**THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR**

June 24, 2018

Matthew 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:2 “...and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

In August 9-12, we are going to have an international Bible conference with the theme, “His Kingdom.” The kingdom of God is the main theme of the whole Bible. John the Baptist started his ministry, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus Christ started his ministry with the exact same words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus taught us to pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). When God reigns on the throne of our hearts, we dwell in his light and life. We have love, peace, joy, and freedom in all circumstances. The kingdom of God will come to earth and fully realized when Jesus comes again. Through the 2018 international summer Bible conference, we want to see the vision of God’s kingdom for ourselves and the world so that we can be refreshed and inspired to be Kingdom workers for world missions. In today’s passage we learn how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, the King, through preaching the message of repentance, and how Jesus entered into public ministry. We also learn what it means to repent, the prerequisite for entering the kingdom of heaven.

**First**, John the Baptist and his mission. John the Baptist was the only son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and he was a relative of Jesus. He was 6 months older than Jesus. Verse 1 introduces him as “the Baptist.” Originally, his holy mission was to be the forerunner of Jesus. But he prepared the way for the Lord through baptism and the message of repentance. Because of this he became very famous among people as “the Baptist.” So all four Gospels call him, “John the Baptist,” instead of calling him, “the forerunner of Jesus.” At the time when John came, the people of Israel were oppressed under Roman rule. Moreover, they had not received the word of God through the prophets for 400 long years, for it was a transitional period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. People were weary and tired without the life-giving word of God. They were longing for the voice of God. In this time of desperation, God sent John as the voice of God. Isaiah prophesied it 700 years before his coming. Look at verse 3. “A voice of one calling in the desert, ’Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight the paths for him.’” So John stood out by the Jordan River saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Look at verse 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.” That sounds strange to our ears, but it wasn’t. The early prophets like Elijah were dressed much the same way. John’s diet of locust and wild honey was what he ate because he was in the wilderness. Locusts were considered a clean food by Jewish law. So it wasn’t that strange for the people who lived in that time. But John’s simple foods, clothing and lifestyles were visual protest against self-indulgence of the time. When John lived a pure life, God gave him the spirit of Elijah (Lk 1:17), and the shepherd heart of Moses. When he lived a pure life, God gave him spiritual power to preach the message of repentance to all who came to him. When he lived a pure life, God could use him as the most important person in the work and history of God. His pure life was his essential quality in being the forerunner of the Messiah. Many people live an impure life because of peer pressure or because of their own sinful desires. May God help us to have a holy desire to live a pure life like John the Baptist.

Look at verse 5. “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.” They really wanted to come to God. They really wanted to get out of Satan's rule. They really wanted to change their life direction in God. They really wanted to worship the holy God. They really wanted to experience happiness in being his children. They really wanted to see the kingdom of God. It was because they knew that they could find the solution to all their problems in God. After repentance, they were baptized by John in the Jordan River (6). They experienced that their burden of sin was gone. They experienced unutterable joy overflowing in their hearts. The fact that they were baptized is shocking. Never in all history had any Jew submitted to being baptized. Baptism was done when a Gentile converted into Judaism. Any Jew who would submit himself to baptism would be saying, in effect, “I am an outsider seeking entrance into the people of God. I cannot save myself even though I am a son of Abraham.” So John was calling for a fundamental transformation that even a Jew had to make. He prepared people’s heart through baptism. He said in verse 11, “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.” Ultimately John’s baptism was a baptism that looked forward to the promise of the fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus would come and die on the cross and rise again. Jesus would provide the forgiveness of sins and baptize with the Holy Spirit.

**Second**, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is a simple message. The word “repent” one commentator has said is one of the worst translations of the Greek word that we have. We usually think of repent as feeling sorry. But it means more. The original word says, “To change one’s thinking or to change one’s mind.” John is preaching, “Change your thinking, your mind.” Then you know what happens. It changes your hearts and your lives. So when you read, “repent” in the Bible, try to remember what that word means: Change your mind; change your thinking; change your heart and your life. John preaches “Change your mind for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” That is why people came. John was baptizing and preaching a message of repentance for changed minds and changed lives.

What does it mean for us to change our thinking? Firstly, we have to believe that this world is temporal, but the kingdom of God is eternal. In this world, we have to work hard to get good grades and good jobs to support ourselves and our family. However, we have to know that this world is temporal, and all its glory will pass away. We have been taught that when we get good jobs and find soul mates, we would be happy. But without God, all of them will pass away and all our efforts will be meaningless. We have to always remember that only the kingdom of heaven lasts forever. The kingdom of heaven is our only inheritance.

