

## Middle School Sunday School Lessons by

**rfour.org**

**Year 3: Session 3** – John the Baptist and Jesus

**Class 9: Matthew 3:1-17** – John the Baptist & Jesus team-up

### **CONCEPTS that will be covered in the lesson**

- Discuss what the original word for “sin” meant
- Discuss what the original word for “repent” meant
- Highlight what it is that John is doing and how he helps get the people ready for Jesus

### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

- Some way to play and show movie clip on rfour.org site for this lesson (from *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*)
- Something soft to throw: At least 5 of these soft things per every two students.
  - Balled-up newspaper works well in this case.
- Two ropes/string to mark where the two sides of each team will stand

## **THE LESSON**

### **OPENING PRAYER**

### **OPENING QUESTION**

- Here’s the opening question for today’s class. One of the teachers will ask the question and then to give you some time to think of an answer, the teacher will answer first.
- Once the teacher answers the question, we’ll go around the circle.
- When it’s your turn, start with your name and then answer the question to the best of your ability.
- Here’s this week’s question: *Have you ever had to start something over again? If yes, what was it?*

### **TRANSITION to Video Clip**

- One of the things we’ll be discussing in today’s class is the word of “repentance”
- The Greek word for “repent” is “metanoia” and it means simply to “turn around.”
- We’re going to watch a video clip, now, where the word “repentance” is not used, but the idea of turning around is quite present in the clip.
- The movie clip is from the movie, “Planes, Trains and Automobiles” which is a comedy, but to be honest, the scene is a little bit scary.
- In it, a distracted driver goes the wrong way on a highway

- To make it a little bit less scary, I'm going to ruin the ending and let you know that the two men in the car survive.
- With that said, let's see what happens.
- [Note: The clip on [rfour.org](http://rfour.org) is edited for language and imagery in one section of the clip.]

## Watch Video Clip

### ASK

- How would you describe the emotions of the couple who are warning the two men? (Intense. Worried. Almost angry).
- Why do you think their emotions were so intense? (because the danger was immediate; they wanted to get the men's attention and make them listen/respond quickly)
- How did the two men in the car going the wrong way respond to the couple's warning? (Never took the warnings seriously due to misunderstandings, confusion, and dismissal)
- Do you think the couple could've done something different to warn or communicate better with the men in the car? (they seemed to have done a pretty good job...might be interesting if class has ideas)
- Because the men did not listen and did not turn around, what happened to them? (their car and the semi-trucks got scrapped-up. They almost died.)

### TRANSITION to scripture story

- In the past two lessons/scripture stories that we've read, we've read and discussed the circumstances surrounding the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus.
- In John's birth story, we learned that John was going to help "prepare the way" for the Messiah.
- In today's scripture story, both John the Baptist and Jesus have grown up.
- Let's see how John helps "prepare the way" for Jesus.

### READ **Matthew 3:1-17** (*recommend class reads it out loud; one person per verse*)

1In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" 4Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee

from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he [John] consented.

16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

### **ASK** (*answers are in parenthesis*)

- Is there anything you find interesting or weird about this story? [*to teachers: You don't necessarily need to answer what they notice or have questions about – sometimes just agree with a, "yep, that's interesting" or a, "Yeah, I find that to be weird, too" works*]
- Verse 1 – Where did John the Baptist appear? (In the wilderness)
- Verse 2 – What is John telling people to do? (to "repent")
- Verse 4 – What do you think -- does John seem like a regular guy? (No, he actually seems quite crazy)
- Thinking about the movie clip and the couple yelling at the people going the wrong way, what might be the "advantage" for John in appearing slightly crazy? (gets the attention of the people better – and does so in a faster way; also John might be feeling a sense of urgency – that there was no time to get nicely dressed and speak nicely – just had to get straight to the point)
- Verse 5 – Do lots of people go to listen to John? (Yes, "all of Jerusalem")
- So what do you think about lots of people going into the wilderness to listen to a crazy guy? Why would they do that? (all of the following are possible reasons: Were looking for entertainment, were curious, were hungry for authenticity, were excited about what John had to say)
- Verse 6 – What did the people do after listening to John? (They were baptized and confessed their sins)
- Verse 7-10: John is specifically addressing the religious leaders, the Pharisees, in these verses. Does he sound pleased or displeased with them? (definitely displeased – "a brood of vipers" is not a term of endearment)
- Does that surprise you?
- Verse 3 and verse 11 – What do you think John is trying to do here? Why is he doing what he is doing? (he's getting people prepared for the person who will show up after John the Baptist)
- Who do you think that person is who John is getting the people ready for? (Jesus)
- In verse 13, what does Jesus do? (goes to see John to be baptized)
- Verse 14, is John ok with this? (Not really)
- Does it surprise you that Jesus would be baptized?
- What happens at the end of Jesus' baptism? (the Holy Spirit descends upon him and God says God is well-pleased with Jesus)

### **TELL**

- So today, we will look at how John prepares the people for the "way of the Lord."
- First, let's look at what John means by "make his [God's] paths straight"?
- In verse 4, the Greek word that we translate to "sin" is *Hamartia*. It's an archery term. It means to miss the mark.
- And in Hebrew, the word for sin is *khatta'ah* (root: *chata*) means to miss the way/path or go the wrong way.

