

BEYOND REMORSE AND REGRET

Fifth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Revival* from Matthew 3:1-17

“Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.” Matthew 3:5-6

On Sunday, July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards donned his black preaching gown with the two white tabs at the collar, and stepped into the pulpit of the church in Enfield, Connecticut. The congregation was bored. Churches all over the New England colonies had been experiencing unprecedented conversions, but the people of Enfield couldn't have cared less. Edwards was substituting for another preacher who had begged off. He turned the Bible to Deuteronomy 32:35 and read the text: *“Their foot shall slip in due time.”* His sermon that morning has become one of the most famous in American history. It is called, *Sinners in the hands of an angry God.* Edwards had preached it a few weeks earlier to his own congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, and it had caused barely a ripple. He began to speak in his usual monotone.

People, he said, often presume that all is well between them and God--that with little effort on their part God is well pleased with them. The congregation nodded. Then he came to the part about the spider. I was letting the dog out for the last time a couple of nights ago and started down the steps of our deck. Suddenly I jerked back. A huge, pinkish-gray spider bobbed in the middle of the big web she had spun from side to side. I thought about walking into that web. I shuddered. I imagined sticky spider web across my hands and face, a spider walking across my shirt. A spider like that is repulsive to me. I almost retched. Edwards said to the people, Because of your sin, you are like that spider to God. Imagine that he is holding you by a strand of web between his finger tips. He carries you over to the fireplace where the logs are blazing. And he holds you there over the flame. The only thing that keeps you from dropping into the fire and being instantly incinerated is the mercy of God. You hang there, helpless, God holding the tip of the strand. At any moment he may open his fingers. At any second the web may break. Your only hope is the mercy of the one who dangles you there above the flames, but who finds you utterly disgusting and revolting because of your sin.

As he described the spider, the congregation began to moan and wail. The sound grew in intensity. Edwards ordered the congregation to be silent. The cries of anguish grew louder. Finally Edwards was forced to stop and wait until the noise grew less. Then he called the people of Enfield, Connecticut to repent. And then he invited them to receive by faith the mercy of God offered in Jesus Christ, who alone is able to save. That day revival swept Enfield. And the greatest revival in the history of America rolled through the colonies. These past weeks we've been talking about revival, and about the tools God uses to bring revival. Today we're going to look at the role of repentance.

Turn with me to Matthew chapter 3. The chapter begins with the appearance in Israel of John the Baptist about 27 AD. The first two verses summarize John's message: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* Verse 3 tells us that repentance is a precondition for revival. John quotes Isaiah the prophet and says in effect, “Get ready! God is coming.” We'll address chapter 3 in four parts.

The first thing this passage tells us is the **response of the people** to John's message. Verse 5 says, "*Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan.*" The people left the comfort of the towns and cities and went out to where John was preaching in the wilderness. Don't get the idea that this was out in the woods somewhere. The wilderness on the east bank of the Jordan River was what we would call badlands. It was a wasteland of bare, rocky heights and deep gullies and fissures. There were no trees, just sandy, gritty, sunburned, dry, empty territory. No one lived there. And John himself fitted the picture. Verse 4 tells us he wore a camel hair garment cinched with a leather belt. He subsisted on locusts—can you imagine eating insects?—and wild honey. To us he would seem like a crazy man.

Why, then, would people pay attention to him, much less come flocking to his camp? There were three reasons. The first was a historical one. John reminded people of Elijah the prophet. Elijah, when he called Israel to revival eight hundred years earlier, had looked and lived in much the same way John did now. So, label it the prophetic tradition. Second, there was a symbolic reason. John retreated to the desert and abandoned the civilized world as a way of saying that something was very wrong with the Jewish culture of the day. What do you think about our culture? What do these names tell you? Lindsay Lohan, Nichole Ritchie, Paris Hilton, Michael Vick, Tim Doneghy--the former NBA referee, Barry Bonds. Or what about the fact that over one third of South Carolina's children are growing up in a single parent family? Or maybe Britney Spears is an appropriate symbol of what's happening. She arranged a photo shoot for *OK!* magazine. She allowed her Yorkshire Terrier puppy to defecate on a designer gown worth \$6700, wiped her greasy fingers on a designer dress, complained that the clothes weren't sexy, short or tight enough; and then after three hours she walked off the set with \$14,000 of borrowed apparel. Is anything wrong with our culture—the culture our kids are growing up in? Do you get a sick feeling? Do we perhaps need to junk American pop culture? That's what John the Baptist was suggesting when he went out into the wilderness. And the people of 27 AD sensed that he was right. Then, third, there was a theological reason. John was making a subtle statement that salvation requires a person to walk a path into the wilderness of the soul. Like the old hymn says, "*Nothing in my hands I bring, only to Thy cross I cling.*" There is nothing you can bring to God to save yourself. You must leave it all behind. So, the people flocked to hear what John had to say.

