

Preparing the Way of the Lord (Matthew 3:1-12)

Introduction: *Introducing John the Baptist*

John was sent to make the people eager to receive the coming King. He came out of the desert to convince people that they were sinners needing forgiveness, so that when the Savior appeared they would recognize him as their Savior and trust themselves to him.

1. The Demand: *Repent!*

Repentance implies that our lives are off course and that they need a new direction. It not only points us away from the direction we're going. It points us in the direction of the Savior, who has come "to save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). People were living their lives without any real reverence or respect for God, doing whatever they wanted to do. They may have said that they were God's people, but nothing fruitful was coming from their lives. John called them to turn from their sins to God. That's repentance. It's a change of heart and a change of mind that brings a change of course. That's the consistent Biblical message (see Acts 20:21, 26:20).

"What is meant is not a merely intellectual change of mind or mere grief, still less doing penance ... but a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief, which results in 'fruit in keeping with repentance'" (Don Carson, *Matthew* [EBC]).

2. The Promise: *The Kingdom is at hand!*

In one sense, of course, the whole universe is God's kingdom, because he rules over all things. But when the Bible talks about the kingdom of God coming, it means the coming of the promised king, and his rule over the world—which will never be the same again. John is heralding the coming of God's king and the dawning of his promised kingdom, one that would bring both salvation and judgment (see Dan 9:24-26).

3. The Warning: *Flee the wrath to come!*

You can't use soft words with hard men. Gentle words would have done nothing to these hard-hearted Sadducees and Pharisees. The harshest language in the Bible is always reserved for church leaders who have betrayed the gospel and deceived the people. Unless they turned to God, unless they stopped making a charade of religion, unless they stopped thinking of themselves so much better than others because of their strict ceremonial observances, they were going to perish in the great judgment about to come upon Israel only to suffer eternal judgment in the fires that would never be quenched.

First, John makes it clear to this crowd that they're in a rotten condition. Second, he warns them that there's wrath on the way. Third, he says that it's possible to flee from the wrath to come. Fourth, John suggests that someone showed them that they needed to repent, for it's no small thing for a religious Jew in an elite religious group to admit that he's under the wrath of God and liable to be burned like chaff in unquenchable fire.

Conclusion: *Are we prepared for the Lord's coming?*

He called for them to admit that they were sinners and cry to God for mercy and forgiveness of sins, as symbolized by baptism. John didn't invent baptism (see Heb 9:10-13, Mark 7:1-4, Isa 52:15, John 1:25). We need the Lord for ourselves, our families, our society and our country. And how is the way prepared for that? By heeding the call to repentance and bearing fruit worthy of repentance we are likewise preparing the way of the Lord.

Competing Claims to Apostolic Authority (Galatians 1:11-2:14)

Introduction: *Review*

The bane of Paul's life and ministry was the insidious work of false teachers, who dogged his every step. No sooner had Paul planted the gospel in a new community than false teachers rushed in to lead the people astray. Paul had planted churches in the Roman Province of Galatia during what we call his first missionary journey, in cities such as Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13-14). And yet, in a matter of months, these churches had fallen away from the gospel. The Judaizing teachers had come from Jerusalem (Gal 2:12, Acts 15:24) claiming to represent the true message from Peter and James and the other apostles.

1. Paul's Gospel was not from man but Christ (1:11-24)

The church did not produce the gospel. The gospel produced the church. Both his message and his mission, he says, came from Jesus Christ Himself. And having made this claim, Paul goes on to prove it from history.

(a) *What happened before his conversion (v. 13-14)*

A man who is in such a determined state of mind is not likely to start preaching a different message all of a sudden.

(b) *What happened at his conversion (v. 15-16a)*

I, I, I, I... "But ... it pleased God, who ... called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16). This is the only thing that can account for such a man suddenly preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(c) *What happened after his conversion (16b-24)*

He didn't go up to the apostles and ask *them* what he should preach to the Gentiles. Paul received his message and mission from Christ, so he went right to work. He only made one brief visit to Jerusalem in 14 years. When people reject Paul's word, they're not rejecting Paul; they're rejecting Jesus Christ.

2. Paul's gospel is the same as that of the other apostles (2:1-14)

The apostles there give these men the right hand of fellowship and approve of Paul teaching. And Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. If the apostles in Jerusalem really taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation—as the people were saying in Galatia—wouldn't you think that they'd have insisted that Paul's fellow evangelist, Titus, had to be circumcised immediately?

When people in the church were being pressured to accept Jewish customs, it's a matter of defending Christian liberty; there must be no compromise. And especially when people are told that you can't be saved—Paul refused to submit to them for a single hour for the sake of Christian liberty and the truth of the gospel.

Conclusion: *More competing claims to apostolic authority*

Time and again, large parts of the church have succumbed to the same errors that had repeatedly bedeviled her in Biblical times. Salvation by grace was corrupted with by man's work in his justification before God. Ritualism increased, legalism replaced Christian freedom, and the "traditions of men" that Jesus and the Apostles so summarily rejected as false came back repeatedly in virtually identical forms. All this counterfeit religion was sold to the church again and again under the guise of "apostolic authority."