

The New You

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Date: 08 January 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, my name is Tommy. I'm the rector here on behalf of our church. Let me again welcome you, especially if you're joining us for the first time. We're excited that we have a baptism this morning that we're going to celebrate in a little while. Also, just to note, we are having some sound issues. The maids are not currently working, and we've got some awesome people working on it, but my hope is that you can hear. We're using the monitors here, and we're just cranking them up. So if you're in the front row, you're getting a full dose of the Word this morning.

So some of you may be familiar with a certain social media influencer. He's been in the news recently. His moniker is the Liver King. Anybody know who the Liver King is? There you go. I knew that there's always one. The Liver King. He has these pretty naturally massive muscles. He has got this gigantic beard that comes halfway down his torso, and he mostly walks around barefoot and shirtless, regardless of where he is. And he aims his message primarily at men. And he says, the big problem, the biggest problem, is that society these days has made men soft.

And the way to undo that is to go back to the, what he calls, ancestral lifestyle. And he holds out nine tenets of the ancestral lifestyle. What this essentially amounts to is working out all the time doing excessively brutal workouts and eating enormous amounts of raw meat. And he focuses on, he focuses on eating a lot of beef brains, testicles, and of course, a lot of raw liver.

And so there are pictures of him with just a whole liver just digging in. And so this guy has amassed a massive following. He's made hundreds of millions of dollars claiming that if you adopt his lifestyle, the implication is you can look more and more like the Liver King. All along, he's claimed that his body is all natural. It's the product of the ancestral lifestyle. So of course, this week, it was announced that the Liver King is actually being sued for \$25 million because it turns out that his secret is not a steady diet of raw liver, but rather steroids. Something like \$11,000 worth of steroids a month.

So, you know, we read this and we sort of roll our eyes and laugh at a guy called the Liver King. And we think, well, who could possibly have ever believed that? But a lot of people did. And a lot of people are taken with anyone who holds out a promise of change. Because I think deep down, we all want to change.

[2 : 4 7] We all have things about ourselves that we wish were better. And yet our society is filled with people who are offering empty promises of change. And so we're sort of caught, right? Because on the one hand, a lot of us, I think, wish that we could change. That's why we make New Year's resolutions.

But on the other hand, there are so many promises of change that turn out to be empty. So many attempts in our own life to change that fail that along with our desire to change comes a healthy dose of cynicism. This kind of secret belief, or maybe not some secret belief, that change really isn't possible. So when something like the Christian gospel comes along and promises change, not only for a certain people group, but the possibility of total transformation for all people, for people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, we are naturally going to feel a bit cynical. And yet this morning, we're going to look at a passage, Matthew chapter 3, verses 13 to 17. And what we see in this passage is the essence of real lasting change according to the gospel. We see here what makes the gospel different from all of these other self-improvement programs that are out there for sale. And the gospel tells us two things that are vital for us to recognize before change can become possible in our lives. We're going to look at both of these as we look at the baptism of Jesus. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for your blessing. And we thank you that you're with us. And we thank you that your word is true. And we ask only this morning that you would fulfill your promise to be a God who is in our midst, who speaks to us, and that as your word goes out, it would not return to you void. It would accomplish in us all that you intend. We pray this in your son's name on that. So two reasons why, two realizations that we need before the gospel becomes something that can actually change us. The first thing that we need to realize is this, is that our problem, our problem is worse than we think. Whatever you think your biggest problem is, your most besetting struggle in life, the gospel says, no, no, no. It's worse than you think.

John was a prophet who lived in the desert. And at the beginning of our passage in verse 13, we see this man named John, and he's baptizing people. And as people come to be baptized, he is preaching one central message. He's saying essentially this, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. We see that in verses two and three. Now what we need to understand is the entire Jewish religion is built around the promise that God is going to one day send a deliverer. This deliverer is going to bring judgment on the world, bring judgment on God's enemies. He's going to vindicate the truly faithful among God's people. He's going to overthrow Rome, and he's going to inaugurate a new world order full of peace and flourishing. We're referred to as the kingdom of God.

