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Matthew 3:1-4:11

Intro

One of my first ever theology classes was **New Testament I**, with Dr. Poe. I'll never forget an analogy he used, in our first class, to define the word **repent** biblically. "To repent" means to "change one's mind," not in a casual way, but in a **life-changing way**. He put it like this: imagine walking into a sandwich shop, such as Subway. They ask you what you'd like: you say, "Turkey." But then, you change your mind; "No, actually, make that roast beef." That's not repentance; it's just changing your decision. But rewind the tape: they ask what you'd like, and you say, again, "Turkey." But this time, you also say, "No, wait a second, I change my mind; I'm going to be a **vegetarian**. Just veggies, please." "That," Dr. Poe said, "is **repentance**." It's a humorous example, but I think it helpfully shows what the Bible means when it calls us to **repent and believe in the gospel of Christ**. It's talking about turning to live *a completely different way of life*.

These three passages, in Matthew 3:1-4:11, are three very well-known, memorable, and powerful passages of scripture. First, we see John the Baptist, proclaiming a clear, yet biting message from the Lord "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" Then, we see the *baptism of Jesus*, a revelatory moment where we see a clear picture of who Jesus is. And then, the powerful account of *Jesus's trials and temptations in the wilderness*. Each of these passages could easily be a sermon on their own; they are each rich, full of profound truths and practical applications to our lives. And yet, when we put them all together, we also see that they flow together: at the heart of the gospel is a call for each of us to *repent and believe*; and **all three of these passages unpack for us what it means to repent and believe**. We get a clear picture of *who we are, who Christ is, and who we are in Christ by faith*.

So let's jump in with point number one:

I. God's True People Repent - We must turn away from sin and turn to God in faith

The passage begins with the introduction of *John the Baptist*. Many years have passed since the end of chapter 2; when we left off, Jesus was a baby; now, Jesus has grown into a man. And before we see the beginning of Jesus's ministry, we see **John**, the prophet sent to "**Prepare**

the way of the Lord” and to *“make his paths straight.”* Everything about John is meant to remind us of the Old Testament prophets: his clothing of camel hair, his diet of wild locusts and honey, and the fact that he lives in the wilderness - these are all allusions to different prophets of old, especially the prophet *Elijah*. At this point in the story, It has been *hundreds of years* since God had sent the last prophets to bring His Word to His people; and now, suddenly, *a new prophet has burst onto the scene; the Lord has broken his silence and is speaking to His people!* And rightly so, the people of Israel flock to John in the wilderness to hear his message from God! And his message not only *fulfills scripture*, as is made clear with the quote from Isaiah 40, but it also sounds very similar to the prophets of old.

And what is the message of this new prophet? **“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” (3:2)** The first two chapters of Matthew have made *explicitly clear* that **Jesus is the promised King, ushering in not only the promised Davidic throne of Israel, but the promised Kingdom of God!** This “Kingdom of God,” or “Kingdom of Heaven,” is at hand because the **true King has arrived!** Jesus had come and he was about to begin his work of bringing about this promised Kingdom. But not only did the Old Testament promise a coming King and Kingdom; they also spoke of *one who would prepare the way for the King:* John. And he prepares the way by preparing people’s hearts to *receive the true message of the Kingdom.*

The message of the “Kingdom” is a message of both **salvation and judgment.** The promised King is also the promised *savior:* Jesus comes to bring salvation from God! And yet, the Kingdom also brings a warning of *coming judgment.* John’s message makes clear that this is God’s judgment against our **sin.** He uses several analogies: he calls the religious leaders a “brood of vipers” and says their hypocritical teaching and self-righteousness is not enough to fulfill God’s demands of righteousness or to deal with their sin (3:7-8). He warns the people of Israel that being *ethnically part of Israel,* being physical descendants of Abraham, is not enough to be part of the true people of God (3:9). He warns us by telling us that our “bad fruit” of disobedience and sin leads to *destruction and judgment,* for we all deserve the wrath of God. He uses the analogy of a “winnowing fork,” of where farmers would toss wheat into the air and let the wind blow the chaff away; so it will be with God in judgment, casting *sinner*s, which includes *every person that’s ever lived,* into the “unquenchable fire” of Hell (3:10-12).

