

Prepare the Way

From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”

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Let’s start our discussion today with a game. The game is called “Shuffleboard”. Lots of people have played it. You can play it on a special table, like the one you see in this picture. Or, you can play it on a larger area on the ground.



Shuffleboard Playing Area



Shuffleboard Table

In shuffleboard, you push a little disc towards a target. You want to get as close as you can to the target. If you can’t land directly on the target, you try to get as close as you can. When you plan, you have an opponent. They want to get their little disc close to the target too. Now, what happens if you went first, and your little disk is sitting on the target? Your opponent can choose to knock your disc away.

This game takes on an interesting dimension when you move up to countries in northern Europe - places like Sweden and Norway. It’s very cold up there. So, Shuffleboard grows from a table game into a game played on the ice. When you do that it becomes a game called “Curling”.



Olympic Curling

In this game, you don’t play with little discs – you play with big stones. The stones have been carved so they’re round. The principle stays the same – you want to push your stone, let it slide across the ice, and land on or near a target. However, there’s one very important addition in this game: You also have a person (or two) with a broom. I’d like to concentrate on that person.

This person’s job is to position themselves just ahead of the moving stone and smooth the ice in the path of the stone. Smooth ice makes the stone go fast. Rough ice makes the stone travel more

slowly. If the player with the broom does their job, the stone travels at exactly the right speed and stops in exactly the right place. Apparently, it’s hard work. The player has to put their weight into the broom strokes.

When you play shuffleboard on a table, you don't need the extra player because everything is under control. On the ice, you get bumps and holes, so you need this extra player to fix those problems with their broom. ***So, we have a game where one person's whole job and purpose is to smooth the way for another player.***

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe". Today's message is entitled, "Prepare the Way". It involves a man who had one purpose in life: To prepare the way for someone else; To make the path smooth and straight. The man's name was John the Baptist. Let's read about him.

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.'" (Matthew 3:1-3)

Matthew begins his account just before the birth of Jesus. Scholars place this around three- or four-years B.C. We need a quick side note here: "B.C." is supposed to mean "Before the birth of Christ". "A.D." is supposed to mean "Year of our Lord", or "after the Lord's birth". When early Historians attempted to set this date, they were a little off. So, we have the irony of Christ being born three or four years "B.C.", or technically before his own birth.

-Don't ask. I wasn't there.

Anyway, when we last saw Jesus, he was a child with his mother, Mary and his father, Joseph. They had just returned from Egypt and settled in the town of Nazareth. The text that we just read represents a later time, around 30 years has passed.

During this time, we know very little about Jesus. We know only that when Jesus was twelve, his family visited Jerusalem, and Jesus already knew enough about Scripture to have intelligent discussions with teachers in the Temple. We learn that from Luke's account in chapter two. This passage starts with the phrase, "In those days". This is around 30 A.D.

We don't know a whole lot about John, either. We know some things about his parents. Let's read about them in Luke:

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. (Luke 1:5-7)

Previously, we read about King Herod. That was “Herod the Great”. This is his son, “Herod Antipas”. So, we have “Herod the Great”, and “Herod – *the other one*”.

John’s parents were righteous people.

We know that John’s parents were righteous people. You’ll see something very interesting as we examine the Gospel Stories. We’re going to learn that many of the important players in the story, especially the good ones, were raised in Hebrew culture. John’s parents were from a family of priests. They were faithful to their calling as Godly leaders. *The point is, it makes a difference when people choose to follow God. It affects how your children will look at God.*

We’ll later see that all the twelve apostles came from Hebrew families. Some of the apostles were faithfully waiting for the Messiah when Jesus came. Others, like Matthew, had fallen into sin. Here, the point is, we can’t always decide for our children whether they will follow God. But, the fact that we offer them the choice is vitally important. In the case of Matthew, because he was raised in a culture of faith, he knew to follow when Jesus called him.

Here, I need to ask a tough question: ***Do we offer our children solid training in the things of God?***

I’ve mentioned in previous sessions that we sometimes have to compare our church and our beliefs to others. Sometimes we do that because we feel that we have a better understanding than other groups. Sometimes though, I am forced to admit that other groups appear to be out-do us.

If you look at our Jewish friends and our Catholic friends, we see cultures that place a great deal of emphasis on religious education. Our Catholic friends have confirmation. Our Jewish friends have Bar Mitzvah. Preparation for these events is thought to be very important. My Jewish friends will often admit, and will pride themselves in the fact that earthly success based on education is important to them. Every Jewish mother wants her son to be a doctor. If he can’t be a doctor, lawyer will work.

