



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Matthew 3: Change Your Mind

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I HOPE YOU CAN JOIN US THIS WEEK FOR OUR CAPITOL BIBLE STUDY. SEE THE BOTTOM OF THIS PAGE FOR TIMES AND LOCATIONS.

HAIRY COATS AND BIG BELTS

Matthew 3 records the ministry of John the Baptist. John was an unusual and fascinating man. He lived in the desert of Judea, north of the Dead Sea. His food was locusts and honey. Locusts were an approved food according to Leviticus 11:22, though I would not want to eat them even if they are honey coated!¹ His clothing was made of camel's hair, with a big leather belt around his waist.

Why did John look and behave in such an unusual way? A bit of Old Testament history might help our understanding. Throughout Israel's history, God had raised up one prophet after another to guide the nation. One of the greatest prophets was Elijah, who lived in the 9th century BC. Elijah was described as "a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8, NIV). The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, was written in about 400 BC and concludes with God promising, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5). After Malachi wrote, no more prophets were to be found anywhere in Israel for four long centuries. It was a strange period of silence and waiting ... waiting for the promised return of the prophet Elijah who would finally come and prepare the way for the Messiah^{2 3} Then, John the Baptizer shows up, wearing the uniform of Elijah and calling the nation to repentance. John was indeed the fulfillment of the prophecies about Elijah's second coming (Luke 1:17, Matt 11:12, 17:10), heralding the coming of Christ.

What was John's mission? Just as modern day government leaders will often send an advance person ahead to make arrangements for their appearance at an event, so Kings in ancient times would send a herald to prepare the way, especially to make sure that the dirt roads were cleared and passable. Hence, John came declaring, "Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight" (Matthew 3:3)! Only in this case, the *Lord* was the King of Kings and the *paths* to make straight were human hearts.

CHANGE YOUR THINKING

John's message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (vs. 2). The kingdom was certainly near, for the King of heaven himself, Jesus Christ, was walking bodily among them.

The word *repent* (Greek = *metanoew*) is often misunderstood. It means, literally, to change your mind or thinking. "The primary sense in Judaism is always a change in man's attitude toward God and in the conduct of life."⁴ It means being truly sorry for sins, and intent on seeking God's help because of them and making any recompense possible to those who have been impacted by them.

POOR SUBSTITUTES

Too often, people try to substitute something else for repentance.

Discipline: Repentance is a change of mind, not action. One can appear to be outwardly moral, as no doubt the religious leaders of John's day did, without having actually repented inwardly (Matthew 3:7-8).

Religion: It is not enough to be religious. The religious leaders of John's day were ready to go through the ritual of baptism, and he rebuked them because they were not sincerely repentant (Matthew 3:7-8).

Knowledge: It is not enough to know the Bible or even to believe it. The Scribes and Sadducees were considered experts in the Bible, but John rebuked them (Matthew 3:7). As James cautions, "the demons also believe" (James 2:19).

Affiliation: Matthew 3:9 records John cautioning the Jewish religious leaders about thinking they were right with God because of their heritage as descendents of Abraham. In the same way, we dare not think we are right with God simply because we are Americans, or Protestants, or Catholics, or Republicans, or Democrats, or any other affiliation.

Pretence: I heard of a man who sent a check to the government for back taxes with a note attached that said: "I felt so guilty for cheating on my taxes I had to send you this check. If I don't feel

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: WEDNESDAYS @ 7:30 A.M., ASSEMBLY RULES CONFERENCE ROOM (3171)

STAFF/LOBBYISTS: WEDNESDAYS @ 12:00 NOON, ROOM 125

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any better, I'll send you the rest." God is not fooled by halfhearted repentance or pretend sorrow. A better model to follow would be Zaccheus, the tax collector who turned to Jesus and amply paid back those he had defrauded (Luke 19:8).

WHERE NEW THINKING LEADS

A New Start: John baptized those who repented. Baptism was a hugely symbolic step for the Jews of his day. No Jew had ever been baptized prior to this, since baptism was the way that Gentiles indicated they were outsiders wanting to convert to the faith. John's baptism showed that all who come to God, no matter what their background, must start over with Him.⁵

Repentance is still the starting point for salvation today. Jesus began his ministry just as John did, saying ""Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). The apostle Peter later preached, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Paul, similarly, taught "both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21). We are saved when we finally wake up to our depraved condition and cry out, ""God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13, 2 Corinthians 7: 10).

A Changed Life: Repentance means a change of *thinking* about our sinful condition and about God. However, when it is accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, it is ALWAYS followed by change in *actions* as well. John therefore urged those who said they had repented to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). Fruit refers to godly character qualities. The apostle Paul listed some of these qualities in Galatians 5:22-23. They include, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Jesus said we can identify those who are not really with him by their lack of such fruit (Matthew 7:20). Of course, none of us is perfect, and we all stumble at times, but a truly redeemed person will gradually over time increasingly demonstrate godly character (2 Peter 1:8).

JESUS IS GREATER

John the Baptist was a great man. In fact, he was greater than anyone who had ever lived up until his day (Matthew 11:11). However, Jesus was far greater than he. John said of Christ that

he is "mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals" (Matthew 3:11).

This verse, Matthew 3:11, holds very special meaning for me personally. I grew up in a devout churchgoing home and knew quite a bit about God and Jesus. I had not read through the Bible for myself though. One day, someone gave me a Bible, and I sat down alone and began to read through the book of Matthew. When I came to Matthew 3:11, God stirred my mind and heart like never before. I had always revered Jesus and recognized him as great and even divine. Yet, I had never understood him to be *that* great – so great that I might not even be worthy to carry his sandals. Over the next few weeks, as I thought about Jesus' greatness, God began to show me my own sinfulness and need for a savior. He brought me to a place of repentance and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of my sins. Since then, though I am still far from perfect, as any who know me can attest, God has enabled me to often "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." I am so grateful for John's message that helped to point me to Christ!

THE STAKES ARE HUGE

John's message is one of great joy for those who have changed their thinking and turning to God, but it is a strong warning for those who would choose to live life apart from God. John explained that, one day, God will "gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). As for me, I personally look forward to being in that nice, big, cozy, barn, enjoying all His blessings.

¹ Some today speculate that the "locusts" John ate may actually refer to the chocolaty-tasting carob pod's that grow on the "locust trees" that grow throughout the area, though this seems doubtful since the pods lack protein.

² Note that Elijah would not need to be reincarnated, since he was taken up bodily to heaven (2 Kings 2:11).

³ Still today, some Jews practice traditions in anticipation of Elijah's coming. When a baby boy is circumcised, an empty chair is set aside for Elijah. At the Passover meal, a cup and chair are set for him, and a door is opened to welcome him.

⁴ Fritz Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Zondervan, 1976).

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1992), 56.