The Price of Preparation — Delivery Transcript

Matthew 3:1–12 (CSB) · Wes Terry · Sunday, January 4, 2026 · *Straight Paths*

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All right, well thanks to Scholar for leading us in worship through song. If you've got a Bible, you can open it to the book of Matthew. We're going to be in Matthew chapter 3. This year, 2026, we'll be studying the life of Jesus, working our way through the Gospel of Matthew. It's going to be a an exciting time. And in 2026, the first Sunday, typically people have a inkling for change. It's a well I killed my screen. I don't know if there you are. Yeah, typically it's an inkling people have an inkling for change in 2026 and the first of the year, and every time the first of the year rolls around there's two groups of people.

There's the groups of people who really take that seriously and make their list and set their goals and try really hard to reach their goals. And then there's the people who make fun of those people. And you're one of those two types of people. And I've been either one of those kinds of either one of those kinds of persons in my life before. I feel like in my twenties to 25 to 35 years old I made fun of that kind of I made fun of that kind of thing. And now that I'm a ripe old age of 40 I take it more seriously because if there's if life is throwing you a bone in any way whatsoever and you feel a little inkling for change, you should take advantage of it because it doesn't happen very often.

And so if the Holy Spirit's working, give him something to work with, is what I always say. So don't apologize for setting those goals or having your new year's resolutions. You should make them, you should make them God-honoring, and you should do them in the power of the Holy Spirit because anything good in life is worth pursuing and worth going after. And the other thing about good things in life is they require some degree of preparation. So you can set your goals, but oftentimes to reach a goal worthy of being reached, you're going to have to do some kind of prep work to make it happen.

Anything in value of life requires preparation. I mean anything. Even your frozen taquitos. You know, you got to prepare them at least a little bit too. 60 seconds in the a microwave is what I recommend. But Thanksgiving dinner requires a little bit of preparation. Your home remodel project requires preparation A paint job, if anyone's ever done any kind of painting

before, you know some of the most important work is the prep work. And if you don't do the prep work, then it shows in the final product. It doesn't look the way you wanted it to look because you didn't put in the you didn't pay the price of preparation.

Well I think what's true in the physical world is also true in the spir spiritual world. And just like you need to do the prep work to have a nice remodeled house or a nice painted room. If you want an abundant life, you're going to have to pay the price of preparation. There is an abundant life available to each and every one of us. But preparation precedes that abundant life. Our mission as a church is to make disciples, but our vision is to see every person. In Abilene and around the world, but to see every person discover new life in Jesus.

I believe that Jesus came to give us life. That's what he said. I came to give you life and life to the full. Abundant life is available in Jesus. And my goal as a pastor and our vision as a church is to see every person. Discover that life. Every student, every young person, every old person, every boy, every girl, every man, every woman. The question isn't does God want you to have an abundant life? That much is clear. The question is are you willing to pay the price of preparation to have that life?

And that process of preparation can be painful, it can be difficult, it can be require some degree of change on the way that you think and the and the and the things that you assume about God and about the world. And that's really the question behind our text today. The price of preparation. So if you'll join me in jaw or Matthew chapter three, we're going to start in verse one and we're just going to work our way down through this section. I'm going to stop at verse three. This is the story of John the Baptist who comes to prepare the way for Jesus.

It says in verse 1, in those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, repent. Because the kingdom of heaven has come near. Some translations say the kingdom of heaven is at hand, for he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said, a voice of one crying out in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. Make his paths straight. So Matthew is saying, John the Baptist has come, sent by God as the messenger. To do a very important work, which is to prepare the way of the Lord.

Matthew has been, if you've been with us over the last couple of weeks, you've noticed that Matthew Is very intentional to try to prove that Jesus is the Old Testament Messiah, the Old Testament Christ who is Prophesied in the Old Testament. God made a promise to David, who was king of Israel, that you're going to have an offspring who's going to sit on your throne and his kingdom would have no end. And Matthew is saying, Jesus is that king, Jesus is that Messiah, and his kingdom, the kingdom of God, has now come.

Now that part wasn't controversial, John preaching the kingdom of heaven is at hand. A lot of Jewish people would have been hankering for that message. Because a lot of Jewish

people believed the Old Testament and the prophecies about a Messiah and they were anticipating any day now, God send your Messiah, God send your kingdom, because these Romans are a are terrible. They're a pagan government, they've occupied us, they're ruthless and mean. And so it wasn't controversial for John the Baptist to say the kingdom of heaven is at hand. What was controversial was John's So that you need to repent to possess it.

