
Lesson Overview

Biblical Passage Matthew 3:1-12

Supporting Passages Mark 1:1-8, Luke 3:1-20

Memory Verse Matthew 11:11

Biblical Truth

The prophet John the Baptist, a contemporary of Jesus, prepared people for Jesus' ministry by calling them to repentance and pointing them toward Jesus the Messiah.

Context

This lesson provides the background for Jesus' early ministry by considering the ministry of His relative, John the Baptist. Although John was only a few months older than Jesus, he announced Messiah's coming and demanded repentance—life-changing transformation—from those who would be ready for Christ's harvest of followers. John baptized those who confessed and repented with the baptism of repentance.

Learning Goals

- Students will examine the importance of John's prophetic ministry and his message of repentance.
- Students will determine their need to model before the world a life that is marked with repentance.

Prayer Suggestions

- As you prepare to teach this lesson, pray for your students.
- Pray that students will understand what it means to truly repent of sin.
 - Pray that students will realize that their choice to follow Jesus leads to new life.
 - Pray that students will "show fruit" in the world around them.

Biblical Commentary

Investigation

John the Baptist was fully aware of his status as a prophet. Mark noted John “wore clothing made of camel’s hair . . . and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mk. 1:6). These traits and his God-centered **preaching** showed that he clearly belonged to the old prophet traditions. John followed in the footsteps of Elijah and other ancient prophets, focusing on preparing people for God’s Kingdom. John’s message was for the Jewish religious leaders who considered themselves pious. They believed God would bless them just because they were Jews. But John clarified that God’s covenant is for those who obey His Law, not for those mired in religious traditions based on external deeds. Jesus and Paul later echoed John’s message.

John told both leaders and laypeople that Israel’s King was coming and that they must repent in order to receive Him. Many did, but few were religious leaders because they were unprepared to accept Jesus as the Christ (Lk. 7:30).

John was the prophet whom God promised would prepare the way for Israel’s Messiah (Is. 40:3, Mt. 3:3). John spoke God’s message to all who would listen, regardless of the personal cost to him. His obedience to God later led to his imprisonment and execution.

Importance

This passage challenges believers to be bold witnesses for Christ. It teaches that **Jesus is God and Savior**, the Messiah whom the prophets foretold. John said, “After me will come one who is more powerful than I . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (v. 11). By this, John preached that salvation could not be acquired through ritual or even baptism, but only through belief in the One to come. His insistence upon repentance has offended and convicted people for more than two thousand years.

This passage also shows that **Salvation is by Faith Alone**.

Interpretation

Matthew 3:1-2 The exact time John began his ministry is not certain, though it was probably in A.D. 25/26. Luke’s Gospel notes that John appeared “in the fifteenth year of the reign of **Tiberius Caesar**” (Lk. 3:1). Matthew may have used the phrase “those days” to identify a crucial time in Israel’s history. It was nearly thirty years after Jesus’ family had made their home in Nazareth (Mt. 2:23).

John’s ministry began in the Desert of Judea, a remote, rugged area east of Jerusalem in the lower part of the

Jordan River valley (northwest of the Dead Sea). Shepherds allowed their flocks to graze in areas like these, but few people would have made it their home.

A chief characteristic of John's ministry was his dynamic preaching, empowered by God's Spirit. The people of Israel had not heard preaching like his since the time of Malachi about 400 years earlier. John soon attracted a multitude. One word can sum up the focus of John's preaching: "Repent!" This word means "to change one's mind or to turn completely." Imagine someone traveling in one direction and then making a 180-degree turn. In the New Testament, repentance goes far beyond feeling sorry about sin—repentance involves actively changing priorities and activities. True repentance requires turning away from sin and toward God. Of course, when a person repents he does not magically do away with his sin on his own. Forgiveness comes only by faith as a result of the work of Jesus Christ. Still, everyone who wants the forgiveness and eternal life Christ offers must confess his sin and then turn away from it to follow God's ways. It was to this genuine change of focus that John called his hearers.

John preached his message of repentance because it was a crucial time in history—"the kingdom of heaven" would soon appear. The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God are used interchangeably in the Gospels. Luke did not explain this phrase that John used. Most Jews believed it referred to an earthly kingdom like King David's. However, John was referring to God's reign over human hearts. The coming of Christ's public ministry was the coming of the King. Jesus' call to believe in Him as the Christ and follow Him as Lord would inaugurate the Kingdom.

