Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Has Come Near

Matthew 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:2 “and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The purpose of studying the book of gospel is to learn about Jesus, his nature, life, teaching, ministry, and so on. Each gospel has its own unique character and focus. Matthew, the former tax collector Levi, was a Jew.  So, he wrote Jesus from the Jewish viewpoint as the Promised Messiah who would come as the king of the Jews. Mark described Jesus as the Son of Man who came to serve while Luke, the Gentile, wrote about Jesus as the Savior of the world. John, one of the Twelve, testified Jesus as the Son of God. Matthew frequently compared Jesus to Moses, who received the law at Mount Sinai. As Moses wrote the law to teach the Israelites how to live as the people of God, Matthew also wrote the Sermon on the Mount to teach Christians how to live as citizens of heaven. The key word for Matthew’s gospel is the kingdom of heaven. It appears 84 times in Matthew’s gospel. So, Matthew introduced Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven with many parables unlike other synoptic gospels.

Matthew starts his story from the genealogy of Jesus, his birth and exile to Egypt. We’ll study all these during Christmas season. Today we will start Matthew’s gospel with the story of John the Baptist. Look at verses 1-3. “***In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.***” God sent John the Baptist as a forerunner for the king Jesus. In ancient days before a king came, a forerunner went ahead of the king and shouted, “Here comes the king!” How did John the Baptist prepare the way for the king Jesus? He delivered the message of repentance. “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” He meant that in order to welcome the king Jesus, we must repent. The word ‘repent’ means ‘turn from sin to God.’ In Hebrew the word ‘repent’ has two meanings, *nacham,* ‘which means ‘grieve over wrongdoing’, and ‘*shub*’ which means ‘change direction.’ In other words, you admit your sin and change your mind. In Greek the word ‘repent’ is *metanoeo* which means ‘change your mind.’ Change your mind from sin to God. For example, when you have the mind to lie down and sleep, but change your mind to get up and pray. When you have the mind to play video games, but change your mind to study the Bible or finish homework. You have the desire to watch drama, but change your mind and visit campus.  This is the meaning of *metanoeo* in the narrow, but practical version.

The appearance of John the Baptist was not out of nowhere, but from the prophecies of God. Around BC 700 the prophet Isaiah prophesied the appearance of John the Baptist as a voice of one calling in the wilderness who would prepare the way for the Lord. (Is 40:3) God also promised to send Elijah to the Israelites before the Lord came. (Mal 4:5) Jesus indicated John the Baptist as Elijah who would come before him. (Mt 17:12) In modern terms John was a pastor’s kid. His father was Zechariah, a priest and his mother was Elizabeth, who appears in Luke’s gospel. (Lk 1:5) So, John could have lived a comfortable life in the priest’s house. But he lived in the desert. Verse 4 says that **his clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey**. (4) John lived a pure and simple life for the sake of mission. His message was powerful. His spiritual power came from such a pure and mission-centered life. Robert Hardie, the Canadian missionary, and Sarah Barry, have a common point in their missionary life in Korea. Both of them moved out from the comfortable missionary compound to move into shabby Korean houses and lived together with Korean natives. Their humble and sacrificial life opened the hearts of many Koreans for the gospel message.

Look at verses 5-6. “***People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.***” Luke’s gospel explains this in detail. The crowd asked John, “*What should we do then*?” John answered, “*Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same*.” (Lk 3:11) John also answered how to repent to tax collectors and soldiers who asked him, “*What should we do*?” If John the Baptist appears to us today, how will he answer us, when we ask him, “What should we do?”  How will he answer you? He will answer me, “Paul, you have wasted time because of your laziness. You did not care for your people because of your selfishness.” There were many people who came to John to confess and were baptized. There was a great spiritual revival by the Jordan River. The spiritual revivals in Wales, India, and Korea in 1903-1907 started with public confession of sin. In India a little girl confessed her sins before her schoolmates. And her schoolmaster followed her. Then all students and teachers joined the public confession of sin and accepted Jesus.