Repent. And not only do you need to repent, you got to be baptized. And that part would have been shocking to most of the Jewish audience reading Matthew's gospel and hearing John's initial message. It gets back to the question I asked just a minute ago. It's not a question of whether or not God wants to give you a perfect life. It's not a question of whether he wants you to enjoy the kingdom. The question is, are you willing to pay the price to get it? And that was the question John was posing to these people listening to his message.

Everybody wants the kingdom, but are you willing to pay the price? Now in saying what he says, John is not suggesting that the life that Jesus alone can give is something you have to earn. He's not teaching a workspace salvation. John's message is not different than Jesus' message when it comes to the gospel. Salvation is by grace. It's through faith, it's not of works, lest anybody boast. But even a free gift of grace from God must be received by a willing heart. And for your heart to be in a place that you would receive a gift of God's grace often requires your heart to be prepared.

A preparation price must be paid in order for you to have the kind of heart that will receive the grace from God. And that's what John the Baptist is explaining in this text, and that's what I want us to look at this morning. The price of preparation. It's not a matter of whether we want the kingdom. Everybody does. The question is, are we willing to pay the price? And that first verse there is really pregnant with meaning. The phrase, in those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness. Every one of those little phrases is important the phrase, in those days, if you're studying the Bible and you see a little temporal marker like that, you want to ask the question, what days are those days?

And if you ask the question, what days are those days, the immediate context tells you they're the days immediately after the birth of Jesus and immediately preceding the ministry of Jesus, because John the Baptist comes before Jesus comes on the scene. If you study this historically, you'll know that the span of time between Matthew 2 and Matthew 3 is somewhere around 30 years. And so we get a whole chunk of Jesus' childhood just kind of skipped over. There's a little bit in Luke's gospel about growing in wisdom and stature and stuff like that, but not much.

We go straight from his birth and the events surrounding his birth to his ministry. Now, in some ways, Matthew is giving us everything he wants us to know. And if you read Matthew 1 and 2, what he wants us to know is that Jesus is the Davidic King. Jesus is the Messiah. He went again and again and again, making the point that this is in fulfillment of what the

prophets have spoken. When he gives the genealogy, he says that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to David.

When he talks about Jesus being born of a virgin, he says this is in fulfillment of what the prophets have spoken in Isaiah 7. When he talks about Jesus being born in Bethlehem, He says again, he makes a little note in fulfillment of what the prophets have spoken. When Jesus flees to Egypt, escaping the king Herod trying to kill all the babies. He says that they flee to Egypt in fulfillment of what the prophets have spoken. He says the same thing when they relocate from Egypt back to Nazareth. He makes a little comment at the end in fulfillment of what the prophets have spoken.

So if you're wondering, Matthew, what do you mean by those days, I think what Matthew would say is the days in which God kept his covenant promise, the days in which God delivered his messianic king. These are the days in which new life has dawned. These are the days in which God's kingdom has come and that kingdom has come not in a political ruler not in a ethical method ethical message not even a set of moral practices, God's kingdom has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God's kingdom has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

And in some ways, that's the most important element for us to establish in Matthew chapter 1 that these days are the days in which God's kingdom have come. And that same is true today. Just as true today as it was in the first century. Theologians talk about the already not yet tension of the kingdom of God, that God's kingdom has come in part. In the birth of Jesus Christ, his death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father, and that God's kingdom will be completed at the second coming of Jesus. Where the kingdom of this world is swallowed up by the kingdom of God.

We live in an already not yet tension, and that's what these days are, according to Matthew. But it's not just the days in which God's new life has dawned these are also days that follow 400 years of prophetic silence. See, that's the wider context. If you look at Matthew 1 and 2, the immediate context, these are the days of the kingdom. The kingdom is located in Jesus. But if you zoom out to a biblical context, the last prophetic word that had been spoken to the people of Israel was 400 years prior through a prophet named Malachi.

It's the last book of your Old Testament, in case you didn't know that. And the message that God last gave the people of Israel was I'm going to send you a messenger who would prepare the way of the Lord. If you're taking notes, this is a reminder that sometimes the abundant life that God wants to bring you in 2026, sometimes that life will come after a period of waiting. Sometimes God may require you to wait a period that you did not want to wait, but it was in that period of time that He did the necessary work of preparation.

