

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Matthew 3 introduces John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah, operating in the Judean wilderness and calling Israel to a baptism of repentance. John's ministry is framed immediately by prophetic fulfillment — the voice crying in the wilderness of Isaiah 40:3 — establishing that everything now unfolding is the long-promised arrival of covenant renewal. John's message is urgent and confrontational: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The religious establishment arrives — Pharisees and Sadducees — and John does not soften his message for them. He calls them a brood of vipers, strips their Abrahamic ancestry of its assumed saving power, and demands fruit worthy of repentance. He distinguishes his own baptism from the one coming — water versus Spirit and fire — and describes the Coming One as incomparably greater, whose winnowing fork is already in hand. The chapter closes with the baptism of Jesus: Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized by John; John protests; Jesus overrides the protest with "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness"; Jesus is baptized; the heavens open, the Spirit descends as a dove, and the Father speaks — "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

This Text — Intent

God is accomplishing several interlocking purposes simultaneously through this chapter. First, He is establishing the identity credentials of Jesus before Jesus' public ministry begins — not through argument, but through prophetic fulfillment, divine voice, and Spirit-attestation. The reader is being prepared to receive Jesus as the one for whom the entire prophetic tradition has been waiting. Second, He is confronting the reader's false securities — the assumption that heritage, religious identity, or ritual participation constitutes right standing with God. John's confrontation of the Pharisees and Sadducees is not merely historical record; it is a structural challenge to every reader who approaches God on the basis of anything other than genuine repentance and the righteousness supplied by the Coming One. Third, God is displaying the shape of the gospel before the gospel is fully proclaimed — Jesus, the sinless one, steps into the place of sinners in baptism, the Father's approval rests on Him, and the Spirit equips Him. The reader is being shown that the righteousness "fulfilled" here is not John's righteousness or Israel's righteousness but Jesus' own, undertaken on behalf of others.

Subject Sentence: John prepares Israel for the Messiah through confrontational repentance and the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry.

Primary Claim: God is announcing — through prophetic fulfillment, prophetic confrontation, and the direct voice of the Father — that the long-awaited kingdom has arrived in the person of Jesus, and that entry into it requires a repentance no heritage or religion can substitute for.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of John's Baptism and Its Relationship to Christian Baptism

The most persistent interpretive question in Matthew 3 concerns how John's baptism of repentance relates to Christian baptism and to Jesus' subsequent instruction in Matthew 28:19. Dispensational interpreters sometimes sharply distinguish John's baptism as belonging to a transitional "kingdom offer" period, with its own theological logic separate from the church age. This reading acknowledges the transition point correctly — John's baptism is not identical in theological content to New Testament baptism — but overreaches by treating it as so discontinuous that it provides no typological or theological grounding for what follows. The better reading, well-attested in Reformed and Baptist exegesis alike, is that John's baptism functions as a preparatory sign within the continuous covenant of grace: it signifies repentance, anticipates the Coming One, and is fulfilled and superseded by the Spirit-baptism Jesus administers. Lutheran interpreters tend to emphasize the water element and its continuity with subsequent baptism, sometimes reading too much sacramental freight into this preparatory rite. The text itself keeps the distinction clear: John draws the contrast himself — his water baptism and the coming Spirit-and-fire baptism are not equivalents. The Reformed reading holds both: genuine continuity of covenant purpose, and genuine discontinuity of form and fullness.

The Sinlessness of Jesus and the Baptism Puzzle

Why does Jesus, who has no sin to repent of, submit to a baptism of repentance? This is the question Matthew himself raises through John's protest (v. 14). The common evangelical misreading flattens the answer to "Jesus was setting an example of humility" — which is true but insufficient. A Wesleyan/Arminian reading sometimes emphasizes the example of submission and the moral modeling of identifying with sinners. This is a genuine application but underestimates the theological freight of the phrase "to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). The Reformed reading is to be preferred and argued: Jesus is not merely modeling humility or identifying sympathetically with sinners. He is actively fulfilling the righteous requirements of the covenant on behalf of His people — stepping into the place of sinners, taking their position, being identified with their need. The Father's immediate confirmation ("with whom I am well pleased") is not post hoc approval of a good choice; it is covenant ratification — the language of Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 fused into a declaration that this is the Servant-King in whom the entire redemptive plan converges.

The baptism of Jesus is thus a preview of the atonement: the sinless one identified with sinners, bearing what they bear, earning what they cannot earn.

The Confrontation of the Pharisees and Sadducees: Moral Warning or Gospel Announcement?

