

**REPENTANCE - KNOWING WHY AND KNOWING HOW - Both Are Important - Part seven - Sunday, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, 6:30 p.m.  
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**REPENTANCE - BUILDING A HIGHWAY FOR THE GLORY OF GOD**

**Matthew 3:1-6** - "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."

**Isaiah 40:3-5** - "A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. [4] Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. [5] And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

This is the seventh message in our series on the subject of repentance. We're looking at repentance as it relates to **believers**. If you've never come to know saving life in Jesus Christ, God the Son, you need to experience what the Bible calls "**repentance unto life**" (**Acts 11:18**).

In spite of all your best efforts, you are, without the work of the Spirit of God in your heart, "**dead in trespasses and sin**" (**Ephesians 2:1, 5**). That means you are unable to help yourself become right with God. Just like the rest of us in this sanctuary, you need to acknowledge your need of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who died to take away the guilt of your sin and give you eternal life.

But repentance isn't just for the unsaved. And it is never a one time experience, like a divine "get out of jail free" card. We've already seen the meaning of the word "**repentance**" in the New Testament - "**metanoeo**" - **meta** (after or following), and **noeo** (to perceive with the mind, to understand).

Repentance is **what you do after you come to understand with the mind** what God is saying to your heart.

And the **ongoing** nature of repentance is further portrayed by John (quoting the prophet Isaiah) as the process of **building a highway**. It has to do with **preparing the way for the Lord**. This was John the Baptist's role - to **get people ready for Jesus!** And he was particularly concerned with the **religious** people of his day - that they were too prone to **make excuses** and **justify their lack of readiness** for the Lord.

And, because of this, John saw the particular relevance of the words of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah too, spoke to God's Old Testament people. And he called them to set a process in motion in their lives to **ready them for the work God wanted to do in their hearts through the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ**. John had the same burden toward the Pharisees and Sadducees as they came to him for his baptism of repentance.

There are **two key concepts** found in Isaiah's words. John picks them up and calls the crowd, and particularly the **religious** crowd, to a fresh application of Isaiah's words to their hearts. The two concepts are **confrontation** and **construction**. We'll look at **confrontation** this week. I have only one main point with a few sub-points as I wrap up.

1) **THE CONFRONTATION COMES, NOT ONLY IN THE CONTENT OF THE MESSAGE, BUT THE STYLE OF THE MESSENGER**

What I mean is this: Not only was there a **message** for these religious leaders, but there was a **messenger**. In this case, the messenger was John the Baptist. Look at how he's described in the gospel of Matthew:

**Matthew 3:1, 4-5 - "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea....4-5....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...."**

Look at John. He's rough, uncultured, almost crude, certainly quirky. And he's not offering lectures at the local temple. He's way out in the desert. Probably he's filthy. He has bad teeth and knotted long hair.

It would be like a call coming to us today to come back to God that began like this: ***“There’s an old man, with a scraggy main of matted hair. He’s up about 90 miles miles north of North Bay, in a little lean-two out in the woods....”***

That’s the process God was using in the last of a long line of prophets, sent to call His people to get ready - to ***prepare a way*** for the coming glory of the Lord in their lives. So we have to come to terms with a fundamental question about this whole plan: ***Why does God choose to use John the Baptist?*** Is this just a cute fluke of Biblical history? Or does Father God have a plan that isn’t just accidental - a plan that ***fits in with the kind of repentance He’s calling these people to?***

I believe the description of John the Baptist is an important part of the repentance process for these religious people. John wasn’t coming to atheists. He was calling out to people who had received the Ten Commandments, who had just that morning gone to the Temple to offer sacrifices.

In fact, he was screaming out his call to repentance to leaders in the temple who, just that morning, had signed receiving orders for a fresh delivery of sheep that had just arrived for that day’s sacrifices. These were people who observed the Passover.

In other words, as you look at John, you are looking at ***God’s method for speaking to those who thought they already knew well enough, on their own, what religion and holiness and Godliness was all about.***

That’s why John comes on the scene the way he does. The first process in preparing a highway for the coming glory of God is ***confrontation***. And that’s just what John does. There’s something about him that immediately ***jolts*** and ***jars*** all our preconceptions about how religion ought to look and feel - and perhaps even how God ought to speak to people like we.

So, here’s lesson number one about how God works when He wants to call ***religious*** people to ongoing humility and repentance: When God - when a ***loving*** God - wants to call religious people to repentance ***He always begins with confrontation***. Or, to put it in the terms of our text in Isaiah, ***confrontation*** always precedes ***construction***.

Please notice, this is **not** the way God typically begins His dealings with the unsaved when He calls **them** to repentance: **Romans 2:4** - **“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”**

In this age of grace (which will one day come to an end) God frequently **woos** the lost with kindness and patience. He makes His rain to fall on the just and the unjust. But, when He deals with those in the **know** - those who have had so much religion they are **religiously callous** - He begins, usually, not with **gentleness** but **confrontation**.

Here's why this is so: People soaked in religion tend to **settle** in their faith. We all do this. We naturally tend, over time, to walk very **conveniently** before the Lord. We know what we know pretty well. We live better than many outside the church. We hear much about love and peace and grace. There's hardly a modern worship chorus with the words **“wrath”** or **“judgment”** in it.

And there's something else - another tremendous problem with the modern religious scene: The sheer bulk and variety of religious input we encounter in our day is almost overwhelming. The variety of **styles** and **forms** in which the message of the Kingdom of God comes to us is staggering. Everything is offered to us on our own terms.

