

Matthew

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Preacher: Rowell, Peter

- [0 : 00] The time is gone and spent, Our sinners saved and saved for him, And let us raise the praise.
- God sent his Son to my Lord, Thou who reveal us from the curse, He took our witness all alone, And he brought us with his power.
- In guilt of the dungeon where we came, Let's seek Christ's death and justice save, God, Jesus, our Son, set them free, And for the heaven of the sea.
- Salvation is our God alone, God, Jesus, our Son, and our Son, God, Jesus, our Son, and our Son, And we have given us all, And we have given us all to him, We have given us all, And we have given us all, For the heaven we have given us all,
- And we have given us all, Thank you.
- [3 : 56] Thank you.
- In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
- Particularly considering those last few words, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
- A period of just over 30 years stands, I believe, at the very centre of human history.
- A period ushered in by the ministry of John the Baptist. And that period comprising the few years that the Lord Jesus lived here on this earth.
- [5 : 20] The few years that he lived here and then the very short while afterward leading up to the time of Pentecost. It is those years that stand at the very centre then of human history.
- That is the climax of human history. That is the point to which the Old Testament constantly looks forward.
- John the Baptist comes, according to Old Testament prophecy, to be a voice in the wilderness, to speak to me of the coming Messiah.
- And then to point to him. Well, literally to point to him when he says, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. It is very striking then, that at this central point in human history, we have first the ministry of John the Baptist, who began by saying, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
- Immediately followed by Jesus, who began his ministry by saying, Repent ye, and believe the gospel. There are a few simple and obvious deductions from that statement.
- [6 : 48] The first is that both John and the Lord Jesus Christ knew the importance of repentance. And they knew that at this particular juncture in history, it was vitally important for men to repent.
- Because it was at this point in history that God was demonstrating his power. At this point in history, God had sent his only begotten Son into the world.

God was manifest in the flesh. A thing that had never happened before. And it was at this point, in this part of the world, that men and women were brought face to face with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This reference here, to the kingdom of heaven, of course, has primary reference to Jesus Christ. It is saying, He has come.

The King has come. The King has come to set up his kingdom. You will see men and women brought into this kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

[7 : 57] Some have argued about the differences between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God and so on. I believe that this is an expression, this phrase, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, which really describes that of which the Lord Jesus Christ is king.

It is his kingdom. Sometimes it is said of this kingdom that the kingdom of God is within you. That is when Jesus Christ reigns spiritually within the hearts of men and women.

Sometimes this kingdom of God is likened to the church. The church is the kingdom of God because in the true church, the Lord Jesus Christ is king.

In the true church, the Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord. So then, it was at that point in human history, when God revealed his own dear son, that men and women were particularly and very pointedly called to repent.

If you think of the situation which John was facing, I think you'll understand even more why he was sent to preach repentance.

[9 : 23] You know that for some 400 years, between the end of the Old Testament and the coming of John the Baptist, there had been no prophetic ministry from God.

That doesn't mean there hadn't been teachers. There had been teachers amongst the people of Israel, but there had been no inspired prophetic ministry from God.

From the end of the Old Testament to the coming of John the Baptist, God had been silent in that sense. He had sent no inspired scriptures to the people.

There was no written record of anything that God had said to the people. During that period, the faithful, believing people had been waiting for the coming Messiah.

They had been waiting for the one that Isaiah had spoken of, the servant of God. Some of them surely understood at least something of the significance of chapters like Isaiah chapter 53.

[10 : 35] But for the most part, the religious world of John's day and the religious world that Jesus Christ faced when he came was a religious world that was sunk in tradition and formality and legality.

What do I mean by that? It seems to me that for the most part, the people of Israel knew something of their history.

They boasted of being God's people. They boasted of being the people whom God had specially chosen. They were God's elect people. They boasted of being God's people.

They boasted of their religious traditions and also of their national traditions. The Jews are like that today. The real Jew.

