

Title: Jesus' Ministry
Biblical Text: Matthew 3:1-17
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Matthew 3:1-17

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 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.’ ” Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier 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 and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by

him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Except for Luke, every gospel writer skips about thirty years of Jesus' life. Luke records a lone story of twelve-year old Jesus chopping it up with the religious leaders of Jerusalem, to his parents' chagrin. Other than that we're zoomed ahead from his first two years of life to what's known as his "public earthly ministry"—three years of miracles, teachings, and building a discipleship team leading up to his crucifixion. And it's the beginning of those three years where we'll pick up the story today.

But before Jesus' ministry officially begins, there's a warm up act. A man named John the Baptist shows up on the scene preaching about repentance and something he calls "the kingdom of heaven". But he's not just preaching. He's also baptizing people in the Jordan river. So quite the scene takes shape a few decades after the birth of Christ. Crowds of people are meeting this dude with a strange diet and homemade clothes in a river, confessing all their sins. Let's be honest, this sounds

like a cult. And yet, through all the oddities of John's personage and message we catch a glimpse of the brilliance of Jesus' earthly ministry.

You see, the Son of God who came as a baby ... heralded by angels ... worshipped by wisemen ... and hated by kings, came with a purpose. He came to be with us, but he also came to do something among us. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about what Jesus came to do, namely what he came to do before his death. Because his ministry—the words and work between his birth and death—give us clarity about what we are supposed to do between our births and deaths.

Through this passage we'll see that Jesus' ministry is about three things and it's how we'll organize our time ...

- A *moral* renewal.
- A *cosmic* rule.
- A *beloved* Son.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: A Moral Renewal (vv.1-3; 8-10, James 4:9, Ephesians 4:32)

There are a few things that emerge from John's words and actions that give us clarity about Jesus' ministry. First, John came preaching about repentance. Look at

v.1 with me. *Read Matthew 3:1-3 ... In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 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.'*" John is preaching repentance. So, we'd do well to ask, *what's repentance?*

Professor Craig Blomberg, who was my Greek professor in seminary explains that, "**Repentance in Greek traditionally implied a change of mind or attitude, but under Old Testament influence it took on the sense of a change of action as well**" (73). Repentance is this holistic transformation. It's a change in what we think. It's a change in our disposition. It's a change in our behavior. Now, in order to fully understand what John is talking about when he's talking about, let's pull apart a few ideas that are often conflated in our spiritual imaginations. As we'll see, they build upon each other ...

- The Bible talks about sorrow over sin. Not only is an entire book of the Bible dedicated to lamenting our sin (Lamentations), but the Apostle James instructs his readers to, *Read James 4:9 ... "Be wretched and mourn and weep"* ... over their sin. This is the start of any godly transformation. We should be grieved by our sin in the same way that God is grieved over our sin (see Psalm 78:40). In fact, through lament we learn to share God's heart.

- From our grief, the Bible also teaches us to forgive. Forgiveness is not merely the emotion of feeling sorry. Rather, as Yale professor Miraslov Volf explains, "*To forgive means to release the condemned wrongdoer not just from punishment but from guilt*" (*Free of Charge*, 172). In our minds, he says, we detach the doer from the deed. We resist the impulse to see and think of someone through the lens of their sin. We seek forgiveness. We grant forgiveness. The Apostle Paul calls us to be ***Read Ephesians 4:32 ... "forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."*** Through forgiveness we learn to share God's mind.
- From sorrow and forgiveness, we can move on to repentance. To be sure, sometimes the fullness of the forgiveness process isn't over until repentance or a change in behavior has begun to take place. Sometimes it all happens at the same time. Nevertheless, repentance can only come as the heart and mind are reformed by God's character. This is what leads to a true change in behavior. You see, true repentance doesn't come without the reconstruction of the soul. That's what John is getting at when he tells the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elite of the day, ***Read Matthew 3:8-10 ... Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*** Their religious acts were just that, an act. They we

not keeping with repentance, but keeping up appearances. Through repentance we learn to share God's power.

This is the *moral* renewal of Jesus' earthly ministry which John the Baptist begins to layout in his preaching. He's calling for repentance. Repentance is the way, in John's words, we *prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight* (see v.3) it's aligning our whole being with the nature and character of God. Learning to feel with God's heart, see with God's mind, and live with God's power.

This leads us to another part of John's warm up act, preparing us for Jesus' ministry. You see, John not only came preaching repentance but also performing baptisms. Now, in the Ancient Jewish world ceremonial cleansing was a common practice. But there's something different here. ***Read Matthew 3:4-6 ... Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*** Let's not miss this. Old Testament water purification practices were always about ritual purification. Never for sin and guilt. And so what John is saying here is that baptism is not a routine or show. Rather, it's a mark of *moral* renewal.

