



JOHN: A FAITH THAT CHALLENGES OTHERS

THE POINT: Faith stands unwaveringly on the truth.

THE PASSAGE: Matthew 3:1-12 (CSB)

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GETTING STARTED

Who's your favorite doctor from the movies or TV? What do you like about them?

Life Connection

Medical doctors are talented men and women who serve a critical role in society. If they survive the rigorous college and medical school study, they face the challenges of residency. Later, as practicing physicians, their learning continues with every patient interaction.

Have you ever visited your doctor hoping to discover the cause and cure for your mysterious ailments? After you are examined and asked questions, the doctor steps out of the room to review the test results. Left alone, you begin to worry about hearing bad news. The wait has no mercy. Finally, the doctor reenters your room as you hear three gentle knocks on the door.

Smiling, the doctor says, "I know your condition, and the cure is simple." As you wait for the explanation, the doctor says, "You are free to leave now." Can you imagine that happening?

Christ-followers sadly sometimes act like doctors who know the cure but are unwilling to share it. Let's share our faith; people need us to tell them about faith in Jesus!

GUIDE: Call attention to **The Point: Faith stands unwaveringly on the truth.**

STUDY THE BIBLE

READ: MATTHEW 3 :1-6

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" ³ For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight! ⁴ Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses to explain how the kingdom of heaven had come near.

Recap: *God's message of truth through John drew large crowds of people. Many found faith in God's truth, resulting in repentance and baptism. Faith must be found before it can be shared. Of course, it must be shared before it can be found. This is God's cycle of evangelism.*

Discuss: Why is it important for us to help prepare the way of the Lord in others' lives?

What are some obstacles to sharing the good news in our culture and how can we overcome them?

Transition: We can call others to the same faith in Christ we have. In the next verses, we see that calling others to faith often calls for addressing hard truths.

READ: MATTHEW 3:7-10

⁷ When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. ⁹ And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Recap: *John the Baptist boldly preached God's truth, and many people responded with repentance and baptism. However, some Jewish religious leaders who came to hear John believed they were excluded from his warnings because Abraham was their father. They weren't there to respectfully listen to John but to confront him. John didn't sugarcoat his words. Standing on his faith in God and His word, John didn't hesitate with speaking the truth.*

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses to provide background on the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Recap: *Followers of Jesus Christ have countless opportunities to confront people lovingly or boldly with the truth of God's Word. Sadly, more times than we care to admit, we let these opportunities pass us by without saying a word. We get caught up with our own challenges and decide to let someone else deal with them. Yet, God has charged each follower of Jesus to be bold and courageous with His truth.*

Discuss: How can believers strike a balance between confronting people lovingly but boldly?

Who do you know who effectively addresses hard truths?

How can we share the truth of the gospel in ways that connect in our culture?

Transition: In the next verses, we see that the message of faith is never about us but solely about Jesus.

READ: MATTHEW 3:11-12

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more

powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹² His winnowing shovel 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 fire that never goes out.”

ENGAGE: Complete the exercise “Examining Hard Truths” to help the group consider hard truths about themselves. Read each statement aloud, pausing after each one, and have them reflect silently on each one.

- I recognize my own need to repent.
- I encourage others to repent and turn to Jesus with their needs and sin.
- My heart rejoices when anyone repents and turns to Jesus in faith.
- I regularly look at my own life and evaluate whether or not the “fruit” of my life matches an attitude of repentance.
- An unbiased person looking at my life would recognize that I have a desire to put Jesus first in all things.

Pray: This passage and activity give us an opportunity to consider reasons we might need to repent. Invite the group to spend a few moments in prayer, confessing sin and asking for God’s forgiveness.

Recap: *Preaching and teaching aren’t about you; they’re about Jesus. John the Baptist knew that reality all too well, and his words proved it. His preaching pointed people toward Jesus and away from himself, and the ability to do that requires discipline and humility.*

GUIDE: Use the commentary for these verses to explain the significance of baptism.