So that when that day did come, you were ready to receive it. That's what he's saying in these days. Four hundred years of prophetic silence. The last word that they heard was from Malachi. This is chapter three verse one. See I am going to send my messenger and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant you delight in see he's coming, says the Lord of armies. A little bit later at the end of his book, he says, look, I'm going to send you the prophet Elijah When?

Before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And so these people, the people of Israel, have been waiting 400 years with this final word. 400 years of silence, 400 years of no prophetic vision, no thus says the Lord, no God nod or God wink that says, hey, I'm still around. And during that waiting period, God was preparing his people. Now, why I think this is relevant for you and for me is because some of you know exactly what that feels like. You know exactly what the original audience of Matthew 3 would have felt because you've been waiting.

And you've begun to wonder, is God still there? Does God still care? Do my prayers matter? Does God hear them? Is is there even a God? These were the kinds of questions many Jewish people in that context were asking. But sometimes God waits to prepare us for the better life, the kingdom life that He desires us to live. The question is, are you willing are you willing to be patient and wait? The other thing that you see is God's kingdom sometimes comes in a pattern you didn't want to recognize. If you go to the next slide, John the Baptist is the one, Matthew says, spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, who said a voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

That's a quotation of an Old Testament passage in Isaiah chapter 40. And for the Jewish people in the first century, Isaiah chapter 40 was in a very popular messianic passage many people had it committed to memory and they were kind of anticipating and waiting for this thing to come true. And so when Matthew writes through John the Baptist is that Isaiah and he is preparing the way of the Lord. He is not just saying that John the Baptist is the messenger. He's not even saying that Jesus is the Christ. He's saying that Jesus as the Christ is Yahweh in the flesh.

If you read this in the original text in Isaiah 43 in the original Hebrew, you see that L-O-R-D is all caps. That's a clue from the English translation that this is the Hebrew word Yahweh. In the Old Testament. And Jewish people wouldn't even translate the full word Yahweh because the name of God was so revered, so holy. Dustin preached last week the Shema, the Lord our God, the Lord is one the Jews were so strictly monotheistic, the notion that a human Messiah would come and that he would be God in the flesh.

That was anathema. That was paradigm shattering. That was no way, no how. And yet that's exactly what John the Baptist is preaching, and that's exactly what Matthew is arguing in his gospel. Right out of the gate, Matthew is claiming Jesus is God in the flesh. So not only is the

new life, the abundant life located in the person of Jesus Sometimes the good life that God wants to create in your life, sometimes it's going to come in a pattern that you won't have eyes to see. It will come through a situation that in your gut you want to reject because of the associations or because of the difficulty therein, and you'll say, no way God can use that.

No way God can use them. Just like people looking at John the Baptist were thinking to themselves, this guy's cuckoo for cocoa puffs. Surely God's not going to talk through someone like that. Sometimes he does. Sometimes he will use things. That you think God wouldn't use. Sometimes He will use people that you would think God wouldn't use. Sometimes the abundant life comes in a pattern. You didn't see coming. The question is, are you willing to have eyes to see? Are you willing to be patient and wait? John's description is just like Elijah.

He has a camel hair garment. And then a leather belt around his waist. This is the same language used to describe Isaiah in the Old Testament. He eats locust and wild honey. A lot of people make a big deal about that, you know, him eating bugs in the wilderness. It's actually not that uncommon. In the Old Testament, there's actually Levitical laws about diet, clean and unclean foods. Guess what is deemed a clean food in the Old Testament? Yeah, locust and wild honey. I recommend it if you want to lose weight, 2026.

Great way to slim your waistline, get that six pack Nothing like throwing up to you know get the calories off. This description of John the Baptist is not Matthew's way of saying John the Baptist was the weird uncle, nobody invites to Thanksgiving It's merely saying John the Baptist was unimpressive. He was not Ritz and glamour. He was not the you know respectable package. He was a simple man. He had a very simple message. He lived in a simple place. And it just goes to show, again, that sometimes the abundant life that Jesus wants to give you, it's going to come in a pattern you may not have eyes to see.

Because God was doing something profound, something significant. But it came at a time of patient waiting for many, many people, and it came in a way. That most people didn't have eyes to see. And the same is true for you and for me. He tells them to repent because the kingdom of heaven has come near. And then in verse 5 it says that people from Jerusalem All Judea and all the vicinity of the Jordan, they were going out to him. This is also unusual. Typically when a prophet developed a ministry, the prophet would gain a following by going to the high traffic areas.

