

True Repentance: Embracing Our Need for Change (Matt. 3:1-17)

I can be pretty stubborn about some things. Few people know I majored in music in college and even fewer that I played the flute and I've worked hard to keep it that way. And for most of my adult life, I have refused to play in public. The skills aren't there anymore and after spending the majority of my youth and college as the only male flute player in the orchestra or band, I've always felt that the flute was a little effeminate. But about a year and half ago, Laurie told me that my granddaughter, Addie, asked if I could come to Parents Day at her kindergarten class at Roosevelt and play my flute. I said, "I don't play in public." Laurie said, "But she's your granddaughter." I was stuck. I didn't want to disappoint Addie but I didn't want to play my flute – especially in front of a bunch of strangers. So I was an unhappy camper for a day or so. Well, I've discovered that God and my wife usually agree; and the Spirit of God began to show how stubborn and selfish I was; and I realized I needed to be a good sport and dust off the flute for a class of kindergartners and their parents. I noticed that as soon as I agreed with God, the irritation and the heaviness I had been feeling were replaced by joy. I have that experience all the time and you probably do as well. Joy comes from repentance; when we stop doing what we want to do and do what God wants us to do instead – no matter how unattractive what God wants us to do may look initially. We grow by repenting and once I stop repenting, stop listening to Jesus and making regular necessary course corrections, I stop growing. Experiencing the presence and power of God is the result of a lifestyle of repentance, and today as we continue in our study of the gospel of Matthew, I want to talk about how repentance and embracing our need to keep changing is oxygen to our spirit.

Matthew wrote his gospel to his fellow Jews. That's why he quotes from the OT so often. Matthew isn't writing a biography of Jesus; he is making the case that Jesus is the promised king of the OT; the son of David, the Messiah who will establish God's kingdom on earth and restore creation to what God intended before Adam and Eve rebelled. Matthew is really continuing the story of the OT and that's why we entitled this series, *The Return of the King*. When Jesus arrives, Israel has been without a king from the family of David for almost 1000 years and living under the rule of one foreign power after another; and so the Jews were constantly looking for the arrival of that promised king who will free them from foreign oppression and usher in the new age of peace and prosperity promised by the prophets. Matthew says that king has arrived and in chapter 3 Jesus is introduced to Israel as their promised king by the last OT prophet, John the Baptist. John's message was simple. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." My goal is to show you how repentance opens the door into God's kingdom and why a lifestyle of repentance is vital to a faith that lays hold of God and all of His blessings. In vs. 1-6 we'll look at John's call to repentance. In vs. 7-12, we'll look at the danger of false repentance, and in vs. 13-17, we'll look at why repentance works to usher us into God's kingdom. And if you are not living a lifestyle of repentance, I hope you'll begin today because it will bring health to your soul.

John's Call to Repent (1-6) *"Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, (which was an unpopulated area about 20 miles east of Jerusalem) saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' (It's been 400 years since the last OT prophet appeared in Israel and so John's appearance was a big deal. He was like a character right out of the pages of Israel's history and his appearance caused a big stir in Israel. Everybody knew about John; he becomes a major figure in Israel's history of that time. Matthew wants to show how the entire Bible is about Jesus and so he adds, "For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he*

said, *'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!''*

Matthew says John is the fulfillment of the prediction in Isaiah 40:3 that not only will God visit His people, He will send a messenger in the wilderness to announce His coming. Isaiah 40 begins the second part of Isaiah when Isaiah's message shifts from the present judgment of Israel by the Babylonians to the future restoration of Israel. Chapter 40 proclaims comfort to Jerusalem because their sins have been forgiven and God Himself is returning to Israel as their King. Isaiah's reference to the wilderness would remind Jewish readers of the significance of the wilderness in their history. Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery to Egypt into the wilderness and then Joshua leads them out of the wilderness and across the Jordan into the Promised Land and the beginning of a new life. Now following Israel's exile to Babylon, Isaiah says God will lead Israel out of the wilderness and into a new life again which is what John is announcing. *"Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey."* To make sure Israel saw the connection between his ministry and their past history, John dressed and lived like the prophet Elijah who also called Israel to repentance and the Jews definitely made the connection. *"Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins."* Vast crowds travel from Jerusalem and southern Israel to listen to and be baptized by John in the Jordan as they confess their sins in response to John's message, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

