

LESSON 4

December 27, 2020

Unit I: The Beginning of a Call

Get Ready

Devotional Reading: John 1:19-34

Background Scripture: Matthew 3

Print Passage: Matthew 3:1-12

Key Verse—This is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (Matthew 3:3, KJV)

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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.’” (Matthew 3:3, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Recognize the reality of sin and the necessity of repentance.
- Identify with John the Baptist in his call to prepare the way for Christ.
- Repent of your sins and bear witness to this repentance through your deeds.

Key Terms

Baptized (verse 6)—Greek: **laptize (bap-tid’-zo)**: dipped; sank; submerged.

Confessing (verse 6)—Greek: **exomologeó (ex-om-ol-og-eh’-o)**: agreeing; professing.

Preaching (verse 1)—Greek: **kérussó (kay-roos’-so)**: heralding; openly proclaiming.

Prepare (verse 3)—Greek: **hetoimazó (het-oy-mad’-zo)**: to prepare; to make ready.

Repent (verse 2)—Greek: **metanoieó (met-an-o-eh’-o)**: to change one’s mind or purpose.

Voice (verse 3)—Greek: **phóné (fo-nay’)**: a tone, sound; speech.

INTRODUCTION

As the curtain closes on the current year, the rising curtain of the New Year will usher in a floodgate of new resolutions. This annual tradition of resolving to change or do better in different areas is often well-intended but somewhat flawed. It is hard to keep new resolutions without addressing the old habits that make change necessary. For example, old habits of overeating create the need for resolutions related to diet and exercise. Old habits of oversleeping and watching late-night television necessitate new resolutions on getting to work on time. Did you ever wonder why people tend to make the same resolutions year after year? Old habits bring you back around to the same situations over and over again until, suddenly, you are stuck in a cycle—but the solution is simpler than many seem to realize. The problem with breaking the cycle lies in the slowness to repent from bad habits and poor behavior. The first step to real repentance is honest acknowledgment of the bad behavior and its source. Change begins with taking responsibility for self-defeating personal habits. Ask yourself, what am I doing to encourage the very behavior I want to change? Think about how you got to where you are. The power of spiritual repentance is the remorse or regret that moves one to make meaningful, measurable change. The greatest resolutions on earth will fail before you speak them if old habits are not replaced with new ones. Resolutions have no power without discipline, effort, and a changed mind. Change only happens when we acknowledge wrong attitudes and behaviors and sincerely seek to do something different.

With a truly repentant spirit, a contrite heart, and a commitment to do the work—you can do anything. With or without a New Year’s resolution, you can do all things through Christ that strengthens you (see Philippians 4:13).

THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

The local religious leaders sent representatives to hear John, not because of interest in what he was preaching but to investigate the threat that his popularity posed to their own influence (see John 1:19-22). John the Baptist’s preaching appealed to the outcasts of Jewish society, including tax collectors and members of the occupying army (see Luke 3:10-14). Many of them had been shunned and disdained by religious leaders and others.

John’s message of repentance was offensive to the two major parties of the Jews—the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were a sect that preached strict adherence to the Law of Moses. The Sadducees were generally wealthier and more politically connected. Both groups were confident that they were sufficiently righteous before God and had no need for repentance (see Luke 18:9-14). Many felt that they not only were exempt from the Law’s punishment, but that they also had the right to broadly condemn others who did not measure up to their standards of self-righteousness. They often used the Law not as a magnet to draw others to God but as a weapon or yoke of bondage to condemn and humiliate the people, thus creating a greater and deeper division within the religious sector of the Jews. The timing was right for someone to come who could show the people a better way—God’s way. God had set the stage for the ministry of John the Baptist, and for the one who was to follow him, the Lord Jesus Christ.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The Path (Matthew 3:1-4)

KJV

1 IN THOSE days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,
2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
4 And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

NIV

1 IN THOSE days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea
2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”
3 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.’”
4 John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

“In those days” (verse 1) possibly refers to “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (Luke 3:1). It could also refer to the spiritual state of the people—they had been without a prophetic word for close to five hundred years. Their souls needed revival along with a fresh call to repentance. John was likely very familiar with the geographical area (see Luke 1:80), as he had

grown up in the outskirts of the region. Today, the area remains mostly uninhabited, arid, and hot. The lay of the land presented him with an opportune time to spend time with God in solitude. John's prophetic message was unlike anything the people had heard in their lifetime. John's call for repentance is a message that is still unpopular, even among many who count themselves as faithful. John preached, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (verse 2). The sermons repelled some and resonated with others who could connect John's message with the words of the Old Testament prophets who brought a similar message. John called his hearers to acknowledge their sin and turn to God with a sincere heart. Quoting Isaiah 40:3, Matthew describes John as the one called by God to prepare the way for the message of the Messiah. John refers to himself as the voice of one "crying" out in the wilderness, a place of loneliness, for people to prepare their hearts to receive the Lord (verse 3). Matthew describes John's usual attire, much unlike anything one would expect from a priest, preacher, or prophet. In striking contrast to prominent religious leaders, John wore the simple attire of a camel's hair robe with a leather belt and ate a diet of locusts and wild honey (verse 4). John's appearance did not glorify himself. He realized that the path people often need to see is not Glory Road but Humble Boulevard.