Matthew 3:3-6 Matthew saw John's ministry as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, specifically from Isaiah 40:3. This passage refers to a practice in ancient times in which workmen went out to prepare the roads before a king traveled on them. They straightened curved paths and leveled uneven roads to remove any obstacles. In a figurative way, this was what John was doing—his "voice" was a tool in God's hands to prepare the way for the King of Kings. God had sent him to prepare people's hearts for the coming Messiah.

John the Baptist is described as a rugged man ministering in a rugged place. His clothing resembled Elijah's (2 Kg. 1:8). He wore coarse sackcloth woven from camel's hair, which was used in making tents, and a leather belt. John's diet consisted of what was readily available in the desert: dried locusts and wild honey. The Hebrews ate locusts, which were considered clean according to the Law of Moses (Lev. 11:22).

Despite being in the wilderness, John had no trouble attracting a crowd. As word spread, people came from the Jordan River valley, the city of Jerusalem, and the country of Judea. They traveled for miles to the desolate area to see and hear John. This was probably due in part to John's oddity. But the people also hungered for God and His Word. The Jewish belief system in the early first century A.D. consisted mainly of legalistic, meaningless rituals. John's ministry and message opposed empty religious ceremonies.

John's message was far from what the Jews might have expected from the first prophet in hundreds of years. John emphasized that only those who truly repented were spiritually prepared to glorify the coming King as He deserved. Israel was not ready, but John had come to help make the people ready.

Many of those who heard John's message were convicted, confessed their sins, and **baptized** by John in the Jordan River. The people apparently confessed their sins just prior to their baptisms. That probably means they confessed their sins publicly. Some biblical scholars have estimated that tens of thousands of people may have heard John and been baptized by him or one of his disciples (Jn. 1:35).

Matthew 3:7-10 Among those who came to see and hear John were the "**Pharisees and Sadducees**," Israel's spiritual leaders. Many of them came simply to observe the spectacle. However, as they did with Jesus, they may

have come to listen to John's teaching with the intent of silencing him if his message did not line up with their own teachings.

Most Jews would have respected these leaders because of their piety, education, wealth, and influence. But John easily saw past their appearance and called them a "brood of vipers!" Jesus later used the same term to describe religious leaders (Mt. 12:34, 23:33). Vipers were poisonous snakes. John emphasized that the leaders' teachings and influence were like poison, leading people away from God rather than toward Him.

John questioned the religious leaders' presence when he asked, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (v. 7). John presented the picture of a raging fire that caused snakes and other creatures to flee from its destruction. The "wrath" he mentioned referred to God's unending righteous anger and opposition to sin. That wrath will reach its culmination in the Day of the Lord. On this day, God will enact final judgment against sin and all who have not turned to Christ for forgiveness. Race will offer no protection—even for the Jews. John may have been accusing the Jewish leaders of looking for a good luck charm (perhaps baptism) to help them avoid God's judgment.

Before the Jewish leaders could speak, John emphasized that physical descent from Abraham had no bearing on their relationship with God. John may have pointed to rocks on the riverbank as he noted that God could create children for Abraham "out of . . . stones" (v. 9). The Jewish leaders were wrong to believe that God automatically accepted descendants of Abraham. The truth is that God accepts those who have a relationship with Him through faith. Paul later wrote that having Abraham's faith, rather than his bloodline, secures one's salvation (Gal. 3:6-9).

A tree's seed determines what fruit it produces. A person's heart determines what actions he or she produces. John emphasized that God sees through everyone's hypocrisy. God is not fooled by religious acts with no real meaning. What God expects of His children is "good fruit"—actions, habits, and words that reflect a change of heart through a genuine relationship, rather than mere ritual, with Him. John warned the Jewish leaders that if they did not produce good fruit, God would not spare them in His judgment.

Matthew 3:11-12 The entire crowd focused on John. Nevertheless, he tried to turn their attention to the greater One coming after him—the Messiah. John emphasized that in the midst of impending judgment, hope would come through Jesus, who was "more powerful" than him. Jesus' authority, honor, and ministry would be far beyond anything known from John. John said he was nothing compared to the coming King, not even fit to carry Jesus' sandals.

John went on to contrast his ministry with that of the coming King. John baptized with water those who repented of their sins. Jesus would "baptize...with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (v. 11). John's baptism prepared people for God's Kingdom. Jesus' baptism initiated people into His Kingdom, as prophesied in Isaiah 44:3 and Joel 2:28. The "fire" with which Jesus would baptize could refer to the purifying or refining effect of the flame. But in the context of John's message it likely referred to the judgment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In ancient times, farmers gathered their crops of grain and spread them out on threshing floors. Then they would walk on the grain or let animals tread on it. This separated the stalk and the "chaff" from the grain. The chaff was the hard outer shell. The grain was the usable portion they ground into flour and made into bread. After separation, the farmer used a "winnowing fork," or pitchfork, to throw the contents of the threshing floor up in the air at a windy time of day. The wind would blow away the lighter parts of the wheat but allow the heavier grain to drop back on the floor, eventually separating the good from the bad. The farmers stored the grain in barns and used the leftover chaff to start a fire for cooking.