Secondly, we have to acknowledge that we need help and turn to God. Repentance does show our dependence on God when we say, “Lord, I have sinned. I sin every day and I sin much. Sometimes I sin openly and sometimes secretly, sometimes with my words, actions and also my thoughts. Sometimes I am not so loving.” But what does Jesus say? “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.” Rest for your souls through his forgiveness. We come to God with repentance: with the change of thinking. Godly sorrow brings the change from the worldly thinking that says we can’t admit weakness. It is not a weakness. Sorrow over sin is our dependence on God. This is the word of our God saying, “Come to me, and I will not condemn you. I will forgive you.” Our Lord is the only God like that. Allah is not like that. Buddha is not like that. All the false gods demand perfection or condemnation. The Lord our God says, “Come just as you are, and receive the forgiveness of sins and guilt.”

Robert Hardie was a University of Toronto medical school graduate and he was sent to Korea as a missionary in 1890 when he was 25 years old, and served there for 45 years. While Hardie was preparing his message at a conference of missionaries, the Spirit of God powerfully convicted him of his own sin. There was not much fruit in his 10 years of mission work and he realized that it was due to his arrogance, his pride in being a doctor and seeking respect from people and his attitude of racial superiority. God convicted Hardie to confess his sin to fellow missionaries at the gathering and to repent his failures in front of the Korean Christians at Wonsan Methodist Church while delivering the message the following Sunday. When he did, the Holy Spirit moved the hearts of the people. Missionaries repented their sins. Congregation members confessed their sins. And the power of God swept through the church. Repentance was the spark that started this great revival. This was the beginning of the Wonsan Revival Movement of 1903 and it inspired the great Pyongyang revival of 1907 in North Korea. It was the work of the Spirit that finally broke out as at Pentecost. In 1907, Pyongyang became known as the “Jerusalem of the East.” The revival lasted some 40 years touching all levels of society including those in political power, including North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung’s parents.

Look at verse 2 again. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” When we change our thinking, Jesus, the King, is ready to come into our hearts and rule. Matthew uses the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” 33 times. Other gospels use the phrase “the kingdom of God. ” Both carry the same meaning. Most likely Matthew uses this phrase because he was writing to a primarily Jewish audience. Throughout their history the Jews have had such a great reverence for God that they would avoid saying or writing the name of God. One of the words that they would use as a substitute for the name of God was “heaven.” So Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in place of “kingdom of God”.

Understanding the concept of the Kingdom of God is crucial to understanding the Bible. We must understand that this kingdom of God is not limited to a specific place or a time, rather it is where the lordship, the kingship of God is acknowledged by men. Some day in the future, when Jesus returns, he will inaugurate His Kingdom truly and completely. That will be the full manifestation of the kingdom. Today the kingdom of God comes immediately and truly--but only partially--to all of us who put their trust in Jesus and his message, thus committing themselves to live the holy lives God’s kingship demands. Then they have peace in their hearts even though there is no peace in the world.

**Third**, produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Look at verse 8. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” This comment was in response to religious leaders who had come out to hear John but had evidently not demonstrated any sign of true repentance. He said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, “I don’t know what is in your hearts; but I can see what is in your lives.” Repentance is a change of thinking, change of mind, change of heart and a change of life. If lives are not changed, the hearts have not changed either. The thinking hasn’t changed. These religious leaders still trusted in their tradition and pride. John warned them in verse 10: “The ax 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.” Jesus would soon come and look for good fruit, signs of repentance, of a changed thinking, heart and life, and he would cut down all the trees that do not bear fruit. What are some of the good fruits of changed hearts and lives? Galatians 5: 22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

**Fourth**, Jesus was baptized by John. Look at verse 13. “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.” John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (14) John hesitated to baptize him, for he knew Jesus was God who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. What did Jesus say in response to John? Look at verse 15. “Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented.” In order to fulfill God’s will, Jesus honored God's way of doing his work and history. In order to take over John’s work to himself, Jesus humbled himself and received baptism from John. Here we learn that we cannot participate in God’s work without humbleness. Also he was baptized in order to identify himself with sinners like us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

What happened when Jesus received baptism from John the Baptist? Look at verse 17. “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” God was pleased to see that his work of salvation was proceeding from John to Jesus as was prophesied. So God made a declaration to the world that Jesus is the Savior of the world who came to fulfill God’s salvation plan. This event was virtually the inauguration of the Messiah King.

In conclusion, the kingdom of heaven has come near. When we repent by changing our thinking, then Jesus the King will come into our hearts and rule our hearts. The kingdom of God comes, where there is peace and joy, and where God is our refuge and fortress.