

Repentance

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0:00] So folks, I'm driving to Aldi last Friday night. It's 7pm. And I've got Radio 2 on in the background. And the presenter slash DJ!

New Year nonsense. Why? Because there was nothing wrong with last year's you. And we're straight into Express Yourself by Madonna, which is a decent tune.

But my first thought when I heard her say that, and there's a reason that she gets prime time on a Friday night on the radio, isn't there? Because she's telling people exactly what they want to hear.

But my first thought when I clocked that and heard that was, she clearly never met me last year.

And I want to put it to you, I'd imagine that she probably never met you last year. And all that takes us to the good news of this passage in Matthew chapter 3.

Have you got it there? Summed up in that one word you get in verse 2. Do you know what Matthew 3 is? It is the complete antithesis of Michelle Visage.

[1:26] And it's really, really good news. Do you see that word at verse 2? Here it is. Repent. And it comes up three times in this passage.

Repent. Let me just do a little bit of work on that word. Maybe you hear that word, and you have an instant allergic reaction. This man, John the Baptist, that we've been reading about, he is, if you're honest, everything that puts you off Christianity.

I mean, here's a guy dressing like he's from the Bronze Age. Here is a guy who's telling us by his life that he is anti-vegan. Yeah? Here is a man who's peddling a religious ritual that reeks of being a cult.

Here is a man who's preaching a dated Turner Byrne message. And you hear this word, repent. You see this man, John the Baptist, and you think, how on earth is this word, repent, good news? Well, here's why. See, if you were to Google the word repent, you would find a number of dictionaries throwing at you a definition, which means something like to feel deeply sorry about something.

[2:42] Right? And dictionaries are always a good place to go when you're looking at words, because they tell you not so much what the word means as much as how we use the word in modern day culture, right? So the dictionary is throwing up that definition of feeling deeply sorry about something.

But when the Bible uses that word, it's talking about something way more all-encompassing. That word means, at its core, to change your thinking.

Right? Saying to yourself, I'm leaving behind my old way of life because I'm choosing to walk in a new way of life and perform the very thing that your driving instructor told you never ever to contemplate doing.

and do a complete U-turn. Which raises the question, turn from what? And this is where we need to get into the Bible story as a whole.

See, at the beginning of the Bible story, we read Adam and Eve eating from the fruit in the garden that God told them not to. And the thing about that is that it's not just a momentary lapse of judgment.

[3:59] What is going on there is something cataclysmic. What they are doing in that moment is declaring, as they dethrone God, that they want to exalt themselves.

themselves. And as they do that, they are embracing a total recalibration of their reason for existence. Sin is fundamentally human beings turning away from their creator and worshipping ourselves and created things rather than him.

And because of who this God is, because he is all glorious, because he is supreme, because he cannot tolerate and look upon evil, God is rightly banishing them from the garden, from his very presence.

He would be denying himself if he didn't do that. They are his enemies. Mankind is deserving of his just judgment, but not only that, think about it.

What do you get when you turn away from the source of life and light? What do you turn to? You turn to darkness and death, right?

[5:17] And I cannot think of two more apt words to describe the news than I see on BBC every single morning. Right, let me put it like this. Here's Tim Keller, Uncle Tim.

He's always good for a read. He puts it like this, okay? In his wonderful book that I read over the Christmas period called *What's Wrong With The World*. Right? He wrote this. What's wrong with us?

What could lead human beings to do things like this? If you don't ask that question, if that question doesn't burn in your heart, your head is in the sand.

You hear what he's saying? So the call to repent is the gracious wooing from a holy, mighty, yet merciful God, his invitation to flee from our old sinful ways.

Flee from them and run to him. And in so doing, run back to the source of life and light and return to the very thing that we were made for, which is to delight in God, savour him, live for him and serve him and love him forever.

[6:30] Do you know that's the reason that you were made this morning? Friends, repentance is throwing open the doors of your soul before the Lord and saying, would you come in?

Now John might look strange, give you that, but his message is the constant drum that God's been banging through the pages of the Bible story, right?

It's nothing new as it were, all the way through the Old Testament as God sends prophet after prophet to his people to address them and to address the nations.

And it's the exact same message that Jesus will preach and it's the exact same message that the apostles as they take the message of the gospel to the world that they will preach. So repentance, the call here, is not something new.

Jesus will say the very first words of Mark's gospel, the very first words that Mark recalls coming out of his mouth, repent, repent, turn back. And all I want to do this morning is allow this text to tell us three things about repentance.