Very proud. Proud of their traditions. Very much devoted to the history of their nation. You remember that Jesus came unto his own.

[11 : 47] That is the people of his own nation. And his own received him not. That seems to me to be generally the spirit of the age in which John Jesus first preached.

They came to preach to people who had a form of religion. They came to preach to people who had a long tradition. They came to preach to people who had religious teachers.

But the religious teachers had misled them. And it seems to me that particularly John the Baptist was sent with a very pointed, even a devastating ministry.

You wouldn't feel very happy if I turned to you tonight and said, Oh, generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

If you saw a man out in the streets of this part of the country, dressed like John the Baptist was dressed and living like John the Baptist lived, you'd probably say, Oh, another madman.

[13 : 00] John's ministry then was a very pointed, piercing ministry.

And he turns to these people who are full of self-righteous complacency, full of their religious traditions, and he says, Look, you're a nation of vipers.

You're like the viper with poison. Poison in its own body. You have the poison of sin in you and your effect on other people is to poison them.

That's what a viper does. So you see straight away that when John and then Jesus began their ministry, they really began their ministry by pointing out the evil, wicked, sinful condition of the people they were preaching to.

This word repent is a word which immediately says there is sin to be repented of. And the sin of the people was a sin which really focused at this point.

[14 : 15] It was their attitude to God that was wrong. And their attitude to Jesus Christ was soon to be demonstrated as utterly wrong.

But it was the people, of all the people in the world, it was the people who thought they were right. But John says things like this too.

O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? And you'll notice that John's ministry of repentance was not, as it were, directed at any particular class of people.

He didn't just preach to the poor people and leave the rich people on one side. He didn't preach to the irreligious and leave the religious people on one side, or vice versa.

I shall show, I hope, in a moment, the nature of John's preaching and teaching and the sort of people he preached to. But this call to repent, this serious accusation that the people were like vipers, was not made just to the multitude, it was made to the Pharisees and the Sadducees as well.

[15 : 34] And they were the principal religious men of the day. Amazing, isn't it? It's like John coming to people who for all their lifetime have thought that religiously everything was alright.

And he is saying to them, everything is wrong. You need to repent. repent. That's not easy preaching, is it?

That's not comfortable preaching when men come and say, repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The very word itself says, there is something radically wrong.

And the preaching of repentance is the preaching of the need for a radical change. A fundamental change.

You know what repentance means, don't you? I mean, you've had that explained to you many times. What the word repentance means in the Bible. It is a deep down change within us.

[16 : 44] It is a whole change of direction in our lives. It is a change of attitude within us. It is a complete change in the whole direction of our thinking and of our desires.

And John is coming to people who thought of all people in the world that they were God's favourites and he is saying, repent. There's something fundamentally wrong and there is to be radical change.

Now, friends, I believe that when the gospel is faithfully preached, when Christ is fully and faithfully preached to people, then this same demand is made in the preaching of the gospel.

A demand for radical change. There is no Christianity, friend, apart from radical inward change. And I believe we're living at a time when the situation in our nation and when the situation in the churches that we're familiar with is so serious that we need to return to this simple, faithful preaching of God's word.

Repent you. There is need of radical change. People don't like change, do they? The Jews didn't like change.

[18 : 18] They didn't like the way John came out of the wilderness. He was a strange man. He didn't conform to their idea of a religious teacher.

He wasn't like the scribes and the Pharisees. He wasn't like the great rabbis of the day. He didn't come with a long rigmarole of do's and don'ts and rules and regulation that just confused people and left them bewildered.

He came with this very painful but simple message. Repent ye for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The times were so serious it demanded this kind of preaching.

this was a crisis in human history. God was manifest in the flesh and John calls men to repent. You know very well that John's ministry was a ministry that was a ministry of preparation.

It was a preparatory ministry. He had come to prepare the way. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make his path straight. You probably know that in those days if a great and famous king was visiting a part of the country then in front of his chariot and in front of all his attendants as they rode along with him there would be a forerunner.

