



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from September 20 afternoon through September 27 morning

Matthew 3

In the Gospel of Matthew, there exists a gap between Jesus at approximately age 2 and Jesus as an adult at the outset of his earthly ministry. There is little recorded about the childhood of our Savior. Our only glimpse comes in Luke 2, which is a narrative about Jesus at the temple at age 12. Matthew was guided by the Holy Spirit to move directly from the narrative about the visit of the wise men and the flight to and return from Egypt, to the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.

Matthew introduced John the Baptist, who was slightly older than Jesus and related to Jesus through their mothers (Luke 1-2). John lived, looked and ministered differently than any other religious messenger of his day. He lived in the wilderness of Judea and used the basics of God's creation to provide his clothing and food. The message he proclaimed was connected to the coming kingdom of God: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (v. 2). In fact, he stated the kingdom of heaven was on the verge of becoming reality. Matthew pointed to the prophecy given in Isaiah 40:3 and connected this to John, who was in fact the voice in the wilderness who prepared the way of the Lord. John's ministry was one of repentance, confession and baptism. His calls to repent and confess were reminiscent of Old Testament prophets who had come before him (and in fact he was somewhat similar to Elijah in a variety of ways). However, the baptism aspect of his ministry was new. While there had been ritual self-washings before this, this baptism administered by John was unprecedented. Perhaps this is why so many people made their way out into the wilderness to hear his message and respond.

As those who were Pharisees and Sadducees started to show up at John's baptism ministry, John saw them and confronted them, calling them a "brood of vipers," (v. 7). His challenge to them was to return to the ways of God, rather than relying on their heritage to count them among God's children. John was direct: these men were not special because of their family connections to Abraham, and they if they did not turn back to God they would be "cut down and thrown into the fire," (v. 10).

John then spoke about the one for whom he was preparing the way. He described this one who was coming after him as greater than John, and his ministry also would be greater. John said he baptized with water, but the one who was coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (a prediction of what would happen when the Holy Spirit would come on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2). And again John issued a warning: he who was coming after John would separate the wheat from the chaff. Those who were true children of God would be brought into the barn, while those who were not would be burned.

At some point after this (though Matthew does not say exactly how long), Jesus traveled from Galilee out to where John was conducting his ministry for the purpose of receiving John's baptism. John knew exactly who Jesus was and in his own understanding thought Jesus did not need to receive his baptism. The Messiah had no need of repentance or confession, and instead it was the Messiah who should baptize John, rather than the other way around. However, Jesus insisted he did in fact need to be baptized, "to fulfill all righteousness," (v. 15). What did this mean?

The Law included no requirements about baptism, so Jesus could not have had in view anything pertaining to Levitical righteousness. But John's message was a message of repentance, and those experiencing it were looking forward to a coming Messiah who would be righteous and who would bring in righteousness. If Messiah were to provide righteousness for sinners, He must be identified with sinners. It was therefore in the will of God for Him to be baptized by John in order to be identified (the real meaning of the word "baptized") with sinners.

Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 25.

John consented and baptized Jesus. And just after he came up out of the water, God gave a visual and audible confirmation that Jesus was in fact His one and only Son. The heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended "like a dove" to rest on him, and God's voice was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," (vs. 16-17). The work of the Spirit at that moment fulfilled Isaiah 11:2, and this event brought all three persons of God into view at one time: God the Father (the voice from heaven), God the Son (Jesus, who was baptized) and God the Holy Spirit. This moment likely was experienced only by Jesus and John. The identity of Jesus as the Messiah would have been accepted by larger crowds had they witnessed this, and the gospel records do not seem to indicate that took place ... the larger crowds that followed Jesus did not seem to realize that he was indeed the Messiah.

Discussion Questions

1. Try to put yourself in the place of a Jewish person, hearing the message of John (v. 2) for the first time. Keep in mind that there had been no message from God for 400 years. How would you interpret and receive John's message?
2. How does John's message of repentance apply to us today? How does it apply to those who do not believe in Christ? How does it apply to the church?
3. What is the meaning of baptism? If you remember your own baptism, what did it mean to you? How did that moment factor into your journey of following Jesus?
4. Why do you think John was so confrontational with the Pharisees and Sadducees? Do you think his challenge to them can be applied to people in today's world? If so, how?
5. How do you understand John's message given in verses 10 and 12?
6. What does it mean to you that Jesus submitted himself to John's baptism?
7. How are you encouraged by the presence of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit seen at the baptism of Jesus?