

# “Matthew”

## Fall Series 1

### Lesson 4

## “Matthew 3:1-17”

**Objective:** To understand the message that Matthew meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context, in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis upon application.

**Materials:** I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Matthew, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, various modern translations, and any other sources relevant to the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding, help us make application to our current situation.

#### Procedures

1. We will begin by examining the text from the Greek text.
2. We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural, and social settings, in order to understand the message Matthew intended and that God still intends for us.
3. From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the words of Matthew, for the early disciples, then to our modern contextual framework as disciples of Jesus.
4. We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes and thoughts in order to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

# Lesson

As we continue in our study of Matthew we come to chapter 3 which narrates events some 30+ years later than those recorded in chapter 2. We are introduced rather abruptly to John the Baptist. We are given none of the background regarding his origins or connections to Jesus, as are found in Luke. Matthew focuses, as do Mark and John, upon his role as the one who prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah. For us, John the Baptist is a famous character and his name is a title of fame and renown, but for the first-century audience they will have focused more upon function rather than upon the title. His title is more about what he did rather than merely a title of identification as if it was a surname (last name).

We say he was the Baptist almost as if this was his last name. He was called this because of what he did not merely as a title. John dipped people in water, the water of the Jordan River. The word *Baptist* indicates that this is the man named John, the one who dipped, or immersed, people to mark their confession of being sinners and their need to change their hearts in order to pursue a different direction in life. He administered this dipping

for the people who answered the calling of his preaching which was: **“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”**<sup>1</sup> John was a proclaimer of the change that God was about to initiate in and through Jesus. The coming of the “kingdom of heaven” was an indication that things were about to change. The world, the universe, was going to be under new management. In light of this impending change, people needed to change their hearts, they needed to “repent,” to change their direction. As a tangible marker of the beginning of this change of direction, this change of heart, John would immerse those who committed to this change in the waters of the river.

The word that is used by Matthew here is not a word that means just to change once and then the change would be over (*μετανοείτε* - *metanoείτε*) and complete. The indication of this word, in this context, is that they are to begin to change and then continually participate in that change process. It is to be a process that is one of perpetual change. Though Matthew does not actually mention the word “heart” in his writing, in translating this into English this gets to the core of what John is challenging his

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<sup>1</sup> CEB.

audience to do. He is challenging them to change the direction of their heart, to change their desires, their modus operandi, their hopes, their dreams, their heart attitude. The coming of the kingdom of heaven meant that new management was about to take over and a reckoning was on the horizon. John's audience knew that this meant the coming of the presence of God, living in the midst of His people, in a way similar to the way God dwelt in the midst of His people in the exodus from Egypt, when God dwelt in the midst of the people that He was leading through the wilderness. We too are in a wilderness of despair and hopelessness and we need to be led to freedom into a new kingdom.

Matthew wants us to understand that the coming of John was prophesied beforehand by the prophet Isaiah; it was prophesied hundreds of years before the event. Once again, we see the focus of Matthew upon the fact that the coming of the Messiah is as had been predicted and proclaimed in the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> This is something that only

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 40:3-5 - **A voice is crying out: "Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! 4 Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. 5 The LORD's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the LORD's mouth has commanded it."** CEB.

God could have predicted and initiated. In this, we have God intervening in creation, beginning something new and different. Matthew is indicating to his readers that the long expected, and long anticipated event of the coming of God to bring His kingdom to earth was about to begin.

At 3:4, we are told about the wardrobe selections of John. Needless to say John was not a fashion aficionado. His clothes were inexpensive, likely extremely uncomfortable, and his choice of diet was unique and distinctive. It likely that John did not entertain too many guests for dinner. Why this focus on clothing and diet? Certainly it is the case that John's attire and diet fit in with the ruggedness of his proclamation. His clothing is both appropriate to his rough lifestyle, but also likely symbolic of his prophetic role.<sup>3</sup> It also likely refers more specifically to description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8.<sup>4</sup> Elijah was also a man of the wilderness.<sup>5</sup> Jesus will never specifically identify John as (the

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<sup>3</sup> Zechariah 13:4 - **On that day each of the prophets will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies and won't put on a shaggy coat in order to deceive.** CEB.