[19 : 55] There would be a man who would go in the front and he would prepare the way. He would make sure that before the great king arrived the roads were clear.

He would make a plain clear way for the great man to ride through. And he would prepare the people for the coming of this great one.

Now John was doing that. That was John's ministry. So the preaching of repentance is a ministry which is preparatory to the coming of Jesus.

That was true historically and I believe it's been true many, many times since. The preaching of repentance is that which prepares men's hearts to receive Christ.

Repentance and faith now in these gospel days always comes together. Repent ye said Jesus and believe. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved said the apostle.

[21 : 09] But you remember how Peter preached at Pentecost. He charged the people with the sin of crucifying Jesus. He charged them with evil in such a way that they were pricked in their heart and they cried men and brethren what shall we do?

the preaching then and the doctrine of repentance is that which is preparatory.

It is a work of the Holy Spirit preparing men's hearts for the coming of Jesus. Jesus Jesus Now friend don't you feel that we are living in days which are exceedingly dangerous?

I suppose gracious people down through the history of the world or the history of the New Testament church anyway have often thought that they were living in the last days but you know the moral condition of this country at the present time is unspeakably evil and the attitude of Christian people believing people seems unspeakably complacent.

People don't seem to be sufficiently perturbed and concerned about things. I don't want to be unkind.

[22 : 42] I thank God for praying friends and praying churches and communities like your own but you know friend I'm saying things like this wherever I go.

I said it at home only last week. The danger is that we get used to a familiar round of observance. We get used to our traditions and we get into habits and we as it were we settle down in our own little way of doing things and we think everything's alright.

And suddenly John bursts on the scene and he says repent ye there's something radically wrong. wrong. And that's the danger.

It's the danger over and over again in the history of the church. There are times of blessing and revival. Churches are built up. New churches are formed.

Believers gather together. There is great blessing but then there's a period of decline. And what holds people together is really just an attachment to tradition, family, background.

[24 : 01] Why do you find friends that almost everyone in our chapels are the children of parents who were also in our chapels, who were children of parents who were also in our chapels.

And so you might go on, I can. Father, grandfather, great-grandfather and back beyond that probably. Why is it like that?

No, I'm not saying that it's impossible for those people to be true believers. Certainly it's not impossible. And I thank God for many who I know and love as true believers.

I would cut myself out if I said it wasn't possible to be a true believer with that kind of background. But what I am saying is that with that kind of background there is a very great danger, a very great danger that we settle down into a system and we content ourselves with the familiar.

And John was saying, repent, there is something wrong, deep down there is something wrong. John was calling men and women to recognise that there was something seriously wrong and there had to be real change.

[25 : 29] And men resented what he was saying. That wasn't uncommon, was it? In the day when John was preaching and Jesus was preaching, people would not listen.

Jesus came to his own and his own received him not. They resented that kind of preaching. But let's look at what John was saying.

O generation of vipers who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance and begin not to say within yourselves we have Abraham to our father for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

You won't go to heaven because your parents and your grandparents and your great-grandparents went to heaven. you won't live a truly Christian life in this world because your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents live that kind of life.

And this is really what John is saying isn't he? John is saying there is need of real personal change. It's alright talking about repentance as long as other people repent.

[26 : 54] what John was saying is personal repentance is vitally necessary. Personal repentance.

No pointing fingers at other people. The scribes and the Pharisees were very good at that. Very good at pointing fingers at other people. You know as I travel about this country I find friends that in professing Christian circles there is one thing that people are very good about and that is pointing the accusing finger at others.

But one thing they are not very good about is repentance. Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance.

Now what were the fruits worthy of repentance? These were evidences that there had been this inner change.

John is saying now show me that there has been an inner and a radical change. Show me that there has by the things that you do.

[28 : 12] There's a gospel being preached these days friend which seems to me to be no gospel at all because it sets before people a kind of Christianity from which repentance has been eliminated.