This may be a kind of **plus** for soft **evangelism**, but it's a great **minus** for **discipleship**. It's a plus for evangelism because people of all styles and stripes can be reached quicker than ever before with the message of Christ Jesus in a form they can understand and respond to. It's a great **minus** for discipleship because, with the overload of styles and forms and packages of Christianity available, I can always **hear what I want to hear, and get it all on my own terms**.

We are now living in an age where even our Christianity is packaged and served up according to market-driven taste buds. I have my **favorite authors**. They suit my taste. I don't even have to read those who do not. I get to **program** my own music according to my tastes. I can watch religious programming on T.V. I have my **favorite religious broadcasts**. I have the stars I like and the ones I don't care for. When a religious program doesn't suit my taste, I simply change channels.

If I go to a church where they sing too loud, or stand too much, or preach too long, or don't clap and jump as much as I like, or pray in groups, or raise their hands, or talk about money too much, or not enough, then I simply change churches. I can probably find one that suits my tastes.

The point is, ***I can find what I want on my own terms.*** And, believe it or not, that's a ***terrible*** atmosphere for making strong disciples! We all get so terribly ***accustomed*** to walking in a faith that's ***tailored to our liking.*** We all get so ***unaccustomed*** to being genuinely ***confronted*** in our walk with Jesus. It is, for all of us, increasingly easy to maintaining the trappings of our faith without ever being pushed into deeper, and perhaps uncomfortable, levels of maturity in our walk with the Lord.

This is perhaps ***the*** great danger in the modern North American church. It's increasingly easy to ***refuse to grow up.*** It's increasingly easy to ***consider different options*** when we feel challenged and stretched. It's becoming quite acceptable to simply ***pinball my way through my Christian life,*** just bouncing from one option to another, without having to ***change or grow inside.***

Listen, ***that's what John the Baptist is all about.*** He won't let these people switch channels. He won't give them anything on their own terms. He wouldn't ***pamper*** them. How many Christians live huge segments of their short lives changing authors, changing channels, and changing churches, without even stopping to consider that what God may want to change is ***them!***

I need to reconsider the important place John the Baptist has in my life. I need to see him, in all his repulsive glory, as God's way of saying to me, ***"Don, you don't define the terms on which you follow me in this world. I define the terms. Now, grow up and get over it!"***

I'm not making a big deal over just a little thing in the Scriptures. When you look for it, this idea of ***confrontation*** and repentance is dealt with repeatedly in the Scriptures:

**Matthew 11:7-10** - "As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? [8]"

**What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. [9] What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. [10] This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."**

Very quickly, here we see Jesus once again affirming John's unique role in *"preparing the way"* for the coming of Christ, the Messiah. But there was a problem. The people weren't ready for the kind of repentance John was calling them to.

So Jesus presses the issue in very strong words: ***"What were you thinking? What did you expect in terms of getting ready for My coming? Did you think John would cater to your wishes. Did you think he would blow in whatever direction you wanted him to go? Is that what you think My call is all about? Is that how you think the Kingdom of God comes?"***

As if these verses weren't enough, the apostle Paul addressed the same issue, especially with reference to the state of the church in the last days - the days in which you and I live:

**2 Timothy 4:1-4 - "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."**

These are striking words, and very sad words. Do we frequently see the fulfillment of these words in many a church? People (says Paul of a day he couldn't see, but in which we now live) will have a hard time seriously coming to terms with life-giving, Biblical truth. And it won't be because they're slow or mentally dense. The problem is the *teaching* (if it's Biblical teaching) won't accommodate their *desires*.

Then he says something even *more* stunning: These people, people who professed faith in Jesus Christ, who called Him *"Lord,"* who go to church, upon finding the teaching won't fit their

desires, rather than ***change their hearts***, will ***change teachers*** - “....For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths”(3-4).

So John the Baptist has a message for such times: ***“Prepare the way of the Lord! - Forget your style choices and preferences. Forget your tastes - your likes and dislikes. Those aren’t the important things. Just prepare the way of the Lord! It isn’t about you. It’s about Him!”***

Put the hit on the last word of that command - ***“Prepare the way of the LORD!”*** Even that term, ***“Lord,”*** can become deflated through it’s frequent use. I often wonder if it wouldn’t be a good idea to declare a moratorium, just for a couple of months, on the use of the word ***“Lord”*** in the church - “Praise the Lord!”, “Isn’t the Lord good?”, “I’m just rejoicing in the Lord.”

Over and over we say it. Lord. Lord. Lord. Lord. Lord. And so many times I just wonder if Jesus might come among His people and say, ***“Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things I say to you?”***(Luke 6:46). This is Jesus’ way of saying, “What kind of Lordship do you think I require? Do you think the words and songs and slogans are enough?”

And then Jesus says, ***“Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father!”***

Remember where we’re coming from in this teaching today. ***Confrontation*** always precedes ***construction***. But be careful you don’t hear this teaching incorrectly. Its application is ***freeing*** - not ***condemning***. This is not a negative emphasis. It’s a gracious God’s way of preparing our hearts, not for a mean, cruel dictator, but for the Holy Spirit’s ***reconstruction of my life***.

The confronting voice of the Spirit of God only comes to my too complacent heart to begin the ***construction*** of something glorious - something that will ***bear the weight*** of God’s glory in parts that just aren’t ready for it right now.

Repentance brings the fresh glory of the Lord into our lives - always!