

The Key is Repentance

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[0 : 00] All right, I don't know whether you realize this, but there are different ways of saying sorry, different motivations for doing so as well. So an older gentleman once admitted cheekily to me that whenever he was in doubt, and I think he was referring to with his wife, he wouldn't ask permission first, but would just go ahead and do something.

And then if needs be, apologize later. So that's all well and good, except that I think it quite reveals the fact that he wasn't really sorry in the first place, was he?

Now, as parents, I'm one of them, when children do the wrong thing, we teach them to say sorry, don't we? And sometimes it gets to the point where we actually insist that they do, even when they refuse to be sorry.

And so they do, but perhaps not for the right reasons. And then we know of people who are always apologetic. You know, they'll say sorry, regardless of whether they're in fact in the right or wrong. Now, it could be that they just want to avoid conflict or they are people pleasers. And then finally, of course, we've heard the phrase sorry, not sorry.

[1 : 19] You might have used it yourself. And that's when someone empathizes with you, but really they're not sorry for what has happened. They might even quite agree with the outcome, may have had a hand in making that happen.

But, you know, they're saying, yeah, I can sort of feel for you, but nah, not sorry. So, as you can see, there are quite a number of reasons to say sorry, isn't it?

And why you do so. But what about when it comes to us and God? And God who is concerned not just with us saying sorry, but as Ryan used that word, but us being repentant as well.

Now, what does true repentance look like in God's eyes? That's what we're going to look at today. But before we get into it, let's first consider the person that God sends to teach us about this idea in our passage today.

And his name is John the Baptist. You might have already guessed his ministry began just before Jesus did. And so if you look in verse one of Matthew three, we read, John's clothes were made of camel's hair and he had a leather belt around his waist.

[2 : 52] His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan, confessing their sins.

They were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Now, John the Baptist, we know from Luke's gospel, was a relative of Jesus, slightly older than Jesus was.

Matthew, however, is focused on other things. And so his concern, as we see here, just like in previous weeks, is how John fits into the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

And so we're given details of John's lifestyle. In verse four, his clothes were made of camel's hair. He wore a leather belt. All this material from dead animals.

Right. So it's actually not kosher for the Jews to be doing it. And what's more, he lives out in the wilderness, dining on locusts and honey. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was watching an episode of Heston's feast.

[3 : 55] Many of you, Heston Blumenthal, yes, you know him? Yep. Well, one of his episodes, he revealed that apparently during the Victorian era, insects were considered a delicacy.

Because they were rich in protein and nutrition and had no fat. Now, I'm pretty sure, however, that that's not why John was feeding on locusts.

Rather, the reason why we have that detail is because locusts and wild honey are the only things that were available to eat in the desert. And what Matthew is trying to show then is that John is the Elijah that was foretold.

He's the messenger the prophet Malachi spoke of, who will appear before the Messiah does. And we saw that in the two readings from Malachi by Brandon.

So, if you look at the slide, Malachi chapter 3, verse 1, the Lord God says, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Now, who is this messenger?

[4 : 58] Chapter 4 and verse 5, we have, I see, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. So, if the first Elijah began the age of the Old Testament prophets, then John the Baptist, as the second Elijah, will bring it to a close.

The book ends. And like Elijah, John lived in the wilderness. And people went out to him to hear his voice, to hear his message. And so, Matthew as well ties John directly to the prophecy in Isaiah 40, which is written in Matthew chapter 3.

So, it says on the slide, this is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

All right, we're going to do a bit of what we did last Sunday, and that is to answer some questions.

And so, this week, we start off with this very simple question on the next slide.

What is the instruction of the voice in Matthew chapter 3, verse 3? So, have a quick chat with your neighbor, if you like. Okay, because it's a simple question, only 10 seconds.

[6 : 34] All right, who's got the answer? Shout out, or hands up. Sammy?

You don't know the answer. Okay, who else does? No? Prepare, yes, and?

Correct. See, I told you it was simple. Don't try and look for tricks in the question. So, two things, right? Prepare and make straight. Or, if you like, because they're actually the same things, prepare by making straight.

And those of you who are observant will also notice that in Malachi chapter 3, we have a similar instruction. Except the only difference there is that it is the messenger who is the one who prepares. I suppose what he does is he prepares by instructing others to prepare, if that makes sense. But when you come back to Matthew, notice what John takes preparation to mean.

[7 : 39] For John, to prepare is to repent, isn't it? Now, realize at this point, it's not like the people of Israel had no expectation of their Messiah coming.