What Do You Think? What can individual believers do to clear a path that helps others to see Jesus?

The Plea (Matthew 3:5-8)

KJV

- 5** Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,
6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.
7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:

NIV

- 5** People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.
6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.
7 But 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?
8 "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

The initial plea is a part of John the Baptist's work of setting the path, calling for people to repent from their sins (see verses 2-3). Matthew records that people from all over the area—including the region of Judea, the city of Jerusalem, and locations around the Jordan River—came out to the Jordan to repent and be baptized by John (verses 5-6). Matthew draws a distinction between repentance and baptism—they are two separate actions. There can be no repentance without an acknowledgment of sin. Sadly, many churches have watered down the profession-of-faith statement to a few empty words that carry no real (or very limited) weight. Matthew wrote that those who came to repent and be baptized boldly confessed their sins. No one who refuses to confess their sins and allow God to fully enter their hearts can rightfully claim repentance or restoration. Any refusal or neglect to acknowledge personal sin implies a false belief that one does not need salvation. Water baptism is a symbol of the process by which God washes away sin and

justifies those who repent before Him. As John is baptizing those who have repented of sin, several of the Pharisees and Sadducees show up, with no intentions of repenting or being baptized. When John sees them, he calls them “vipers,” venomous snakes that seek to poison others. Imagine John’s voice as He asked, are you truly here to repent? John boldly challenges the religious leaders’ motives for being present (verse 7) but sincerely encourages them not only to repent, but also to show fruits, or evidence of a repentant heart (verse 8). This second plea is a direct challenge to the religious elite, those who freely condemned others yet denied their own need for repentance based on their religious stature and reputation as strict followers of the Law.

What Do You Think? How can we make the holy rite of baptism more meaningful in the lives of Christians? Is it even necessary to emphasize that as important?

The Promise (Matthew 3:9-12)

KJV

9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:

12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

NIV

9 “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 “The ax 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.

11 “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 “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.”

John continued his plea to the Pharisees and Sadducees with a bold challenge and public promise spoken while he attacked the notion that their Jewish lineage made them righteous (verse 9). Ancient Jews still regarded themselves exclusively as God’s chosen. As such, they were quick to connect their personal relationship with God to their biological and cultural heritage as descendants of Abraham. They were proud to be called the sons of Abraham by birth but failed to live up to Abraham’s spiritual legacy as a man of deep faith and devotion to God. John boldly explained that the time had come when all those of the tree of Abraham who were not bearing spiritual fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire (verse 10). Those present would have known he was speaking of their family tree and the cultural heritage they hid behind thinking it would exempt them from doing right and seeking a true relationship with God through repentance. John explained that while he baptized with water for repentance, after him would come another—one more powerful than him (verse 11), one whose shoes he was not even worthy to unlatch. The one John referred to,

Jesus, would baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire (verse 11)—an unquenchable fire that would burn up the chaff (that is useless deeds) (verse 12). John called his hearers to repent and be baptized and be cleansed by the purifying fire of God that burns up hypocrisy.

What Do You Think? What is the church doing to engage and prepare the world for God’s final return and judgment? What are you doing personally?

A CLOSING THOUGHT

This unit deals with a call to repentance. Today, we must not neglect Christ’s call to us as individuals. Each of us has a calling to fulfill that points others to Christ as witnesses for God’s kingdom. It is not enough to settle the question of your own salvation; what are you doing as a witness for Christ? Take a closer look at your spiritual life. Pray, meditate, study, and grow so that you can touch someone’s life and fulfill God’s purpose.

YOUR LIFE

This week, pray to God for a glimpse of those things that may be lacking in your own spiritual life—things that may hinder your walk and Christian witness. This is the last lesson for the year. Now is a good time to make a new commitment to serve God with your whole heart. Give your all to Him.

YOUR WORLD!

After taking time to pray, make a list of ways that you can begin to make a difference for God in your own circles of influence. Someone is waiting for your witness. Are you ready? Are you willing?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we pray for a fresh revival of Your mission, beginning in our hearts, our homes, and our communities. Guide us by Your Spirit to be the beacons of light someone around us needs today. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

CONCLUSION (PREPARING FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON)

While reading the Background Scripture, consider this thought: “How would I engage in an amazing ministry?”

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(December 21-27, 2020)

Monday, December 28: “Live by God’s Word” (Deuteronomy 8:1-11)

Tuesday, December 29: “Jubilee—The Year of God’s Favor” (Leviticus 25:8-17)

Wednesday, December 30: “The Miracle of the Meal and Oil” (1 Kings 17:8-16)

Thursday, December 31: “Naaman’s Leprosy Is Healed in the Jordan River” (2 Kings 5:1-14)

Friday, January 1: “Jesus Overcomes the Devil’s Temptations” (Luke 4:1-13)

Saturday, January 2: “Jesus Is Driven Out of Nazareth” (Luke 4:23-30)

Sunday, January 3: “Jesus’ Mandate for Ministry Is Announced” (Luke 4:14-22)