Therefore, our only hope is to **repent!** To confess our sin and turn to the Lord, casting ourselves upon his mercy. And true repentance, John reminds us, bears **good fruit.** This is why

he *baptized people*: though there were cleansing rites before, John's baptism was something new, with *new symbolic meaning*. It was an *outward sign* for people to *demonstrate confession of sin and repentance, turning to God in faithful response to His Word*. John's message and baptism prepare the way for the Kingdom of God by making very clear how we can receive the salvation that GOD's King Jesus brings: ***if we repent and turn to Christ, we will be saved! If we do not, we will face His judgment and wrath forever.*** We must *repent and believe in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven and be saved*.

This is the **call** of the gospel; this is the demand of the gospel on each of our lives. This is what begins in **conversion**: when we turn away from sin, acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves and deserve God's wrath, and then turn to Christ in faith, believing in the good news of salvation in Christ alone!

But this doesn't stop at conversion; each Christian must live a life of *ongoing repentance*; to truly believe is to *daily turn from sin, turn to Christ in faith, and strive to lovingly trust and obey God because of His grace*.

This is why living in *unrepentant sin and refusing to obey GOD* is *absolutely incompatible* with claiming to be a believer. Some claim to be believers but continue to go on sinning in willful, deliberate ways, and will often even try to *justify* or *excuse* their sinful lifestyles. Some claim to be believers, yet show *no signs of true repentance* as they justify sexual immorality, living with their boyfriend or girlfriend, or getting a divorce for unbiblical reasons. Some claim to be believers, yet *refuse to obey the Lord* by striving to obey GOD's Word, joining and attending a gospel-believing church, and pursuing a life of holiness. Such people might even respond by saying, "Hey, I've repented; after all, I "walked the aisle," or said this prayer, or was even baptized 10, 20, 30 years ago." But that isn't true repentance. Biblical repentance and faith is not something we do just once in our lives, at our conversion, just in order to become Christians and "get right with God" so we can get out of Hell, and then continue living our lives the way we want to. It just doesn't work that way. To truly *repent and believe* is to surrender all that we are to Christ and embrace a whole new life of faith; to *repent* is to *turn*, to *put away* the old way of living - as a slave to sin - and to *turn* instead to a *new way of living* - the way of **faith**. If we truly believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior, then we embrace a *lifestyle of repentance* - *daily turning away from sin, confessing it before God, turning to the gospel of Christ in faith by remembering and trusting in His promise of forgiveness and salvation for all who turn to him,*

and then striving, by His grace, to trust, love, worship, and obey the Lord in all of our lives! To be a Christian is to turn to Christ in *repentant faith*.

[Transition] 3:1-12 shows us the first step of repentance: turning *from sin*. 3:13-4:11 shows us the next steps: *what we are supposed to turn to*.

II. Jesus Identifies with God's True, Repentant People and Obeys in our Place

In verses 13-17, we are finally introduced to *Jesus, the Man*. He comes to John to be baptized. But if John's baptism is a *sign of repentance*, then why was Jesus baptized? Jesus is perfect and sinless; he had nothing to repent from, nothing to change, at any point in his life! So then, why did he need to be baptized by John in order to "*fulfill all righteousness?*" For a few reasons:

1. First, it presents Jesus as the *promised Davidic Messiah* - God's promised Savior and King - that John was preparing the way for; this formally connects the Old Testament promises and the ministry of John the Baptist to the life and ministry of Jesus as it is about to begin. This shows very clearly that *Jesus is ushering in the "Kingdom of Heaven"* that John said was at hand.