<sup>4</sup> **They said to him, "He wore clothes made of hair with a leather belt around his waist." Ahaziah said, "That was Elijah from Tishbe."** CEB.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 17:3-7; 19:3-8; 2 Kings 2:6-12 - This set of verses are set in just this same area of the wilderness.

returning) Elijah, but Matthew is already preparing his audience for just such an identification.<sup>6</sup>

At 3:5, we are informed that people from Jerusalem, Judea, and all around the Jordan River are coming out to hear him preach. What would make you walk miles across the desert to listen to them? These were people looking for, and hoping for, the intervention of God into their lives. They were not just looking for Friday night entertainment. Real effort was involved in them making their way deep into the wilderness to hear this poorly dressed man with a rough and ready diet. At 3:6, we are informed that “they confessed their sins” and when they did this John immersed them in the waters of the Jordan River. This response of contrition and repentance reminds us of other times when people turned to God in repentance such after the Golden Calf incident, the repentance in the time of Ezra, and the repentance in the time of Hezekiah, the repentance of Nineveh, and the repentance in the days of Josiah.

Matthew notes, at 3:7, that many Pharisees and Sadducees came in order to be immersed by John. These opposing parties

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<sup>6</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 105-106.

found something in common with one another in the preaching of John. John the Immerser obviously had not read, or ascribed, to the tenets of the book entitled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He describes those coming to him as a “brood of vipers” (ἐχιδνῶν - *echidnon*), a term of derision and contempt. “The intended reference is rather to an evil and destructive and repugnant character: the serpent is poisonous .... ‘brood of vipers’ could be regarded as in some sense equal to the term “children of Satan” (cf. Jn 8:44).”<sup>7</sup> John is here challenging the sincerity of their actions. “True repentance is not a matter of words and ritual, but of real change of life.”<sup>8</sup>

At verse 3:8, John makes clear this concern. What people do, demonstrates whether or not they have truly repented, or not. For some repentance is just a word, a step or some ritual observance, not actually the reality of a changed heart. Surely this too is a challenge that each one of us should consider carefully, not just once in a while, but each moment, of each, and every, day that we live and breath. Are we truly sorrowful for our actions that

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<sup>7</sup> W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary series, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 304.


<sup>8</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 111.

hurt and harm others and for our actions that break the heart of God? If we are truly sorry for our actions, we will seek to genuinely stop those actions, those thoughts, and those failures. The mark of true repentance is a changed life, a change heart.

At 3:9, John challenges them not to rely upon their bloodlines, or upon what their great ancestor Abraham did. Ancestry, and bloodlines are not what counts, true repentance, a truly changed life is what is being called forth by God through His prophet. Here, once again, we find Matthew carefully pointing out that the message is not just for the physical descendants of Israel, but for those who are the descendants of Abraham in true repentance and in genuine changed heart. John makes it clear that God is able to raise up from stones true children of Abraham. God made people from the dust of the ground and it is no great thing for Him to make children from rocks.

The question here might be is John being overly judgmental or just plainly is he being mean-spirited to the Pharisees and Sadducees? I do not think that this is at all the case here. John is a truth-speaker and the truth often sounds harsh and it hurts people's feelings. Truth cuts deeply into our illusions and our





pretenses. Truth shines light into all the dark and hidden crevices of reality. John is not soft-spoken, pleasant, or given to soft-pedaling his words. John delivers the truth raw, and in unrefined form, because in this form it has the most impact and gives the greatest opportunity for genuine change. John warns his audience of genuine danger. There is actually a dangerous cliff ahead of them and if they do not turn and go a different direction they face destruction and judgment at the hands of God.