So an Isaiah or an Ezekiel, they would post up in the city, the town square, they would preach. Think about like going to Las Vegas or Austin, Texas, you post up on Sixth Street, you post up where people are at, and then you preach your message, and then eventually because of your exposure, you gain a following. That's not what happens with John. John is preaching in the wilderness, and then people are coming out to John in the wilderness

because his message was so profound. It's the last thing that I think is important for you to think about when it comes to God doing a new thing in your life in 2026.

Sometimes it's going to require you to go someplace you didn't want to go. They had to go out to the wilderness of Judea. This is this is the wilderness of Judea, okay? And this is the River Jordan. So John is baptizing on the River Jordan somewhere. People are coming from all around Jerusalem. Judea, all the surrounding vicinity of the Jordan River, they're coming to John. Now he's he could be doing some of it up here. Some people think Jesus was baptized down here. We don't know exactly where Matthew 3 is happening.

But the point is people were traveling a distance, journeying into the desert, into the wilderness, in order to prepare for what John said was coming. Now I raise the question, why the wilderness? Because typically the wilderness is associated with a God-forsaken land. You know, you don't meet God in the wilderness. The wilderness is the desert. God isn't there. It's dry, it's spiritually. Divorced from kind of the presence of God. You see this when Jesus is led by the devil into the wilderness to be tempted. He probably felt far from the Lord because he was in that wilderness place.

So why does God send John to the wilderness to prepare people for the coming of the Lord? I've I think the answer to that is the same reason why Jesus went to Egypt and Jesus was born of a virgin and Jesus was relocated to Nazareth. It's all in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Jesus is the true and greater Israel, right? He is the one who did what the original Israel did not do. He res he did what Adam didn't do. He resisted temptation in the wilderness. Well the first people of God, where were they formed?

They were formed in the wilderness, right? They are delivered from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God parts the Red Sea. They get on the cusp of the promised land, but instead of entering the promised land, they worship idols, they come grumble and complain against the Lord. And so God punishes them and makes them wander for 40 years in the wilderness until that entire generation passed away. Only then were God's people ready to receive the promised land. And just like that first Israel, just like that first people of God had to meet God in the desert to be formed and become ready, I think sometimes God requires us to wait a season we didn't want to wait, to work with a pattern we didn't want to see, and go to a place maybe we didn't want to go.

Because in all of those ways, God is preparing us to receive the greater life that Jesus alone can give. And it's so important for us as we start a new year to have a category in our mind that God may do that with me today. That I have to have a heart that's prepared to receive the thing that Jesus wants to do. And that part of God's process in preparing me may take longer than I want to wait. It may come in a way I didn't see, and it may cause me to go to a place I didn't necessarily want to go.

But if you will be willing to do those things, then God will meet you in those places. God will meet you in that season, and God will work through those things to prepare you for what's next. And that's all John the Baptist is saying. Now, if that's true, if you're willing to do those things, then the question is, how do I prepare myself? If that's when the preparation happens, if that's how the preparation, then what do I do to be prepared? All of that is implied in John's title, John the Baptist.

We hear the word baptism and we have a certain thing come to mind because we're a Baptist church. We baptize people after they turn from sin and put their trust in Jesus, we baptize them as a public expression of their faith. For Jewish people in the first century, baptism was something else entirely. In fact, baptism wasn't even for the Jews. Baptism was reserved for Gentile people who were converting into Judaism And so if you were a Gentile and you wanted to worship Yahweh, the God of the Jews, then you would have to be baptized as a way of saying, I'm with you guys.

I'm in. I'm converting. I'm dying to my old way, and I'm going to become a follower of Yahweh. When John the Baptist says to a Jewish audience, you need to repent, you need to be baptized, what he is essentially saying is your Jewish ethnicity is not sufficient. For you to be ready for what's coming. Your Jewishness is not sufficient for you to inherit the kingdom. You've got to repent. You've got to be baptized. And so we need to take the word baptism based on what it meant to the original audience, not what it means to us.

And the word repentance, we need to understand in its original context, not what you think it means. When you hear the word. Because a lot of people when they hear the word repent, they think it means to feel bad about your sin or to try really hard to do better. That's not that's not repentance. That's not what John is saying. And so what John means by repentance, he I think explains beautifully as you continue to read the rest of this section. He says in verse 6 that they were coming out to him from all of these different places.