The second section of our passage tells us about the **radical act** that John called the people to carry out. Verse 6 says, "*They were being baptized by [John] in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.*" In order for you to understand the shocking thing John was doing, you must know several things. First, don't equate the baptism of John with the baptism Jesus commissioned. John's baptism was not Christian baptism. John's baptism was for repentance. Jesus' baptism was the sign of entry into the covenant.

Next, in the period of the Old Testament the church of God was the nation of Israel. Today the church is made up of people from all nations. In John's day, if a Gentile wished to become a follower of God and join the church, he must become a Jew,

and that meant he had to do three things. First, he must make a profession of faith and promise to obey the Law of God. That was the easy part. Second, if he was a man he must be circumcised. That hurt, and therefore many who would have liked to be Jews stopped short at this point. In the New Testament we find them referred to as *God-fearers*--Gentiles who believed in and worshiped God, but who had not become Jews. Third, a Gentile must be baptized. This was a purification ceremony where a person was sprinkled with water to symbolize that was filthy before God because of his sins, but now was washed clean after his repentance. The scandal about John's baptism was that he was baptizing not Gentiles, but Jews. He was saying to the Jews in effect, because of your sins you are as filthy as a Gentile. Even though you belong to God's people, even though you're a member of the church, you still must be cleansed from your sin. This was a great insult to people who considered themselves religious. But nevertheless, verse 6 tells us, they came confessing their sins and then John sprinkled them with water from the Jordan River to declare them symbolically clean.

What about the church people you know? What about you, yourself? Are you clean and pure before God, or are there things about your life that are in fact unclean? The Barna Group conducted a poll of over a thousand people last October. They found that roughly one-third of Americans engaged in sexually inappropriate behavior in the last month, such things as looking at pornography on-line, viewing sexually explicit magazines or movies, or having an intimate sexual encounter outside marriage. The good news is that two-thirds haven't done that, but still, that's about seventy million Americans who have. Among young adults in their twenties and thirties, half have done these things. But here's the kicker: born-again church members check in at the same rate as non-Christians. And young adult Christians are significantly more likely to consider as morally OK things like sexual fantasies, cohabitation, sex before marriage, pornography, oral sex, and same-sex encounters. (See www.barna.org) What does that tell you about the hearts of our children? There are plenty of other areas where people are unclean, for example, lying, dishonesty, rebelliousness drug abuse, or violence. I ask again, are there things in us that are morally unclean? John pushed a button in the people of his day and they began confessing their sins.

The third part of our passage takes this a step farther. It tells us that people must **repent visibly**. Verse 7 records that a large number of Pharisees and Sadducees came to John to be baptized. Look at how John greeted them. "*You brood of vipers!*" John accused these religious leaders of being a group of poisonous snakes! You'd think he would be glad to welcome the pastors and teachers. If we can get the leaders of the church to repent and join the cause, we'll really have a revival! That's how I'd figure.. But John insulted them. "*Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?*" He's attacking their motivation. A number of years ago someone gave me a cap with two bills pointing in opposite directions. On the front it said, "Where'd they go? I'm their leader!" John's point was that as a pastor or church leader, if you want to keep your position you'd better be out in front of your people. If they're repenting, then maybe you'd better do that too, so you look good. That's what politicians do. When all of America shut down the comprehensive immigration reform bill a few weeks ago that Senator Graham helped to craft, he got out in front last week by proposing an amendment to build a wall across the

border with Mexico. And it passed the Senate 89-1! What amazes me is that there was one senator who voted no!

John the Baptist was having none of this “religious correctness.” Think for a moment about those Roman Catholic priests who perpetrated such a horrible crime upon their members by sexually abusing children. The Catholic Church never dealt adequately with it morally. They just shuffled priests around and the abuse continued. The lawsuits have gone against the church. Now they feel remorse. “We apologize,” they’re saying. Now they regret what happened. Of course they do—they got caught! But remorse and regret are not enough. John says there is wrath to come. In verse 9 he says it doesn’t matter if you’re religious. God doesn’t need you. In verse 10 he says the woodsman has already leveled his sharpened axe against the roots of the tree. We would say, “The logger has pulled the string to start his power saw and the blades are already spinning.” What must we do? In verse 8 John says, “*Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.*” In other words, repentance must be visible. Like my mother used to tell me, “If you were really sorry you wouldn’t do it again.” Repentance means you change how you live.