Summarize: John was also disciplined in his humility. Although he acknowledged his role in the kingdom of God, John’s message was never about himself. The Bible speaks about the importance of humility and mentions two of the most notable people who practiced humility:

Moses: “Moses was a very humble man, more so than anyone on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3).

Jesus: “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Discuss: What do you appreciate about the ministry of John the Baptist?

What are some lessons we can learn from the ministry of John the Baptist?

GUIDE: Refer back to **The Point** for this session: **Faith stands unwaveringly on the truth.**

RESPONSE

Ask. Ask God to help you become a person who stands for truth, no matter the cost. Ask Him to give you courage for the journey.

Analyze. Look at your life. Are you willing to let go of disobedience to God’s Word that is

keeping you from telling others about your faith in Jesus Christ? Make a list of those things that are obstacles right now and pray for God to remove them.

Act. Don't wait for the perfect time, place, or opportunity. Put into practice the things you have learned about sharing your faith and do it. Practice with a family member or friend. The more you act, the more comfortable you will become in being a soulwinner.

Pray: Close your group time with prayer, thanking God that we can put our trust in Him because we know He will keep His promises to us.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 3:1-6

Connection to The Point: John the Baptist called the people to repent and prepare their hearts for the Messiah.

John the Baptist (v. 1). John the Baptist was Jesus's cousin. John's role was to prepare people for the coming of Jesus by calling them to repentance. In the Gospel of Mark, John is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Just as Elijah critiqued Ahab, John critiqued Herod (Mark 6:17-18). In Luke, the theme of barrenness is emphasized for John's mother in the announcements of the coming births of both John and Jesus. Here in Matthew, John's name is the first one mentioned after Jesus's genealogy and story of Jesus's birth.

Repent (v. 2). The word *repent* means to change your mind—or your purpose in life. Repentance is not merely changing one's mind in a strictly intellectual sense. Repentance is broader and more holistic than mentally assenting to a new idea or even changing one's opinion or view of something. As John was calling people to repent, he focused on their whole lives, because repentance includes not only a change in one's thinking but a change in one's overall direction in life. Repentance is connected to the next idea about the kingdom of heaven drawing near. Individuals were being called to change the course of their lives in the same way the entire world was about to change with the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed One—the King.

The kingdom of heaven has come near! (v. 2). The *kingdom of heaven* is not a distinct theological idea from the kingdom of God and is simply Matthew's way of saying the kingdom of God. As an observant Jew writing to observant Jews, Matthew probably used the phrase "of heaven" instead of "of God" in an abundance of caution to avoid using God's name in vain, and thus violating the second commandment (Ex. 20:7). The *kingdom* refers to Christ's reign over the hearts, minds, and lives of people who respond to Christ through repentance and faith.

By saying that the kingdom of heaven had come near, John was saying that it was drawing near and that there is an overlap in the times and ages. John's ministry can be seen as the beginning of the age of the Messiah who was coming to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament.

Isaiah (v. 3). Isaiah's prophetic ministry extended well beyond his lifetime. He prophesied to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah as the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were being taken into captivity due to their disobedience and sin. In addition to having the ministry of forthtelling the message of God to the people of Judah, Isaiah was also given

insight into the future—the time after the people were taken into captivity. This quotation comes from Isaiah chapter 40. In that chapter, Isaiah prophesied to the people of his day about a future time when the Lord would restore His people after their exile. By quoting Isaiah, Matthew taught us that John was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. John acted as the forerunner to the Messiah—preparing the way for the Lord to come to His people.

Camel-hair garment (v. 4). John's dress and lifestyle, including his diet, were connected to other people who lived in the desert. They both "point to an austerity and asceticism appropriate to his stern calls for repentance."¹ Matthew's description of John the Baptist is similar to the dress and lifestyle of the Old Testament prophet Elijah as described in 2 Kings 1:8. Both Elijah and John acted as forerunners to men whose ministry eclipsed their own.