So they're waiting, and they're waiting, and they're waiting hundreds of years, thousands of years for God to fulfill this promise. And John comes along in the desert wearing camel hair and eating wild locusts and honey, and he says, the time is now. The kingdom of God is drawing near. The deliverer is coming. We need to get ready. And so he says, therefore, now is the time to get right with God.

[6 : 31] Everyone needs to repent. Everyone needs to be baptized. Now here's the thing is easy to miss. Most Jews assumed that they were already right with God. Why? Because they're Jewish. They were born Jewish. Their parents were Jewish. Their great-grandparents were Jewish. They could trace their family lineage all the way back to David. They knew that if anybody was right with God, they were right with God. And so sure, they might have a few small sins here and there, a few peccabillows that they needed to get off their chest. But by and large, if anybody was right with God, they were right with God. But John's ministry was to the Jews. John was preaching to the Jews. So John is saying, everyone needs to repent. Everyone needs to be baptized, even the religious leaders, especially the religious leaders, whom he refers to as a brood of vipers. So this is John's message.

You think that you're right with God. Oh, no, no, no. Repent and be baptized. Now, how does this connect with us? Well, most of us, I think, in this room, it's safe to assume we've all kind of grown up in the United States. Not all of us, but most of us here. And if you've grown up in the United States, you've been exposed to some version of Christianity, whether or not you call yourself a Christian today.

Most of us grew up exposed to some version of Christianity. And often it's a very thin version of Christianity. It's a sort of a thin spirituality. Along with this idea, there is a few basic principles. There's this idea that Christianity is about, at some point in our lives, we pray a prayer to God. It could be when we're kids. It could be at Christian summer camp. It could be older when we're listening to a sermon. And we pray a prayer and Jesus comes into our heart. And at that moment, our sin is washed away. And then we're good to go. And there's really not much more to it.

Go to church, volunteer, serve in your community. Those are good things. But beyond that, there's not much more to it. Not saying any of that is wrong, but I am saying, doesn't it strike you that it's very formulaic? It's very transactional. And in that way, with all due respect, I would say it's not unlike the liver cake. You want to change? Here's a tried and true method. And if you take on my method and buy my supplements, you'll look more like me. I look more like Jesus. So you'll look more like Jesus, right? That's what's on offer a lot of the time. And what we need to understand is that John is talking about repentance in a very different kind of way. He's not talking about a prayer that we pray at some point in our lives, get right with God and then move on. John's talking about a very different kind of repentance. And in the next chapter, what we see is that Jesus will begin his public ministry. And then Jesus takes it even further. Frederico Matthews Green writes this, the first time Jesus appears in the first gospel, the first instruction he gives is repent. From then on, it's his most consistent message. In all times, in every situation, his advice is to repent.

Not just the scribes and Pharisees, not just the powerful. He tells even the poor and the oppressed that repentance is the key to eternal life. Few people would argue in our society today that the rich and the powerful need to repent. Jesus says, no, no, no. Everyone, even the poor and the oppressed, the answer is always to repent. Now, why would this be the case? What we see here is the idea that repentance is not just something you do once in summer camp. It's something that marks every day of your life all the time. It's how you respond to every situation. The reason is because repentance, this understanding of repentance, has a more accurate understanding of sin.

[10 : 41] And the reality is that sin is a lot like an onion. It's a lot like an onion. When we become aware of some sin in our life, some way that we are rebelling against God in our lives, we're called to repent. Meaning, whatever that thing is that we're holding on to, we let go of that thing, and then we turn and we embrace the grace and the love that is on all through Jesus, right? So it is a turning away from it. We let go of the sin and we turn and we embrace the grace of God. That's repentance. And when we see sin in our lives, we're called to repent, turn away, right? And embrace faith. When we do that, we are essentially peeling back one layer of the onion.

Fantastic. Praise God that layer is gone. But it's an onion. So there's another layer underneath. And in time, we begin to recognize that there is a deeper kind of sin, a deeper form of rebellion that was underneath the thing that we repented of. And that merits our attention and our repentance as well. So let me give you one example to flesh this out. Say you're late to a meeting. And you know, being late to a meeting used to not be as big a deal before Zoom because everybody would kind of be talking for the first 10, 15 minutes, getting their coffee. But if you're late to a Zoom meeting, it's totally different. It's like, if you're like one minute late, people are like, where is it? And everybody's sitting awkwardly on the call and they're just waiting on that one person who's not there.