[7:46] And here's number one and this is verses one to six if you want to scan your eye over it. It's that repentance means confession. Okay?

Repentance means confession. Now it would be so easy to think about John and what he's doing here that it's kind of like some novel social media craze that's taken off on TikTok, right?

Everybody wants this because it's novel, it's new, it's strange. What's this all about? But we've got to see that his arrival in the scene here is not random. It is both timely and it's hugely significant.

It's so significant, in fact, that all four of the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, spotlight his ministry. So it's a big, big deal here. But what Matthew is doing in particular, remember, he's writing for his fellow Jews to help them understand who this Jesus is.

He's wanting them to show that as John comes on the scene here, that this is the moment we've all been waiting for. Right? Do you see verse 3?

[8:56] You got it there? Do you see how he quotes from the prophet Isaiah? Do you see Isaiah 40 there? And the context of that quote is everything.

God's people, if you remember the reading, are about to be taken into exile by the Babylonians. That's the context. Not because the Babylonians are stronger or scarier or mightier, but they're about to be taken into exile because God is using them as the instrument by which to punish the sins of his people.

But God is promising in chapter 40 that he's one day, if you picked it up in the reading, he's one day going to come in the future personally to rescue his people from their biggest problem.

And the biggest problem is not another superpower. Their biggest problem is their sin against him, a holy God. And you'll know that that day is about to hit when you hear the voice of my messenger.

That's what Isaiah 40 is saying. When you see my messenger, when you hear his voice, when you hear his call to repent, you can bet your bottom dollar that I'm about to turn up to save you.

[10:16] And this messenger, his job is going to be simply to get you ready for my coming. And that's John.

Do you see him here? Remember, there's no words in this text that are wasted. There's no filler here. Do you see the description of him? Come here. Leather belt, camel's hair, eating locusts. Yeah, anti-vegan. We're not doing that if you're vegan, right? Do you see that? Why is he telling us that, Matthew? He's telling us because he's trying to get us to see that this guy, John, is dressing like Elijah.

Elijah. If you know the Bible story, this guy Elijah that comes up in the Old Testament and his ministry, his message is to say to the people, to the nation, you need to turn back to God. He's challenging the religiously compromised of his day, Elijah, saying, you've got to pick who you're going to serve. Right? If Baal is God, worship him.

[11:20] Just go for it. Go for it. But if Yahweh is God, if the Lord is God, then worship him. But you're doing this whole half-hearted thing. It's like the hokey-cokey. You're in, out, in, out.

You've got to choose. And John is dressed like Elijah. He comes on the scene here in the spirit of Elijah. And here's the question as this guy rocks up.

How do people respond in the text? Do you see verse 5? Again, remember, none of this is filler. People didn't stay away.

Do you see it? Thinking, who is this guy? They came to him in droves. Do you see it? All sorts of different people.

You get that in the other Gospels. But Matthew wants you to see they're from all sorts of different places. Do you see that? They're from Jerusalem. They're from all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

[12:19] So this is not just one and twos. This is people in droves coming to see what's going on. So this is big news. And what do they do?

What's the word? What do they do? They confess. Now can I call a time out at this point? Just think on that for a moment.

According to the Bible for you and I to get right with God we need to not present him with a portfolio of all the reasons that he should accept us.

According to the Bible we need to rather confess to him every reason that he should reject us. Now how counterintuitive is that? You see it?

And they get baptized. Now why would anyone want to do that? You know growing up in Scotland we were made to study this book called Macbeth.

[13:29] And so etched in my mind every time I read something like this is that line from Lady Macbeth just after she's committed murder and she cannot wash the blood off her hands.

Do you know the line? Oh damn spot out I say. This is what she says. She cannot make herself clean. She's guilt ridden and she cannot change.

Friends going down underneath the water do you see people are publicly declaring symbolically that I feel like I'm covered in dirt. and I cannot carry the sense of shame and guilt and regret.

I am tired of pretending and I need to be made clean. Now let me just make two real quick fire bits of application at this point.

as we seek to be a church that is seeking to make confession great again. Okay. When we think about this word confession friends this should be a natural thing that we do.

[14:45] We are saved by grace we are united to Jesus the moment we put our faith and trust in him but the Bible is calling us to that lifetime of repentance. Where is God calling us to change? What is he putting the finger on in our life?

Here is number one bit of application. That our churches shouldn't be easy places for sin but they should be safe places for sinners.

Can I say that again? Our churches shouldn't be easy places for sin. I was on a safeguarding call the other day doing the training. We need to make sure that happens.