2. Secondly, in this baptism, God the Father announces clearly who Jesus is: "***This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.***" As the Spirit descends in a visible way upon Jesus, and as the Father proclaims that He is His Son, this doesn't mean that Jesus *didn't have the Spirit* or *wasn't the Son of God* prior to the baptism; on the contrary, it is *outwardly proclaiming and visibly showing* what was true all along: Jesus is the true Son of God, being God Himself, and is the perfect *servant of God* in his human life and ministry on earth; the Father is "*well pleased*" with him because, as the temptation account makes very clear, Jesus perfectly obeys the will of God at every turn.

3. But this also very importantly *identifies Jesus as the True Representative of Israel, and therefore, God's people in general*. When Jesus is declared to be "God's Son" in 3:17, it reminds us of what we saw last week, in chapter 2:15 - "*Out of Egypt I called my son.*" As we saw last week, that verse refers to Old Testament passages where **Israel**, God's people, is pictured as "God's son," and then **Jesus** is shown to be the fulfillment of such passages; as God's **true Son**, he represents the true people of God.

John's *baptism of repentance* was for God's people to outwardly proclaim and demonstrate their repentance and belief in response to GOD's promises of salvation through the Messianic King. Jesus, as that true King and Savior, is baptized in the same way *in order to outwardly identify with God's people as their representative*.

The next passage, 4:1-11, continues to make this point: right after his baptism, Jesus is "*led up by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*" (4:1). And while there, he fasts "*forty days and forty nights.*" Just as we saw, in chapter 2, that the events of Jesus' early life were almost 'replaying' the events of Israel's early history, so we see a similar thing happening here: after God brought Israel out of Egypt, to be His holy people and worship and obey Him, He brought them up into the desert. Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, disobeyed God and didn't trust Him; Jesus fasts in the wilderness for 40 days, tempted and tested, and yet ***obeys perfectly*** where Israel had failed; not only Israel, but where we *all* have failed.

Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life, the life that you and I have not and never could live. But this becomes *good news* for us when we realize that Jesus *perfectly obeyed as our representative*. He perfectly obeyed *in our place*. What we see here is that Jesus, representing the *true people of God*, stood the test and perfectly obeyed, indeed, perfectly fulfilled *all of the demands of God's righteous Law*. When we read the temptation account of Jesus, and how he never gave in and obeyed to the end, it doesn't just convict of our sin and remind us of our guilt; it also *encourages us* by showing that Jesus did this *as our representative!* And not just here, but his *entire life of perfect obedience* was lived *for us*, and his *righteousness is accredited to our account* - that is, if we are part of His people; if we are part of the group that He represented in his life, death, and resurrection.

So who is part of that group - God's true people - and how do we join? As we've already seen, *it's those who repent and trust in Christ*. When we repent and believe, we are *united to Christ, by grace through faith*. This means He *stands in our place as our representative; He assumes our sin and guilt, which he took to the cross; and we assume the perfect righteousness of Christ that he obtained throughout his life of obedience; He fulfilled the Law's demands for us, His people*.

This is what **baptism symbolizes**: we are *immersed in the water* as a picture of death and burial; then, we are *brought out of the water*, as a picture of *resurrection and new life*. When

Jesus is baptized here, he *identifies with all who repent and believe in Him* and pictures *what he came to do to save them*. He not only obeyed perfectly, being innocent, but he also *bore our sin and guilt upon himself on the cross*. He died and was buried, taking on the wrath of God and the penalty of our sin: **death**. And then, three days later, He was raised from the grave!

This is why baptism is the first step of obedience in beginning the Christian life: it is an **outward sign** of our repentance and faith, publicly demonstrating that we are *turning away from and dying to sin and trusting completely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ*; it's a symbol that we are united to Christ now, by His grace through our faith; it is a symbol that we *already raised to live a new life in Christ, and that we will one day be raised to eternal life in Him!* Baptism visibly pictures what it means that Christ is our representative: that He died, was buried, and was raised *in the place of His people*. If we *repent and believe*, if we turn to Christ in **faith**, then we are part of His people! His righteousness, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection count as our own! And so **baptism**, the first commanded act of obedience for each believer, is an *outward, visible picture of repentance and faith*: through it, we *publicly declare that we are turning away from sin and turning to Christ in faith*; and we are also *visibly picturing* what we believe in: that we are trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ alone for our salvation.

