

2025/12/14

Growing in Holiness Through Repentance

3:1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 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.’”

4 John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 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? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 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. 10 The axe 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.

11 “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. 12 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.”

INTRODUCTION

This morning, we want to begin by looking at Exodus 3:5 where God told Moses at the burning bush: **“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”**

The verse reveals one key aspect of holiness: it is tied to God's Presence. God's Presence turns ordinary ground into holy ground. As God's people draw near to Him, we are called to reflect His character of holiness. "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

To be holy is to draw near to the Holy One. This requires reverence and transformation. In Moses’ case, it required him to remove his sandals before he could come closer to God. This is a good reminder that holiness demands separation from sin and be transformed.

An important aspect of transformation is repentance. What is repentance? Repentance (μετάνοια, metanoia) essentially is **a change of mind**. In biblical and theological context, it is the change of **mind, heart and direction**. To repent is to engage in fundamental rethinking and reorientation of one's life. It means **turning away from sin** and turning toward God. But what is **sin**?

I. SIN

o Let’s start by looking at two common biblical terms associated to the idea of sin.

1. **Iniquity** refers to something **bent**, or **twisted**. It is the inner **crookedness** that inclines us toward perversion and wrongdoing. Examples – (a) we engage in gossip disguised as helpful prayer request – “Let’s pray for the Pastor, he confided in me that he has been having marriage problems”, or (b) we constantly point out flaws in others' work, corrects minor mistakes in meetings, and says, "I'm just telling it like it is. Someone has to". We justify ourselves as being an honest critic.
2. **Transgression** refers to **crossing** a **boundary** that breaks trust in a relationship. It is knowingly crossing the line and deliberately disobeying. It is tantamount to rebellion and defiance. Examples – lying for self-gain, viewing pornography knowing it's wrong for us, or breaking a promise that we have made.

o In summary: Iniquity is the inner crookedness.

Transgression is the wilful rebellion against God’s boundaries. While iniquity and transgression are specific expressions of sin, what is the fundamental essence of sin itself?

o Sin is “missing the mark” or “missing the target” we were meant to hit. It is falling short of God’s original intent for humanity.

o What was this mark or intent? God created human beings in His own image. We were made in His likeness to represent Him in creation—to reflect His character and glory. His design was for us to partner with Him in ruling and caring for the world.

o But we have sinned and fallen short of His glory. We have missed the goal of God’s original design: to reflect His glory, to represent Him, and to responsibly rule and care for His creation.

o In essence, sin is missing the mark of God’s original design for us—to reflect His glory, represent Him, and faithfully care for His creation.

o John the Baptist’s message was clear and simple. In 3:2, he proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 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.’”

o Put simply, God is returning as King to rule over His people and is setting up His kingdom on earth. **Turn from your sin and turn to God.** Get ready to reflect God’s glory again!

o 3:5 says “people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 **Confessing their sins**, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”

II. SIN of SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

o There is an interesting observation to take note of in 3:7 – “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? 8 **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** 9 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. 10 The axe 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.**”

o What do you make of this? The **Sadducees** were the priestly and political religious leaders centred around the Temple. The **Pharisees** were the religious teachers and interpreters of the Law among the people. Why was John the Baptist so harsh with them, calling them children of snakes? The text suggests quite clearly that it has to do with repentance – “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” and “every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

o Weren’t they religious leaders and teachers? They are good people, so what “**good fruit**” did they not produce that upset John the Baptist? I would like to offer two aspects that’s quite clear if you read the rest of the Gospel of Matthew.

1. They were people with a “huge head, big mouth and small body”. They know much, talk much but do very little. They accumulate Bible knowledge, teach doctrines, attend seminars, and speak confidently about religious truths, yet their actions lag far behind their words.

Jesus said this of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:2 “...Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. 3 So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. 4 They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.”

Isn’t that true of our own experience? It is easier to discuss faith than to practice it, easier to teach others than to obey ourselves, and easier to appear spiritual than to actually serve. This imbalance creates a faith that is top-heavy in knowledge, speak loud in speech, but weak in obedience. We talk about the kingdom more than we live it.

If that’s true of us, we need to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” by putting into practice what we know and teach. Beside knowing and talking, we need to be doing more.

2. The second aspect has to do with what’s commonly call “moral licensing.” Moral licensing happens when a person does something good and then feels that it gives them permission to do something wrong. In other words, they believe their good action earns them credit that excuses their bad behaviour.

Jesus said this of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 “...you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith...25...you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence!”

What lies behind “moral licensing” is the idea that doing something good makes it feel okay to do something bad. It is having the mindset that salvation is by works. The belief that salvation depends on our good deeds, so we keep a mental scorecard of our actions. As long as we believe our good works outweigh our bad deeds, we assume we are safe and acceptable before God.

Is this a reflection of your own experience? You think you can earn your salvation by your good works. So, you tried your best to do good deeds and after you have done enough of them, you felt it is okay to occasionally indulge in one or two wrongdoings?

If that’s true of us, then we must repent. We must turn away from the mindset of salvation by our own works and turn instead to the deep conviction that salvation is found only in God’s grace, demonstrated on the cross of Christ.

Only Jesus’ death on the cross can take away our sins; no amount of good works can achieve this. As Ephesians 2:8-9 makes clear, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

The good works we do are not the root of our salvation, but its fruit. We engage in them because we have been saved, not to be saved. As the very next verse, Ephesians 2:10, declares: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

RESPONSE

This morning, we have looked at holiness and learned that a key aspect of it is being in the presence of God. To be holy is to draw near to the Holy God, and this requires transformation. This transformation begins with repentance—a change of mind, heart, and direction, turning away from sin and turning toward God.

Turning away from sin requires us to renounce two things: first, our iniquity—the inner crookedness of our nature; and second, our transgression—the wilful rebellion against God’s boundaries.

We were made to reflect God’s glory. Though our selfishness and wrong choices have marred that reflection, God can restore it. Jesus redeemed our broken image by dying on the cross to take away our sins. Though He was without sin, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). In this way, Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

We see two different responses to John the Baptist’s call. When the people came to him, confessing their sins, he baptized them. In the same way, when we confess our sins to Jesus, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

But when the religious leaders came without producing fruit in keeping with repentance, John called them “brood of vipers” and warned that every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

From this, we must learn to repent of our own self-righteousness. We cannot hide behind a righteousness of mere words and knowledge without a life of obedience. Nor can we cling to the false belief that salvation is by good works, using our occasional acts of goodness as a license for ongoing sin.

So, as we respond this morning, the call is the same for every one of us: to come to Christ in honest confession, trusting in His finished work alone for forgiveness, and to turn, by His Spirit, toward a life that bears the authentic fruit of repentance—a life increasingly transformed for His glory.