

Session 2

THE CALL & PREPARATION OF THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

Matthew 3:1-17

Memory Verse

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

– MATTHEW 3:11, CSB



The Call & Preparation of the Ministry of Jesus

THEOLOGICAL THEME: As Isaiah foretold, John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus's ministry, then baptized Him in the Jordan River, kicking off a ministry that would lead to our eternal salvation.

CALL TO ACTION: As John the Baptist did, we must humble ourselves and understand our assignment as followers of the true King by sharing the good news where we live, work, and play. Are you good with your part in His story? Have you considered what your supporting role in the story is?

Have you ever heard the term “main character energy?”

This popular slang expression is so prominent that Merriam-Webster, the faithful dictionary publisher and website, defines it.

People who have “main character energy” live like they are the main characters of their lives. Think of a Hollywood blockbuster. We follow the main character. Most of the time we root for them, too. We celebrate their wins and are heartbroken over their losses. We boo their rivals. In the few hours we devote to watching their story play out on the big screen, we're emotionally invested and (usually) want the best for them.

When you have “main character energy” in real life, you live like you are that character. You're self-assured and self-confident. You become or act like the center of attention. You are self-empowered. When this term is used online, it's usually in “good for you” types of praise, admiring the way someone acts or is living.¹

But this is not the life we are called to in Jesus. When we faithfully follow Him, Jesus is to be the center of attention in our life, not us. He is the main character. We're the supporting characters in His story.

In our passage today, we'll meet John the Baptist, one of Jesus's "supporting characters" in His earthly ministry. John knew he wasn't the main character, but the One who was coming after him, Jesus, was. Like any good supporting character, John didn't seek to be the center of attention; instead, his ministry pointed to Jesus.



What does it look like to point to Jesus in your daily life?



How are you pointing to Jesus today? How can you make Jesus the main character of your life?

Session Summary

Our passage in Matthew opens with an introduction to John the Baptist, whose ministry prepared the way for the coming Messiah, Jesus. He prepared the hearts of the people, helping them see that they were sinners in need of repentance and salvation that would ultimately come through the promised Messiah. John recognized he wasn't the "main character" in this story and used his life and ministry to point to Jesus.

When Jesus Himself arrived on the scene, ready to be baptized, John, knowing he was unworthy of the task, tried to stop Jesus. And yet, God used John to bring Him glory in this moment in the waters of the Jordan. We see the heavens opened and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all together in one place, inaugurating a journey that would lead to the cross and our salvation.

1. John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-6)



What stands out to you about John from these verses?



How would you describe John's ministry from these verses?

Today, we are beginning a study of the book of Matthew. The author of this Gospel doesn't identify himself in writing, but church tradition names the author as Matthew (also called Levi), one of the twelve disciples in Jesus's inner circle. Matthew was a tax collector.² Jesus called Matthew to follow Him in Matthew 9:9 (see also Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27-28). Many scholars have speculated that, as a tax collector, Matthew would have been accustomed to keeping detailed records, and he probably put that skill to use to record testimony of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel referenced the Old Testament more than any other Gospel account,³ like in today's passage, and emphasized Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish people.

In this passage, Matthew described the role of John the Baptist as the forerunner and herald for Jesus's earthly ministry. John the Baptist's birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth (Mary's cousin) was foretold by an angel in Luke 1:13-17. The angel told Zechariah that John would be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:15) and walk in the spirit of the prophet Elijah "to make ready for the Lord a prepared people" (Luke 1:17). God set John the Baptist apart for a special purpose before his birth, and in these verses in Matthew, we see that special purpose in action.

In Jesus's day, it was common for kings to send someone ahead of them to prepare the way for their arrival. The role of this herald was to make sure the people and the land were prepared for the king's arrival.⁴ John acted as the forerunner for the arrival of the King of kings, preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah.

In the Old Testament, the words “in those days” would many times point to the fulfillment of prophecy,⁵ which Matthew would make clear in a few verses. John preached in the wilderness of Judea, the area where the people had received the Israelite law, a time when the people had been set apart for new beginnings.⁶ John paved the way for a more important new beginning: the arrival of Jesus.


John proclaimed “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” (Matt. 3:2). Even today, this is the first step we must take to accept the gift of salvation: recognize we are sinners unable to save ourselves in need of a Savior. Jesus would also call people to repentance in His ministry.

Matthew quoted Isaiah 40:3 here showing that John’s ministry fulfilled prophecy spoken by the prophet Isaiah. This prophecy also pointed to the coming Messiah and would have been especially meaningful to a Jewish reader who would recognize this prophecy for exactly what it was: evidence that Jesus was the Messiah.

Matthew gave a description of John’s outward appearance and lifestyle beginning in verse 4. He ate locusts, the food of the poor, and wore a similar garment to the Old Testament prophet Elijah.⁷ The people apparently recognized something different about John because they flocked to him to be baptized.