What would the Jews have understood John to mean by the kingdom of heaven? They would understand the kingdom of heaven as heaven's rule of the earth – God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. The OT promised that God would one day reign over the entire earth through His king in Jerusalem; and all of the blessings the Old Testament prophets described when the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ were realized: the lion would lay down with the lamb, the nations would beat their swords into plowshares and permanent and universal peace and blessing would rest upon the earth. John says that kingdom is at hand. What must Israel do to enter the kingdom? Repent. Turn from their wicked ways and obey God as king so they can experience the blessing of His reign. Why do they need to repent? In the book of Deuteronomy, God describes the blessings that come from obeying Him and the curses that come from disobeying Him; and how Israel will disobey and worship other Gods and all these curses will come upon them and they will be exiled into the nations. But in Deut. 30:1-10, God promises that when Israel repents of their sins, He will bring them back from exile and reign as their king and they will experience the blessings of His kingdom. Throughout Israel's history, God calls His people to repent and turn back to Him so that He may reign over them as their king and bless them with His kingdom; and John's message is the same. *"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* That was Jesus' message as well. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* (Matt. 4:17) And that was the message of the apostles. In Peter's first sermon in Acts 2:38, he says, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* In Acts 26:19-20 Paul describes his ministry to King Agrippa saying, *"So King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance."* The call to repent is always part of the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom because repentance opens the door into the kingdom. So to prepare Israel for the coming King and His Kingdom, John preaches repentance with baptism as a symbol of that repentance and new beginning.

But why is repentance so vital? The word repent means to change one's mind: to turn and go in a new direction. Today even secular people call that a "come to Jesus" moment today; when we realize that all the problems in our life are the result of the path we've been on and it's time to change paths. Repentance and faith are really two sides of the same coin. If I believe that Jesus is Savior and King, then I will stop moving in the direction I've been going and follow Him. But if I don't repent, if I'm not interested in changing, then I really haven't believed.

Repentance isn't just changing our opinions; it's changing our behavior; which I've learned from being married. When Laurie and I were first married, I discovered that I could end any argument by apologizing. "You're right, Honey. I blew it. I apologize." And there would be peace. But eventually my wife saw through that scheme. Just admitting I was wrong wasn't enough any longer, she wanted to know why I was wrong. I couldn't just apologize; I had to explain what I did, why I did it and why it was wrong. And then there would be peace. You can see where this is going, can't you? Laurie discovered that even though I understood what I had done wrong and apologized for it, I would do the same thing again the next week. Some of the hardest words for a husband to hear are, "We've talked about this so many times and you promised me you would change; but you haven't. I just can't trust what you say." Repentance isn't just admitting we're wrong or even feeling bad about it. I haven't really repented until I stop doing it. Here's why that is important. I talk with people who say they are Christians because they hold the correct opinions about Jesus and maybe even asked Him into their life at one time but have no interest in following Him now. I can show them from the Bible that they aren't treating their spouse or their child the way Jesus tells them to or handling their money or living the way Jesus wants them to but they don't care. They have no intention of following Jesus as King—and yet they call themselves Christians. The Bible says that's impossible. Nobody is perfect and we all fall short in many ways. But if I don't care about what Jesus says and have no intention of following Him, then I've never repented. And if I'm the same person today I was 5 or 10 years ago, the Bible says I'm not a Christian because the Christian life is a lifestyle of repentance. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin and I can't have one without the other, which brings us to the second thing we learn from Matthew 3, the Danger of False repentance. It's easy to think we've repented when we really never have. Let's read vs. 7-9.

