

Matthew 3:1-12

Christians washed and cleansed by the Savior,

Let's cut right to the chase. ***Is Your Heart into Christmas?*** If you're struggling with being into Christmas because of all the peripherals, learn from John the Baptist. John came to prepare people's hearts -- not exactly for Christmas as we know it, but for the coming of the Savior as he began his ministry in Palestine. A right relationship with God, as we'll see from John's words, has everything to do with the heart: (1) ***A heart horrified by its sin***, (2) ***A heart rejoicing in Christ's kingdom***, and (3) ***A heart producing real fruit in my life***.

1

We have a lot of Advent and Christmas traditions. It's a good thing one of them is not eating bugs, because that's what John the Baptist did. He lived off the land and wore scratchy camel hair clothes that could withstand living in the elements. Most importantly, he preached a piercing message: ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!"***

"Repent!" John said. In Greek: *Change your attitude! Change your whole way of thinking!* It begins with changing the way we think about sin.

We live in an age that doesn't just downplay sin, it often boasts about sin -- as if it's a badge of honor. *"You'll never guess how much I drank Friday night,"* or *"I hope the boss doesn't figure out what I did on my sick day,"* or *"I really pulled the wool over my parents' eyes last night."* After many generations of practice, beginning with Adam and Eve, we have also become experts at rationalizing and excusing sin. The last thing our sinful selves want to do is see sin for what it really is: a full out assault on God's throne; an attempt to overthrow his kingdom; and a despicable conspiracy of our sinful flesh with the devil and his demons.

John warned his fellow Israelites about sin and told them to repent so they wouldn't be shut out from God. He knew well the words of Isaiah, ***"Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear"*** (Isa 59:2).

There is no hope for us unless we are first **horrified** by our sins. The **Pharisees and Sadducees** weren't troubled by their sins at all. They were troubled by others' sins. They came to John with proud hearts. They were the elite. They felt they weren't like these common folk, this riff-raff flocking to John and confessing their filth. The Jewish leaders felt they had nothing to confess and nothing to be saved from.

May God help us, fellow Christians, if we ever feel we are above anyone else because we think we sin less than they do or are not as guilty as they are. Any sin more than zero sins condemns us! And sin is not only the bad things we do (sins of commission), but also all the good we leave undone (sins of omission). For example, how many prayers for others do we leave unsaid because we focus only on ourselves? How many gifts of talents and time do we waste because we want to take the easy route, the path of least resistance? How many times couldn't we have built up and encouraged others? And on and on and on it goes. Our daily mountain of sin is massive!

John said to the self-righteous Jewish leaders: ***"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath!"*** In other words, *"Why are you here? You condemn others but you are just as condemned!"* ***"The axe is already at the root of the trees..."*** *"God is about to cut you down to size."*

The common folk were coming to John the Baptist at the Jordan because their sins scared them to death! Do ours?

Yes! Sin is horrifying! But look. John did something to relieve the people's fear of punishment for sins. ***"Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."*** Their sins were washed away. And in your baptism, so were yours!

But how? How could John, a mere man, wash away sins? How can river or tap water make a heart clean before God? John explains, ***"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."*** John was merely the hand that poured the water. Baptism's power was not in John but in the One coming after him: Jesus. John was a prophet, but Jesus is much more than a prophet. He is the almighty God! The spark of the fire of spiritual life would come through God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

John said, ***"The kingdom of heaven is near!"*** John's work at the Jordan River proved that ***"the kingdom of heaven was near."*** John's appearance is what the OT prophets said would happen. The Savior's ministry would now begin and it would end at his death when he said, ***"It is finished."*** Jesus the Savior would establish a kingdom of grace and glory that would never end.

Rejoice, repentant sinners, that your sins are forgiven and that you are members of Christ's eternal kingdom. One day you'll get the chance to meet our fellow believers from 2,000 years ago who came to John at the Jordan repenting of their sins and being baptized. What an honor that will be!

3

While we wait for that glorious day, we have work to do. John said, ***"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."*** A complete change in attitude also produces a change of words and actions.

If you're a bank robber who comes to faith in Jesus, what would you expect that bank robber to do? Quit robbing banks, right? That's producing fruit (works) in keeping with a repentant heart. Now, let's apply that elsewhere. If I am living an immoral life and come to faith in Jesus, what would the good fruit be? To quit living immorally. No rationalizing, no excuses! Walk away from it! If I am harboring bitterness or hatred in my heart and come to faith in Jesus, what fruits would be in keeping with repentance? Quit hating and holding grudges!

But with our sinful nature, how can we do this? We can't -- not on our own. The ability to hate sin and flee from it comes only from Jesus. That's why John the Baptist spent his entire ministry pointing people to Jesus. ***"Look! The Lamb of God!"*** ***"He's your salvation, and he's your motivation to live here as his saved people."***

A couple of weeks ago we talked briefly about Jesus being the Vine and us being the branches. When the branches are connected to the Vine, the branches naturally produce fruit. The fruits we produce are really fruits produced by Jesus working through us. Let's think about that each day. What good fruits am I producing as Jesus pours out his love through me?

Is your heart into Christmas? As repentant followers of Christ Jesus, who lives and rules in our hearts, yes, our hearts are into Christmas 365 days a year, every year of our lives.

Amen.