For many of us, that's the substance of the Christian life: moral renewal. Are you repenting? Have you been baptized? Are you personally obeying? Therefore many of us gage the goodness of a particular week or the whole of our lives based upon

our conformity to God's righteousness. We are good or bad based upon feeling with God's heart, thinking with his mind, and living with his power. In fact, this is essentially the practice of conservative churches and denominations. They are build on structures and practices of personal moral renewal as the litmus test for faithfulness and genuine fruitfulness and divine favor. In these contexts, the purpose of Jesus' ministry is, as writer C.S. Lewis imagined, "*to make ... little Christs*" (*Devotional Classics*, 10).

We're talking about holiness. Living with moral conformity to God's character. Holiness is a very good thing. But, *doesn't it seem like there's more to Jesus' ministry than personal moral renewal?*

Movement 2: A Cosmic Rule (vv.2;11-12, Luke 4:18-19)

Upon further consideration, a second aspect of Jesus' ministry emerges which I think not only doesn't disregard holiness but ultimately gives richer meaning to our repentance and baptism, to our *moral* renewal. Look again at v.2. John say, ***Read Matthew 3:2 ... "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*** While repentance and baptism are personal responses, the idea of a kingdom conveys at the very least a corporate or communal aspect. *Right? So, what is the kingdom of heaven?*

Well, first we should say that there is no reason to see a difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Both are found frequently and seemingly interchangeably throughout the Bible. In Jewish consciousness, the name of God was so precious and ineffable that they regularly substituted "God" with "heaven". (So as to avoid the possibility of speaking his name too casually.) So we're talking about the same thing whether we're talking about *the kingdom of heaven* or *the kingdom of God*.

Having said that, John immediately gives us a clue about the nature of this kingdom by telling the crowds that the kingdom is *at hand*. *Did you see that in v.2? Read Matthew 3:2 ... "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* This conveys the idea that that kingdom has already arrived, at least in some measure ... specifically through the arrival of the Messiah or the king. As professor Blomberg notes, "*the kingdom' depicts the irruption of God's power into history in a new and dramatic way with the advent of Messiah Jesus*" (73). The king is here and he's brought his kingdom with him. That means this isn't just a communal or corporate reality, the kingdom of heaven is a cosmic reality that has invaded earth.

And John isn't the only one to proclaim that the kingdom was at hand. Jesus himself says the exact same thing in Matthew 4:17 and even instructs his disciples to preach this message in Matthew 10:7. *The kingdom of heaven is at hand*. But, *what's all this mean?*

Well, in order to understand and receive this kingdom, we should be careful to get into the minds of this first-century context in which John preaches and Jesus arrives. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright suggests that both Jesus and this first-century Jewish world would have believed two things that informed their reception and inauguration of this idea of the kingdom of heaven. Wright explains in his brilliant book *The Challenge of Jesus* that those two beliefs were first that "**God's choice of Israel to be the means of saving the world**" ... and secondly that ... "**God's bringing Israel's history to its moment of climax, through which justice and mercy would embrace not only Israel by the whole world**" (35). They believed God would save the world *through* Israel. And they believed this salvation would be exacted through a climactic event bringing lasting love, truth, and healing the whole of creation—namely the coming of the Messiah.

So, when these crowds were coming to the Jordan river to be baptized and as the crowds soon followed Jesus all over Judea, what they were hearing and believing was that God was keeping his word. God's chosen people, Israel, were being used by God to welcome the Messiah who would establish love, truth, justice, and mercy on earth as it is in heaven (see Matthew 6:10). In fact, the first sermon Jesus preaches comes from Isaiah 61, **Read Luke 4:18-19 ...** ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*** You see, through the Spirit ... the kingdom of heaven and thus all God's promises were now being realized in Christ the Messiah.

The kingdom is the ushering in of good news, liberty, and divine favor. And so, John doesn't just tell us about what it looks like to feel, see, and act rightly. He talks about power and authority. *Read Matthew 3:11-12 ... "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier 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 and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* The kingdom of heaven isn't simply about righteousness. It's about power. It's not simply about personal moral renewal through repentance. It's also about God's cosmic rule and reign. It's about holiness and justice.

While many of us focus on that personal *moral* renewal of Jesus' ministry, others of us focus on his *cosmic* rule. In other words, instead of centering our lives on holy living we highlight the plight of the poor and marginalized, working for the goodness, liberation, and holistic renewal of all things. It's not about private righteousness but social redemption. That's what we see in more progressive or liberal churches and communities. There's an emphasis on things like taking care of the planet, social justice, and gender equity.

This is why theologian James Cone writes that the gospel of the kingdom is "*an immanent reality—a powerful liberating presence among the poor right now in their midst, 'building them up where they are torn down and propping them up on every leaning side.'* *The gospel is found wherever poor people struggle for*

justice, fighting for their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (The Cross and the Lynching Tree, 155).

You can see, one of the great tragedies of the modern western Christian Church is that we've divided what Jesus inaugurated as one. We've chosen a kingdom of righteousness or a kingdom of power; a life of holiness or a life of justice; a baptism of water or a baptism the Holy Spirit and fire; a *moral* renewal or a *cosmic* rule.