"But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham." (Matt. 3:7-9) More and more people are coming to the Jordan to be baptized and because so many people think that John is a prophet, the religious establishment figures they should at least make an appearance at the Jordan as well, probably pulling up in black Escalades and getting in line to be baptized also – just to show everybody that they also are ready for the coming of God's promised kingdom. But for the Pharisees and the Sadducees – the conservative and the liberal wings of Israel's ruling class, it's all just political theater – which is why John calls them a bunch of snakes in the grass, pretending to be one thing while they're wholly another. John tells them that if you are serious about repenting, change your behavior; and to not make the mistake of supposing that because you are descendants of Abraham and God's chosen people, repentance is unnecessary. According to John, there is no repentance without a change in our behavior. In fact, in Luke's account, many of the people who come to be baptized ask John what they should do to repent. John replies, "If you have two coats, give one away to someone who doesn't have any." He tells the tax-collectors to collect no more than they've been ordered to collect and he tells the soldiers to not take money from anyone by force but to be content with their wages. Repentance always involves admitting we've done wrong but just admitting we've done wrong is not repentance. Repentance always involves feeling bad for what we've done but just feeling bad is not repentance. True repentance always involves a change in behavior. Not a promise to change or a prayer that God will change me, but actually changing what I do. If my behavior hasn't changed, I haven't repented. Do you ever find yourself confessing the same sin over and over? You felt horrible the last time you sinned and promised God you would never do it again, but here you are. Nobody is perfect and we all slip up. However, if you don't see any improvement in a particular area, you need to ask yourself, "Have I really repented or do I just feel bad for the moment?" I used to think if I had to keep confessing the same sin until God grew me out of it; but I discovered that I never grew out of any sin. Nothing changed until I repented and began to live differently; until I got so disgusted with myself and began to take whatever steps it took to kill that sin. The lesson here is that I haven't

truly repented until my behavior changes, until I bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. No fruit, no repentance. You can feel bad about looking at porn –but until you put accountability software on all your devices so that your spouse and your friends can see exactly what you look at on the internet to prevent you from going there in a moment of weakness, you haven't repented. You can feel bad about neglecting the Bible and prayer but until you set your alarm and get up early to spend regular time in the Bible and prayer, you haven't repented. You can feel bad about verbally abusing your children but until you confess that to them, ask them to forgive you and tell them they are free to ignore you any time you speak to them harshly or in anger, you haven't really repented. Real repentance is more than good intentions; it involves concrete change in behavior.

Let's go back to the Pharisees and Sadducees and see what fuels false repentance. Why do we just go through the motions and settle for half measures instead of going to war against our sins? We don't think we need to change – that we can get away with holding on to our sins. That's why John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees *"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; (John knows how these guys think. Don't think that because you are God's chosen people that God is going to give you a pass) for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. (God doesn't need you. He can make children of Abraham from the rocks if He wants to.) The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; (I'm always impressed with John's great humility. He has come to prepare the way for God's promised king, yet as far as John is concerned, he is unfit to do the job of the lowliest servant, taking his master's shoes off.) He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* (Matt. 3:8-12) The prophets taught that the promised king would divide the wheat from the chaff and the righteous from the wicked; and right every wrong and settle every score and baptize those who believe in Him with His Holy Spirit but those who do not repent with unquenchable fire. So John says, "Don't be so sure the king is going to be pleased with you when He arrives. Only those who truly repent will enter His kingdom." Jesus said the same thing but few believed John or Jesus because like the Pharisees and Sadducees, most of the other Jews of that time believed they were already God's chosen people and didn't need to repent because God would bless them anyway because of who they were. And we don't take repentance seriously for the same reason. Christ has forgiven me, I'm going to heaven and nothing can separate me from Him – so why worry about the occasional sin? Isn't grace a get out of jail free card? We're saved from hell by our faith in Christ but our sins can still ruin this life if we're not repenting regularly. Sin separates us from God, His blessing and His presence. That's why the most miserable people in the world are Christians who refuse to repent. They assume that because they belong to Jesus, sin can't hurt them, just like the Pharisees and Sadducees did. And that turned out to be a fatal assumption.

That brings us to a third lesson about repentance in this chapter, why repentance works. Why do only those who repent enter the kingdom of heaven? Let's read vs. 14-17. *"Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan {coming} to John, to be baptized by him. (The last time we heard about Jesus in Matthew, His father Joseph was taking Him and His mom to live in Nazareth where He has been living quietly and working as a carpenter for the first 30 years. But now Jesus goes public and He does so by identifying Himself with John's kingdom of heaven movement and standing in line with everyone else to be baptized. Except Jesus has no sins to repent of and John knows it.) But John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?' But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'" Then he permitted Him."* Jesus has nothing to repent of and nothing to change. He is everything a human is created to be; and yet He tells John that He must be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness. What does Jesus mean? Throughout Matthew's gospel, everything Jesus does He does to fulfill Scripture. He fulfills all the specific predictions about the Messiah, and He also relives the history of Israel, doing what Israel should have done. He is the greater Israel, the greater Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David. He lives the way they should have lived to accomplish what they failed to accomplish. That is what Jesus is doing here. He is identifying Himself with Israel's need for repentance in preparation for the coming kingdom of heaven, fulfilling the conditions of Deut. 30 in their behalf, repenting in their place. *"After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he (John the Baptist) saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove {and} lighting on Him,*