I'm in Malachi. Let's get back to Matthew. Okay. He sees coming out from all of these places to be baptized by him in the Jordan River, and they were confessing their sins. But notice when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees, underline those two words. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, produce fruit consistent with repentance. In other words, you're not repenting. You need to really repent. Don't presume to say to yourself, verse 9, well, we have Abraham as our father.

For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. The axe is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who's coming after me, he's more powerful than I am. I'm not even worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his

hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, and the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out.

Tell me what you really think, John. So when John says repent, what does he mean? Whatever he means, it's not what the Pharisees and the Sadducees were doing. Sometimes to know what a thing is, you got to know what it isn't. If you're new to Bible study, the words Pharisee, Sadducee, that might be new to you. That's okay. They were, if I could explain it this way, they were two parts of the religious establishment in the first century. The Jewish religious establishment was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees would be the populist, conservative, lay-driven, by lay I mean not leadership class, but kind of lay-level zealous people who were zealous for moral conformity to God's law and the rabbinic tradition that had been put on top of God's law.

If you really wanted to be committed to God, then you would be a Pharisee. It was kind of like the super Christians of today, which I don't recommend having super Christians, but you know those people that oh you're really on fire for God. Those people, you're always going to church and you like you don't even cuss. Not even when people cut you off in traffic. You know, you don't watch these kind of movies. Those kind of people who were just, if it can possibly make me sin against God, I'm not going to do it.

Those people, those were the Pharisees. And the Sadducees I would describe as a smaller group. They were more aristocratic, which means they were wealthier, more high class, they were politically connected. They were friendly with Rome, who was the pagan occupying government of Israel at this time. They were really intricately woven with the temple life in Jerusalem. And temple traditions like animal sacrifices and festivals and events of that nature. And unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament. That's called the Torah. The books of Moses, sometimes they're called, which meant that the Sadducees did not believe in certain things, like angels.

Which angels are in the Old Testament. I don't know why they didn't believe it, but they didn't believe in angels and they didn't believe in supernatural things like the afterlife or the resurrection. In fact, when I was a kid, the way they taught me to distinguish between the Pharisees and the Sadducees is that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. That's why they were sad, you see. Does anyone else remember that? Now you can be plagued with that stupid joke for the rest of your life. It's not a bad way to remember them.

But my point is they were similar in that they were both part of the religious establishment. But they were distinct and in a way warring against one another for what true religion is. What does God truly want? Does he want you to be a conservative or a liberal? Does he want you to be like politically connected and friendly with Rome, or do you need to be a zealot who's who's resisting Rome? Very similar to today in how politics can get weaponized

religiously and people take different sides. And both of them would have had a vested interest in controlling John's movement.

Because John is popular. The fact that these people were leaving Jerusalem and Judea and the surrounding areas and they were traveling to the desert. That tells you that John was somebody. John had gained a following. John was making waves. And so I don't know if these Sadducees and Pharisees were coming to be baptized or if they were coming to spy and check things out or maybe they were coming to throw water on John and kind of ruin his reputation. But John is not impressed and John is not swayed. He calls them out as a brood of vipers, which brood means children, viper, snake.

He's saying, you're the devil's children. You guys are demons you're broods of demons. Your father is the devil, which is John's way of saying you're a hidden spiritual danger. To what God really wants for people. That's what a viper. A viper was a small stake a snake. It was very camouflaged. They were hard to see. But as soon as you stepped on it, you were it was bad news bears, right? You were in a bad way if you stepped on a viper. And he's saying that's what these people are, which is tremendously offensive.

It would be as though John would say to our religious establishment of evangelicalism, nobody nobody worships God. Nobody knows what God wants. Everybody's doing it wrong. The religious conservatives and the religious liberals, nobody's got it right. This is what God wants. How popular do you think that would be? Well, if you were part of the establishment, not very. And so whatever they were doing isn't repentance. That's the point. And if I had to say what their repentance was, I would call it performative repentance. And this is what I think a lot of people think repentance is.

A lot of people think repentance is performative. In other words I need to externally, outwardly change my behavior so that I am superior to the people who are bad and so that I'm acceptable to God. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees had different types of performative repentance, but they were both performative. The Pharisees were performative in saying, so long as I adhere to God's law and the rabbinic tradition and have all these extra rules and regulations. Then I'll definitely be better than the normal people out there, and I'll also be impressive to God and he'll have no choice but to like me because of how moral I am.