And I want to caution us. In our church there are some who center moral renewal in their own concept the Christian life and others who center cosmic rule. You're in group together. You married each other. We're in this church together. And if we're not careful our proclivities will lead to judgement and division, rather than unity. While holiness folks look down on justice folks for not preaching certain doctrines ... justice-minded Christians can easily despise holiness believers for not loving their neighbors. *Are you with me? In each other we must see the other half of the kingdom which we are prone to miss.* After all, the message is not simply say *repent*. Nor is it just, the *kingdom of heaven is at hand*. Rather, it's both. Our moral renewal is the way Jesus' cosmic rule begins to take hold of this world.

So, what does it look like to embrace both aspects of Jesus' ministry?

Movement 3: A Beloved Son (vv.13-15; 1617)

Well, first let's understand to divide Jesus kingdom message is to divide Jesus. You see, conservative Christians often look at Jesus as their teacher; building character through lesson, parables, and wisdom. Progressive Christians, however, look to Jesus as a healer, restoring communities through binding up wounds, feeding the hungry, and speaking for the voiceless. We both see him as king. But the way we see him as king informs our view of his kingdom.

Through Matthew's retelling of the start of Jesus' earthly ministry we see that Jesus is both our teacher and our healer, because first and foremost he is someone else.

Watch as Jesus enters Matthews narrative. *Read Matthew 3:13-15 ... Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.* Okay, so this long-awaited Messiah comes to be baptized ... like everyone else. He's our teacher, who practices what he preaches. Yet, John is dumfounded by this. He thinks, as likely many of us would, that Jesus should baptize John. After all, John knows Jesus is greater, more holy, and more powerful than him. Jesus is the healer, not John. However, baptism isn't about some moral ranking. Jesus makes this clear. You see, Jesus isn't being baptized by John because he's inferior to John. Rather, Jesus is being baptized "*to fulfill all righteousness.*" And when he does, heaven (the kingdom of heaven) shows up on earth.

Matthew goes on. Look at v.16. ***Read Matthew 3:16-17 ... And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*** This is one of the most precious scenes in the whole of Scripture. It's such a tender yet powerful moment. Much could be said about the full presence of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Much could be said about the nature of baptize; it's practice, mode, and meaning. Much could be said about much ... but I'd like to focus on a simple and singular aspect: *the voice from heaven*.

It's the Heavenly Father.

The Father speaks from heaven, from the place where his Word and will and way and glory and power are without question or resistance. And he says, "***This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased***" (v.16). Now, this might seem like a stupid question. But, *why does he say that? Why is the Father pleased with his Son? Why is he saying this now? At Jesus' baptism? At the start of Jesus' ministry?* After all, the kingdom has arrived, but it's not yet fully expressed. Jesus is actually just beginning his ministry; he hasn't raised the dead, given sight to the blind, fed thousand people with five loaves and two fish ... he hasn't graduated, written any books, hosted a podcast, or taken public office. Remember, except for Luke's single twelve-year old story every biographer of Jesus has skipped nearly three decades

of his life. All Jesus has done on earth is show up. That's why the Father says this here and now. You see, the love of the Father is unconditional because the Father's love precedes all conditions. His love not only precedes the cross. It shows up before creation (see John 17:24).

This tells us so much about the Father's love.

This tells us so much about who Jesus is.

This tells us so much about the kingdom.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus is our teacher and our healer because long before he was either of those things, he was the ***Beloved*** Son. And it's when we see him as the Beloved Son, when we see his ministry through this lens ... we'll learn to see ourselves as dearly loved children too. Because though we were made for God's family, our moral impurity and our cosmic negligence created distance with the Father. Our hearts dead with sin. Our world broken by sin. Yet, this Beloved Son was born of a woman and died on cross. In doing so Jesus made a way for our hearts to be renewed and the cosmos to be healed. And between his birth and death, his ministry makes this perfectly clear.

Now, between your birth and death you can rest in this truth. Because when Jesus is merely your teacher ... you can't rest. *Can you?* After all, there's always another lesson to learn and more sin of which you need to repent. When Jesus is just healer ... you can't rest. After all, there's always more work to be done, wounds to bound up, and justice to be achieved. But when Jesus is the ***Beloved*** Son, we can

rest. *Why?* Because the one who has enjoyed intimacy, favor, and love with the Father forever gives us those things with the same unconditional love through which he received them. The voice from heaven speaks over you, *this is my beloved daughter, with her I'm well pleased. This is my beloved son, with him I'm well pleased.* Before creation. Before the cross. You are loved.

When we are at rest in this love as children, we learn seek the kingdom out of joy, not obligation. When we are at rest we seek righteousness out of love, not fear. Perhaps this is why Jesus would soon tell his disciples that because their Heavenly Father loves and takes care of them so well they can live without anxiety and ***Read Matthew 6:33 ... seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*** Knowing through the *Beloved* Son the Father is pleased with us, enables us to rightly see Jesus as our teacher *and* our healer. It enables us to repent and embrace the coming kingdom, fulfilling the ache of a creation longing to be made new.