

The Radical Believer

Someone said not too long ago to a new Christian, “I hear you have given up all your pleasures and become a Christian!” That statement reflects what others often believe about what it means to become a Christian. Our text helps us to understand just the opposite.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, **2** “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” **3** For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.”

4 Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, **6** and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. **9** And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. **10** Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier 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 and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

From John the Baptist’s ministry we understand some important things about biblical repentance.

I. **All people everywhere must repent (vv.1-4)**

We see that Jesus uses the same opening phrase in His ministry in Matthew 4:17. His disciples preach repentance (Mark 6:12; Luke 24:47; Acts 2:36-38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:19-20).

Repentance simply means “to turn.” John is wearing unusual clothing and eating weird food because he knows that he is the one who is to proceed the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah (see Malachi 4:5-6; 2 Kings 1:8). The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it well: “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.”

II. **All people everywhere must repent repentantly (vv. 5-12)**

Augustine once said that we must repent of our repentance, meaning that our repentance is always flawed and must continually be perfected. In this text we learn some important things about repentance.

a. We must confess sincerely (v.6)

To confess sincerely means to recognize that our offense is primarily against God Himself (Psalm 51:2). We must also sincerely confess our sins specifically (see Westminster Confession of Faith 15.5), and we must confess our sins with true godly sorrow (see 2 Corinthians 7:10).

b. We must change decisively (vv. 7-10).

John’s complaint with the Pharisees and Sadducees is that they were only playing the role and not earnestly repenting. We must bear fruit in keeping with repentance. See how Zacchaeus turns his life around upon meeting Jesus and receiving his salvation. There are no legacies in God’s Kingdom and there are no quick fixes.

c. We must trust in Christ explicitly (vv.11-12).

John points to Jesus Christ as the true Judge who will “clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn” and “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The ultimate motivation for repentance is our view of Christ. He is an awesome judge and we revere him. This, John got right. What John missed, however, was that Jesus, in His first advent, came not to condemn but to save (John 3:17). This is why John was confused about Jesus’ identity after John was thrown in prison (see Matthew 11:2-3). What John did not yet understand was that Jesus will judge in His second coming but in His first coming, He has come to extend mercy, amnesty, and grace (see Matthew 11:4-6). Jesus explained to His disciples that John was the greatest man ever born up until his time (Matthew 11:11) but then He goes on to say that the “least in the kingdom of heaven” is greater than John! That is because we, the least in the Kingdom, understand the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. This is essential for true repentance. Paul puts it well in Titus 2:11-14:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

We can see from Paul’s words that the saving grace of Jesus Christ leads to a holy life and good works. This is the secret of Christian repentance.

So someone says, “You’ve given up all your pleasures and become a Christian.” The answer clearly is that we have finally discovered our true Pleasure and all that we have left behind is our foolishness.

Discussion Questions

1. What can we learn from the life of John the Baptist about what it means to be a radical follower of Christ?
2. Explain the simplicity of John’s message in verse 2. What does he mean by “repent”? Why does he say that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand?
3. What are the counterfeit versions of biblical repentance that we observe in our own day?
4. What are the impediments to true repentance that often keep us from resting in Christ?
5. Why is John so hard on the Pharisees and Sadducees? From his encounter with them, what do we learn about true repentance?

6. What did John not fully grasp about Jesus' ministry?

Going Deeper

1. How can you be more authentically repentant in your relationship with Christ?
2. What impedes you most often in your repentance? What can you do about it?