That's performative. It's not sincere. It's certainly not what God wants. And it's not true repentance. The Sadducees were much more performative in the sense of traditions and religious observances of festivals and symbols and things like that. It would be like someone today saying so long as I go to church every Sunday and so long as I'm part of a small group and I got baptized and I did all the things then I'm good with people, then I'm good with God. But in that case, that's not repentance either because it's external, it's based on other people's opinion, it's not internal, and it's not before the Lord True repentance, in fact the very word repentance is not performative change.

It's what I'm going to call a genuine change of perception. And the word perception is really important because again, I think when people think repentance, they think feel bad. They think do better. That's not repentance. Repentance is a change of thinking. It is a changing of your mind. It's built into the word. The Greek word repentance is meta-noia. The Greek word meta is a preposition that means after or with. And then the word noia or noose is the Greek word for mind or thinking. So it's literally saying it's what happens after you change your mind.

That's repentance. And in that way, repentance, the best, the best, best, best definition of repentance I've ever heard is that repentance is agreeing with God about the facts. Think of it this way, if you're married, have you ever had a had an argument with your spouse and the things that they thought and the things that they said just drove you crazy? And you thought to yourself, how can anyone think that way? And if she would just think, if she would just see this the way I saw it, we wouldn't be fighting.

Has anyone ever thought that? Or you think the opposite sex is like cuckoo for cocoa puffs? They if they would just think like a man, or if they would just think like a woman, we wouldn't have this problem. Anyone ever thought that? Well, if they thought like a man, or if they thought like a woman, or if they thought like you thought, that would be repentance. That would be them seeing the world the way you see the world. And true repentance, repentance before God, is essentially saying, God, I'm going to see it your way.

I'm going to see the world the way you created it. I'm going to see myself the way you see myself. I'm going to see Jesus the way you said to see Jesus. I'm going to see my suffering the way you said to see suffering. Repentance is a change of perception. Now, will that create sorrow over sin? Surely. But that's a downstream effect. That's not repentance. Will it create a desire for change? Of course, but that's a downstream effect. It's not repentance. Repentance is seeing the world as it truly is, which means the hard work of preparing for repentance is removing the obstructions that keep you from seeing clearly.

You've got to remove from your vision those things that keep you from seeing things as they really are. And that's why repentance can be so painful. And that's why the Pharisees and the Sadducees weren't ready to do it. They were blinded by their traditions. They were blinded by their self-righteousness. They were blinded by their core assumptions about what God must be like and what is pleasing to him. And John is saying, you're not ready, and you won't be ready. Until you repent. So what does that look like practically? That's what I want us to close with and then we'll be done.

I'll give them to you all up front. John's response to the Pharisees and Sadducees, if you want to be a person of repentance in 2026, you've got to cut out the false pretense and pride. You've got to confess the real problem of sin. Confess your real problem, which is a sin problem You need to show real proof or demonstrate proof of real repentance. And then You

need to receive the real power for change. So cut the pretense, confess the problem, show real proof, and receive the real power. They're all in the text.

So if I can if I don't get to them, you'll get to them later. Okay. When he says to cut the pretense, what he's essentially saying is, you guys are so dead set on being better than everyone else. Because of your temple traditions or because of your self-righteousness, and you have no idea that that's a pretentious spirit before the Lord, because God is not impressed by you. He says in verse what was it verse nine, do not presume to say, we have Abraham as our father. He's saying, don't presume that somehow your ethnicity or your traditions or your whatever in the past somehow commend you before the Lord.

It does not. And the same would be said to you and to me, except for most of us we don't have Abraham as our father, at least not our biological father. But some of us do carry that spirit. In fact, you might ask yourself, why are you here today? Why are you at church? The first Sunday of the year. Most people skip this one. And yet here you are. Why are you here today? If the answer, honestly, isn't to worship Jesus because he's worthy, but so that people don't think I'm a pagan.

Or so that my spouse will think I'm trying hard this year. Or so that God will be happy with me. That's a little bit of pretense. Pretense is just doing something with an ulterior motive. What you say is what you're wanting is not actually what you're wanting. That's pretense. And so often we can't see our pretense in the mirror. It's really hard to see pretense in the mirror. But if you were to ask, when's the last time the Bible actually wounded my pride? When's the last time the scriptures actually cut me to the quick instead of being a club that I could beat other people with?

