

## The Straight Path

Matthew 3.1-12

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Church is about meeting with God. How do we prepare for meeting with God?

During the days of Advent this is one of the central questions. It is the most important question for us to get an answer to, because we will all one day meet with our creator. Are you ready for that?

John the Baptist explains to us how our lives can be made right with God, so that we are ready to meet with him.

### 1. John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a strange figure. He came from a nice middle class family. But he decided to dress rather strange; his daily food was not what you can buy in Metro Market; and he preached a very tough, radical message.

Like a serious prophet of the Old Testament, he spoke of the coming wrath of God. Now that is certainly a message that does not make someone immediately into Mr Popular.

But John was taken seriously by the people of Israel. I guess because they realised that they were living in a time of extraordinary significance.

John spoke of the coming wrath of God; I think he was predicting that God would take action against all injustice among the people of God, and this actually happened when Jerusalem and its Temple were burned by fire in the year 70.

In a more general sense, John's words are a warning for us, to be prepared to meet with our God. How will he judge our life?

John spoke very hard words - but he offered a way out. He preach law, but then gives us Gospel as well.

What was his message?

'Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for Him.'



Straight paths. Those words remind me of language used in Islam, in surat al-Fatiha: 'Ihdina al-siret almustaqiim.'

Islamic theological scholars agree in general that this straight path is the religion of Islam, and a lifestyle of obedience to Allah and his prophet as prescribed in Islam.

So Muslims who pray that Allah leads them on the straight path mean that he keeps them inside Islam and that they will live strictly by all practices of Islam.

## 2. Confess sins and live the life

What does the straight path mean for John the baptist? Surely, he is also speaking of lifestyle. His message has echoes of the Old Testament prophets who called people back to full obedience to all the laws of God.

John calls people to conversion and to change their life. If we look at this superficially, this connects John's message with any religion that preaches that in order to please God, we just have to follow a set of rules and habits.

But the message of the Gospel is not that if we obey God, we will not be judged.

This is certainly not the Christian message. For John, the straight path meant to recognise our sins and to change our lifestyle - but here is the difference with other religions. Our faith recognises that sin always spoils any optimism about our ability to actually do this full obedience to God.

The main religion here in Egypt says that if only we know what we must do, and if we are then really committed to doing it, then we can live perfect lives that satisfy God.

But the problem of mankind is so deep, we are not able to obey perfectly. And many times we even do not want to obey. We are so messed up.

Our problem is deep, it is sin rooted in our hearts and minds. How deep this problem is, became clear by the message and baptism of John. Thousands came to him, thousands converted, wanted a new life, were baptised. Hallelujah they shouted.



And the same people, a few years later, shouted for the crucifixion of Jesus our Lord. Crucify Him, they shouted.

Our amazing decisions, our firm commitments, they do not seem to change us much.

John also made clear that it does not matter much to what denomination you belong. He accuses the good, law-abiding Jewish leaders who came to him for baptism, that

they were just hypocrites, and that only a radical make-over of their lives would satisfy God.

“You think God is satisfied with you because you follow a set of rules and because you are part of the tribe of Abraham? Forget it. That is not enough for God.”

As Christians we are mistaken if we think that by being born as a Christian, and by being baptised and being part of the perfect church, and by trying to live a morally upright life, God will be pleased with us.

“God can make children of Abraham from any stone you see here in the desert”, John says to those who came to him.

To be a child of Abraham is not that important after all. What counts, is change, what counts, is lifestyle. Real change is needed if we want to qualify for God.

Its about Jesus - not about my path. He is the Way.

John reminded people of the absolute need for conversion and a renewed lifestyle - as a true child of the Old Covenant.

But he was also the bridge to the New Covenant. He was aware that conversion, baptism and a new lifestyle were urgent - but they were not the final thing.

He knew, it is not enough, simply because we are never good enough.

John points us to Jesus our Lord as the solution. The straight path he talks about, is to prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The human problem of separation from God, cannot be solved by our conversion and a changed lifestyle. The final answer is in Jesus Christ himself.

John says, that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit. What does this mean?

First, that Jesus will come to do something not on the outside. It is not some water on our head that sets you right with God. It is something the Holy Spirit does, who touches our whole being, inside and outside, He sets us right with God.

And more important, by being baptised with the Holy Spirit, it is God himself who connects with our lives. Jesus has given us his Spirit to connect us with God.

God himself has become part of our life. Our life as Christians is not in the first place about doing this or that. It is in the first place, that God is himself in our life.

For all this, we need Jesus Christ. He is the only one who, after his birth, walked the straight path perfectly.

Let me be a bit theological here. You know the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert. The nation of Israel was tempted in the desert and what did they do? They trespassed Gods laws, they worshipped even the golden calf.

Jesus was tempted in the desert and did obey God perfectly. The people of God are unable to love God and their neighbours perfectly well, but Jesus was able.

He walked the straight path and he did this on our behalf, as the representative of the people of God.

### 3. Our inability

Sure, we try to live as Jesus did. We try to walk the straight path. But we are so messed up. We belong to the humankind who try to live good, but at the same time we are family of those who crucified the Perfect One.

Our efforts to walk the straight path do not bring us to God; it does not save us from our sins. It actually shows us our sinfulness.

If you do not get this point, I suggest you read the sermon on the mountain, Matthew 5-7, and try to live strictly by that this weekend. You will see how wonderful you serve God.

We try, we try, but we cannot be perfect. Something always pulls us down.

Only Jesus Christ can make us right with God. He has given us the Spirit of God, so that God - Father, Son and Spirit, are always around you, with you, in you. That is our reconciliation with God.

Does this mean our conversion and changed lifestyle are not important? Of course they are important. But do not think for a moment that our intentions or our Christian lifestyle makes us right with God.

It is Jesus Christ. And real change only comes when Jesus Christ is part of our life; without the Holy Spirit's work, what can change us? And even with the presence of God, our increase in holiness is still very minimal.

We allow our Lord to be in our lives by confessing our sins. By admitting we do not have the means in ourselves to live for God and to please God. By acknowledging that on whatever path we walk, we will never reach the height of divine perfection.

A focus on the need for change may seem very pious, but it is, in a sense, idolatry. It takes our eyes away from Jesus Christ, from God. It looks more at ourselves and what we must do, than at God, our saviour.

Let me give an example of how this works. I remember once being on Mount Sinai, in the night. We climbed down the mountain and it was a steep descent. In order to walk carefully, I looked down at the path and at my feet. That was very problematic. Walking went much better when I looked up, to catch the light of the moon.

Listen to the prophets, listen to John the Baptist, yes be a good person. But all this is so minor compared to Jesus Christ. He is stronger and more worthy than anything we could ever do for God.

That is why John the Baptist shouts it out, when he sees Jesus come: See the Lamb of God who carries away the sins of the World. He is God with us, He forgives our sins, He gives the Spirit of God in our lives for making us better people - what an amazing Gospel. What a reason to focus on Jesus only.

## **Conclusion**

So, the best way to prepare our hearts and minds for meeting with God, is by looking at the only one who was able to walk the straight path perfectly.

Focus on Jesus Christ. Have faith in Him.

Allow Him to work through his Spirit in your life. And then you will more and more walk with Him on that straight path.

But do not focus on how you walk, do not focus on the path. Focus on Jesus Christ himself and through his Spirit, He is with you and He will help you.

He is with you and he helps you even when we meet with God. At that moment you will stand hand in hand with Jesus before the Father and He will look at Jesus and say, well done.

**+ Amen**