At 3:10 John continues with his warnings; this time indicating that the ax is already at the root of the trees. The danger is imminent. Who are the trees? They are the people and the ax represents the coming judgement of God. The ax will cut and then what is cut down will be thrown into the fire. What happens to wood when it is thrown into the fire? It is consumed and destroyed. John continues to preach to his audience a message of repentance so that the outcome for them will be different from the one their current heading will deliver. He seeks to coax them to go into a better direction than the one in which they are currently headed. His message is not just for Pharisees and Sadducees. Unfortunately, in each of us resides a little bit of

Pharisee and Sadducee. You see, we can all be prone to self-righteousness. We can all think that at least I am better than such and such. We can begin to pat ourselves on the back for the good things we have done and the money we have contributed, for the meals we have bought for the poor, for the orphans we have helped. All of these are good and noble things, but John knows that more is needed, more is necessary.

Good fruit, fruit that comes from a truly humble and repentant heart is what John is challenging his audience to have here. He wants no Emmy award winning actors, he knows that God is not fooled by acting, He is able to discern the genuine from the false. John challenges his audience to produce fruit that is in alignment with a changed heart, one that is devoted to God and truly humbled by recognizing sin in their lives. At 3:11, John will continue his warning by turning to speak about the one who is coming after him. He speaks here of Jesus and continues in his task of laying the foundation for His coming. He continues to prepare the way. He tells us that the one coming after him is “stronger,” “mightier,” than he is.

This one (Jesus) will immerse them in the Holy Spirit and in fire. The coming of the Holy Spirit will burn away what is bad and so purify the repentant people of God. For a similar metaphor one can look to Isaiah 4:4,<sup>9</sup> Zechariah 13:9,<sup>10</sup> and Malachi 3:2-4.<sup>11</sup> These are all metaphors for the coming of God's judgment.<sup>12</sup> The metaphors of judgment continue in verse 12 with the imagery of cleaning the wheat of the harvest in separating the chaff from the wheat. In all of this narrative section, the concern is over and over again to warn the audience of the impending judgement. These warnings are not just for the Pharisees and Sadducees they are for all the people, both of those listening in person to John, and to those of us still able to read these words today. All of us need to be cognizant of the impending judgment that will come. Such a focus helps us to change direction and do things differently, to

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<sup>9</sup> **When the Lord washes the filth from Zion's daughters, and cleanses Jerusalem's bloodguilt from within it by means of a wind of judgment and a searing wind, ....** CEB.

<sup>10</sup> **I will put the third part into the fire. I will refine them like one refines silver; I will test them like one tests gold. They will call on my name, and I will respond to them. I will say, "They are my people." And they will say, "The LORD is our God."** CEB.

<sup>11</sup> **Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can withstand his appearance? He is like the refiner's fire or the cleaner's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. They will belong to the LORD, presenting a righteous offering. 4 The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in ancient days and in former years.** CEB.

<sup>12</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 113.

think differently, and to act differently. These warnings are in place to initiate change.

At 3:13, we are introduced to Jesus coming; He traveled from Galilee to the Jordan River in order for John to immerse Him. One of the major questions from this section is, “Why does Jesus need to be immersed?” Needless to say there has been an enormous amount of debate regarding this matter. In all truth we are not given all the information that our curious minds would like regarding this matter. Hagner writes of this event, “In the act of baptism, John will obediently bring his preparatory mission to its climax (cf. John 1:31) by accomplishing the transition to the Promised One. The reception of immersion, by Jesus, in obedience to the will of the Father, proves to be the occasion of the formal beginning of His ministry.<sup>13</sup>

In some sense, the baptism of Jesus, by John, marks the transition point, the passing of the baton, from the Messenger to the Messiah. For John, this completes this stage of His ministry and for Jesus this will be the starting point for His ministry. At 3:14 John tries to refuse to immerse Jesus indicating that he needs

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<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 33 (Dallas TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1993) p. 56.

to be immersed by Jesus instead. As one might anticipate, there is a great deal of discussion and many differences of opinion as to why Jesus comes to John to be immersed. Why does He need to be immersed at all? After all he has nothing to repent for does He? Matthew does not focus on the matter of the sinlessness of Jesus here, and to be fair, there is no indication that the immersion of Jesus here is for repentance as it is for others that come. His immersion is somehow different, while also bearing similarities to the immersion of the others that hear the message of John.