You go on living the same kind of life. You go on doing the same kind of things. You have the same kind of pleasures. There's no change.

bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance.

And the people were disturbed by this. And they said what shall we do then? What is this man telling us to do? Whatever does this repentance mean?

what kind of fruits is he looking for? He answered and said unto them, he that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none, and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.

[29 : 23] John is saying that the kind of radical change that he is calling for in this doctrine of repentance produces a change to life, to possessions, to our relationships with other people.

It produces a compassionate spirit. One of the saddest things in this world is to see Christian people, so-called Christian people who seem devoid of compassion.

Thank God if you've been delivered from that kind of so-called Christianity, and I'm sure that some of you have, he that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none.

I feel that John's remarks here are focusing particularly on those who have plenty compared with others. He hadn't one message for the rich and the influential and another for the poor and the needy, had he?

It was the same message for all of them. But here he is directing his words particularly to those who had plenty. They had two coats, they had enough to eat, but there were those around them who hadn't.

[31 : 01] And you'll notice as we go on through these verses that the kind of radical change that John was speaking about when he says repent ye, was a change at the point in people's lives where they were most unwilling to change.

And you know that's what happens when people preach repentance truly. you will find that they begin to probe you and your life at the point where you're most sensitive, where you don't want to be touched.

Isn't that true? Don't you sometimes hear preaching which is very, shall we say, very personal, where the application is very plain.

You say, it's not me, but deep down inside you there's a guilty feeling that perhaps after all it is you. John was dealing with people at that point in their lives where it was hurting most.

The publicans came to be baptized. John was tax collectors usually in the employ of the Roman overlords of the country.

[32 : 30] They were universally hated and very often they were dishonest and deserved the kind of reaction of an oppressed people.

But they came to John. What do we do? What shall we do? And he said unto them, exact no more than that which is appointed you. He put his finger, you see, on the very point in their lives which would be most hurtful to them because it was that point in their lives at which they made their fortunes.

it was at that point in their lives that they were most deceitful and would have the most arguments to cover what they were doing, to justify themselves in the dishonesty that they were involved in.

John puts his finger right on the point. He says, exact no more than that which is appointed you. Then come the soldiers, likewise demanded of him, saying, what shall we do?

And he said unto them, do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely, and be content with your wages. The soldiers of John's day were given very often to oppressing the people.

[34 : 02] they were in a position of power, and they abused that position. They were violent, they oppressed people, they robbed people, and nobody could do anything about it.

They would lay false charges against people, accuse, neither accuse any falsely, that's exactly the thing they were doing.

I'm not saying that that's what you were doing. You're not soldiers, are you? You're not in the police force, which would be a sort of parallel situation today.

What I'm trying to show is that when John preached repentance, he was preaching repentance in regard to those things in people's lives, which they were most unwilling to change.

change. This was the general habit of the soldiers of the day. This was the way the soldiers made a good living. And even then they were discontent.

[35 : 12] And John speaks a very relevant word for these days, doesn't he? He says, be content with your wages. It was this covetousness and this discontent that made them behave in such an oppressive way and such a dishonest way.

Now he says, be content with your wages. One of the signs of the times, really, is people's discontent, isn't it?

Constant disturbance in industry over this very issue, wages, more and more wages, there's more and more discontent.

And if John were preaching today, he would preach in our streets and cities and he would say, be content with your wages. John's ministry didn't stop with the poor and the obscure of the day, nor with the soldiers, nor with the rich, but John's ministry affected those in the highest place in the land.

Herod the tetrarch being reproved by him for Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done. Herod was reproved by John for the sin of immorality.

[36 : 51] He had robbed Philip of his wife. He was living a sinful life. And John fearlessly had exposed that.

No, I'm not saying, of course I'm not saying that I think anyone here tonight has done a thing like that. I hope no one has. I hope there's no one here tonight who's living that kind of life.