John proclaimed that God's Spirit would also perform this dividing function. The Spirit would separate those in a relationship with God through faith from those who refused Him. The Spirit will eventually gather God's own into heaven and send His adversaries to hell, the place of "unquenchable fire" (Mt. 25:41; Jude 7; Rev. 19:20, 20:14-15).

Implications

John was a highly visible servant of God whose lifestyle was a stark contrast to many around him. Like John, we are called to live highly visible lives as we serve our King. While we are not to fulfill John's unique role, we are to be like "stars that shine in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (Phil. 2:15-16). This means separating from the crowd as we fulfill our role as messengers of Christ's Kingdom.

How do your words and actions differ from those who do not follow Christ? John called for people to produce fruit that gave evidence of the change (repentance) that had happened in their lives. How does your lifestyle reflect the change Christ has made in your life?

John boldly shared the truth of God's Word. Like John, God wants us to boldly share His truth of judgment and mercy. We have His power (through the Holy Spirit), and He convicts us of sin. God simply wants us to be tools in His hands to bring about the salvation of others. How bold are your students in sharing God's good news? How has God used them to lead someone else to Christ?

Teaching Plan

Connect

Review Questions

(5-8 minutes, easy set-up)

Students will answer five review questions from the previous lesson.

Print one copy of the "Review Questions" activity sheet for your use.

After greeting students, use the review questions to test what they can recall from the previous lesson as well as to provide the context for today's lesson.

Master Teacher Option: Be Prepared!

(10 minutes, easy set-up)

Students will list the items that are needed for certain activities.

Provide a copy of the "Be Prepared!" activity sheet and a pen for each student.

Distribute a copy of the "Be Prepared!" activity sheet and a pen to each student. Instruct student to gather as many ideas for ways to prepare for the events on the paper by getting ideas from other students. Emphasize that students can only write one idea of other students' handouts and cannot duplicate anything already written on the handout. After three minutes, call time. Instruct students to count up their responses, and acknowledge the student who has gathered the most ideas from other students.

Ask: **Had you considered how much preparation any of these events might require? Why?** State that God prepared from the beginning of time for the coming of His Son, and used John the Baptist to be the one to announce Jesus' imminent arrival.

Explore

Master Teacher Key Study: John the Baptist

(15-20 minutes, easy set-up)

Students will study Matthew 3:1-12 to examine the importance of John's prophetic ministry and his message of repentance.

Print one copy of the Master Teacher Key Study for your use. Provide a copy of the Student Worksheet

and a pen for each student.

Learning Goal: Students will examine the importance of John's prophetic ministry and his message of repentance.

Pass out pens and copies of the Student Worksheet. Then, use the Master Teacher Key Study to teach Matthew 3:1-12.

Transform

Deeper Discussion

(10 minutes, easy set-up)

Students will discuss how repentance should affect the life of a believer.

Learning Goal: Students will consider their need to lead a visibly Christian life by living a life of repentance.

Use the following questions to lead students into to discuss John the Baptist's message of repentance and his announcement of the coming of Christ:

1. **What is the difference between someone simply changing his or her behavior and true repentance?**
2. **Why should we repent even if we're not really a "bad" person?**
3. **How should repentance affect our lives?**
4. **How does our repentance witness to others about Christ?**

After discussion, point out that all believers come to Jesus during a time of repentance and by asking Jesus to be their Savior. Emphasize that accepting salvation comes after sins have been repented, and is evidenced by a change in behavior that points witnessed back to Christ. Close by praying that God will convict you all when the sin in your life takes you in the opposite direction of where God is.

Master Teacher Option: The Need to Repent

(10 minutes, easy set-up)

Students will discuss what kinds of acts call for repentance.

Provide a dry erase board and marker. Also provide paper and pens.

Learning Goal: Students will consider their need to lead a visibly Christian life by living a life of repentance.

Instruct students to think of some atrocities that have happened or are currently happening in the world. (*Examples may include the Holocaust or slavery.*) Ask: **Do you think that these actions were**

behaviors that warranted repentance by someone? After responses, ask: **Are there some sins that don't really require repentance?** After discussion, explain that all sin is against God, and all sin requires repentance.