But, here’s something vitally important: The path to earthly success isn’t allowed to preempt what the Jews and Catholics consider to be the religious path of their children. Children in these cultures attend “religious education classes” from an early age. Jewish children do not skip out of Bar Mitzvah training to study math. Catholic children do not skip out of confirmation class to study chemistry. When their children achieve these goals, Bar Mitzvah or confirmation, there are major celebrations. ***Do we take the spiritual training of our children seriously?***

I’d like to suggest two things. ***First***, many churches offer Sunday school for all ages. Your children need to be there! It would help a lot if you commit to bring your children on time and on a regular basis.

Second, in the Jewish and Catholic traditions, some aspects of religious education are undertaken by the highly trained people. A priest often teaches confirmation class. A rabbi teaches Bar Mitzvah class.

The Free Church has a curriculum aimed at preparing young people in the ways of faith. It's called "BRICK" (Built Right in Christ's Kingdom). I will happily sit down with children in our church and personally walk them through this material. For those in our congregation who are reading this, contact me if you're interested. If you attend another congregation, maybe it's time to ask the pastoral staff to be directly involved in individual and small group instruction for our children.

John's parents were righteous people. All the apostles were raised in Jewish culture. We as a church need to follow that example.

John's birth was announced by an angel.

There is a second quality of John that is important. We also know that John's parents were not able to conceive. We're told they were getting on in years. Yet, God wanted a special child to be born, so he helped them. John was not born of a virgin, but he was born with supernatural help. We learn in Luke 1 that John's parents had prayed for a son. An angel appeared to John's father to tell him that his prayer had been answered. Here's what the angel said: "...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born." (Luke 1:15) Imagine that – filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. This man John was going to be someone very special.

Let's pause here and consider that phrase: "Filled with the Holy spirit".

This is a surprising topic. Let's read something that the apostle Paul said to his friends in the church at Ephesus: "...be filled with the Spirit..." (Ephesians 5:18)

Do you know that you are commanded to be filled with the Spirit? Yes, **everyone** is. Do we even know what that is? As I just said, everyone is commanded to be filled. Everyone is to be active on some level in ministry. The only thing that changes from person to person is their gifts. However, as important as this is for individuals, there is one group for people for whom the filling is vital.

In the book of Acts, the apostles found themselves to be very busy people. They felt that they needed some help. In particular, there were people who were needy who needed physical help of different sorts. The apostles felt that they should dedicate themselves to the business of teaching and prayer. So, here's what they decided to do: "Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them... (Acts 6:3)"

This is very important. When the original apostles needed the individuals who would later be called deacons, they gave instruction to choose special people. When they did this, they didn't

say, “We need some people who have time on their hands.” They didn’t say, “We need nice people”. They didn’t even say, “We need hard-working people”. They said, “we need people who are filled with the Spirit and Wisdom.” If anyone in the church has a title of leadership, they must be filled with the Spirit and wisdom.

What does it look like to be filled with the Spirit?” This is a big topic, so let’s start in this session by looking at John the Baptist.

No Miracles

There’s one important quality of John that we need to highlight first when looking at the question of the Spirit. It’s found in the Gospel of John:

40 Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. There he stayed, 41 and many people came to him. They said, “Though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true.” (John 10:41)

Look at verse 41: “...John never performed a sign...”. John had some miraculous things associated with his birth, but after that there was nothing supernatural associated with his ministry. Here’s why this is important: Some Christians believe in something called the “Charismatic Movement”. They believe that being filled with the Holy spirit means having all kinds of miraculous things associated with your life. For example, you have to do something referred to as “Speaking in Tongues”. To do this, you must enter into an elevated emotional state and speak in a foreign language that you don’t recognize. Or, your life must be filled with healings.

We must profoundly disagree. ***John was filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born, yet he had no miracles associated with his life. So, being filled with the Holy Spirit must mean something else.***

More qualities of John prophesied by the angel

The angel didn’t stop there. Let’s read more.

16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

Let’s look at two of the phrases here. In verse 17 we see: “And he will go on before the Lord...”

Then, in the last sentence we see these words: "...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. That's where we met John today in Matthew. He's in the process of doing exactly what the angel said he would do.

3 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.'" (Matthew 3:1-3)

So, here's John. He's filled with the Holy Spirit. There are two sentences which, more than anything else, summarizes his life:

- "Prepare the way for the Lord."
- "Make straight paths for him."

