

Family Ties: Jesus' Strange Cousin Matt. 3:1-12 12/5/04

Last week Lou preached on the long genealogy we find in Matthew chapter one that leads to Jesus. I guess I could have taken that difficult, boring passage myself, but it was more fun to see what Lou could do with it! I thought he did a great job reminding us that God used ordinary people, sinners and saints, to bring about the birth of Jesus. This morning we continue our series, "Jesus' Family Ties," with a look at Jesus' strange cousin, John the Baptist.

One time a pastor was preaching about John the Baptist. He was lifting up John as a model for all those in his church. Unfortunately, he phrased his concluding challenge this way, "What this church needs is more Johns!" He wondered why he got the response he did! But his point was right. The church does need more folks like John. In fact, Jesus said there has never been a greater person born into the world than John the Baptist. So let's think about what kind of man he was as we listen to what Matthew says about him. *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'* (Matt. 3:1,2)

Now there had been no prophets in Israel for hundreds of years. It was a barren, hard time of God's silence, and the people felt abandoned by God. But now God was speaking to his people again through his prophet,

John. That in itself created a great deal of interest in him. But John pointed the people away from himself, instead preparing them to receive Jesus, a role foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Listen to the next verse.

“This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

He prepared the way for Jesus. Now we have to admit that John lived a strange lifestyle. *Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”*

(Matt. 3:4). Now that’s a low-carb diet! He lived alone in the wilderness.

He had a subsistence diet and simple rough clothing. And he had chose to live in poverty. This was one strange dude! But John’s lifestyle gave integrity and power to his message. It was obvious that he wasn’t in it for the money! And people came in droves to hear him. Maybe they were curious about his strangeness. Or, maybe they came because they were hungry to hear God speak to them after such a long silence. At any rate, Matthew tells us, *“Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”* (Matt 3:5-6)

What was the message that people came to hear? There were two major parts to it. John, who may have benefited from a Dale Carnegie

course, began by attacking some of those who came to hear him. *“But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* (Matt. 3:7-10) Wow! That’s pretty harsh! He calls the Scribes and Pharisees, who were very religious people, “a brood of vipers!” John compares their coming to hear him to snakes slithering out of the desert grass in front of a raging fire, trying to escape their coming destruction in a panic. Why is he so hard on them? We can figure it out by what he says next, *“Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham.”* (Matt. 3:8,9)

The Jews rightly understood themselves to be the people God had chosen. And they loved the benefits of being God’s people- the sense of protection, dignity and identity, and the hope of eternal life. But they were chosen for a purpose- to carry out God’s work in the world- to be a light to the nations, to use their wealth to help others, to live pure lives. As all you

Bethel Bible Course graduates know, they were blessed to be a blessing! But apparently many of them failed to fulfill that part of their calling. So John warned them not to trust their ancestry for protection from God's coming judgment. He said that God can raise up children of Abraham from the very stones of the ground. They should not presume upon their background to protect themselves from God's coming righteous judgment.

Do people do that today? Sure they do! Some people think that because they grew up in a church, or grew up in a Christian home, or were confirmed, or joined a church, that they are somehow safe and secure from God's future judgment. Not according to John! What does he say? *"Bear fruit worthy of repentance."* Simply put that means we've got to walk the talk. We can't just claim God's grace and then live in a way that denies we've been touched by that grace. We'll come back to this later, but first, there's more to John's message.

John tells the people what the coming Messiah is going to do. And it's not what we usually associate with Christmas and the tiny, helpless little baby in the manger. *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* (Matt. 3:11) The first promise here is that the Messiah will bring the Holy Spirit who will be available to all of his followers as he "baptizes them in the Spirit." We could

devote a whole series of sermons to the work of the Spirit in our hearts. God's Spirit encourages us, guides us, convicts us of sin, gives us special abilities, works on our character, and empowers us to do God's work. This is a wonderful promise! But the second promise isn't so wonderful. The second promise about the Messiah is a promise of judgment. *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* (Matt. 3:12) This doesn't sound like "peace on earth, goodwill toward all," does it? So, let's talk about what this means.

The image is a common ancient agricultural one. When wheat is cut and gathered, the kernels of wheat need to be separated from chaff so it can be ground into pure flour. That is done on a threshing floor. The farmer takes a large winnowing fork and tosses the mixture of grain and chaff into the air. The lighter chaff is blown aside by the wind, while the heavier grain falls to the ground and is collected and used to make flour. This image of separating the wheat from the chaff is used several places in the Bible as a metaphor for the final judgment when God separates those who submit themselves to his reign from those who reject his authority over their lives. There will be a final accounting for our lives at that time.

On that day the Adolf Hitlers, Joseph Stalins, Pol Pots, Bashar Al-Assads, and Saddam Husseins of this world, as well as all those who have

gotten away with causing evil and pain anywhere, will finally receive what they deserve.

And who is going to do this work of judgment? The Messiah. The Old Testament prophets always understood that judgment was an important part of the work of the Messiah. John just continues that theme. What they did not understand is that the Messiah was not going to do the work of judgment during his first appearance. Jesus was born, taught, healed, died on the cross, was resurrected, and returned to the Father without doing this work of judgment. Thankfully, God has graciously provided an extended period of time for people to consider their ways and decide to follow his Son and join the work of the Kingdom of God. Then, at Christ's return, this judgment will occur.

In light of the coming reality of judgment, John calls the people to the only imaginable response, which is also our response. *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near... Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”* (Matt. 3:2, 8) And many people came, repented, and were baptized as a sign of being washed clean from their sin and beginning a new way of life.

What does repentance really mean? The root of the word means “to turn.” And that’s really what repentance is all about. We turn from our old way of life, from our sin, and turn toward a new way of life, a life oriented toward Jesus the Messiah, and his priorities and ways of living. It’s as if I

was walking down a path in one direction, and I turn 180 degrees away from that direction and head back the other way. That's repentance. But because of the depth of human sin, this does not come naturally or easily to us.

Once a shoplifter wrote a note to a local store that said, "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100 that I owe you for merchandise that I've stolen." Then he added a P.S. "If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest of the money!" We often try to avoid true repentance, by just repenting part-way, or making excuses for our sin, or blaming others. We need God's help to really turn around our lives. And since God desires our repentance, he'll help us to do it.

Repentance involves admitting our sin and taking responsibility for it. Sometimes it may involve deep sorrow for the pain we have caused God and others. It often involves making amends for the wrong we have done to others. But it always involves turning our lives away from sin and toward God. And that is a radical step, which requires a great deal faith. You see, we usually sin because we somehow believe that it will get us what we really want- security, power, pleasure, affirmation, or love. When we repent, we choose to believe that those needs can be met through our Creator, rather than through illegitimate means. We choose to believe that

we can have security, because God will never abandon us. We can have power because God wants to change the world through us. We can have pleasure, because the God who made us understands fully what we most desire. We can have affirmation and love through our partnerships with Christian brothers and sisters as well as through our own relationship with God. When we repent we are trusting God to meet our deepest needs through legitimate means.

Here's one final thought. John's reminder about coming judgment is not a cause of fear for followers of Jesus. For the Judge will not be our enemy, or someone who is just dying to inflict retribution and pain on us. No, the Judge is Jesus himself who is dying to rescue us from the results and penalty of our sin. As we celebrate the season of Advent, which focuses on Jesus' first coming, we also remember his second advent, when he will come again and bring his righteous judgment. In preparation for his return, John invites us to repent!