And then you're getting pinged in text. Are you coming? Are you coming? Not that it's ever happened to me, but it's a much bigger deal on Zoom. And so say you're late to a meeting, you keep someone waiting for say 20, 30 minutes. Now that's arguably a minor sin because it's a lack of regard for someone else's time. And so you apologize and you repent. You say, I shouldn't have done that. It was disrespectful. Please forgive me. And maybe you pray a little prayer to God, asking God's forgiveness for disrespecting that person's time. You're peeling off a layer. Praise God. That layer is gone. You've repented. Later, as you're reflecting on this, you begin to realize that, you know, that wasn't just a one-off thing. It's actually kind of a habit in my life.

You begin to realize that your friends who know you well, they kind of expect that you're going to be late. They know that if they're meeting you at lunch or a restaurant or whatever, they know that you're probably going to be about 20 minutes late. You begin to realize, wow, I'm doing this to a lot of people in my life. And you begin to reflect on that. That's kind of selfish. And I've garnered this reputation and that's not good. I'm known as a person who doesn't respect people's time.

And you begin to realize this is actually a sin pattern in my life. So you spend some time praying about that and you confess it to the Lord and you're peeling back that layer and you're asking God to help you be on time so that you can respect people's time and treat them the way you want to be treated. And so you're peeling off another layer. Praise God, that layer is being done. That's fantastic.

[13 : 51] But then in time, you begin to realize, you know what? Under that, there's this other reality in my life that I never really saw before. I realized that why am I late all the time? Well, I'm late because I am so profoundly busy. I'm so busy. I feel like I'm always running around. I'm always late to everything. Plates are always dropping because we've got so many plates spinning. I'm really busy.

That's why I'm late. And you're convicted by the fact that, you know, this isn't really an excuse that I can give to the person who's been waiting. It's really on me. I need to figure out the busyness. Why am I so busy? That's another layer. Okay. Now, busyness can be a very insidious form of sin. You know, first of all, we're called to be people of peace. We're called to be people of joy.

And if you're busy, it robs you of both. We're called to be people who regularly take time for Sabbath rest and busyness robs us of that. Over time, it can wear us down. It can corrode our relationships. So you realize, man, I got to take this seriously. Well, then you start to peel off all layers. You say, well, before I can actually peel this layer off, I have to figure out why am I busy? What's driving the busyness? Now I'm getting somewhere. Okay. We're a few layers in. We're starting to make progress. Why am I busy? Well, busyness can be driven by different things.

Some people are busy because they're so devoted to climbing the ladder of success. They're so devoted to excelling in their career, say, that they are willing to sacrifice anything and everything. So their job always comes first. They're always committed to working. They work 80 hours a week. They never sleep. And that's why they're busy. So that would be busyness rooted in an idol of power and success, right? That's one kind of busyness.

Other people are busy for a very different reason. They're busy because they're driven by fear and anxiety. And there's a need in their life to micromanage everything in their lives.

[15 : 57] And so that would be a form of busyness rooted in an idolatry of control. It's a very different kind of busyness. And then there are other people who are busy because they use busyness as a way to stay disengaged. Busyness is a kind of white noise that keeps them from ever having to feel negative feelings or face hard truth. And they just sort of stay on the run all of the time, filling their lives with distraction. That's another kind of busyness rooted in a very different idol, the idol of comfort, avoidance. Then there's another kind of busyness that comes from people who aren't ever able to set good boundaries. No matter what, they're always saying yes and over committing and giving themselves above and beyond, even when it's not necessary, because they don't want to let people down and they're convinced that they have to earn people's approval and love. That would be a busyness rooted in an idol of approval. Right? So just a few examples. But before you can peel that layer back, you need to start to do some real heart level reflection. What idol am I serving? What thing have I allowed to become more important than God in my life? Is it power? Is it control? Is it comfort?