As we've already seen, there's anticipation, isn't it, of a Davidic king, of a coming Messiah who will liberate them. But I suppose they were preparing in other ways, weren't they?

The zealots, for example, plotted. They prepared by plotting to overthrow the Romans. Others, perhaps, were doing it in more spiritual or ritualistic ways.

So, there was a focus for some of them to prepare by rebuilding the temple. And for the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, they prepared by focusing on keeping the law, becoming better people.

Now, how do all of these sorts of preparations square with John's command? It's not quite repentance, is it? Because repentance is about coming to God and admitting that we've wronged him, that we've turned away from him.

[8 : 54] We've rejected him. And repentance is then about turning back to him and submitting to him and wanting to obey him again. Now, you may well think, but you know, aren't the Pharisees doing just that?

After all, they're trying to obey God's laws, aren't they? They're trying to be righteous. How is it? Or is it the fact that they are repentant or not?

Well, if you look at verse 7 of Matthew chapter 3, not according to John. So, we keep reading.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

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 of Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees. Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Now, imagine if you're one of these Pharisees or Sadducees.

[10 : 05] You know, you've been trying hard to be a good Jew. You study the scriptures diligently. You pick out the finer points of doctrine. You know, and debate it with others to improve yourself.

You even try and keep the law. And then, you know, after a while, you probably look around and you go, If any one's ready for the kingdom of God, then it's got to be me, really.

I mean, if it's not me, who else? You know, tax collectors? Prostitutes? And then you come out to the desert and you see this guy, John.

He's dressed in camel's hair. He's munching on locusts. And what does he say to you? He gives you an earful, doesn't he?

He calls you a brood of vipers. What an insult. I mean, does he not know who I am? You know, I'm a child of Abraham. I'm one of God's people.

[11:09] No, in fact, I'm better than that. I'm one of the better ones of God's people. You know, and what's more, I've been obeying the law. So what is it that the Pharisees and the Sadducees are not getting here?

Or more specifically, what does John mean by producing fruit in keeping with righteousness? What does that mean?

All right. Well, next question then to talk to your neighbor on the slide. What is fruit that is in keeping with repentance? And that starter question by Ryan may be able to help you a bit.

So off you go. I'll give you a bit more time this time because this is a bit more engaged as a question. But I want to hear your answers as well. Okay.

Any volunteers? Can be one sentence or one word. Anyone? Confessing their sins?

[12:14] Okay. Yep. Good. Anyone else? Sorry. What did someone say? Humility. Yes. I think that's probably where I would go with it.

Confessing your sins is good, but I want to sort of come back to that in a bit as well. See, we often think that doing something, good works, is evidence of righteousness.

But actually, that isn't the right measure. And that's because so-called good works, which we think is fruit, could actually be the fruit of repentance or the fruit of self-righteousness.

Let me say that again. Good works could be the fruit of either repentance or self-righteousness.

And so you can take any example, including confessing our sins, which is an outward thing.

But I'll take another example. For example, when you see someone giving lots of money to the poor, you can't really tell, can you, what's going on in their hearts? Are they being generous because they're responding to God's generosity to them?

[13:31] Or are they doing it to show how good they are? Or even just to convince themselves that they are good? Likewise, when you see someone in church teaching or correcting others of wrong teaching, are they doing it to help other people know the truth for their good?

Or are they trying to show that they are right? And for others to know that they are right? No one, really, apart from the person themselves, can really tell, isn't it?

And I have to say that even they themselves sometimes can't tell because it's possible to delude yourself, isn't it? To think that your motives are pure, when actually they are not.

Only God knows, I suppose, in the end. And so you see, the acts themselves, confessing, giving to the poor, whatever, these are not wrong in and of themselves.

They are actually good things. And God would certainly not want you to do the opposite. You know, you don't do the opposite by stealing from the poor or spreading false teaching. That's not what you do.

[14:48] But these good deeds, in and of themselves, are not sufficient to show that they are the fruit of repentance. Instead, it's only when we search our hearts that we'll be able to tell.

So how do we really tell if the motives that we have are pure or right or instead wrong? Well, I think the key difference is, as Stephen said, it's whether we're doing it out of pride or humility.

Good works that are the fruit of self-righteousness spring from pride. Whereas good works that are the fruit of repentance spring from humility.

The former looks at the good that's done and says, look how good I am. Well, the latter looks at the same thing and says, look how good God is.

Because everything that I'm doing is simply an expression of my thanks to him. And so the question I have for you is, can you tell the difference when you do something and when you look into your own heart?