and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." Now don't miss this. At the same moment, that Jesus identifies himself with Israel's need to repent so their sins can be forgiven and they can enter God's kingdom, God announces that Jesus is His beloved Son in whom He is pleased in every way – that for the past 30 years, Jesus has lived as the only human being who doesn't need to repent. Vs. 13-17 is a great summary of the gospel: the sinless Son of God identifies Himself with sinful people so that we can enter His kingdom. He lives the life we failed to live so that God can credit His perfection to us. He identifies Himself with our sin and dies in our place for those sins; and God identifies us with His perfection. That's why repentance works. To enter the kingdom of heaven, you have to recognize that you've been going in the wrong direction; that you have failed and fallen short and need the forgiveness and the fresh start God makes available in Christ. You see, the gospel is good news but it is only good news to those who need good news. As long as I think I don't need to repent or to be forgiven, I won't come to Christ for that forgiveness. Jesus told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray; a tax-gatherer and a Pharisee; a bad man and a good man. The Pharisee thanked God that he wasn't like the tax collector; that he paid tithes of everything he got and fasted twice a week and kept God's commandments. But the tax-collector kept beating his breast and praying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." Jesus said that only one man left the temple that day right in God's eyes; the man who repented, the man who recognized he needed mercy and forgiveness; the man who knew he needed a Savior. That's why repentance opens the door to the kingdom of God. Jesus said he who humbles himself will be exalted and he who exalts himself will be humbled. Everybody is a sinner and every sinner can be forgiven – but only if we'll humble ourselves and repent and believe that Jesus saves us through His death and resurrection in our behalf; that we can't save ourselves and need outside help. And you can do that right now. If you believe that Jesus is God's Son and that He died in your place and rose again that you might have eternal life, repent and believe. Tell Jesus you accept Him as your Savior and Lord and that you want to live for Him rather than for yourself from now on. Ask Him to come into your life and to make you the person He wants you to be. And then please tell me or one of the staff and we'll help you with the next step in the great adventure God has for you. Now if you've already done that and are a Christian, remember that we become Christians by repentance and faith and we grow as Christians by repentance and faith. Walking with Christ means making constant course corrections as we get to know Him better and become more sensitive to His voice: what John calls "walking in the light." John writes in 1 John 1:6-9, *"If we say that we have fellowship with Him and {yet} walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* Light reveals. Darkness hides. When I walk in the light, I face the truth about myself. Notice that it's not sin that breaks our fellowship with God, it is our refusal to admit that sin and repent; which is why repenting must be a lifestyle. As I read my Bible or pray or just go through the day, I become aware of not doing things the way Jesus would do them; and so I tell Jesus. "Sorry Lord, I should have listened instead of talking." "Lord, I confess treating that guy the way he deserved to be treated rather than the way You've treated me." "Sorry for panicking there and not trusting You, Lord." "Lord, I was so focused on my own agenda that I completely missed Yours." "Lord, I confess assuming I knew what to do and moving ahead instead of bringing that decision to You." The more I walk in the light, the more opportunities I find to repent and the more I repent, the more I grow and the closer my relationship with Jesus becomes. Walking with God doesn't mean living a sinless life. It means living an honest life. That's why Proverbs 28:13 says, *"He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion."* If you feel far from God today, here is something I've found never fails. Get alone with God today with a piece of paper and a pen and ask God to show you if there is any sin you need to confess and repent of. Then write down whatever comes to mind. You may need more than a single sheet. When nothing else comes to mind, write 1 John 1:9 across the list. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* Then throw the paper away. Facing our sins and repenting of them regularly is absolutely essential for spiritual health. We never have to repent of things we don't want to do but if those things are blocking our experience of God, they are slowly choking our soul to death. Put those things aside and experience the life God wants you to experience and Christ died for you to experience.