Is it the approval of other people? What is it? And it may take you a long time to really root that out. Now, under every surface level sin, the meeting that you're 15 minutes late to, the white lie that you tell and you're not even sure why you told it, the snap where you say something hurtful to your family, under every surface level sin, you're going to find deeper and deeper layers of sin. Let me just be clear. This is just one example.

The reality is sin is a vast, interrelated, interconnected network. There are networks of sin in our lives. Onions within onions within onions, right? Running through our lives.

And so repentance, the way Jesus and John talk about it, is not just a one-time thing at summer camp. It is a lifestyle. It's a commitment to peeling back the layers, recognizing that greater knowledge of God is intimately interconnected with greater knowledge itself. And that you need both.

That you need both in an ongoing kind of way. But this understanding of repentance is the key to change. Peeling back the layers, figuring out what is underneath.

[18 : 43] The Apostle Paul, near the end of his life, after a lifetime of this, a lifetime of repentance, in one of, if not the last letter he ever wrote, he says this. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. This is a man who spent his life peeling back the layers.

This is what he has come to see about himself. The problem is, and you can anticipate this, if you actually commit to doing this, it's going to be excruciatingly painful.

If you want to be honest about it, it's going to be painful. So what makes it possible to endure the pain? This brings us to the second thing that we need to realize in order to actually change.

Not only do you need to realize that your problem is worse than you think, whatever it may be, whatever you think it is, it's worse. You also need to recognize this, that God's love is greater than we could ever, ever, ever imagine.

It is greater than we can ever imagine. John is out here baptizing people. He's preparing them for the coming of God's deliverer. He's calling people to repent. And then he sees Jesus and he realizes all at once, this is the deliverer that God has sent. And he recognizes Jesus as he comes up.

[20 : 07] And you can imagine him almost getting ready to get down on his knees. And then Jesus asks, will you baptize me? And that's totally unexpected for John.

And John is baffled because Jesus is God's deliverer. Jesus doesn't need to repent of anything. According to all the prophecies, he's the righteous one who has come to fulfill all of God's purposes.

So John says, well, if anything, you should be baptizing me. I'm the unclean one. But Jesus insists. And so John baptizes him.

And we need to ask what's going on here. The reason that Jesus gives is this. He says, let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

Now we just said, Jesus can't mean that he's not righteous and he needs to become righteous. We already established that. So what does Jesus mean? What does it mean to fulfill all righteousness? Jesus knows that he has come to fulfill a righteous purpose of God set out many, many, many centuries earlier.

[21 : 19] In other words, John thought God's deliverer was going to come and judge the world. But Jesus knows that is not why he has come. When Jesus allows himself to be baptized, we actually see the real reason he came begin to emerge.

Jesus didn't come to judge sinners, to stand on high and condemn sinners from his place of righteousness. Jesus came in order to identify themselves.

And so what we see in the baptism is not Jesus standing as judge over them. We see Jesus standing among with sinners, identifying and standing alongside them.

And that begins to help John and others realize this is a very different kind of deliverance than anyone was expecting. The reason is this.

God loves human beings so much that even though we deserve that judgment, we deserve for Jesus to do that. He loves us so much that he was willing to actually stand with us and then trade places with us.

[22 : 31] And where we see this go is ultimately to the cross at Calvary. Jesus there is willing to endure the punishment meant for human beings on the cross.

And then following his resurrection, he offers us his righteousness in exchange for our sin. And here's the good news of the gospel.

In Jesus, God became like us so that we might become like him. So being a Christian isn't about being a good person.

Hopefully that comes with the territory. But that's not what defines a Christian as a Christian. Being a Christian means allowing Jesus to trade places with us.

So Christian baptism is not the same thing as the baptism of John. We're going to see a baptism here in just a little while. It's not the same thing as the baptism of John.

[23 : 36] When Jesus is baptized by John, he is identifying with us in our sin. But when we are baptized in Jesus' name, we are identifying with Jesus in his righteousness.

It is a very different thing. Jesus transforms what deliverance means. He transforms judgment by allowing himself to be judged.

And he transforms baptism by offering a righteousness to us like a gift, like a garment. And immediately after Jesus is baptized, it says, The heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.

And behold, a voice from heaven, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. When God looks at his Son, he feels pure delight.