Instruct students to consider the lifestyles of the Pharisees. Remind students that the Pharisees were very religious people who lived “good” lives—and yet John insisted that their lives lacked genuine repentance. Distribute paper and pens and direct students to think of something in their lives that they need to remove. Say: **Pay attention to the very first thing that pops into your head.** Then, ask: **What would repentance mean for you with that issue?** Remind students that repenting does not just mean *not* doing the sin anymore. As an example, use the issue of Internet pornography. Explain that in addition to asking God for forgiveness, repenting may include taking the computer out of the room, discontinuing cell phone Internet access, and installing an Internet accountability filter. Direct students to write their answer to the question on their paper.

Conclude by leading students in a time of prayer, leading students to prayerfully think of what their lives would look like if they completely turned from that particular sin and acted in the completely opposite manner. Close by asking God to strengthen the resolve of those students who are ready to turn away from any sin that pulls them away from God.

Take Home Activity

Family Devotion

(10-15 minutes at home, easy set-up)

Distribute copies of the Family Devotion to students and encourage them to share the devotion with their family.

A copy of the Family Devotion will be included in your lesson PDF download.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

(5-8 minutes, easy set-up)

Use these questions to review the content from Lesson 5: "His Adolescence"
The correct answer for each question is printed in bold, italic font.

1. Every year, Jesus' family went to Jerusalem to _____.
 - a. attend the county fair
 - b. make sacrifices
 - c. attend the Passover feast**
 - d. visit Mary's cousin Elizabeth
2. In Luke 2:41-52, how old was Jesus when He went to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph?
 - a. 9 years old
 - b. 10 years old
 - c. 12 years old**
 - d. 13 years old
3. What did Mary and Joseph think about Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem?
 - a. They thought it was a good idea.
 - b. They were unaware of it.**
 - c. They thought that the schools were better in Jerusalem than in Galilee.
 - d. They thought it was a bad idea, but they were unable to change His mind.
4. Where did Mary and Joseph find Jesus?
 - a. at the arcade
 - b. in the Temple**
 - c. at Peter's house
 - d. at Herod's palace
5. What was Jesus doing when Mary and Joseph found Him?
 - a. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions.**
 - b. He was protesting taxes on the Israelites.
 - c. He was healing the crippled and feeding the hungry.
 - d. He was drawing in the dirt.

LESSON 6

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE

BE PREPARED!

Between each pair of extremes, draw an X on the line at the point that most correctly identifies your response to each situation.

For example, to mark at the middle of the line would indicate that you are just as close to feeling the response at one end as the other.

<p style="text-align: center;">PROM</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">HOMECOMING FOOTBALL GAME</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">SENIOR TRIP</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">BAND CONCERT</p>

LESSON 6

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE

Biblical Passage: Matthew 3:1-12

Memory Verse: Matthew 11:11 Truly, I tell you, among those born of women there has risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

1. We must be bold witnesses to _____ the coming of Christ (Matthew 3:1–6).
2. Proclaiming Christ may require us to declare some _____ messages to others (Matthew 3:7–10).
3. Proclaiming the truth of Christ means that we focus on Him, not _____ (Matthew 3:11–12).

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the difference between someone simply changing his or her behavior and true repentance?
 - Why should we repent even if we're not really a "bad" person?
 - How should repentance affect our lives?
 - How does our repentance witness to others about Christ?
-

FALSE LIVES

Pharisaical evidence	Evidence for repentance

Based on what you've found, can true repentance exist without tangible evidence? Why?

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT . . .

"It is not so much what people do in this world as their reasons for doing it which really makes a difference. Sacrifices are not so important as the reasons for which you sacrifice . . ." —*Eleanor Roosevelt*

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE

(15–20 minutes, easy set-up)

Use this outline and any of the corresponding activities to share the Biblical Truth with students.

Introduction: If you were going to announce the coming of Jesus Christ just before His earthly ministry, how would you do it? Text blast? FaceBook? Twitter? God used Jesus' cousin, John, to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist faithfully revealed the coming of Christ to the world around him, fulfilling many prophecies from the Old Testament.

1. We must be bold witnesses to announce the coming of Christ (Matthew 3:1-6).

Biblical Background: John the Baptist was born shortly before Jesus and was His cousin. In fact, before John was born, an angel told his mother Elizabeth that her son would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Mt. 1:17). John lived in the wilderness north of the Dead Sea and preached a message of repentance (vv. 1-2). As such, John fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah as the one who announced the coming of Jesus (v. 3). John drew attention not only for his harsh message of repentance, but for the way he lived in the desert. People throughout the area came to hear him and to be baptized by him (vv. 4-6).