Baptized (v. 6). The baptisms John performed were not the same kind of baptisms we perform in our churches today. The baptisms John performed were preparatory for Jesus's ministry. In the book of Acts, Apollos is described as "an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures" who was "fervent in spirit" and who was "speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only John's baptism" (Acts 18:24-25). Two Christians, Priscilla and Aquilla, heard his preaching and "took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately" (v. 26). In other words, John's baptism and teaching was true and accurate, but it was incomplete. It required something more. Christian baptism picks up where John's baptisms started. In our churches today, baptisms symbolize a person's faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a step of obedience as well as a testimony of one's faith, both to other believers and to non-believers.

MATTHEW 3:7-10

Connection to The Point: John's call to repentance was a call to action: Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Pharisees and Sadducees (v. 7). *Pharisees and Sadducees* were two of the three main Jewish religious groups in the first century. They were distinct from one another, yet they are often depicted in the New Testament as being equal in their opposition to Jesus and His kingdom. Sadducees only believed in the written Word of God and did not accept the oral traditions as authoritative. In fact, they only believed that the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, were authoritative. Meanwhile, Pharisees believed the entire Old Testament to be the Word of God and also emphasized the oral tradition that had developed to interpret the Torah. Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead and taught that the soul, the immaterial part of a person, did not survive physical death. In this way, Pharisees were intellectually more orthodox in their professed theology. However, their theological profession did not result in spiritual vitality. Most of the Pharisees failed to recognize the Messiah when He presented Himself to them.

Brood of vipers (v. 7). By calling these men a *brood of vipers*, John was echoing Genesis 3, when the first man and woman were led astray by a serpent. Snakes and vipers were viewed as being both shrewd and dangerous. John was not afraid to call out sin when he saw it—despite the risk of personal harm. Later, in Matthew 14:1-12, John would be arrested, imprisoned, and executed for telling Herod that he was sinning by taking his brother's wife as his own wife. The call to repent is not merely a call to change our way of thinking but, in the power that the Holy Spirit provides, to change our entire way of life so that our lives are marked by joyful obedience to God.

Produce fruit (v. 8). Good works are the fruit, not the root, of our salvation. Therefore, by calling this *brood of vipers* to produce fruit, John was, in one sense, calling them to do something that was impossible. They could not produce fruit unless the Spirit first gave them the gift of faith (Eph. 2:8-9). However, the call to repent and believe was a means of grace to these religious leaders. John's Gospel seems to indicate that Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, had come to repent and believe in Jesus (John 19:39-42). Matthew, Luke, and John all indicated that Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Jewish political and religious council known as the Sanhedrin, became a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57; Luke 23:50-51; John 19:38).

Don't presume (v. 9). In the Old Testament, God graciously called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:27-12:1). Abraham did not earn his calling, and his behavior did not keep him in God's grace. Only God's grace kept Abraham from making a shipwreck of his faith. In Galatians 3, Paul would remind the churches in Galatia that their reception of the Spirit came by faith and not by the flesh. Presuming upon the graciousness of God is sin. Whenever we think that we have earned or are entitled to God's grace, we demonstrate that we do not understand grace for what it truly is—the unmerited favor of God due only to the work of Christ not our own work.

Abraham as our father (v. 9). The fatherhood of Abraham was important to the Jewish people because they incorrectly thought that their physical heritage was what put them in right standing with God. Matthew recorded John the Baptist's teaching that no one should rely on their physical heritage. Instead, God's grace comes to all who believe on His Son no matter what their physical heritage is. The most important dividing line is not between Jews and Gentiles but between those who have trusted in Jesus as Messiah and those who do not.

God is able to raise up children for Abraham (v. 9). It was always God's intention that His people be a people of faith, not merely a people from a certain ethnic or national heritage. This reality becomes more and more clear as the storyline of the Bible unfolds. By the time the final book of the Bible is revealed to the apostle John, it has become abundantly clear that God calls people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation to come and worship the risen and enthroned Christ (Rev. 7:9-10).

