequently, Matthew goes to great lengths to introduce to us this herald in order that he might affirm from another angle, that indeed Jesus Christ was a king. Like any king, He had a herald, and not just any herald, not just any forerunner, but according to Matthew 11:11, John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever been born up until his time. Indeed, a great man. Matthew introduces us to John because it fits his theme.

And John's message was the message of repentance, the message that was needed to get Israel ready. Because the tragedy of the matter, as we have seen, was that even though the King was coming and even though the kingdom was imminent, the people were not ready and the people could not receive the kingdom. There was sin in Israel. Israel was lost. In fact, Israel was no different than Gentiles at this point. And that's why John preached a baptism, because baptism was actually the rite which a Gentile proselyte went through to become a part of Israel. And John was, in effect, saying, "You're on the outside looking in. The good news, the King is coming; the bad news, you're not ready. You've got to be converted. You've got to be changed." The word "repentance," literally, is "converted." You've got to be transformed. You've got to turn your life around and get ready for the King or you will not be able to receive His kingdom.

Repentance is the key note of John's message.

Matt 3:2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

This was John's message "Repent." That is, turn from sin and towards God. We'll look at that more closely later in the passage. But why repent? Because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The Kingdom of Heaven, that is, God's kingdom, God's reign, God's rule, is at hand. But what does all this mean? What does repentance mean? What is this Kingdom of Heaven? The reign of God's rule?

Well first, let's have a look a bit more about John the Baptist and who he was. Matthew as well as the other 3 Gospel writers tell us that John the Baptist was the exact one foretold by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years earlier.

Matthew 3:3 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.’”

John's message was a call to repentance.

The call to repentance is important and must not be neglected. It is entirely accurate to say that it is the *first word of the gospel*.

(Matthew 3:1-2)

John wanted people to know that **the kingdom of heaven** was *near*– as close as your **hand**. It wasn't as distant or as dreamy as they had imagined. This is why John was so urgent in his call to repentance. If the **kingdom of heaven is at hand**, then we must get ready *now*.

Some people think that repentance is about *feelings*, especially feeling sorry for your sin. It is wonderful to feel sorry about your sin, but **repent** isn't a "feelings" word only. It is an *action* word. John told his listeners to make a change of the mind, not merely to feel sorry for what they had done. Repentance speaks of a change of direction, not a sorrow in the heart.

Repentance is an important thing. It's a great, great biblical truth. And I want you to understand it before we look again at his message.

The great theologian Eric Sauer aptly explained repentance. He said this, "**Repentance is a threefold action. (1) In the understanding, it means knowledge of sin. (2) In the feelings, it means pain and grief. (3) And in the will, it means a change of mind,**" and all three **have to be there**. In general, then, repentance involves first of all, insight in the mind, that is understanding; secondly, despair in the emotions or the feelings; and thirdly, a change of life, changing the pattern, turning around, coming to the place where you see the truth in your mind

Now, let us explore together the word Repentance from John's message.

(1) In the understanding, it means knowledge of sin.

That is the intellectual part. Repentance begins when there is a knowledge of sin, when there is a recognition of sin. There had to be an understanding of sin involving a sense of personal guilt, a sense of personal defilement, a sense of personal helplessness. All three of these are illustrated very aptly in Psalm 51.

Take your Bible and turn to Psalm 51 verse 3. This, by the way, is David's repentant heart crying out to God after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. In order to eliminate her husband, he got him out in a battle and instructed his soldiers to get him in the heat of the battle and leave him there until he was killed. And in response to that, his heart is broken and he repents. But first of all is the intellectual part in verse 3. "For I acknowledge my transgression and my sin is ever before me."

The story goes that Lady Huntington was invited, or rather invited, I should say - the Duchess of Birmingham - to come to hear George Whitfield preach. The duchess responded in this manner: "It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. It is highly offensive and insulting." Well, Lady Huntington was insulted when George Whitfield attempted to call her to the recognition of sin, and consequently she never entered into the act of repentance.

(2) In the feelings, it means pain and grief.

We go from the mind to the feelings, and it becomes a recognition not only of sin, but that sin is hateful to a holy God, and then there is an overwhelming sense of guilt in the emotions. Psalm 51 again and verse 1: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."

Here is a man crying for mercy and the only man who needs mercy is a man who is - What? - guilty. Innocent men don't need mercy. Justice will do fine for them.

It's got to be a sorrow directed toward God. **Sorrow that is merely a sense of shame because everybody found out, or sorrow that is really fear of the consequences, is selfishness- not repentance.** True emotional guilt, true sorrow in the heart, is because God

has been violated and that's the stuff of which real repentance is made. There are lots of people who are sorry they got caught, right? Lots of people who are sorry they lost their reputation, lots of people who are sorry they got some consequences; that's different. Listen to this. True repentance doesn't think of consequences, it doesn't think of other people's opinion, and it doesn't think of excuses; it does think of transgressing God, it does think of being personally guilty.

You begin with the intellect and then it moves to the feelings. But no matter how convinced the mind is about sin, and no matter how pained the emotions become, even in the right way, true repentance will never happen without the third area, and that's a turning around.