But if there is anyone here tonight living that kind of life, then I have to say to you what John said to Herod. Repent. That kind of life, if you go on living that kind of life, is a life lived in opposition to God and his word.

But you know, friends, we are living in a grossly immoral age. We are living in an age when people view marriage as just a temporary convenience, to be broken at whims and fancies.

We're living in an age when young people are brought up in this atmosphere. My own young daughter went to a new school two or three weeks ago and the first girls in her class asked her was this, are your parents together?

[38 : 26] children. Because so many of them aren't. And you know, friends, we are not immune, are we, to the spirit of the age.

These things affect us. You young people at school and college, these things will affect you. the general prevailing attitude of loose morals is a very great danger because you tend yourself to begin to compromise.

You say, well, everybody's doing it. John came into a situation where the highest and most influential person in the land was doing it and he says, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

I feel that the principal point to which John was moving in his ministry was repentance in regard to God and Jesus Christ.

For God had sent his only begotten son into the world. God had demonstrated his purpose and his will in this wonderful way that his own divine son had appeared on the earth.

[40 : 01] John's ministry was to point to Jesus and say, behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. He was pointing men to Christ and the ministry of repentance always leads to that point where men will point to Jesus and they will say, behold the Lamb of God now friends what is the attitude of your heart to Jesus Christ?

Because it may well be that at this point there is need tonight of repentance that your attitude to Jesus has been wrong. But when you have had the gospel of Jesus Christ so frequently and so plainly preached to you the attitude of your heart to Jesus Christ has been wrong.

What is the natural attitude of men's hearts to Jesus Christ and the gospel?

Is it one of faith and love and submission? Not at all. The natural man doesn't receive the things of God. Jesus came to his own his own received him not.

His whole life was lived as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and as Isaiah says we hid as it were our faces from him. He was despised and we esteemed him not.

[41 : 31] Is that how you've been living? Effectively Jesus is despised and rejected. God's God's ministry is highly relevant tonight.

John's preaching comes with very personal application. Repent ye for Jesus has come. repent ye for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

I don't know how soon it will be before the Lord Jesus comes again and gathers the whole of his church together. I sometimes think it won't be long.

But I know this that in the prevailing wickedness of the age the ministry of repentance is vitally important. And amidst the prevailing indifference to Jesus Christ and the gospel this call is very important.

Repent ye and particularly to those who have heard the gospel preached many times who have had the great privilege of hearing the truth about Jesus Christ.

[42 : 53] Repent ye for the kingdom of heaven has come near to you. In the preached gospel the kingdom of heaven has come near to you.

It was at hand. You saw God's work in the lives of those around you and near to you and in your own family. The kingdom of heaven was at hand. And yet still he is despised and rejected of men and men of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

You say what shall we do? Which is exactly what they said when John preached. It's the kind of thing they said when Peter preached and then when Paul preached.

What must we do? Repent ye. and Jesus says repent ye and believe the gospel. And the apostles say believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

Now this means a radical change within you. A deep down fundamental change of your attitude to Jesus Christ. True repentance is such a change within that instead of treating the Lord Jesus with indifference and carelessness and concern the Lord Jesus is seen as the very Lord of your lives.

[44 : 31] The one who has supreme authority over you. The one who is worthy of your worship and reverent regard.

That is the kind of repentance John is speaking of. Such a change within that the despised and rejected Jesus becomes the almighty Lord.

The master doubting Thomas after all his fears and confusions came to the same point didn't he? my Lord my Lord and my God.

Now that's the kind of change which this word really means. Repent ye. Repent ye. are you troubled about this?

You say something like one of our hymns says I would but can't repent. I've got a heart that's so hard. I want to be sorry for my sin.

[45 : 54] I want to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. I can't. Well it's a strange paradox but if there's already that measure of concern there's been in fact there has been repentance.

A recognition that your condition is wrong and a sense of trouble and grief because it is wrong, that you know Jesus is exalted a prince and a saviour to give repentance and remission of sin.

