

**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near -
Produce fruit in keeping with repentance Matthew 3:1-12**

Matthew, the disciple of Jesus also known as Levi, wrote his gospel for Jewish Christians with the main purpose being to confirm for his readers that Jesus is their Messiah sent by God to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. In fulfillment of such Old Testament predictions, enter John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ with the message that he preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near-produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Now the message to repent had become a familiar theme for God's people. Throughout their history the children of Israel had led lives that required God to send one of his prophets to call his people to repentance. In the days of the Judges, the people would sin against God. God would call the people to repentance by allowing them to be oppressed and when they cried out to him for deliverance, he would send a deliverer to rescue them.

At this time in salvation history God was calling his people to repentance again! They had fallen away from God again! Their worship life had become one of half-hearted devotion- performing the required sacrifices, saying the right things, and giving the outward appearance that they were righteous and upright. They were trusting in their ability to keep God's commandments and in their good works to enter the kingdom of heaven. Their hearts and minds, as far as God was concerned were far from Him. So God sent John to call the people to repent of these sins.

Matthew quotes the Old Testament to confirm to the people that the prediction of a forerunner to their Messianic King Jesus Christ with his message had been fulfilled, while at the same time illustrating what repentance is. He tells us that John the Baptist "was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah [40:3] A voice of one calling in the desert, *Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.*" Hundreds of years earlier Isaiah said that John the Baptist was coming. Look at the illustration for repentance "make straight paths for him." Make straight paths in your heart, and in your life. Repentance is radical road construction that takes place inside of you. Our thoughts, our desires, our wants, and our feelings – all these things tend to be crooked inside of us. Spiritual potholes everywhere in our soul!
Which has the effect of our love for God going up and down.

“Repent, ” John tells us, “Make straight paths for him.”

In Old Testament times, before a king would visit a town, radical road construction would take place. If the road had high spots, they would be chopped down and leveled. If the road had low spots, they would be filled in. If the road were crooked, it would be straightened out. Once the road was smooth and straight, it was ready for the king. Do this inside of you, John tells the people. Your thoughts, your desires, your wants, your feelings, your love for God, just straighten it out he says.

Do you think you would have coped with the message of John the Baptist back then and there? Venturing out from the big city and streaming in from the surrounding countryside to the Jordan River to hear this man who had come out of the wilderness, eating and dressing like a poor homeless person wearing wild animal skins, probably smelling of locust and honey breath, and preaching repentance. A man who in no way could we define as being polite, sensitive and politically correct because he does not mince his words, and cares not who or how many he might offend. He cuts right to the chase, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. You have been waiting for the Messiah, so pay attention, he is coming. People get ready and prepare the way of the Lord.” Cut through all the moral and spiritual distractions, eliminate the nonsense of selfish pride in your lives and pay attention. Stop running after all that doesn’t matter, stop turning away from God. God is in search of you so quit prioritising and pursuing your own worldly wants, gains and desires because what is needed is a radical change of your heart and mind, your whole life in fact which especially requires you to forsake sin and turn or return to God.

To illustrate what repentance is and requires, think of a husband driving his wife in a car and the wife tells her husband to turn right at the next roundabout and by mistake, he turns left. When he realises what he has done, he says to his wife “I’m sorry my dear, I went the wrong way.” But if that is all he does, it isn’t enough because that’s the heinous ‘Sorry but I’m not sorry attitude’ where his saying sorry isn’t getting them any closer to where they want to be; it isn’t even stopping them getting further away. To get where they want to be he needs to stop the car, turn it around and go back on to the correct road that his wife told him to take in the first place. That is John’s saving no frills message of repentance. So take a look at your life, see where you have put your priorities, where your treasure really lies, and turn around and see God

looking to save and guide you back to him with true repentance.

Repentance is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but a daily action. It begins each day with confessing our sins such as Jesus encouraged us to do in the Lord's prayer and John in 1 John 1:9, and then going a step further, to "die daily to our sin", as Martin Luther reminds us in a quote from his Catechism. This means that we are to stop running after everything else and turn instead to God.

Repentance is to make decisions for God as his children in our daily life that show where our hope and determination truly lies. Clothes, status and material gain mean nothing in light of the truth that God has claimed us and loves us. We are repentant when we live like this is true. Repentance is the ongoing lifestyle of the people of the kingdom. Repentance is to bear fruit of the kingdom. We are part of the kingdom of God when we bear good fruit. If we do not, we have decided to move ourselves out of the kingdom. We are a part of the kingdom when we love God with all our heart and mind, with all our soul and with all our strength and then, choose to love our neighbour as we love ourselves by looking outwards to minister to their need. Such a spirit runs contrary to the attitude of self-entitlement where we believe that we deserve certain perks because we belong to this church or that the church exists to meet my needs. We are to repent of such an attitude of entitlement. We are a part of the church, which is the body of Christ, because we recognise Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and seek to live accordingly. Salvation does not come as a birthright as the Jews claimed when they said that 'We have Abraham as our Father' [v9] but through faith in Christ. And what we do not want to do it is to become part of that "brood of vipers".

John uses strong language in our text for today. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had arrived. They were very pious outwardly, but inwardly, they were proud and materialistic among other things. John calls them a brood of vipers, and tells them to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The Pharisees and Sadducees claimed to be humble and spiritual, but everything they said and did showed them to be the opposite. John compares them to a fruit tree, and tells them that the "axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." He condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees, because they would not change. They would not

repent. They would say and do things to make themselves look pious and spiritual. But there was no real change in their hearts and lives. They were selfishly proud, controlling, materialistic, and they liked it that way...things that we too can struggle with today.

Now let me ask you this – what kind of religion are you really looking for? I think most people are looking for a religion that will meet their own perceived needs and make them feel good about themselves. Is that what you are looking for? Something that makes you feel good about yourself? The truth is that is not what Christianity, or John the Baptist, are all about. John the Baptist is not standing out in the desert telling everyone to smile, because God loves you just the way you are. And then everyone leaves the desert and goes home and feels good about themselves. John the Baptist is telling you and me to change, to stop being yourself, to repent and be different from how you normally are. And if we do not like that then we are the Pharisees and Sadducees that John condemns.

He condemns such an attitude in these verses and warns one and all that the fire of God's wrath is coming our way vv10,12. But as we seek to live in daily repentance, we discover the hope that is ours. Hope that lies only in God. Hope that lies in the kingdom of heaven, which is coming, and which is here. Hope does not lie in that which we look to, to valid our own worldly importance. We are important, we have hope as we die each day to old ways and have the courage to live according to God's ways. The kingdom of heaven declares that God and God's ways rules from now on. We do good deeds because that is how people of the kingdom live bearing or producing fruit in keeping with repentance.

Along with John [v11], we are not worthy to carry his sandals, but he declares us worthy to share with him the opportunity to be Christ to all those around us. He offers us hope that transcends time in every place, hope which declares us right before God because of God's grace. Life then becomes a life lived in response to that great gift. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near and produce fruit in keeping with repentance" is the call that we should be left with ringing in our ears today, a call that we all need to hear. It is the voice of John the Baptist calling out to us to repent of our sins, to prepare our hearts and to prepare our lives so that we are indeed ready to again meet our King. And may God graciously grant that we will indeed listen, truly listen to the

message of John as we prepare in our hearts to meet now with God's son by his Spirit in celebrating communion/the Lord's Supper.

Let us pray:

O Lord, give me the heart of John the Baptist,
a heart of repentance, a heart that is humble and spiritual,
a heart that is prepared to welcome you, and shows it, by the way I
live my life producing the spiritual fruit that you desire in me.
Amen