Before this, the Jews would wash ceremonially, and when Gentiles converted to Judaism, they would be baptized. But John’s baptism was different. Since Jesus had not yet begun His public ministry, John’s baptism could not signify that a person had joined the body of Christ but instead was a public profession of repentance and commitment to live a changed life.⁸

Baptism today is not a saving act. We are saved through God’s grace by faith in Jesus alone, not because of any actions, like baptism, that we might perform. For these Jews, baptism was an outward sign of a commitment to repent and live differently. For us, baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality of receiving the gift of salvation and following Jesus.

 **Application: Why is repentance an ongoing part of the Christian life and not only something we do to first receive Jesus?**

2. Pointing to Jesus (Matthew 3:7-12)



What strikes you about John's proclamation to the people in these verses?



What warning did John give? What promise?

The Jewish religious leaders (the Pharisees and Sadducees are named here) are often painted as hypocrites in the Gospels. By all appearances, they lived a holy life, and yet many did not have the humble heart posture God requires, desiring wealth, power, and reputation more than actual righteousness. Jesus would later call them out as John did here.

John called out the religious leaders as enemies, warning them that their biological status as children of Abraham would not ultimately save them. John's words referencing God's ability to raise up children of Abraham from the stones foreshadowed the eventual incorporation of the Gentiles into God's family.⁹

Often in biblical imagery, a tree's production of "good fruit" (v. 10) represents the good works of a believer in Jesus because of a repentant heart. In God's orchard, all other "trees" are cut down. (Note this does not support the idea that our good works can earn salvation; our good works are the result of a born-again heart.)

In verse 11, John pointed directly to Jesus, alluding to the fact that, like a worker separating good grain from worthless chaff, God will one day sort believers from nonbelievers.

As we discussed earlier, John knew he was not the main character here. He did not want glory but passed that along to the Lord. Someone else was coming, someone better, someone for whom John wasn't even worthy to perform the lowly task of removing His sandals. That someone was Jesus.

❓ Application: What warning is there for us in John's message to the religious leaders? What might this type of hypocritical religious thinking look like in our lives today?

3. Jesus's Baptism (Matthew 3:13-17)

❓ Why would John view it as inappropriate for him to baptize Jesus?

❓ How was Jesus's identifying with those He came to save in being baptized?

At last, the moment John had been heralding had arrived! Jesus was on the scene. He came from Galilee and His baptism would officially begin His public ministry.

John knew Jesus did not need to repent, and so he hesitated to baptize Jesus. But Jesus knew it was God's will for John to baptize Him, and just as Jesus submitted to the Father's will, John submitted, and Jesus was baptized.

Notice again, John sought no glory of his own. He recognized his unworthiness. He approached Jesus humbly. John correctly understood who Jesus was, and who he was in comparison—a sinner. But God desires to and delights in using us for His glory as He did with John. We are sinners, but God wants to redeem us and use us as part of His story.

At Jesus's encouragement, John baptized Jesus, and we see all three persons of the Trinity interacting in one space: the Son, in the river being baptized, the Holy Spirit, “descending like a dove and coming down on him” (v. 16), and God the Father, speaking from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased” (v. 17). This is one of only two instances where Matthew recorded the

Father speaking in his Gospel.¹⁰ Matthew seized the moment to highlight Jesus's divinity: Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

John prepared the way, and Jesus took the first step for His public ministry. The mission was underway.

? Application: What can we learn from John's response to Jesus in this passage? What does it look like to respond similarly to Jesus in our daily lives?

Conclusion

At the end of our passage today, Jesus arrived from Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. While John hesitated because he knew Jesus did not need to repent of any sins, Jesus knew His baptism was the will of the Father, so John was obedient in following God's plan. God used this imperfect human with a humble heart to bring Him glory in the waters of the Jordan.

God still works this way today. He calls us to tasks that we don't feel equipped for, prepared for, or worthy to participate in, and though we are imperfect sinners who often get it wrong, He delights in working in and through us as His unlikely instruments.

The key to successful involvement as a "supporting character" in God's beautiful story, like John, is to adopt the same attitude as John: humble obedience.

? What can we learn from John the Baptist about how to live a life for Jesus?

? How can we seek a bolder life for Jesus today? What can we do to point to Him more clearly in all we do?



Why should our role in God's story continually lead to sharing Jesus with others?

Memorize

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

- Matthew 3:11, CSB

References

¹Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "main character energy," accessed June 17, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/slang/main-character-energy>.

²Charles L. Quarles, "Matthew," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1494.

³Thomas L. Constable, "Exposition," in *Notes on Matthew*, 2025 Edition, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/matthew/matthew.htm>.

⁴Constable, "Exposition," in *Notes on Matthew*.

⁵Quarles, "Matthew," 1502.

⁶Constable, "Exposition," in *Notes on Matthew*.

⁷Constable, "Exposition," in *Notes on Matthew*.

⁸Quarles, "Matthew," 1502.

⁹Quarles, "Matthew," 1502.

¹⁰Quarles, "Matthew," 1503.