This is why baptism is so important: it visibly marks out those who are proclaiming faith in Christ, as His people.

[Transition] But again, this doesn't *just affect our conversion: it transforms the entire rest of our lives*.

III. In Christ, We Fight Sin and Temptation by *Trusting in God's Word*

Because Christ is our representative and we are *united to him*, then the gospel *empowers and enables us to resist sin and obey*; a life of *repenting and believing* in Christ means a life of *fighting temptation and striving to obey*. We are only able to do this *because we are in Christ*. Therefore, Christ is both the *basis for* and the *model of* Christian obedience. As we look at the *temptation and testing* of Christ in the last part of the passage, we learn about the *nature of our temptations* and the *way we must fight temptation*.

Throughout **4:1-11**, Jesus is *tested* by three *temptations* that come from Satan; and each time, Jesus *passes the test*, remaining faithfully obedient and perfectly righteous. Each time, Satan *twists* or *perverts* a good thing, showing that *temptation* is often a trap in which we *pursue a good thing in the wrong way*, or *turn a good desire into a perverse desire*, or *seek to rely on ourselves to bring about what we think is good, rather than rely on and trust in God*. And Jesus resists each temptation, each time, *by quoting scripture, the Word of God*.

We see the **first temptation** in **4:3** - “*And the tempter came and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’*” Jesus replies by quoting **Deut. 8:3** - “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” The temptation is to *trust in self* rather than to *trust and rely on God alone*. We are tempted to sin because we are *tempted to think that we know better than God, or that we can’t trust God to meet our needs and desires, so we need to take it into our own hands; we are tempted to rely on our own strength and wisdom*. And yet, this is a lie from Satan. *We must trust and rely wholly on God and His Word*. We can only truly live by *living upon every word that comes from the mouth of God*.

The **second temptation** comes in **4:5-6** - Satan tells him to *cast himself down* from a high place, saying that if Jesus is truly God’s Son, then God will send angels to save him. And then, *the devil quotes scripture to back up his temptation!* Here we see one of the nastiest, yet subtlest ways Satan attacks and tempts us: when he quotes scripture here, he *twists and missapplies it*, taking it out of context from Psalm 91. This is the same move he employed with the first Adam in the Garden of Eden: “*Did God really say you cannot eat from any tree in the Garden?’* Satan *twists God’s Word* to make it say what it does not; and the purpose is to *mislead us* into either *doubting God’s goodness* or to *justify explicit disobedience*. When we are tempted to sin, we are *tempted to put God to the test; we doubt His goodness, truthfulness, and faithfulness*. Jesus responds with quoting **Deut. 6:16** - “*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*” We are not God’s judge; to put him to the test is to doubt him; it is the *opposite of faith*; and every sin is the fruit of **disbelief**. Instead, we must ***trust in the Lord and take Him at His Word***.

The **final temptation**, in **4:8-10**, is the most brash: Satan takes Jesus and shows him “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.” Then, he offers them to Jesus; all he has to do is “***fall down and worship me***.” Matthew has made abundantly clear that Jesus is the true King who will

one day inherit *all the kingdoms of the world*; yet, for now, Satan has real power and authority over them, until that day comes. Here, the temptation is for Jesus to *bypass the mission of the cross; the path to Christ's glory and Kingship over all the world is the path of suffering and dying on the cross*. Satan is tempting him to "*achieve his end goal*" by taking the "easy way" instead of fulfilling God's will. Yet, this is a lie! Christ came not only to rule but to **save**; and this only happens through the Cross. And the evil here is obvious: **to worship Satan would be outright blasphemy and idolatry!** Jesus responds in verse 10: "*Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'*" Every time we sin, we *commit idolatry; we worship the false gods that we think will bring us what we truly desire*. And yet, there is only one true God!