Today, to get us started, I used an illustration from some games. In the days that Jesus lived, and for many years after, there was a better illustration. Whenever a great king came to visit, someone went ahead of him. That person was called a "herald". The herald had two jobs:

1) *Announce the King: To call out very loudly, "Hear ye, hear ye: The King is coming".* That way, everybody was ready when the king passed by.

2) *Clear the way for the king.* The Herald would often bring along a team. Their job was to look at the road ahead of the king. If they saw trash on the road, they got rid of it. If they saw a pothole, they would fill it. You don't want the king's carriage getting stuck in a hole, right? If they saw a bump, they would get out shovels and flatten out that bump. That way, the king had a smooth ride, travelling to his destination at optimal speed.

That's something like what John did. His job was to announce the great king. Next, he was to help to make sure the path was all clear. So, we're told that he stood out in a wilderness area. He called out with a loud voice. What did he call out? First, he said, "Repent!" Then, he said, "Because the kingdom of heaven is near."

Let's take those in reverse order.

"The Kingdom of heaven is near."

There are two ways to run the world. The rightful king is our Creator, God. He's the king of heaven. Sadly, our world doesn't want the rightful king to be on his throne. So, we have a kingdom of heaven, where the rightful king, God, is in charge. Then, we have a kingdom of this world, where God is not in charge. This state of affairs will not be allowed forever. One day, the rightful king will sit on the throne of the earth, as he does now in heaven. The process started when the king appeared on the earth. The king's name is Jesus. John announced his coming.

Like the ancient heralds, John proclaimed with a loud voice, "The King is coming." In fact, "The kingdom of heaven is here."

The herald's job is also to clean away all the things that block the king; the garbage in the road, and the potholes. The way that we do that is to do something called, "Repent". The first thing that the king wants in heaven is us. He wants our hearts. The kingdom really starts there. That's why we closed the last session by asking, "Who sits on the throne of your kingdom? Once we realize that we need the rightful king on the throne of our life, our kingdom, there is an important second step. Our hearts and our lives are surrounded with all kinds of things that keep the rightful king from sitting on his throne. The things that keep the rightful king, God, from taking his throne are called sin.

To repent involves admitting that those things exist. Once we admit that those things exist, repenting means that we turn away from them. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

Conclusion

To bring all this together today, we need to consider three points.

I. Be Saved

First, there are those in our midst who have never made this decision. The rightful King, God, has never been on the throne of your life. You need to repent. That means admit that you have sin in your life. Repent means to turn away.

Now, it's interesting, recall that in the ancient days the king's herald had two jobs. First was announce the king. Second was to smooth the path. If you will admit that you have sin in your life, if you are willing to turn away from that sin, God will do something very special. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid the price for your sin. We're told that the blood Jesus shed washes away all our sin. So, all you have to do is ask God to forgive you through the work of Jesus on the Cross.

Would you do that? Ask God to forgive your sin. Then, invite him onto the throne of your heart. Make him the Lord of your life.

II. Commit to continually confessing sin.

Many in the audience have already been saved. You've asked God to forgive your sin. You've invited Jesus onto the throne of your life. If you've done that, you enjoy the gift of eternal life. No one can take that way.

But you know something? Let's consider an illustration based on something you've surely seen if you've ever ridden in an automobile. Every spring, crews go out onto our highways to make them smooth for us. They fill the potholes. They flatten the bumps. They remove the trash. But somehow, the potholes and bumps and trash all come back.

Life in a broken world is like that. Sin is like all the things the road crews work to remove. It has a funny way of creeping back into our lives. It's the bad choices. It's the idols. And when sin creeps in, it doesn't make us lose our salvation - It steals our joy. Worse, it steals our power.

We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need him to show us our sin, so that we can continually turn away.

Are you willing to ask God to fill you with his Holy Spirit?

Ask him to show you what it looks like. Ask him to teach you. We'll consider this in the coming weeks. And then follow the command to all believers: Be filled with the Spirit.

And that brings us to our final point.

III. We need to become like John the Baptist.

Matthew didn't tell us about John the Baptist so that we could say, "My, my, what an interesting story!" ***John must become our example.***

We've just begun to look at the life of a man who was filled with the Spirit even before he was born. We'll learn more in coming weeks. Here are the phrases that characterized such a man.

- Prepare the way for the Lord.
- Make straight paths for him.

Once we have asked God to forgive our sins; Once we have invited him onto the throne of our lives; Once we have asked him to fill us with his Holy Spirit; Then we must become a people willing to join together to warn everyone that the kingdom of heaven is near. We must clear the way for them. We must be a lighthouse to our community. We must call out to our friends, our families, our neighbors, everyone who will hear.

We must prepare the way.