The ax is already at the root (v. 10). Fruit comes from healthy trees. Unhealthy trees that do not produce fruit must be cut down. If they are not cut down, the unhealthy trees will rob water and life-giving nutrients from healthy trees that are producing fruit.

MATTHEW 3:11-12

Connection to The Point: John's message was centered on pointing to Jesus, the coming Messiah.

Baptize (v. 11). The word *baptize* in this verse is the Greek word *baptizo*. By transliterating the word to *baptize* rather than translating it into English, the meaning of the original word has become obscured. The Greek word *baptizo* means to dip or to immerse. A more direct translation would have been, "I immerse you into the water for repentance." John's baptism was a symbolic act that indicated the individual was starting a new life. Christian baptism would later follow up on this idea and emphasize that one has died to sin and has been raised to walk in new life (Rom. 6:1-11). Thus, baptism is usually the first public step of obedience

that someone takes after coming to faith in Jesus's finished work.

Water for repentance (v. 11). Repentance always comes before the physical act of baptism. Water baptism flows out of repentance and is a public profession of faith and an outward symbol of an inner reality. Repentance is not simply a changing of the mind or assenting to new ideas. Repentance is a complete change of direction and path. It is a radical transformation of one's life that is brought about by the work of the Spirit in a person's life. John's water baptism served as a life marker for those who underwent it. John's use of *water* in this phrase contrasts with the baptism that Jesus would bring—a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. Christian baptism is distinct from, yet a continuation of, the baptism of John. The baptism of John was preparatory for Christian baptism.

The one who is coming after me (v. 11). John understood his role. He was preparing the way for the Messiah who would ultimately transform the entire world. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is recorded saying that just as he decreased, Jesus would increase (John 3:30). This increase and decrease were not an indication of Jesus needing to grow in holiness. Jesus is fully God and fully man. John the Baptist was only a man. Instead, Jesus's increase was an increase in public influence and impact. John would slowly but surely fade to the background in terms of public leadership while Jesus's public authority would grow.

I am not worthy (v. 11). Jesus referred to John as the "Elijah who is to come" and taught that he was greater than other prophets: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared" (Matt. 11:11,14). In spite of this tremendous praise and high status given to him by Jesus, John was humble and consistently sought to direct praise to the One who deserved it—Jesus the Messiah. The reference to removing *sandals* is dramatic. Think about the context of first-century Israel. Roads were dusty and dirty. A man's sandals and feet would have been equally dusty and dirty, and removing someone's sandals was a job reserved for the lowest of servants. By saying he was not even worthy of this task, John was taking a position of supreme humility.

Baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (v. 11). By referring to the baptism Jesus would bring as coming with *the Holy Spirit and fire*, John was signaling that Jesus's baptism would be both more powerful and cleansing. Being baptized with the Holy Spirit is an indication of God's personal and powerful involvement in conversion. Those who are baptized in the baptism Jesus has brought are converted through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit who gives them new hearts and new lives. When the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2, this prophecy by John was fulfilled. Being baptized with the Holy Spirit and being filled with the Holy Spirit are two different things. Having been baptized with the Holy Spirit at conversion, believers must be filled with Him throughout their lives (Eph. 5:18). Some commentators believe the word *fire* here refers to the judgment of hell. However, it seems more likely that John used the word as a reference to the purifying work of fire.

His winnowing shovel (v. 12). A winnowing shovel is not a tool that most of us are familiar with today. It was used by farmers to separate wheat or other grain from the chaff, a process both useful and valuable. Chaff is the leftover shells of grain that are separated from the grain in the sifting process. The image of Jesus's ministry being a ministry of separating and distinguishing is not unique to this passage. Jesus Himself would say that He did not come to bring peace but a sword or division (Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:49-53).