[15:56] Now, let me give you a series of litmus tests, perhaps, to gauge yourself. And again, I'm going to use some examples, or just one.

How do you react if someone compliments you for doing good? Or what if no one does? How do you react?

How would you feel? Would you nurse a feeling of resentment? Or let me push it even further. What if someone gave the credit for the good you did to someone else?

Boy, that really hurts, doesn't it? Or even worse than that, if when you did something good, instead of being thanked for it, you were criticized instead.

You know, you often hear people, when they see reactions like that, they would say, oh, so-and-so's pride is hurt. Right? But nobody ever says, oh, their humility has been hurt.

[17:04] That's not a thing, is it? Because a humble person rarely takes offense, no matter how others react. Isn't that right? Instead, they recognize, that the only person that matters is actually God.

He's the only one whose view counts. It doesn't matter if no one else notices, or if the good intentions, my good intentions are misconstrued, as long as God knows what's in my heart. And ultimately, that's all that matters, isn't it? Now, please don't think that, you know, as though I'm saying all this, that, you know, I'm above this, and I'm beyond this.

I'm not, okay? So, don't try it on me. My initial reaction will not be good, all right? So don't criticize me. Nobody likes being criticized, isn't it?

Least of all me. So, I can tell you now, if you were to criticize me, my initial reaction would be to bristle at it. But that's because there's still pride in me, isn't it? Otherwise, insults and wrong accusations wouldn't bother me.

[18:11] But here's the thing, you see, I think when these things happen, we can go one of two ways, can't we? We can become offended because, you know, somebody's just hurt us.

How dare they? Or we can actually take the opportunity to recognize from our initial reaction that we need to humble ourselves and repent and seek God's forgiveness.

Now, I know my initial reaction is always to go that way because how dare they? They need to repent, not me. But actually, you can use that. You don't have to go that way.

You can use it as an opportunity for you yourself to repent, isn't it? To remember how amazing it is that you can come before the Lord, say sorry to God, and be forgiven in the first place.

Not because of how good we are, but because of what Jesus has done and how good Jesus is.

And then when you've done that, the good that results is the fruit that is in keeping with repentance, isn't it?

[19:18] Because we're responding, not because we're trying to prove how good we are, but we realize just how good God is. That we've been forgiven of our own sin and pride.

And everything that we do after that is an expression of thanksgiving to God, of wanting to be like Jesus because Jesus is the one that took our shame and our punishment to the cross.

Now, why is all this important that John should raise this at the very start of Jesus' ministry? And more specifically, why is repentance not just important, but urgent?

Well, let's get on with verse 10 because John elaborates. He's already said in verse 10 that the axe is at the root of the tree, isn't it? Judgment is coming because the kingdom of God is near.

Repent because it's the only way to avoid God's judgment. Trying to be perfect, for example, isn't going to work because at the end of the day, trying to be perfect springs from pride.

[20:22] So John finishes in verse 11 and 12 saying, I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Now, many of you will know that John the Baptist is mentioned in all four Gospels. And here in Matthew and also Mark and Luke, he's connected to Elijah in Malachi and the voice in Isaiah. And so, as we've said already before, that's to show what preparation looks like because both those passages talk about preparing. And we've just seen that preparing, to prepare means to repent. And so John now says, I baptize you with water for repentance. That's the preparation because someone else is coming and you need to be ready. The water doesn't automatically wash you of your sins, but rather it's meant to signify what's going on in your hearts, that of repentance is occurring.

[21:31] But there's also another reason why the Gospel writers connect John to Elijah and the voice. And it's because if we realize that John is the fulfillment of these prophecies, then it also shows that Jesus, who comes after John, is also the Lord.

Now, I don't know whether at the start you realize that I actually did a bit of a sleight of hand, right? I said, oh, when John comes, we know that the Messiah is coming. But if you look in the passages of

the Old Testament, the ones that we've looked at, there's actually no mention of the Messiah, is there?

I've done it just a bit of a shifty and just replaced and said, Messiah is coming. Instead, what does the prophecy in Isaiah and Malachi say?

Who is the one that's coming? It's actually the Lord, isn't it? And so, if that's the case, and Matthew's trying to show that Jesus comes after John, then what he's saying also is that Jesus isn't just an earthly Messiah or chosen king, he's also the Lord.

He's the one who created the heavens and the earth. He was the one who was there when Israel was rescued from Egypt. He was the one who entered into covenant with the people on Mount Sinai.

