



## **Matthew 3:4–6**

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. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Over the last two days we've been taking an increasingly close look at John the Baptist who'd

come as the last and greatest prophet to prepare the way for Jesus. John was preaching in the wilderness of Judea, the stomping ground of the greatest prophets of old. He walked and talked and looked like one of the greatest prophets in history returned, the prophet Elijah, and he was causing a huge stir amongst every level of society. They were coming out to see him in droves and he was preaching a fiery message of repentance. 'Repent! The king is coming, the kingdom of heaven is near, but you're not ready, so repent! Turn around, turn back to God, you need to completely change the direction of your lives, do it now, publically, today, before it is too late – because soon it will be too late.

You see John had come to prepare the way for Jesus, to make straight paths for him. And what was in the way of people coming to Je-

Jesus was their sin and stubborn hearts. Jesus came to offer them forgiveness but if you don't think you've done anything wrong then you'll never be interested in forgiveness. To receive what Jesus was coming to do, to receive forgiveness, they needed to first own up to their sin, and be sorry for it, to be repentant. And only then could they experience the forgiveness that Jesus would bring. So John prepared the way for Jesus by preaching boldly and loudly and fearlessly about sin and the need for repentance, so that people would fully appreciate their desperate need of God's forgiveness, which is only available through the ministry of Jesus.

And in today's passage we take an even closer look at John. Verse 4 describes his lifestyle. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, which would have been about as comfortable as that

sounds, a leather belt around his waist, and he survived in the desert on locusts and wild honey.

Now the first thing to notice here is, as we've touched on is that that John walked and talked, was dressed like and was preaching in the same place as the great prophet Elijah from the Old Testament. There would have been a huge buzz amongst the crowds that he was Elijah returned, just like the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, had said would happen right before the Messiah came.

The next thing to notice is that it's almost like John's lifestyle embodies his message. His rejection of the self-indulgent luxuries of life – the fine clothes, the fine food, an expensive house over his head – he's the picture of humble repentance, like in the Old Testament

when people were convicted of sin they used to strip off their fine clothes, and put on hessian sacks, and cover their faces and heads in dust and ashes, to show outwardly what they were feeling inwardly. John's the picture of repentance and so he embodies what he's preaching. But more than that, in John's complete disregard of self we see his single-minded focus on the urgency and importance of his message. The time for chasing after the luxuries of life is over, there are more serious matters at hand, repent, the kingdom of heaven is near.

And you know, we have the same message as John, just as important, just as urgent. But do we share his single-mindedness? Do we embody our message? And if not, what message are we projecting through our lifestyle? Are we prepared to neglect ourselves for the sake

of our message? How busy are we collecting the fineries of life, forever improving the roof over our own heads, and are we doing this at the expense of a single-minded focus on the gospel message? Obviously we need to live, and work and eat, and support our families if we have them but have we got the balance right?

Moving on it's also worth noting that many of us today find it difficult to even mention the concept of sin and yet here, John is preaching the need for sin and repentance loudly and boldly. In verses 5 & 6 we read that huge crowds were coming out to hear him preach from all over the countryside, people from every level of society as we read later on in this chapter, and more fully in Luke's account. And what's more they were publically confessing their sins and being baptised in droves. God

was clearly at work, blessing John's preaching and ministry, as the last and greatest prophet went about his work preparing the way for Jesus.

Now John's baptism was unique. It was an unprecedented, one-off, public confession of sins. People would come to him, confess and repent of their sins, and I imagine form huge queues, take off their outer garments and then likely be submerged in the river Jordan as a public symbol of being cleansed of their sin. But it was even more than this – it was a sign of a new thing that God was doing in history, for Israel and for the whole world. You see over a thousand years before, God's people had crossed the Jordan when they first entered and conquered the Promised Land. Now they were passing through the river again as a sign that they were getting ready for a great-

er conquest, God's defeat of all evil and the establishment of his kingdom forever.<sup>1</sup>

Well what a joyful picture this passage leaves in our minds. Thousands and thousands of people putting on hold the busyness and indulgences of their lives in the cities and heading out into the desert, leaving their former lives behind, to hear a great preacher, preach sin and repentance. And then, imagine thousands of people being cut to the heart and publically confessing their sins and symbolicaly being washed in the river Jordan, their lives turned in a complete new direction, hearts ready to receive the forgiveness that Jesus is about to bring. Their hearts ready and excited and overflowing with joy for the coming of God's king and his kingdom that will last forever.

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1 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*. (London: Spck Publishing, 2014), 18.



Why not take a moment now just to drink in this momentous moment of history. And then perhaps, if you're a Christian, remember back to the moment you first repented of your sin. The moment when you first changed the completely changed the direction of your life to face it towards serving and pleasing and delighting in God. Do you still feel as strongly? How can you recapture those feelings today? Perhaps think of John, think of his complete disregard for self and his single-minded focus on the gospel message. What would it take for you to share his passion? What message does your lifestyle preach? And then pray about these things, take them to God, and if you dare, pray that his Spirit might fill you with that same fire for him that filled John the Baptist.

Thanks again for reading. Tomorrow we're going to get a taste of John's preaching which might shock you. I hope you can join me then.