There are questions regarding exactly what happened to Jesus in His immersion and how does this immersion relate to His Messianic self-understanding? There appears to be some sense of embarrassment that arises from Jesus submission to an immersion characterized by the earliest Evangelist as a “conversion baptism for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). Such an immersion fits a man for the last judgment and gives him hope that such a person will be numbered among the saints. How does Jesus fit into such a conceptual framework? For Jesus, immersion represents the demonstration of his solidarity with His people in their need. In Jesus, we see the righteous Servant of God(cf. Isaiah


53:11). As the righteous Servant, He identifies with His people fully and obediently, acting out His role, He receives the anointing of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish His mission; a God-ordained mission of transformation and change. That mission, and that identification, with His people, will ultimately result in His death on behalf of those people; those with whom He identifies. Though, it is unlikely that the sacrifice of Jesus is actually something we should see at this juncture, in His Matthew's Gospel.<sup>14</sup>

There are certainly parallels between our immersion and the immersion of Jesus, but there are also significant differences. One of the most striking parallels between Jesus' immersion and our immersion is the descent of the Spirit and our reception of the Spirit in somewhat like circumstances. It should be noted that the nature of the gift is different. The Spirit comes to aid Jesus in the messianic task, while for the believer the Spirit undertakes the process of making that person anew (Titus 3:4-7<sup>15</sup>). There is one

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<sup>14</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 45-67. cf. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> **But “when God our savior’s kindness and love appeared, 5 he saved us because of his mercy, not because of righteous things we had done. He did it through the washing of new birth and the renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 which God poured out upon us generously through Jesus Christ our savior. 7 So, since we have been made righteous by his grace, we can inherit the hope for eternal life.”** CEB.




feature of the immersion of Jesus that is frequently overlooked: Jesus submitted, in freedom of choice, to the immersion of John, which loudly and clearly proclaimed His submission to the will of God. Jesus, willingly submitted to the obedience of following the path set before Him as the servant of God. He follows the summons of the Gospel message and His baptism marks the acknowledgement of His acceptance of that calling. Jesus, freely, and willingly, approaches this immersion as He freely, and willingly, commits Himself to the path that the Gospel will set for Him. Immersion marks His acknowledgement of this fact, and the response of God in sending the Spirit to rest upon Him and empower Him for His service indicates this understanding.<sup>16</sup>

At 3:16-17, we see the repercussions of Jesus being immersed by John. “Heaven was opened to Him,” and the Spirit of God came down upon Him and rested “like a dove,” and a voice from heaven expressed pleasure in Jesus as the “Son” of God. This moment marks a pivotal moment as Jesus moves from a more private existence into His public ministry. His feet are now firmly set on the path to Jerusalem that will ultimately lead to His death

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<sup>16</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*. p. 66



and in His fulfillment of the will of His Father to redeem those that are lost because of their sins, to release them from their broken existence. Matthew wants us to follow this path, a path that in some sense, we too are called to follow as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are to walk in His footsteps and follow Him in our service, in our commitment, in our willingness to sacrifice ourselves on behalf of others. We are called to freely, in full freedom, choose to pursue this path. The Spirit of God will descend on us as agents of God's redemption in this world in order to empower, embolden, and strengthen, us for the task before us. We follow where He leads.




# Synopsis

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In this chapter, Matthew introduces his readers to John the Immerser, a man who dipped people in the water of the Jordan River to mark their transition of loyalty from one kingdom to another. This ritual event noted their confession of sins, their desire to change their direction in life, and their hope of entering the kingdom of heaven. John stood in the lineage of the great prophets of Israel and was a fiery man that lived very much a rugged and spartan lifestyle, eating locusts, wild honey, and dressing in camel hair clothing.