But they should be safe places for sinners where we can be honest about our failings and the ways that we struggle and the fact that we need each other in our lives.

We've got that saying in our culture made popular by Elton John and I think Blue did an incredible cover of it back in the 90s. What seems to be the hardest word? Sorry.

[15:48] Yeah? Here's a question I ask myself in response to this this week. When was the last time I said sorry? I said sorry to God because my sin has offended him and I'm pleading the blood of Jesus on my behalf.

But I said sorry to the people that I've sinned against. Do you know what one of the wonderful things that is a sign of spiritual maturity and I'm trying to make this more a prayer of mine and invite you to do the same.

that the time lag between us sinning and us repenting and coming clean and saying sorry the time lag there gets not greater but shorter.

And so this asks us to think about the ways that we have wronged the Lord and wronged his people and just the people that we rub shoulders with every day. number two friends what though might the Lord be laying specifically on your heart and my heart this morning that we need to confess.

The claim here is that there is one who is coming who is able to deal with your sin and my sin. And so the invitation here is to not deny it. Don't bottle it but come clean honestly come to the Lord with it and experience the joy in Christ of being forgiven.

[17:09] You know my friend Paul Reese down at Charlotte Chapel I remember he did a funeral of an old man in his church family a number of years ago and he went to visit the family at the home and they showed him this man's old Bible and he had circled the word I think it's Psalm 130 about the joy of forgiveness and he'd gone to town just circling this word forgiveness.

This man had found joy in the forgiveness that Jesus had won for him and so that's the invitation with this word confess. You are declaring in this moment we are declaring that we are patients that need to get to A&E; because we desperately need a doctor to heal us and Matthew's gospel the rest of this story is him showing us how Jesus is the great physician.

He is the one who is able to heal your every spiritual need and we come to God confessing that we have blood on our hands what he does in this moment the spirit says I will take you to Jesus and his blood spilt on your behalf for your sins.

He died so that you don't have to. Repentance means confessing but secondly repentance means change.

Do you see verses 7 to 10? Do you see again? Not filler. See the two groups of people who come to see what on earth is going on here. Right? Matthew names them as the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

[18:46] Do you see it there? These are two religious groups in Israel who although they believe different things are both passionately devoted to religious observance and they are both intrigued by John's message and we've got to ask ourselves why do these guys come all the way down to see what the fuss is all about?

Do you know why they're coming? They're coming because what John is saying is a threat to their whole way of life and it's the fellow Jews who are going to this man John and saying what he is saying is resonating with us in a way that what they are teaching isn't?

And do you see how John he clocks them coming and he lets fly right? And how about this for an opening line? Students you can use this in your lecture hall tomorrow but you've got to get the tone of the text here okay?

He's not looking for friends. He's not looking for popularity. He's looking for these guys to repent as well. Do you see it? What does he say? You brood of vipers. You pet of snakes.

That's what he's saying. Because John perceives that here are two religious groups who are assuming that because of their religious looking lives and their Jewish roots and links to Abraham that they have a free pass and all this repentance stuff.

[20:26] It's what they're presuming. John smells presumption in the air and he wants to rock them, shake them out of it.

But we've got to ask the question at this stage friends, what might we, what might you be presuming on this morning when it comes to being right with God?

Maybe you think my parents christened me as a child. Maybe you've been reading Jordan Peterson and you're thinking, I'm sympathetic to Christian morality.

Maybe you do your bit for charity, maybe you say grace at mealtimes, the list could go on. But all the things that maybe we're tempted to think when it comes to this whole repentance and coming clean before the Lord, that that doesn't apply to me.

can understand how it applies to Putin, but I can't see how it applies to me. Friends, what's the proof of repentance?

[21:26] See it in the text. What is the proof that the love of God has totally transformed and invaded a human heart? What's the proof of it?

Deep, convictional, tangible, fruit. You see him say it? You know, it's a true story told about Harland and Wolf shipbuilders in Belfast.

Famous for being the place where the Titanic was built. They always tell us that it was fine when it left there. Famous for being the place where the Titanic was built, right? At its height, it employed some 35,000 men in its workforce.

You can imagine with that number of people on a building site, construction site. When the bell went at the end of the day and that number of people left en masse, what people soon discovered is that it was the easiest thing in the world just to steal something.

So they used to put, many of the men used to put little bits of copper or lead pipe in their back pocket in their jacket and just walk out. Nothing that they could do about it. But see, during one of the periods of revival in Northern Ireland, many of those men repented and became Christians, put their faith in Jesus.