If that is the trouble of your heart then the way of repentance is to call upon the Lord Jesus to give you a heart that is truly penitent.

so to work in your life by his Holy Spirit that there will be this measure of real change.

You know the old word, the old fashioned word conversion seems almost to be forgotten nowadays doesn't it? Conversion. Conversion means a complete change of direction.

[47 : 12] instead of having our faces away from God the whole direction of our lives away from the word of God and the principles of the gospel there's a change, there's a conversion, there's a new direction just as there was with Saul of Tarsus the moment that light shone from heaven and Jesus spoke to him he says what wilt thou have me to do?

A new direction, submission to Jesus Christ, I am Jesus of Nazareth whom thou persecutest, it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

There he was kicking against God, against God's ways with a heart full of rebellion but now he is broken and submissive and willing to do whatever the master says.

This is conversion. Friends, there is no real Christianity apart from repentance, apart from conversion, apart from faith in Jesus Christ, apart from submission to Jesus Christ as Lord and Master.

I am saying things that you know so well, I am sure I am only repeating what is so familiar to you tonight. Maybe someone hears these things tonight for the first time.

[48 : 52] Maybe someone here realises the importance of this for the first time. Those of you who know this so well can look back in your lives and see this in the past.

I urge you to go home and pray for those who haven't yet repented, that they may repent. You remember the Lord's parable, don't you, of the wise and foolish virgins?

virgins. The foolish virgins repented in a way, it was a kind of repentance, but it was too late. The door was shut.

The wise virgins had gone in with their Lord to the supper. This is not something to be indifferent about, this is not something to be putting off to some distant uncertain future.

Repent ye. There's an urgency about it, repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And for those of us who are older, isn't there a word from John in this text for us tonight?

[50 : 13] We can look back upon our first repentance, we can look back upon the change that God made in our lives, but we must say to ourselves tonight, are we drifting back again?

Are we drifting back toward the position from which we came when we first repented? Then John's words are very plain again.

Repent, for repentance isn't something that happens once in a person's life and is never repeated. Friends, the true believer's life is one of constant repentance.

And I mean by that, that so often we are brought to that position where we turn again. We turn again to the Lord and we realise that we have in fact been turning away from him.

This is what the Bible means by backsliding. We realise there is this constant danger within us to turn away, to turn back.

[51 : 33] Repent, repent you, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Let there be evidence of real change. This is what John is saying.

Let there be evidence of real change. That is true repentance, a change within, and a change toward God.

It is called in the Bible repentance toward God. God. And if in our lives there has been this direction away from God, this drift away from God, then repentance is the call of the gospel to bring us back.

It is repentance toward God. And if you are repenting in that way, there is a movement of your heart and spirit tonight toward God.

You are moving in your heart to God in prayer, in longing, in desire, and you are beginning to cry again to the Lord to come and bless you, and restore you and forgive you.

[52 : 44] You are pleading with God to give you strength against temptation and sin and evil. Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

May the Lord add his own blessing. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Closing hymn number 52 The Gospel brings tidings to each wounded soul That Jesus the Saviour can make it quite whole And what makes this Gospel most precious to me It holds forth salvation so perfectly free The Gospel is dying to return their soul

That Jesus the Saviour can make it quite whole And what gives this Gospel most precious to me It holds forth salvation so perfectly free The Gospel is dying to return their soul The life of our servants gave all things in one Jesus the Saviour can make it quite whole

[55 : 33] Most precious to me Because Jesus the Master has fallen and stilled to me Since Jesus the Saviour can make it quite whole Jesus the Saviour can make it quite whole And what gives this Gospel is The Gospel is the Holy Spirit The Gospel is the Holy Spirit The Gospel is the Holy Spirit The Gospel is the Holy Spirit His O Lord, do fill our hearts with true repentance.

Do bless us with that living faith in Jesus Christ. Who be with us now as we part, keep us in thy fear. Go before us in life's journey.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit our Comforter be with us forever. Amen.

Amen.