People came from far and wide throughout Israel in order to hear the preaching of John and to be immersed by him in the Jordan River. Many came to hear his message, repented of their sins, and were immersed by him. He had especially harsh and stark warnings for the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to hear John's words. He proclaimed loudly and clearly the coming of the "kingdom of heaven." His warnings reflect the tremendous gravity of the choice placed before them.



Jesus came to be baptized by John and in doing so pleased God and received the Spirit of God which descended upon Him in the form of a dove. He did this to fulfill all righteousness, to demonstrate His obedience to the calling of God, and to align Himself with those that needed God's assistance in order to have hope for a better future, one that would allow people to produce fruit that aligned with their changed hearts.

In his account of the beginnings of the proclamation of the Good News, Matthew challenges us, as his audience, to step into repentance and into the hope of a better future that will be ruled by a merciful, just, and gracious, ruler. The Spirit of God is brought into the realm of the lives of those who would seek to follow the ways of God.

# Main Points


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- People are called to change the direction of their lives in order to prepare for life in the kingdom of heaven.
- People are called to confess their sins and make a tangible and real commitment to a changed life.
- Failure to live a life that produces good fruit will bring judgement.
- A time of judgement will come.
- Jesus stands as the primary example of how to live a life that pleases God.

# Questions

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1. When you think of someone “changing their heart” what do you think this actually entails?
2. What are some of the ways that you perceive the kingdom of heaven to be different from the kingdom of this world?
3. In Matthew 3:3, we find the words of the prophet Isaiah referencing straight paths, what do you think this means?
4. Why do you think Matthew feels that it is important for us to know how John dressed and what he ate?
5. Why do you think people travelled out into the wilderness to listen to John? What would inspire you to travel to hear someone speak?
6. Why do you think it is important to confess sins?
7. What effect does confessing sins have upon a person?
8. Why do you think John speaks so harshly to the Pharisees and Sadducees?
9. What are some ways that people can produce fruit that demonstrates that they have changed their hearts and lives?
10. What do you think the implications are if people do not change their lives and produce fruit in keeping with repentance?
11. What images come to your mind when you think about judgement?
12. What message do you think that John intends for his audience to understand from his image of a tree being chopped down and tossed into the fire?

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13. What do you think it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire?
  14. When you think of fire being applied to something what images come to your mind?
  15. Why do you think Jesus was immersed?
  16. What do you think it means that heaven opened and the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus after He is immersed?
  17. Why do you think God was pleased with Jesus for being immersed?
  18. What are some ways that you seek to please God in your life?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that there will come a time when we will be judged by God. There are consequences for the things we do and say. Sometimes we see the delay in justice being done as an indication that all is well and that there will be no price to pay for our sins. The preaching of John speaks against such complacency. What are some ways that you demonstrate a recognition of the coming judgement in the way that you live your life?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words providing a path back to restored relationship with Him and into the kingdom of heaven. Forgiveness is always hard and repentance is very often something that causes us to stumble. In our pride and arrogance we fail to see our own flaws or make excuses for them. John's words indicate that God does not give up on us as even the Pharisees and Sadducees in the audience see hope. What are some ways that you find hope for a better future?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

Sometimes as we read the words of the Bible we fail to recognize that they are still meant to impact us today. These are not just ancient words that have long since lost their ability to impact us today. These are living words that challenge us to something better, something greater, and something far more lasting than this life. What are some ways that you think the words of Matthew, in this chapter, should impact the reality of the way you see, and live, your life?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

God is calling all of us to repent, to change our hearts, and our lives, to reflect more fully His nature and His calling for our lives. God calls us to repentance, to acknowledgement that we need His help. He calls us to change our trajectory and to pursue a different path, one that aligns with a changed heart. What are some ways that people are challenged to live in a different way after accepting the Good News?