Look at verses 7-10. “***But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire***.” The Pharisees and the Sadducees were leaders of the people. But they were not shepherds for their people. They came to John the Baptist not to repent, but to take advantage of John’s popularity. John rebuked their hypocrisy by calling them, “*You brood of vipers*!” Look at verse 8 again, “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*.” What does it mean? This means that you must not repent with your lips, but with action and consistency. Fruitful repentance takes time as a tree takes time until it bears fruit. Starting from confessing sins to being completely converted it requires a certain process of sanctification. The word of God enables us to produce fruits in keeping with repentance. As we wash our hands and feet every day, we also must repent every day. We can wash our sins by the word of God. Jesus prayed for his disciples by saying, “*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*” (Jn 17:17)

Repentance is not just lip service or empty promise, but solemn determination for new life and new direction. So, it becomes painful and feels like dying like a heart surgery. Without dying to sin, there is no righteousness for God. In water baptism when we are submerged under the water, it means that our old self died with Christ. There is no more I, my, me, and myself remain in me, because I have already died with Christ Jesus. (Gal 2:20) Then, when we come out of the water, we live a new life with Jesus who was resurrected. In this way we are united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection through baptism.

At that time the Jews thought that baptism was needed only for the Gentiles who were not circumcised. They were proud of being Abraham’s descendants. (9) But John warned them about God’s impending judgment if they don’t repent. He said in verse 10. “***The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire***.”

Now John the Baptist begins to introduce Jesus in his message. Look at verses 11-12. “***I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.***” What does it mean that Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire? Baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire indicates regeneration. Titus 3:5 says, “*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*.” Water baptism is for repentance. (11, Ac 19:4). The baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire is for new creation. By water baptism John prepared the hearts of people to welcome Jesus. By the baptism of the Holy Spirit Jesus makes them new creations as people who are born of God. This is the reason Jesu said to Nicodemus by saying, “*No one enters the kingdom of God who is born of water and the Spirit.*” (Jn 3:5) The Holy Spirit comes after we repent or before we repent or at the same time when we repent. The important thing is that we must repent in order to receive the Holy Spirit. Peter said in Acts 2:38, “*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*”

Look at verse 13. “***Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John***.” Jesus heard John was baptizing people by the Jordan River. So, he came to be baptized by John. Why did Jesus come to be baptized? Isn’t he a sinless Son of God who does not need to be baptized? So, John tried to deter Jesus, saying, “***I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me***?” (14) What did Jesus answer? Look at verse 15. “***Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.***” What is to fulfill all righteousness? In the book of Romans Paul said that apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (Ro 3:21) Who is the righteous one who the Law and the prophets testified to? He is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the righteousness of God. So, in order to fulfill God’s prophecy and the law Jesus wanted to be baptized, not because of purification, but because of submission (obedience).

Jesus’ obedience pleased God the Father. What happened when Jesus was baptized? Look at verses 16-17. “***As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased***.” It was like a coronation ceremony for the king. Indeed, it was a coronation for Jesus, the Son of God, who started his work as the Messiah. What a spectacular scene! Heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down like a dove, and a voice came from heaven! When we start a new life with Jesus, we experience the same ceremony. When we confess our sins and believe in Jesus, heaven comes into our heart. We believe the truth that Jesus died for me and God loves me. The joy of salvation and freedom from sin overflows our heart, and we experience the kingdom of heaven.  There is a song, “*Your presence is heaven to me*.” Indeed, the presence of Jesus brings you and me into heaven. This is the reason why John the Baptist preached the baptism of repentance saying, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*!”

In conclusion, I ask all of you to experience the kingdom of heaven by producing fruit in keeping with repentance. It starts from your decision to change your mind (*metanoeo*) Remember that the presence of Jesus is heaven to you. May God pour out the Holy Spirit and fire on us and on ESBC 2024 so that we may see the spiritual revival here and in Europe. Amen!