[22:46] And what began to happen is that one by one, all these men began to bring back to the shipyard the stuff that they'd stolen over the years. To the extent that the shipbuilders had to put out an announcement over the airwaves, telling people to stop bringing back the stuff that they had stolen because they didn't have room enough in their warehouse to store it all.

But do you see what John is saying and how it connects to that? What is the thing that God is looking for? What is the proof of repentance?

It is deep, convictional, tangible fruit. The proof that God has gripped your heart is that your life will begin to change. And so John looks at these Pharisees and Sadducees and says, you presume that your lives are producing good fruit, let me tell you that God looks on it and he declares over you that you are producing bad fruit.

Repentance means change. But let me just do a little bit pastoral work here. Maybe like me you hear that and you think to yourself, honestly, I'm not sure where the power to change, I love your message, I love that, but I don't know where the power to change really comes from.

I don't rate my ability to do it. Do you know what? See, if you're there, I think you're exactly where John the Baptist wants his listeners to be.

[24:17] This is not about turning over a new leaf. What John is saying is that I'm getting you ready to see that God's come to give you a new heart.

God's love. So here's the third thing that repentance means. Repentance means Christ. Come with me in verses 11 and 12. See it. What John knows about himself and he keeps telling people, do you see it?

The one that's coming after me, can I paraphrase? I'm not fit to strap his boots. John is saying in that language, I am his servant.

Elizabeth's boy, right? Jesus' second cousin. I'm not fit to strap his boots. And notice the humility of John in that moment.

Don't look at me, look at him. Wouldn't I'd love to see more of that in your life? I take it that's what spiritual maturity again looks like. I want to see less of me and more of him.

[25:24] He is not interested in the limelight. He is not interested in building a following. His delight is that he would be totally eclipsed.

His one aim in life is to point to Jesus and say, you don't need my baptism, you need his. Because I didn't see this for years.

There's a difference between John's baptism and the baptism that Jesus will give people. Do you see it in the text? Blink and you might miss it. There's a difference between the baptisms.

Maybe think of it like this. You know the worst three words you could hope to hear on Christmas day as a child? When you're standing there with your new present opened. And I heard these words from my sister-in-law's boyfriend on Christmas day when our kids opened presents.

You know the three words? Batteries Not included. Batteries Not Included. You're standing there with something that looks incredible. It's wonderful in your hands but there is no power to make it work.

[26:32] That's John's baptism here. That's what he is declaring. My baptism has no power to change. It can get you maybe clean on the outside but it has no power to change you in the one place that we need to be changed which is on the inside.

But coming after me is one who will give you if you turn to him in repentance and faith verse 11 he will give you the Holy Spirit and fire.

Do you see that language there? So if you're a Christian here today here's what's true. Because Jesus has paid for our sins the Spirit has been given to us poured out on all the people of God. The Holy Spirit is not just for a select few. It is for all those who keep their faith in Jesus that he comes to live in our life.

So the Holy Spirit there, the very presence of God come to dwell in us. He is ours. It's what Jesus has come to give us. And his business, the Holy Spirit, is to transform our hearts from the inside out.

[27:39] It's to animate us. Holy Spirit and fire. You may be thinking, what is that fire language all about? I take it it's symbolic there of this inner purity.

That Jesus has made us clean. And he is committed to making us into a people who are passionate about purity.

Because here's what this God does. He specializes in raising up children for Abraham from stones. Do you see the language here? If I could just play on it a little bit. God can make these stones into worshippers. Now how on earth is he going to do that?

Well I think what's going on here, remember the Christian is someone who is spiritually dead. There was not an iota in my existence that wanted anything to do with God until the Holy Spirit flooded my life.

[28:43] A Christian is someone who is internally inanimate but who has had a heart transplant. Something that Ezekiel, something that Jeremiah had prophesied and spoken about the day that God was coming to give his people a new heart and write his law inside of them.

And just remember back to the beginning of the Bible story. What did God do to Adam? He breathed into him the breath of life and he became a living being.

And it's almost as if God, spiritually speaking, he's at it again. What is he doing into stones but breathing into them the breath of life and causing this rock, this stone, because of his grace, to sing out in praise of worship to him.

him. But do you see how I wouldn't be doing my job right and John wouldn't be doing his job right if we didn't see the language at verse 12 that he goes on to use.

Do you see how he goes all lumberjack on them here? Speaking still to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he says the axe is at the root of the tree. Again, not a guy looking for friends but looking to be faithful to the job that God has called them to do.