[22 : 51] He gave them the law, together with the Father and the Spirit, of course. So Jesus, Matthew is saying, isn't just human, he's also the divine Son of God.

As a result, when Jesus comes, he will not only save, which is what the people of Israel expected their Messiah to do, he will also judge, which is what the Lord does.

And whether we face the Lord's salvation or judgment depends on one thing alone. Have we repented? That's why it's important.

Have we produced fruit in keeping with repentance? The key, as the title says of the sermon, is repentance. If we have, then we'll be saved.

Otherwise, the axe, John says, is at the root of the tree. Those without the fruit of repentance will be judged. Now, John gives another image to reinforce this.

[23 : 50] He uses that of a winnowing fork in the hands of the Lord. I'm sure many of you know what a winnowing fork looks like, but I'll give you a picture anyway. It's the fork that's the winnowing fork, not the thing that's in the air.

But what the winnowing fork does is it allows the farmer to separate the grain from the chaff. He'll shove the fork in and toss everything, the wheat and the chaff, into the air. And because the chaff is lighter, it's separated by the wind from the wheat.

The wheat sort of falls to the ground and is gathered, whereas the chaff is sort of blown away and then gathered again and burned. And what John is giving is a picture of the world as it currently is. That little haystack or whatever at the bottom, that's the world. Where all humanity is amassed together. Both the wheat and the chaff are indistinguishable.

And when Jesus first came, that winnowing starts, his death on the cross and resurrection and ascension to heaven paved the way for, as John says, for baptism by the Holy Spirit to occur.

[25 : 01] And you can read that in the book of Acts where it started and it's continued since then.

And so if you believe in Jesus and you are repentant and you produce fruit in keeping with repentance, then we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

This is what the Lord is doing right now, gathering us, those who believe, like wheat into the barn and baptizing us with the Holy Spirit. But one day, he will return to baptize with fire and that's when the chaff will be burned.

That's what judgment will look like when Jesus comes again for those who haven't been baptized with the Holy Spirit. And to be honest, the Bible doesn't tell us when that day will be.

I don't want to scare anyone, but the reality is that it could be any time, any time even today, even now. And so that's why repentance is not just important, it's urgent as well.

John says, the kingdom of heaven is near. Now is the time to repent. And what he said then is as equally true today as it was then.

[26 : 11] And so if there's anyone here today who is still in two minds about following Jesus and repenting, then let me urge you not to delay. Don't say, you know, I'll think about it when I'm ready to settle down or when my career is established or when my bucket list is ticked off.

Really, this should be the thing at the top of your bucket list, not at the bottom. The passage also, I guess, warns us, the rest of us who are Christians, there is a warning, isn't there?

And that's the warning that is to the Pharisees. Because you see, even for us who are Christians, the sin of self-righteousness is insidious.

We need to guard ourselves from it, to keep repenting of it, not to be overconfident and to think, you know, I'm a Christian for 20 years, I've mastered humility.

I mean, that in itself is a statement of pride, isn't it? A few years ago, and some of you were members of this group, I encouraged one of our growth groups, the one that I led, to name

ourselves Repenting Pharisees.

[27 : 24] Because I think that's what it is, isn't it? Deep down, we have a streak of the Pharisees more than we'd like to think.

And so our job, really, is to repent of it. You know, we're so tempted, aren't we, to think that our church attendance, our mission giving, our volunteer work, whatever, you know, all of these things, you know, that we do, they are the things that make us acceptable to God.

Maybe not initially, but, you know, at least I'm better than not doing it, you know. But that's absolute nonsense, isn't it? So rather than try and deny it, because it all keeps, always keeps welling up in us, the better way, really, is to just acknowledge that it's there.

And what it is, is it's pride. And what we do, is repent of it. To admit that actually, we are quite self-righteous by nature. Not to glory it then, but actually to keep putting it to death, every time it rears its head.

Because repentance is not something you do just once when you become a Christian, or when you get baptized. But it's a posture that you need to adopt each and every day of your Christian life.

[28 : 44] let's be thankful that when we repent, God actually is so willing to forgive. Not because of ourselves, but because of the righteousness of Jesus.

Because of what he's done on the cross for us. Taking our place so that he saves us from the judgment that is to come when he returns. Let's pray.

Father, please keep producing in us the fruit that is in keeping with righteousness. Humble us so that we are not deceived by our pride. Instead, when others hurt or wrongly accuse us, help us to realize that even though they may be wrong, we need to examine ourselves to guard against sin or pride.

Forgive us for the sake of your son and rid our hearts of self-righteousness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.