

Temptation in the Desert

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The Familiar Voice of Judgment

Scripture

Matthew 3:1–12 John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, warning people of the judgment that is coming and calling them to repentance.

Prayer

Merciful God, when we hear John the Baptist’s warning that we need to get our lives cleaned up, we cannot argue. We know that we have sinned. What we do not know is what to do about it. We are our own worst judges. Our sin is ever before us, and every effort to manage it has only resulted in more sin. So we begin by simply telling the truth. There is nothing else left. Only your Son, our Savior, can wash away what we have done and left undone. We are lost without your mercy. Amen.

Introduction

From the days of the prophet Isaiah, the people heard that someone would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. This is why Matthew begins his description of Jesus’ ministry by telling us first about John the Baptist. He identifies John as “the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke” when Isaiah spoke of the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

The significance of this passage is that it places the ministry of Jesus Christ in a larger context. As the Son of God, he did not appear as a surprise. Rather, he was the fulfillment of a divine promise. The people had been waiting for a long time for someone who could restore them to right relationships with one another, with God, and with their own souls. This is what we mean when we refer to *righteousness*. According to John the Baptist, the best way to get prepared for righteousness is to confess how far we have fallen from it. So he kept calling people to repent.

To repent simply means to turn around and move in a different direction. When we repent of our sins, we turn and head straight back in the right direction, toward the God from whom we have wandered away.

The people who heard John's preaching would repent by being baptized. This is different from Christian baptism. When the ancient Jews were baptized, it was a liturgical act that was similar to our understanding of a prayer of confession. They were attempting to wash away their sins or, as we would say today, "to clean up their act."

The problem with this endeavor is that we can never get clean enough. No matter how sincere we may be with our repentance, we just keep sinning. We can keep trying new self-improvement programs, but we'll never be able to walk in a new direction only through our own efforts. Perhaps discovering the futility of this resolve is the best preparation for the coming of a savior.

Why Is Judgment Popular?

John was not exactly Presbyterian material. He wore camel-hair clothing with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey, and he kept calling the religious leaders a "brood of vipers." He lived in caves out in the desert where he kept saying things like "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He apparently had little use for chatting and preferred to tell people to get prepared for the Messiah who was coming. "His winnowing fork is in his hand,"

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John warned, "and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." My guess is that John didn't receive a lot of dinner invitations.

So isn't it fascinating that Matthew tells us the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him? We would think people would want to steer clear of such an extreme preacher. Actually,

judgment has always been popular.

The statistics make it clear that even today judgmental churches often grow. It may seem puzzling that people would want to sit in congregations where the preacher shakes a finger at them and essentially scolds, "Bad dog!" Scholars have developed some

sophisticated theories about this. However, the plain truth of the matter is that judgment has always been what we know best. We are judged by physicians from the moment we leave the womb. We're judged by our parents when we are children, and by our children when we become parents. We're judged by teachers, coaches, employers, and worst of all by the person who keeps showing up in the mirror. And seldom is the judgment good enough.

So we all could have taken our place alongside the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, saying, "Judgment? Amen, you preach it, John."

No one is really all that confused about being a bad dog. What is confusing is how to become good again. Our harshest self-judgments are focused on our failures at improving our lives. We keep trying new strategies, like weight-loss programs, another academic degree, getting a new job or relationship, but none of these plans seem to result in fixing our lives. To the contrary, often our strategies for self-improvement only result in hurting others and ourselves.

For example, a man who is driving home late from work receives a phone call on his cell from his ten-year-old daughter. As soon as the phone rings, he realizes that he forgot about her piano recital. He picks up the phone, and his heart sinks as he hears her lament, "Where are you, Daddy?" He apologizes profusely and promises to make it up to her. But even after he hangs up the phone, he is stuck with her question. He looks at his own eyes in the car's rearview mirror and asks himself, "Where are you? How did you get so lost trying so hard to do well?" The judgment is overwhelming and inescapable. We all know about this.

What Is Sin?

There is nothing inherently wrong with working hard or trying to make a few improvements in life—unless we are trying to take over for the Creator. We will always be creatures who have been called to receive life rather than to achieve the life of our dreams. Thus, the judgment we feel always rises from our souls that have become alienated from God by our strategies to become our own creators.