In verses 11-12 John warns those who came to him that they’d better be ready because Christ was coming, and with him would come a day of reckoning. No one will be able to fool him. In verse 12 he uses the illustration of winnowing the wheat. Today we have threshing machines. They scoop up the wheat and beat it out and sift the wheat so that the grain falls into a bin and the chaff is blown away. In the first century, a farmer had to do it by hand. His ox trampled the stalks of grain, and then he took a pitch fork and threw the wheat into the air. The breeze blew the chaff away and the grain fell to the ground where it was scooped up and carried into the barn. Christ will separate the chaff from the wheat when he comes. If you hope to be saved, you must be a grain of wheat. Chaff won’t cut it. Friends, Jesus is coming. There will be a day of judgment. He will not be fooled. Now is the day to repent with a repentance that goes beyond remorse and regret. Repentance must be something visible, seen in the way you and I live our lives.

In the fourth part of this passage Jesus at last arrives at John’s revival center and we see **redirected approval**. Verse 13 says Jesus came to John to be baptized. Our first reaction—given what we know about the nature of John’s baptism—is that if anyone does *not* need to be baptized, it is Jesus. He alone is the holy and righteous one. And that’s how John felt. “I’m the one who needs to be baptized by you!” But notice Jesus’ response to John’s protest. In verse 15: Jesus said, “*Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*” Jesus was saying, “You must baptize me because I have come to identify with sinners. I need to take my place where they are, because it is only through me that they may be made righteous.” He was pointing to the cross. That day with John he took the place of sinners like you and me. One day, three years off, the axe would fall. The winnowing fork would toss the wheat high into the air, and Jesus would be blown away as the chaff, so that you and I and all who trust in him might fall to earth as a fruitful grain of wheat and be carried into the barn forever.

And so John baptized Jesus. As Jesus climbed back onto the bank out of the water something amazing happened. A bird, a dove, came flying down out of the sky and

alighted on Jesus' shoulder. The dove in Scripture is often a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and so it is here. And as the bird landed on Jesus a voice spoke out of the heavens. Not a human voice. Not the disembodied sound from a public address system. It was the voice of God. A similar thing had happened on rare occasions in the past. For example, when the people of Israel were gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai to make a covenant with God, the mountain shook and smoke billowed up from the summit—an earthquake, a volcano, we would say. But then the voice of God thundered down and God recited the Ten Commandments. The people were terrified. They thought they were going to die. God has his rules of life. They are not to be trifled with or ignored or obeyed half-heartedly. God himself judges each man and woman according to how we measure up to his commands. And we each fall short. No wonder we would be frightened to death if we heard God speak. His is the last voice we want to hear.

But not this time. This time the voice of God is not frightening. It is a voice of approval spoken not about us and how we have lived, but about Jesus. Verse 17: *“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”* Jesus had just finished linking himself to sinners. He had stood in their place. He had been sprinkled with purifying water, though he himself needed no purification. As he steps out of the water God the Father puts his stamp approval on the Son and says in effect, “You stand in the place of sinners, and I accept your substitution, and your payment for sin. I approve the transfer of your perfect righteousness to those who truly repent, to those in whose place you stand. They shall be saved.” And the revival began and continues to this day.

What do we do with this? First, dear friends, examine yourselves. Be honest. You know where sin is hidden in your heart and life. I know where it is in mine. Confess your sin. Repent and change. Ask God to forgive you and change your heart so you follow him as he desires. Second, if you are outside the church of Christ—you haven't trusted Christ as your savior—admit your need and come to him. Ask him to save you. Receive his forgiveness by faith and then join with us and follow the Savior.

If you are already one who has been saved by faith in Christ, then produce fruit in your life that makes repentance visible. Break with our culture and what it tells us is important. Stop letting the culture set your standards. Rather, take your direction from the word of God. Desire to know God and to know him well. Join with others of like mind so we encourage and support each other in following Jesus. Lead your children into the center of the church's fellowship. They need to be supported in living faithfully for Jesus too. They won't be able to do that outside the church. Bring them to Sunday School. Get them involved in the youth ministry and the other opportunities we provide. We must do this together so they and we grow in our faith.

Act in love toward others. Love your husband or your wife. Love your children and your neighbors and your fellow church members. Let's be serious about following Christ and bear the evidence that revival has blossomed out of our repentant hearts