(3) And in the will, it means a change of mind.

Repentance does not describe something we must do before we come to God; it describes what coming to God is like. If you are in London, and I tell you to come to Cornwall, I don't really need to say "Leave London and come to Cornwall." To come to Cornwall *is* to leave London, and if I haven't left London, I certainly haven't come to Cornwall. We can't come to the **kingdom of heaven** unless we leave our sin and the self-life.

(V.7-12) John's confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees

This is our introduction to these two important groups in first-century Judaism. These two groups were very different and often in conflict. Together they represented the leadership of Judaism.

Matthew Poole pointed out four things about the Pharisees. (1) They believed that one was made righteous by keeping the law, and they believed themselves to be righteous in this way. (2) They often misinterpreted the law. (3) They held many traditions to be of equal authority to Scripture. (4) They were often hypocrites in their practice, neglecting the core and spirit of the law for aspects of outward observance.

John accused these leaders of wanting to appear anxious for the Messiah, but not truly repenting and preparing their hearts. Therefore, John demanded fruits worthy of repentance. "Many Pharisees and Sadducees may have come for baptism with the ostentation that characterized their other religious activities... they were showing the world how ready they were for the Messiah, though they had not truly repented." (Carson). John reminded them that real repentance will show itself in life. It must be a matter of living repentance, not just talking repentance.

Of course, most of the Jewish people believed in the wrath to come; the difference was the targets of that judgment. "They conceived of the judgment as concerning the heathen peoples; they thought of it as concerning the godless in Israel." (Bruce)

John confronted them in verse 7. He said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

"You snakes, what made you run before the bush fire? What chased you out here? What cleared you snakes out of your holes? What fire made you run? Are you legitimately running from the wrath of God?" John must have been referring to those little snakes that look like a stick. It's on the desert out there, and whenever there was a fire in that dry grass or whenever a farmer would burn his field, those little snakes would come scurrying ahead of the flames. John the Baptist is saying, "What chased you here? Is it really the wrath of God? What's your real motive? Well, he knew it wasn't genuine repentance.

And so, in verses 8 to 10 he says, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." (v.8). This is really a condemnation. He's really saying, you phonies. You come running out here like everybody else pretending to repent and wanting to get this baptism and identify with the

Messiah and be a part of this whole thing. What's your real motive? I know it isn't genuine repentance, because if it was, there would be the fruits of it and I don't see that.

He reads their minds, in verse 9, and says and do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 "Don't be saying to yourself, 'Well, have you forgotten, we're real Jews. We're the children of Abraham.'" "What do you mean, turn around, get converted, be repentant." "Why, we're the sons of Abraham. We have a guarantee in the kingdom."

John says, "Listen, you better not count on that." "I say unto you, God is able to make children of Abraham out of rocks if He wants to." That's no big deal. And, I think, implied in the stones here is the Gentiles. "If you Jews want to turn your hearts to stone, then God will take the lifeless stones, the Gentiles, and turn them into the children of Abraham." He says, "You better not depend upon your descent from Abraham. You better not depend upon your self-righteous hypocrisy. If this is real and you really want to be baptized and you're really fleeing from the wrath to come, the only way you'll escape the wrath to come is to have genuine repentance and to bring forth the genuine fruit of repentance and not to depend upon your ancestry to redeem you."

Today many Christians try and help the Jews to live in the physical land of Israel. But we must remember, that a Jew who does not accept Jesus as the Messiah, as it says so clearly in the Gospels, cannot rely on their physical lineage, or where they live, to make them okay with God. They must confess their sins, repent, accept Jesus the Messiah, and bear fruit in keeping with that repentance. If you want to help today's Jews, the best way you can do that is to preach the Gospel to them.

The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Now, this is really a strong, strong statement. That's precisely the illustration used by our Lord Himself in the 15th chapter of John, the 6th verse. "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, is withered, and men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned." Now, John is saying this: "Look, you can pretend to be running from the wrath to come. You can pretend to be fleeing from the judgment of God, but if there's no fruit there, and if you're depending upon your self-righteous smugness and your descent from Abraham to save you, you're in a lot of trouble because the axe is already laid at the root of your tree because there's no fruit. There's an urgency here.

Well, it doesn't tell us here what they said. It doesn't tell us here what their reaction was. But then again, that's not Matthew's point. Matthew's point is just to present the herald of the King, just to present the King. Luke tells us what happened. Luke gives us the same sermon, only he fills in what happened. And in Luke's account in chapter 3 – there was no reaction from the Pharisees and the Sadducees, none. No reaction. Matthew records it. No reaction at all from them. But somebody reacted; believe me. Verse 9 of Luke 3. Here's the same verse, And the people asked him saying, 'What shall we do then?'" You see, the message wasn't even to them, but they were the ones who were hurting. They were the ones who were afraid. They were the ones who wanted to get it right. And that's the difference between true repentance and phony repentance. The ones who really cared, they were the ones who said, "What do we do?" As far as we know, the Pharisees and the Sadducees didn't say anything.

So where do you stand? With the Pharisees or with the common people who by faith God made uncommon and His children?