And baptism means, baptism proclaims that anyone who is baptized in Jesus' name, When God looks at that person, he feels the same delight.

[24 : 52] He feels the same joy. It means that God no longer sees our sin. He sees the righteousness of his own Son over us.

And just like Jesus, when we are baptized into his name, we receive the same Holy Spirit. It descends upon us.

He remains with us. He works within us, ultimately to transform us. And friends, this is the key to the whole thing.

This is the reason, by the way, why Christians who are growing, Christians who are maturing, Christians who are flourishing in their faith, Are so eager to repent. This is why Frederica Matthews Green would write such a thing.

Because we are eager to peel back the layers of sin, even when it's painful. Why? Because we already have the full assurance of God's love and God's delight.

[25 : 49] We're not earning something. We're not saying, God, if I can just root all of this out, then maybe you'll love me. That's what a lot of other religions say. We're saying, no, every time I peel it back and every time I feel the pain, that pain has been washed away by your love.

And we get so drawn in to that feeling of love that we are eager to pull back the layers. Because there's nothing else like it. Right?

So, unlike the liver king, Jesus doesn't offer us a lifestyle. He doesn't offer us supplements. He doesn't say, if you do what I say to him, you might look like me.

Jesus says, you look like me. Now, live out of that new identity. It's already yours. You already have it. You're already beautiful.

Now, live like it. It's completely different. So, Christianity isn't about becoming someone we're not. It's about living out of the truth of who we really are in Jesus Christ.

[26 : 55] When we're baptized, we gain that new identity immediately. We become like Christ immediately. The rest of the Christian life is about working that out. So, when Paul confronts sin, guess what?

He's not saying, oh, shape up. Be more like Jesus. He says, you've forgotten who you are. This is the old you. That person no longer exists.

So, let me draw all of this together. Why does the gospel make real change possible? In a way that nothing else can. And the simple reason is that it actually gives us a real way to deal with our sin, to peel back the layers, and to root it out once and for all.

That comes through a lifestyle of repentance and the working of the Holy Spirit in us over time. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we gain a new identity. He takes our sin.

He gives us his righteousness. And then Jesus calls us to a lifestyle of repentance, of peeling back the layers. And every time this becomes too painful, every time we're tempted to give in to despair, the gospel reminds us of God's words as he looks at us.

[28 : 07] Every time we're peeling back a layer and I'm tempted to think, I can't believe I do this. I can't believe I'm this awful. If people only knew this about me, they would never want to be my friend. As I'm peeling that back, what do I hear?

I hear through my baptism the voice of God the Father saying, This is my Son in whom I delight. God pulls rank on us and says, My opinion counts more than your opinion when it comes to who you are.

That's what baptism means. And what we discover is that repentance is, I think, in my experience, the only way to really experience God's love, to go from just knowing and hearing and reading about it to feeling it, is through repentance.

You know, when Paul refers to himself as the foremost sinner, there's no hint of self-loathing there. He's not clinically depressed. Quite the opposite. In the verse just before that, in verse 14, he says, And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus.

He's overflowing with the grace and the love of Jesus. And out of that, he says, Guess what? I'm the worst sinner. I'm the worst. And he's happy to admit it.

[29 : 24] Because he's so filled with love and grace. So the more we repent, the more we experience God's love, the more we feel his delight in real and powerful ways.

So whether you're here and you're someone who's never put your faith in Jesus, you've never done this, this is all new to you, or you're a Christian and you're looking at another year, 2023, and you're stagnant in your faith, and you haven't changed for a very, very long time, and you're dry, and you're not sure what you believe, the answer is the same.

Repent. Peel back the layers. And then turn and receive the grace and the love of Jesus Christ that is on offer to the world. Let's pray.

Lord, we are here because of that love. And we're not here because we're good people, because we're good church-going folk. We're not here because maybe even the reasons that we think we're here.

We're here because at some point along the way, he looked at us and said, I love you, and I want you. We're here because of your love. We're here because of your son.

[30 : 40] We're here because of his desire to bless the nations. Lord, and we pray that you would continue to press the truth of what has been said through your word into our hearts in ways that we desperately need to feel.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.