[30:05] The axe is at the root of the tree. Jesus has come to save but he's also come to judge. But we've got to see and I think this is what John should read on. We'll meet him again in the story.

It's maybe the thing that he didn't expect. That that judgment that Jesus has come to give isn't now. Today is the day of salvation.

Jesus' blood is open to everybody who would believe. But there is coming a day when King Jesus will one day return and he will judge the whole earth.

And so the axe at the root of the tree is this imagery of saying judgment will come. Are you ready to face your maker? When Jesus separates the wheat and the chaff, the Bible talks about or Jesus talks about heaven and hell.

And so the question of this passage that John wants to leave his listeners with and I think the aim of this passage for us hearers today is are you ready to meet your maker?

[31:12] I'm going to think about more next week about Jesus and the life that he has come to give. But just as we close, let me tell you about my friend Pedram.

I've met some wonderful people in my time at Brunfield. You're all wonderful, but you know what I mean. Just people from different places doing different things. And they come and God brings them into your life for a season and he takes them on.

Pedram came into my life. He was part of this church a number of years ago. When he got to know him for about six months, three things about Pedram. He was Iranian. He grew up in London and he worked at Curry's PC World.

So every time he used to meet for a coffee, the conversation went all over the place. But he always used to tell me about how growing up, his life was surrounded with people who were all into gadgets and gizmos and the good life.

And he talked about how he kind of absorbed this worldview as to he was thinking, those are the things that I want to pursue in my life and make it all about. And we used to meet up and every time we did, we chat about life and then we crack open the Bible and we look at Mark's gospel.

[32:19] And early on in Mark chapter 1, the first words out of Jesus' mouth, that word, repent. And Pedram looked at it and he thought about it and he mulled it over and his response is to this day one of the most profound things I've ever heard.

He read that call and he said, it's almost as if, isn't he, Jesus is calling me to a life of unlearning. And I thought, brother, what a profound comment.

Because it is what a disciple is. Someone who is learning Jesus, seeking to walk with him all the days of their lives. But part of that learning Jesus process will be about us unlearning the things that used to dominate our lives and our attitudes and our ambitions.

And Pedram reads this and he's thinking to himself, Jesus is telling me in this moment that my heart is like a broken compass. He's telling me that my longings are like a violin that is so badly out of tune.

He's telling me that my ambitions and dreams, it's as if I'm investing myself, my life savings into a bank that God is telling me is just about to go under. And he's come through his death on the cross and his resurrection to call me to repentance, which is to turn from myself and my sin against him, a holy God, and all the wrong ways I used to think to turn from them and turn me into someone who absolutely delights and longs and lives to follow him.

[33:57] Friends, one of the big themes that we're going to see in this gospel is that Matthew wants us to know about discipleship. Chapter 3, what have we had this morning? We've had baptism, right?

And we've had the fruit of obedience, yeah? Chapter 28, what will you see is the commission that Jesus gives to his disciples to go to the worlds to teach them what? To baptize them and to teach them about the fruit of obedience.

And it's as if this whole gospel, one of the sub-themes is this discipleship process of learning what it means to follow Jesus. But right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, this is Matthew is telling us.

You want to follow him? It all starts here, with repentance. So friends, why don't I pray?

We'll just be silent for a few minutes. I'm going to pray. But why don't us maybe just individually just respond to what we've heard this morning? I don't know what God is maybe doing by his spirit in our lives.

[35:03] But just before we sing our couple of songs and close our time together, why don't we just be quiet for a few moments? And just still our hearts come before the Lord and maybe bring our own individual prayers to him.

And so Father, we thank you so much for this morning. Lord, it always feels to me, gathering on a Sunday, meeting with my brothers and sisters, singing your praises, hearing your word, it just reorientates me to the gospel.

Lord, our hearts so often wonder, they get cold, they get distracted, our minds sometimes go all over the place. But I pray, Father, this morning that you would re-center us on the gospel, that there is forgiveness and life to be found in confessing our sins, in repenting, in turning, and returning to you, the God who loves us.

We thank you so much. We're going to see in this gospel that Jesus is the great and perfect physician. And so, Lord, I pray that as we finish our time this morning as we respond in prayer and praise, that you would help us individually respond to this.

And maybe even for some of us today, for the first time, we put our faith and trust in Jesus as we repent of our sins and turn to him.

[36:22] Father, we thank you for your goodness to us this morning. We pray that you'd be with us as we finish our time. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.