Application: So then, we can make some very practical applications from this passage about the nature of temptation and the way we fight it. We learn this: **we are tempted to trust in anything other than God and doubt His goodness; we cannot stand firm during trials and temptations on our own; we must rely on God's promises by trusting in God's Word.**

Here are some practical applications for when temptation comes:

1. **Remember God's Word** - the Bible. Do whatever it takes to help you do this: Read and study the Bible daily; memorize and quote scripture to yourself in times of temptation; ask others to hold you accountable and remind scripture to you as it applies to specific situations; **let scripture saturate and guide your prayers, especially in the midst of temptation.**

2. **Listen to God's Word** - When temptation comes, we are often tempted to *misunderstand, missapply, or doubt* God's Word; we must constantly check our desires, motives, thoughts, and actions against God's Word. Only then can we rightly discern *what is sin and what is obedience*.

3. **Trust God's Word** - We never stop *repenting and believing*; this is what our entire life must be committed to. Daily we must *turn away from sin and turn to Christ, trusting in God's Word and promises*. Everyday, we must *refuse to believe the lies of sin and Satan and trust and believe in the promises of God and the Truth of His Word*. And we can only do this by His grace. As we recognize temptation and remember God's Word, we *cry out to the Lord in faith, asking Him to sustain us, and to give us faith to remember and believe His goodness*

4. **Believe in the Gospel** - The *gospel of Christ*, the sum message of God's Word and promises, is our greatest weapon in fighting sin and striving to obey. When we are tempted to

doubt God's goodness, *we must remember the goodness of God displayed in the cross of Christ!* When we are tempted to listen to the lies and accusations of Satan, *we must remember who we are in Christ because of what he has done for us: we are completely forgiven and righteous purely through faith in Christ!* When you are tempted to think that God is withholding good from you, and that you can only meet your needs and desires through taking matters into your own hands, *remember that God has promised to provide all that you need simply by relying on Him; if he did not spare His own Son to save us, how much more so will he give us all things?* When we are tempted to worship ourselves, our desires, earthly goods, or any other idol we might be tempted to create - let us remember that ***there is only one true God, who demands to be worship alone, and that idolatry leads only to condemnation and judgment; and yet, because we have repented and are trusting in Christ alone, we will never face that condemnation, but have received salvation and eternal life; we are freed from the shackles of sin to freely worship and enjoy God forever!*** Remember who you are in Christ: forgiven, declared righteous, a *beloved child of God!* And this is not based on anything you've done; it's all because Christ has perfectly obeyed in your place!

Remembering and trusting in the gospel is our greatest weapon against sin. But it is also the *antidote* for when we fall prey to Satan's schemes. When you fall into temptation, just as we have all done, even this week, and Satan tempts you to despair and thrusts condemnation on you, *turn to the gospel* - once again, we are reminded we must **repent and believe daily**. *Fight temptation* and strive to obey; but if you fail and fall, then *repent: turn from sin, confess it to the Lord, and turn to the cross of Christ in faith*; remember the **gospel: that you are forgiven and righteous in Christ, and this not based on your works at all, but merely grace**. And *then* strive to obey, because of the Lord's grace.

If you are not a believer this morning, then the first step for you is to **turn away from sin and turn to Christ, trusting in Him alone for salvation**. **Repentance** for you doesn't mean cleaning your life up first or promising to do better; simply *turn away from sin and following Satan*, and turn instead to *believe in the gospel of Christ: trust in perfect obedience of Christ, his death in your place, and his resurrection, and you will be saved!* And then, as the first step of obedience, make your faith public by **being baptized** and joining a gospel-believing church. If you have any questions about this, or if you believe and are interested in baptism or church

membership, I would love to speak further with you. You come now during the last song, or you can find me or one of the deacons after the service.

Let us pray.