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Preparing the Way of the Lord: The Ministry of John the Baptist; Matthew 3:1-12

GPBC

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Introduction – Today’s text is important for several reasons. First, as we’ve seen already, the public ministry of John the Baptist preceding the public ministry of Christ is another OT prophecy fulfilled. And we shouldn’t pass that point too quickly. It simply cannot be overstated how central it is to our faith that Jesus fulfilled prophecy after prophecy and promise after promise concerning the Messiah. Ours is not a misplaced, misinformed, leap-in-the-dark, blind faith. Our faith is well-grounded, well-informed, and well-proven, even down to the smallest and last detail. Isaiah noted in 40:3 that a forerunner would prepare the way of the Lord. And John the Baptist, another miracle child, did just that.

Second, John’s ministry is key to how God was preparing His people to receive and embrace His Son. Jesus didn’t just drop out of nowhere without any groundwork being laid. John’s message and John’s ministry was used of God to prepare hearts. The 400 years of silence was coming to a close. The stage was being set. The herald was announcing the arrival of the King.

Third, there are many similarities between the ministry of John the Baptist for the first coming of Christ and the ministry of the church for the second coming of Christ. Just as John was given a message and a ministry, so we are given a message and a ministry. Just as John was preparing the way of the Lord, so we are preparing the way of the Lord. Just as John would baptize, so we are commissioned to baptize. And just as John knew his message and ministry was not about him but rather about the One who is greater, so we know that our message and ministry is about the One who is greater.

- I. John’s Appearance as Preparation
 - a. John appears on the scene in a nowhere place – the wilderness. He didn’t preach in the marketplace or the synagogue or the city square. He appeared in the wilderness – just as Isaiah prophesied that he would. The wilderness is not exactly where you would find the people – but God drew the people to His messenger and to His Word and brought the people out to the wilderness.

- i. It's interesting isn't it that the way of the Lord would be prepared in the wilderness, that Jesus's first steps of ministry would be in the wilderness.
 - ii. It's interesting but not incidental. Remember Moses led the people of God out of slavery, through the wilderness for 40 years, and right to the Promised Land. And God promised in Deut 18:15 that He would raise up a prophet like Moses.
 - iii. The Exodus has always served as a picture of God delivering His people from the bondage of sin. You see our wilderness is our sin. We stumble and wonder around in our sin. And Jesus would first come to the wilderness. He would lead us out of our slavery to sin, through the wilderness of this life, and right to the Promised Land.
 - b. John appears on the scene seemingly out of nowhere. He wasn't there and then there he was preaching repentance, preparing the way of the Lord.
 - i. Jesus would appear much like that, almost suddenly.
 - ii. Malachi 3:1 – Luke 2:46-47
 - c. John's literal appearance. A prophet's clothing. In the world, but certainly not of the world, certainly not worldly or striving for the pleasures of the world. John was different, a man, but different.
 - i. Now Jesus didn't have the same wardrobe as John, but He did have the same kind of appearance didn't He? In the world, but certainly not of it. He was a man, but so much more than men.
- II. John's Preaching as Preparation
 - a. John's message was repentance. V2.
 - i. Repentance is simply defined as a change – literally a change of mind, which biblically includes a change of heart and behavior. True repentance is a total change of how you think, what you love, and how you live. But what is this change?
 - ii. **Repentance is a humble recognition which brings about a sincere confession that yields a different direction.**
 - 1. Humble recognition – change of mind – we change the way we think about God and about ourselves – He is holy and we are not. He is sovereign and we are not. He is worthy and we are not. He is life and our sin is death.

2. Which brings about a sincere confession – confession means to agree with God. True repentance includes our sincere agreement with God that He is worthy of our praise and that we have denied our praise to Him in order to praise ourselves. We have discarded the Fountain of Life to drink from our own empty cisterns. We agree with God that we cannot save ourselves and we need His grace.
 3. That yields a different direction – now instead of pursuing our sin and our own agenda and the passions of our flesh and the course of this world, we rather pursue Christ and fellowship with Him, and honor Him with our actions and words and thoughts and deeds. Not perfection but direction.
- iii. We see in our text an example of those who embraced John’s message and an example of those who rejected it.
1. V6 – when the crowds heard the kingdom of heaven is at hand, they knew they were not right with God – they had a humble recognition of their state before God. They sincerely confessed their sins – they agreed with God that they had rebelled against Him and rejected His majesty and grace. They began going a different direction marked by their willingness to be baptized.
 2. But there was another group in vv7-10. They were not there to recognize they were not right with God. Had they come just to observe? Were they just going along with the crowds to maintain sway with the crowds? For sure they were not confessing sin and practicing repentance. They had no sins to confess, or so they thought. And according to them, they were on the right direction.
 - a. The problem with the Pharisees and Sadducees is that they were trusting in themselves and in the things they had done rather than trusting in the grace of God and what He has done. John said, “Do not presume to say Abraham is our father” – that doesn’t make you right with God. Being

ethnic descendants of Abraham does not make you right with God. It's not about your birth; it's about the new birth. Paul says the true children of Abraham are children of promise, children of faith, Jew and Gentile. Gal 3:29. "We are Pharisees. We are Sadducees." That doesn't make you right with God. Religious ties, accomplishments, reputation does not make you right with God. Jesus called those just going through the motions white-washed tombs. Cleaned up on the outside, dead on the inside. Trying to earn your way to heaven by keeping religious rules is a dead end.

3. John called them to repentance – "Who warned you of the wrath to come?" Has anyone ever bother to tell you you're not right with God?! You are separated from God by your own self-righteous pride. You are guilty before God.
 4. So John calls them to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. In other words, humbly recognize your separation from God, sincerely confess your sin, and go a different direction – humble thankfulness for grace rather than prideful boasting or trusting in your own morals or goodness.
 5. Then the good fruit comes – the different direction – but if you don't have the fruit, you don't have the root.
- b. John's message of repentance was preparation. You see repentance is just one side of the coin of salvation – faith, or belief, or embracing and treasuring all that God is for us in Christ is the rest of the gospel. And so when Jesus came preaching He would not only say, "Repent," He would also say, "Follow me."

III. John's Baptizing as Preparation

- a. My ministry of water baptism for repentance is simply preparing the way for the One who is to come. His ministry is Holy Spirit and fire baptism. In other words – those who repent are being prepared for new life and everlasting life wrought by the Spirit of God. Those who

refuse to see their need of repentance – who have no need of salvation and no need of a Savior and no desire for change of life who think themselves or try to make themselves right with God – those who refuse repentance are preparing themselves for everlasting fire. Those who are repenting are those who are believing. Those who are not repenting are those who are not believing.

b. V12

c. John's ministry of preaching repentance and water baptism marking repentance initiated a separation of people – those who would see their sin and therefore their need of a Savior and those who would not.

Conclusion – Don't be among those who would not. You'll never make yourself right with God. If you have never repented and believed you are not right with God. But God can make you right with God! Humbly recognize who God is and who you are. Agree with God, confess your sin, embrace His Son, and go a different direction – away from death and into life!!