Illustration: Being in the second position can be difficult. Whether it's second chair in the orchestra, or the back-up quarterback, or even on the second string, few of us are happy being in second place. But John the Baptist was selected to fill that role . . . of announcing the coming of Jesus.

Application: Likewise, we have been given the task of announcing the coming of Jesus into our lives.

2. Christ may require us to declare some unpopular messages to others (Matthew 3:7–9).

Biblical Background: The Jews of John's day had tried, unsuccessfully, to obey the Old Testament's laws and regulations. When they came to hear John, he called them out as vipers for their spiritually empty acts (v. 7). The Pharisees and Sadducees were consumed with following the Old Testament laws, yet John told them to bear fruit that matched repentance because their external display of works did not stem from right hearts (v. 8). John also warned them against thinking that, since they were descendants of the patriarch Abraham, they did not have to be repentant (v. 9).

Illustration: Some people expect to find an easy way through life by using their family's name or reputation. The Jews believed that they had a guaranteed relationship with God. And, some believers expect to make it to heaven because they grew up in a Christian family and have attended church all their life. John the Baptist emphasized that these kinds of beliefs are extremely dangerous to Christians, because they cause them to trust in something other than a relationship with Christ for salvation.

Application: When we repent before God, we are forever changed (2 Cor. 5:17). Our lifestyle (what we choose to do, to say, and to think) should reflect this change. People should be able to recognize us as Christians by our fruit (John 13:34–35). But like the Pharisees, we too can put on a good show without

being changed on the inside. In addition, just as the Pharisees' heritage could not save them, having a Christian family or going to church cannot save us.

3. Proclaiming the truth of Christ means that we focus on Him, not ourselves (Matthew 3:10–12).

Description: John made three explicit references to judgment in this passage, clarifying that those who do not repent consequently face God's wrath. John communicated that Jesus will judge between those people who have truly repented and those who merely pretend. The fruit of a person's life demonstrates the condition of his or her heart, and the Holy Spirit gives further evidence of one's repentance. Whoever does not have evidence of repentance is in danger of judgment and separation from God (vv. 10-12).

Illustration: In detective shows on TV, the good guys do not always know who is guilty. They investigate alibis, question various people, and hold stakeouts. They do this because they are not assured of a person's guilt without sufficient evidence to prove it. On the other hand, a follower of Christ who has genuinely repented will give sufficient evidence of a changed life.

Application: Jesus doesn't need to follow a suspect or question a witness. He knows everything, and He executes perfect judgment for all who are guilty of not repenting. Like separating the wheat from the chaff (v. 12), He will separate the repentant from the unrepentant. His judgment for the unrepentant is eternal separation from Himself. When our bodies die, our spirits go to one of two places, and our decision on earth selects for us our eternal home.

Conclusion: John the Baptist was the obedient forerunner of Jesus Christ. Although his message was not a popular one for many who heard it, he called people to repentance and promised Jesus' soon-coming earthly ministry. Because **Jesus is God and Savior**, we should also be "John the Baptists," doing whatever is necessary to tell the world around us that repentance is necessary, faith in Christ is essential, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

LESSON 6

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE

Biblical Passage: Matthew 3:1-12

Do you recall the last time you watched a U.S. President give the “State of the Union” address? If so, you may recall seeing a man. Not just any man . . . we’ll call him, *the man*. Before the President enters the House Chamber, *the man* walks into the room and shouts: “Ladies and Gentlemen of Congress, I present to you, (*brief pause*) the President of the United States.” And then *the man* walks through the crowd, clearing the aisle. The President enters and the focus shifts. *The man* is not seen again.

Read Matthew 3:1-12. In this passage about John the Baptist, we read the prophecy from the Book of Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight the paths of our God.’” That voice was John the Baptist.

If Isaiah were writing about the American President, John would be *the man*—He stopped everyone in the midst of what they were doing and refocused their attention; he cleared the path so that the real Man could deliver His message, a message of hope and salvation.

John preached a message of repenting from sin and of living a life identified with God. As you go through this week, consider how you might model a godly lifestyle for your teenager.

CONNECTION QUESTIONS:

- Why was John’s role as the one who announced Jesus as the Messiah so important?
- How did John’s appearance, lifestyle, and message draw attention from people?
- How can our lifestyles and messages allow us to tell others about Jesus, the Messiah?
- John called for people to produce fruit that gave evidence of the change that had happened in their lives. In what ways are we “producing fruit” in our lives? What are some areas in which we could use some improvement?