- In other words, the original understanding of “sin” for the Israelites was not about “bad actions.” Instead, sin meant you were off-track because you had somehow aimed at the wrong target.
- John then says, “repent.” The Hebrew word for “repent” is “metanoia” and it means to TURN AROUND.
- Putting these two words together then, we see that John is telling the people that they’ve missed the target; they’ve made a wrong turn and they need to TURN AROUND
- In other words, it’s a lot like the movie clip we just watched – where John is like the couple in the car telling the two guys that they are going the wrong way and need to turn around.
- Once the people get turned around, then, they’ll be ready and able, even, to follow Jesus.
- Or put another way, it’s like going to the dentist. John the Baptist is like the hygienist who sees you first and gets you ready for the dentist. Then, the dentist sees you.

**The following are NOT Teaching Points for this particular lesson, but are notes meant to help answer questions the students may have:**

- **John’s a weird dude. Why?** *His antics are similar to Elijah. In the Zechariah story, the angel tells Zechariah that John will have the spirit of Elijah – meaning have a similar type of passion and fire. This was similar to how Elisha who received “double Elijah’s spirit.” Also, Elijah spent much of his time out in the wilderness, living off of the land. This particular type of weirdness by John probably triggered thoughts in the people about Elijah – automatically making the people think of John as a great prophet.*
- **V14** – *all the gospels have a story where John mentions that he is not the messiah. There was probably much discussion about this at the time among the folk, and probably some competition between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus. Who wants to be with the second best, right? But the authors of the Gospels take great pains to show that John himself did not think he was the Messiah, but was preparing the way for the Messiah.*
- **Baptism of water vs holy spirit:** *baptism by water is the preparation, a symbol of being ready. Baptism of Holy Spirit is when the “ready” becomes “in action.”*
- **V16** – *“heavens were opened” – a symbolic visual to show that the human realm and the divine realm are not divided. That reality is one of the things that Jesus spends his time teaching his disciples: That the Kingdom of God is at hand. Also, this merging of the two realms is not a unique moment in the Jesus stories. We see this happen again in the transfiguration story and also when the temple curtain tears in half when Jesus dies.*
- **V16-17** – *Though Matthew and Luke tell stories of Jesus’ divine DNA, Matthew and Luke also tell the story of Jesus’ baptism which marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In other words, the authors want us to know that Jesus can do what he does, not because of his lineage, but because of what he chooses. And what he chooses in this story is to repent and be baptized, like John says to do. And then, he receives God’s Holy Spirit which enables, empowers, and directs all his future actions. Though we may not have the same birth story as Jesus, the book of Acts tells us this baptism of the Holy Spirit is available to all of us, if we so choose.*

## TRANSITION TO ACTIVITY

- In today’s story, we see how John is preparing the people for Jesus.
- He does this by telling them to turn around.
- And the reason they need to turn around is because if they do so then they will be better positioned to understand, hear, and act upon what Jesus will be sharing/teaching them.
- To help us think about how this works in a more concrete manner, we’re going to do an activity of playing catch.

## EXPLAIN ACTIVITY

- Each team will have two members.
- One member will stand behind this rope
- The other member will stand in front of this other rope (about 8 big steps away from the other rope – or whatever amount of distance you think will work best).
- Each team will receive 5 balled-up pieces of newspaper.
- The member of the team standing behind their rope will be given these balled-up newspapers.
- The other member of the team must **keep their back towards their teammate** with the balled-up newspapers.
- In other words, both members of the team will face the same direction, and the member of the team with the balled-up newspapers will only be able to see the back of their teammate.
- Neither teammate may cross their respective rope/line.
- When I say “Go,” the teammate with the balled-up newspapers will throw them at their teammate.
- The other teammate must catch as many of the thrown balled-up newspapers as possible *without turning around their body or head!*
  - [this means that the one teammate will have to throw the newspapers **over** the shoulders/head of their other teammate. But don’t tell them that! Let them figure it out.]
- The objective of the activity is to see which team can catch the most balled-up newspapers.
- The balled-up newspapers can only be thrown once. So 5 points is the highest possible total you can get as a team.
- There will be two rounds.
- We are about to begin the first round.
- Any questions?
- On your mark, get set, go!

## DO ACTIVITY and tally up points from the first round

### EXPLAIN ROUND 2

- For Round 2, everything will be the same except this time, the catching teammate from your team is going to repent.
- And to repent means what? (That’s right. *Turn around*)
- So the catching teammate is going to turn around and face the throwing teammate.
- All the other rules remain the same.
- We are about to begin the second round.
- Any questions?
- On your mark, get set, go!

## DO ACTIVITY Then tally up the points from both rounds and announce a winner.

### ASK

- Looking at the points from round one vs round two, which round was easier? (Round 2)
- And why, do you think, was Round 2 easier? (Because the person catching the newspapers had “repented” and was therefore better positioned to receive what the other teammate was sending/throwing)

## **TELL**

- This, then, hopefully helps you see why John the Baptist was trying to get the people of Israel to repent before Jesus showed up.
- John wanted them to be ready for Jesus – he wanted them to be facing the correct direction.
- Because if they were facing a different direction, a direction away from Jesus, that would've made it much more difficult for them to receive what he would be sharing. (like round 1 of our activity)
- The same is true for us, too.
- Sometimes our attention is focused somewhere that makes it difficult for us to receive the messages that Jesus shares in the scripture stories.
- In the past, maybe you've heard "repent" mean you've been a bad person.
- But instead, think of it as a friendly reminder that if you want to be able to see and better receive what Jesus is sharing, that you have to make the choice to turn your attention towards Jesus and get ready to hear/receive what Jesus is sharing.

## **CLOSING PRAYER**