If it's been a long time since the scriptures have convicted you, and the only thing the scriptures are useful for is condemning others, then there's probably pretense in your life. That's why they call people a pretentious jerk. That's where that comes from. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees had all kind of pretense. Why do you want to change? You say, I'm here to be a better mom. I want to be the best mom I can be in 2026. Praise God. It's good to be a better mom. Why do you want to be a better mom?

Is it because if you're not a good enough mom, then you're not okay? Is it because if you're not a better mom than your mom was, then your life isn't worth living? That's a subtle idolatry. It's essentially saying the only way I can be happy is if I have this thing in my life, or if I have that thing in my life, or if I'm seen in this way by people and not that way by people. It's divorcing what's ultimately good in your life from the Lord, and it's making it something God can give you.

And if God is a means to an end and not the end in and of himself, then that is pretense. And God can't bless it. And the change that you create in your life around that pretense will not

last. See this all the time in marriage counseling, where someone will come in and I'm going to do better, I'm going to try harder, I'm going to like write love notes every day, and they do for a good thirty days. But then as soon as the other partner is kind of cooled off and okay, I guess we can relax.

I guess I don't have to leave, then it goes right back to normal. Why? Because the motivation for change wasn't sincere. It wasn't for the Lord. It wasn't because you were sinning against God, it was because your actions were threatening what you wanted more than anything else in life, which is to have that person be your spouse. And as soon as that person, as soon as God gives you what you really want, you'll check out on the Lord. You've got to cut it. You've got to cut that junk out of your life.

It will not produce true and lasting change in 2026. It just won't. And then you need to confess your sin. Now that's the part that distinguishes the crowd from the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In verse 6, it says the crowd was being baptized by John confessing their sins. Both groups were sinful. All three groups were sinful. The only thing that distinguishes the crowd who had been baptized was that the crowd was willing to confess their problem. The Pharisees wouldn't confess it, and the Sadducees wouldn't confess it because they didn't see truly.

So one of the ways you know that you've repented is that you begin to see your sin the way God sees your sin. You begin to see your sin as something that's offensive to God, not just inconvenient for you, not just upsetting to other people, but my sin is a violation of God's design, who is my creator and Lord and ruler of the universe. And in Committing sin against him, it's a cosmic treason that is way not okay. That's what confessing the real problem looks like. And one of the ways you know that you've truly repented is that you, it's not just that you see your sin differently, it's that you'll begin to see confession differently.

They were confessing their sins. This is one way I wish Protestants were a little more Roman Catholic. I'll probably get an email for that, but they confessed their sin on the regular. Now they got bad theology, I think, wrong theology. You don't need a priest to confess your sins. Like you don't have to come confess your sins to me. All you need is another brother or sister in the Lord who knows you and loves you. And when you begin to see confession of your sin as a, it's not a road to slavery, it's not a road to shame, it's not a road to condemnation.

When you begin to see confession as a road to freedom, a road to cleansing, a road to forgiveness, now you've repented. Because that's what confession is 1 John 1 9, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. When you begin to see confession in that way, then it's the most exciting thing you could do. It's still awkward. Has anyone ever confessed their sin to another person? It's kind of awkward. Especially when they're not sealed by law to not tell anybody.

That's one thing the Catholics got going for them, but it is important nonetheless. And I don't mean generic confession. You know, marriage is really hard. That's not confession. I've been stonewalling my spouse as a way to punish them. That's specific. I'm just struggling. That's not specific. I lied to my boss because I'm afraid I might get fired. That's specific. And what happens when you confess your sins with that kind of specificity and the person to whom is somewhat irrelevant. But bringing it into the light, it takes that sin and that secrecy and that darkness and it exposes it so that it loses its power over you.

And when you bring it into the light, you begin to see it as God sees it, because it's got to be in the light for you to see it in that way. And then you can begin to address it and turn away from it. And that's what true repentance is. It's seeing your sin truly, seeing confession truly. Which leads to the last thing, which is to show proof of real repentance. It's not that complicated. It's not what the Pharisees were doing. It's not religious performance. It's not going to church more often.

It's not even getting baptized. Like just to get baptized, just to get wet. It's not any of that. The proof of repentance is to live as if your eyes are open that's it. It's to live as if you can really see. I can really see my sin, and so I'm going to let my life reflect as though I do see my sin, which means I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm going to do something different I'm going to turn away from that and I'm going to go a different direction.

