

# John Wesley's Explanatory Notes - Matthew 3

by John Wesley

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*John Wesley's sermon explores the significance of John the Baptist's message of repentance and the establishment of God's kingdom through Jesus Christ.*

**Scripture:** Leviticus 11:22, Isaiah 40:3, Daniel 2:44, Matthew 3

**Topics:** "Repentance", "The Kingdom of Heaven"

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## Description

John Wesley expounds on Matthew 3, emphasizing the significance of John the Baptist's ministry and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. He explains that the Kingdom is not merely a future hope but a present reality that requires repentance and a transformation of heart. Wesley highlights the importance of baptism, not just as a ritual but as a means of receiving the Holy Spirit and fulfilling God's righteousness. He also critiques the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and underscores the necessity of genuine repentance for true discipleship. Ultimately, Wesley points to the divine affirmation of Jesus at His baptism as a model for believers.

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## Transcript

III. 1. In those days - that is, while Jesus dwelt there. In the wilderness of Judea - This was a wilderness properly so called, a wild, barren, desolate place as was that also where our Lord was tempted. But, generally speaking, a wilderness in the New Testament means only a common, or less cultivated place, in opposition to pasture and arable land. Mark 1:1; Luke 3:1.

Verse 2. The kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom of God, are but two phrases for the same thing. They mean, not barely a future happy state, in heaven, but a state to be enjoyed on earth: the proper disposition for the glory of heaven, rather than the possession of it. Is at hand - As if he had said, God is about to erect that kingdom, spoken of by Daniel Daniel 2:44; ; the kingdom of the God of heaven. It properly signifies here, the Gospel dispensation, in which subjects were to be gathered to God by his Son, and a society to be formed, which was to subsist first on earth, and afterward with God in glory. In some places of Scripture, the phrase more particularly denotes the state of it on earth: in ,others, it signifies only the state of glory: but it generally includes both. The Jews understood it of a temporal kingdom, the seat of which they supposed would be Jerusalem; and the expected sovereign of this kingdom they learned from Daniel to call the Son of man. Both John the Baptist and Christ took up that phrase, the kingdom of heaven, as they found it, and gradually taught the Jews (though greatly unwilling to learn) to understand it right. The very demand of repentance, as previous to it, showed it was a spiritual kingdom, and that no

wicked man, how politic, brave, or learned soever, could possibly be a subject of it.

Verse 3. The way of the Lord - Of Christ. Make his paths straight - By removing every thing which might prove a hinderance to his gracious appearance. Isaiah 40:3.

Verse 4. John had his raiment of camels' hair - Coarse and rough, suiting his character and doctrine. A leathern girdle - Like Elijah, in whose spirit and power he came. His food was locusts and wild honey - Locusts are ranked among clean meats, Leviticus 11:22. But these were not always to be had. So in default of those, he fed on wild honey.

Verse 6. Confessing their sins - Of their own accord; freely and openly. Such prodigious numbers could hardly be baptized by immersing their whole bodies under water: nor can we think they were provided with change of raiment for it, which was scarcely practicable for such vast multitudes. And yet they could not be immersed naked with modesty, nor in their wearing apparel with safety. It seems, therefore, that they stood in ranks on the edge of the river, and that John, passing along before them, cast water on their heads or faces, by which means he might baptize many thousands in a day. And this way most naturally signified Christ's baptizing them with the Holy Ghost and with fire, which John spoke of, as prefigured by his baptizing with water, and which was eminently fulfilled, when the Holy Ghost sat upon the disciples in the appearance of tongues, or flames of fire.

Verse 7. The Pharisees were a very ancient sect among the Jews. They took their name from a Hebrew word, which signifies to separate, because they separated themselves from all other men. They were outwardly strict observers of the law, fasted often, made long prayers, rigorously kept the Sabbath, and paid all tithe, even of mint, anise, and cummin. Hence they were in high esteem among the people. But inwardly, they were full of pride and hypocrisy. The Sadducees were another sect among the Jews, only not so considerable as the Pharisees. They denied the existence of angels, and the immortality of the soul, and by consequence the resurrection of the dead. Ye brood of vipers - In like manner, the crafty Herod is styled a fox, and persons of insidious, ravenous, profane, or sensual dispositions, are named respectively by him who saw their hearts, serpents, dogs, wolves, and swine; terms which are not the random language of passion, but a judicious designation of the persons meant by them. For it was fitting such men should be marked out, either for a caution to others, or a warning to themselves.

Verse 8. Repentance is of two sorts; that which is termed legal, and that which is styled evangelical repentance. The former (which is the same that is spoken of here) is a thorough conviction of sin. The latter is a change of heart (and consequently of life) from all sin to all holiness.

Verse 9. And say not confidently - The word in the original, vulgarly rendered, Think not, seems here, and in many places, not to diminish, but rather add to the force of the word with which it is joined. We have Abraham to our father - It is almost incredible, how great the presumption of the Jews was on this their relation to Abraham. One of their famous sayings was, "Abraham sits near the gates of hell, and suffers no Israelite to go down into it." I say unto you - This preface always denotes the importance of what follows. Of these stones - Probably pointing to those which lay before them.

Verse 10. But the axe also already lieth - That is, there is no room for such idle pretences. Speedy execution is determined against all that do not repent. The comparison seems to be taken from a woodman that has laid down his axe to put off his coat, and then immediately goes to work to cut down the tree. This refers to the wrath to come in verse 7, Matthew 3:7. Is hewn down - Instantly, without farther delay.

Verse 11. He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire - He shall fill you with the Holy Ghost, inflaming your hearts with that fire of love, which many waters cannot quench. And this was done, even with a visible appearance as of fire, on the day of pentecost.

Verse 12. Whose fan - That is, the word of the Gospel. His floor - That is, his Church, which is now covered with a mixture of wheat and chaff. He will gather the wheat into the garner - Will lay up those who are truly good in heaven.

Verse 13. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21

Verse 15. It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness - It becometh every messenger of God to observe all his righteous ordinances. But the particular meaning of our Lord seems to be, that it becometh us to do (me to receive baptism, and you to administer it) in order to fulfil, that is, that I may fully perform every part of the righteous law of God, and the commission he hath given me.

Verse 16. And Jesus being baptized - Let our Lord's submitting to baptism teach us a holy exactness in the observance of those institutions which owe their obligation merely to a Divine command. Surely thus it becometh all his followers to fulfil all righteousness. Jesus had no sin to wash away. And yet he was baptized. And God owned his ordinance, so as to make it the season of pouring forth the Holy Spirit upon him. And where can we expect this sacred effusion, but in an humble attendance on Divine appointments? Lo, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God - St. Luke adds, in a bodily form - Probably in a glorious appearance of fire, perhaps in the shape of a dove, descending with a hovering motion, till it rested upon him. This was a visible token of those secret operations of the blessed Spirit, by which he was anointed in a peculiar manner; and abundantly fitted for his public work.

Verse 17. And lo, a voice - We have here a glorious manifestation of the ever - blessed Trinity: the Father speaking from heaven, the Son spoken to, the Holy Ghost descending upon him. In whom I delight -What an encomium is this! How poor to this are all other kinds of praise! To he the pleasure, the delight of God, this is praise indeed: this is true glory: this is the highest, the brightest light, that virtue can appear in.

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