Nothing we do can ever free us from judgment. But this is why John the Baptist's ministry prepares the way for Jesus. Feelings of judgment draw us to the Savior. Only Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, can heal the sin-sick soul.

Sin is anything we do that separates us from God. It involves breaking the commandments of God and also breaking ourselves

along the way. Sin distorts the image of God in our lives, which means that we become so much less than we were created to be. Our relationships with God, others, creation, and even our own souls are all hurt and distorted through sin. Sometimes this hurt is caused by the things we do, and sometimes by the things we leave undone. But at all times the legacy of our sin is a trail of hurt for which we have to take responsibility. By the time we discover the hurt, we have already done more damage than we can repair. And we have drifted further from the communion we were created to enjoy with God.

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The Greek Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann has claimed that our sin is rooted in a lack of gratitude. The story of Adam and Eve illustrates this.¹ They were given the fruit of every tree in the garden as a means of enjoying God. But in taking the fruit of the one tree they were not given, they were seeking something for its material benefits and not as a means of giving thanks to God. We too know the temptation of taking work, relationships, or whatever we want as an end in itself. We do that when our yearning for more is greater than our gratitude. As a result we lose the paradise we were created to enjoy.

When we are blinded by our yearning, we don't think the garden of life is good enough because something is missing. It's only after we see the damage we have done by reaching beyond the biblical limitations that we realize the life we were given was actually paradise. Only by then it is paradise lost. Sin has consequences.

It is not hard to see how the flagrant sinner has made a mess of life's garden, but both Jesus and John the Baptist demonstrated how even good people need to repent, because being good is never good enough to get back into the paradise of communion with God. Some of us need to repent of our moral failures, and others need to repent of trying to be our own saviors.

The Futility of Getting Life Cleaned Up

When the people stood on the banks of the Jordan River and heard John's call to repentance, they confessed their sins and were baptized. Confession is simply telling the truth. If repentance means turning

1. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 16–18.

around, then confession is the recognition that we are headed in the wrong direction. So we confess, or tell the truth, as a critical part of the repentance process.

When we confess, we not only list our sins, but we also tell the truth about our addiction to sin. We sin because we are like cars with wheels that are badly out of alignment and easily run into the ditch. It doesn't matter how hard we try to

steer away from it, we will always sin. This is what the Reformed tradition means by the doctrine of depravity. The problem isn't that we do not know what is good. The problem is that our wills have become so addicted to sin that we cannot avoid it. This does not, however, absolve us from responsibility. Addicts are always still responsible for their

condition. But it does demonstrate that we cannot save ourselves. As the story of King David, Bathsheba, and the murder of her husband illustrates, the only way we can manage sin is with more sin.

When John stood in the desert wilderness and called people to repent, he was actually asking more of them than they were capable of giving. They, and we, are lost in a desert of failures and good intentions that only lead to more failures. So as important as confession is, something has to come first if we are going to be able to repent and turn back to God.

Thus, unlike the angry judgmental preachers, we in the Reformed tradition do not call people to repent of their sins in order to be forgiven. Who can meet that condition? Instead, we first pronounce the good news that in Jesus Christ we have been forgiven, which frees us to confess our sin and repent of it.

Another way of saying it is that grace precedes faith. We do not muster up enough faith or belief in God's will in order to have forgiving grace bestowed on us. Rather, it is God's grace that brings us to faith.

We therefore baptize even babies, who have no faith. They're brought under the sign of God's grace in baptism so that they can spend the rest of their lives responding with a life of faith. It is analogous to a parent who is filled with love for a newborn child.

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The child did nothing to deserve the love and doesn't even know that he or she is receiving it until later in life. But as the love is constantly given, the child learns to love the parent as well.

Our faith and lifelong journey of repentance is only a response to God's forgiving grace. This amazing grace is the only way that we can withstand all of the judgments of life, most of all our own.

Spiritual Practice

Write a prayer of confession, but don't just list your most recent sins. Instead, write a prayer that depicts your addiction to the things that alienate you from God. Is it your pride, your need for control, your fear, or something else that keeps running your spiritual life in the ditch?

Questions for Reflection

Who is the harshest judge of your life?

Is it easier to believe that you are a sinner or that you are forgiven by God?

Why is it so tempting to be our own saviors, and how does that only lead to more judgment?