I'm not going to get upset every time somebody calls me out on a failure. I'm not going to be unwilling to say I'm sorry. Because I don't see that as a necessary means to be okay in life. I can admit my failure because the ground's level at the foot of the cross. That's what everybody does here. Live as if you can really see. As if you really see the way God created you to see. But it's not enough for real change. John says in verse 11, I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who's coming after me, he's more powerful than I.

I'm not worthy to remove his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovels in his hand, he'll clear the threshing floor. And gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out. Say this very simply and very shortly. John is saying, my repentance, my baptism will not change your life. My baptism is water for repentance. In other words, I can help you turn away from what is wrong. But unless and until you turn to what is powerful to what is true and less than until you turn to the Lord Jesus Christ you will not change but when he comes.

And when you put your faith in him, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He actually says two things. The Holy Spirit and fire. I see the Holy Spirit as. Salvation, forgiveness of sins, power to live a righteous life, power to want what God wants, power to see as God sees. But fire is the judgment of God. Which means Jesus will baptize you one of two ways. You will be baptized by the Spirit for salvation, or you will be baptized by fire for judgment. It's just a matter of which baptism you receive.

Which leads us back to our original question. It's not a question of whether God wants to bless you this year. It's a matter of whether you're prepared for what it's a matter of whether you're prepared for the blessing he desires to give. That blessing is located in the person of Jesus Christ. And if you're here this morning and you've never received him into your life as Savior and Lord, if you've never turned from your sin. And turn to Jesus for salvation, then this morning you need to do that. You need to cut the pretense, you need to confess your sin, and you need to believe that Jesus is for you what you could never be for God.

He is your sinless, spotless life of loving obedience to the Father. He is the one who paid the price for your sins on the cross, and he is the one three days later that God raised from the dead to say I love you. His death is sufficient. I will save you. I will forgive you. Not because of what you've done, but because of what he has done for you. And that is the first step of having your best year ever. And if you're not a if you are a Christian this morning, then I would ask you in this time of response to ask the Lord to help you have a spirit of repentance in 2026.

The goals are good, you should keep the goals, but the goals will only produce lasting change if they're coming from a place of genuine repentance. And so would you ask the Lord, why am I really wanting this, Lord? Why do I want to lose weight? Why do I want to buy a house? What's the reason I want to be a better mom? Unless and until it's first and foremost about the Lord, you're not all the way there yet. You're not seeing truly. And so would you ask the Lord to give you eyes to see, as he sees, and eyes to see Jesus clearly for who he is and what he's done.

And a heart of humility to receive patiently. The abundant life that he desires to give you. And so Father, we do. We commit this time to you. As we respond, we thank you for people like John the Baptist, people who tell us things that we don't necessarily want to hear, but we need to hear to receive the abundant life that you desire to give us. And so I pray now as we respond in this time of response that you would give us hearts of repentance, each and every one, that every person that responds this morning would respond in repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that those who are in need of salvation, those who need to make Jesus their Lord and Savior for the first time, that they would have the courage and the faith to do that.

And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. I want to ask you to keep a prayerful heart and spirit as we respond to the Lord. I'm going to give you a few moments to respond. If you want to receive prayer, I'd be happy to pray with you or pray for you. You may have someone you want to pray with, and you can do that at this time. If you're not a Christian, and you're wondering, well, how do you become a Christian anyway? I would encourage you to use your connect card right now.

Just take it out of the back of your chair and check the box that says, I want to receive Christ. I want to pray to receive Christ. And there's no magic potion, there's no magic words. It's essentially doing what we talked about this morning, admitting that you have a problem you can't fix, believing that Jesus solves that problem through his life, death, and resurrection. And confessing him as your Savior and Lord. And so if you'll pray a prayer that's essentially like that, Lord, I admit that I'm a sinner, that my sins have separated me from you, I repent of my sins.

I believe that Jesus paid the price for my sins and I want to make him my Savior and Lord. You can pray that now, you can pray that when you get home. But what's important is if you commit your life to Jesus, that you take that next step of obedience, which is baptism. And so if we can help you take that step, then Fill out that connect card so that we can schedule it and get it on the books and help this year be a year in which you're fully devoted to the Lord.

But you respond as the Lord leads. I'll be here to pray if you want someone to pray with