Some expository traditions treat John's confrontation of the religious establishment primarily as a moral warning — a call to authentic living over hypocritical religion. This reading (common in broadly evangelical and some Baptist preaching) captures a genuine surface-level application but stops short of the text's deeper diagnostic. John is not primarily calling the Pharisees and Sadducees to be more sincere about their religion. He is declaring that their religion — as they have structured it — cannot save them. The warning is not “be more genuine” but “your Abrahamic identity is not your salvation; the axe is at the root.” The Reformed reading presses this further: what John is confronting is not hypocrisy in the first instance but false covenant confidence — the assumption that ethnic and religious identity constitutes standing before God. This is precisely the idol-at-the-root that Keller's diagnostic lens surfaces: the false savior is not outward sin but the moral and religious achievement that has been trusted in place of the Coming One. The Wesleyan tradition rightly emphasizes that genuine repentance produces fruit; the Reformed reading adds that the fruit flows from being grafted into a different root entirely — the one John is announcing.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 40:3** — The voice crying in the wilderness is not merely background scenery; it is the explicit claim that John's ministry is the fulfillment of the prophesied preparation for the LORD's own coming — establishing Jesus' arrival as the coming of YHWH Himself.
- **Psalms 2:7 / Isaiah 42:1** — The Father's declaration at the baptism fuses these two texts: “my beloved Son” (Psalm 2 — the royal Messiah, heir of David's throne) and “with whom I am well pleased” (Isaiah 42:1 — the Servant who will bring justice to the nations). The two threads of messianic expectation converge on Jesus at the Jordan.
- **Genesis 1:2** — The Spirit hovering over the waters at creation is recalled by the Spirit descending at Jesus' baptism, signaling that a new creation is being inaugurated in the person of Jesus — the second Adam entering the waters as the firstborn of the new humanity.
- **Romans 3:21–26** — Paul's exposition of the righteousness of God “apart from the law” provides the theological framework that Jesus' baptism previews: the righteous requirement is met not by human performance but by the one who fulfills all righteousness on behalf of those who cannot.

- **Malachi 3:1–3 / 4:5** — John is the messenger-forerunner of Malachi’s prophecy, and the Coming One he announces is the refiner whose fire purifies — the same imagery John deploys in v. 12. The baptism of fire and Spirit is not a threat foreign to the Old Testament but the fulfillment of Israel’s own prophetic longing.

Aim: To show that the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus demands a reckoning with every false security — religious, ethnic, moral — and that the only righteousness adequate to that kingdom is the one Jesus came to fulfill on our behalf.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	John the Baptist appears in the Judean wilderness preaching repentance; the kingdom of heaven is at hand	“In those days” connects to Matthew 2’s close; the wilderness setting echoes Exodus and prophetic expectation
3	Isaiah 40:3 cited as fulfilled in John’s ministry	Matthew’s fulfillment formula establishes John’s identity before a word of his preaching is quoted
4	John’s clothing and diet described — camel hair, leather belt, locusts, wild honey	Deliberate Elijah typology (2 Kings 1:8); wilderness prophet credentials; countercultural embodiment
5–6	Jerusalem, Judea, and all the Jordan region go out to John; confessing their sins they are baptized	The geographic spread signals messianic anticipation; confession is paired with baptism — not ritual alone
7	Pharisees and Sadducees arrive; John calls them a brood of vipers and asks who warned them to flee the wrath to come	The two opposing religious parties unified in their reception of John’s rebuke — not a sectarian critique
8	Command to bear fruit in keeping with repentance	Fruit is the evidence of genuine repentance, not an addition to it

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
9	Warning against Abrahamic presumption — God can raise up children from stones	Strips ethnic/covenantal heritage of assumed salvific power
10	The axe is at the root; every tree not bearing good fruit will be cut down and thrown into fire	Eschatological urgency — judgment is not distant; the Messiah's arrival inaugurates the crisis
11	John distinguishes his water baptism from the Coming One's baptism of Holy Spirit and fire	The contrast is qualitative and eschatological — John's is preparatory; the Coming One's is transformative and judicial
12	The winnowing fork metaphor — chaff burned with unquenchable fire; wheat gathered	Two destinations, one coming — judgment and salvation are inseparable in the Messiah's arrival
13	Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John	The distance traveled signals intentionality — this is not incidental; Jesus is seeking this moment
14	John protests — "I need to be baptized by you; do you come to me?"	John understands the incongruity — the sinless one submitting to a sinner's baptism of repentance
15	Jesus overrides the protest — "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness"	The key interpretive phrase of the chapter; "us" is significant — John participates in the fulfillment
16	Jesus baptized, comes up from the water; heavens open; Spirit of God descends as a dove	Three sequential signs of divine confirmation — opened heaven, descending Spirit, coming voice
17	The Father's voice — "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"	Public Trinitarian disclosure; Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 fused; covenant ratification of Jesus' identity and mission

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Forerunner Arrives: John’s Identity, Setting, and Ministry
2	7–10	The Confrontation: False Security and the Coming Judgment
3	11–12	The Announcement: The Coming One Is Greater
4	13–15	The Submission: Jesus Comes to Fulfill All Righteousness
5	16–17	The Confirmation: Father, Son, and Spirit at the Jordan

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: John prepares Israel for the Messiah through confrontational repentance and the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry.

Primary Claim: God is announcing — through prophetic fulfillment, prophetic confrontation, and the direct voice of the Father — that the long-awaited kingdom has arrived in the person of Jesus, and that entry into it requires a repentance no heritage or religion can substitute for.

Applications (Five)

1. Repentance is not a religious option — it is the entry point into the kingdom. John’s call is not to moral self-improvement layered onto existing religious identity. It is a call to radically reorient the whole person toward the Coming One. Every person in the room — including the most religiously observant — stands before this same demand. The question is not whether you have been baptized, whether you were raised in the church, or whether you can trace your spiritual heritage to faithful believers. The question is: has your life turned? Is there fruit? This is not a call to work harder; it is a call to stop trusting the wrong thing and turn toward the one who fulfills all righteousness on your behalf.

2. Religious identity and spiritual heritage are not the same as standing before God. John’s words to the Pharisees and Sadducees function as a direct diagnostic for any hearer who has confused their membership, their upbringing, their doctrinal correctness, or their family’s faith for their own. “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as

our father.” God can raise up children from stones. This means nothing in your background — not your baptism, not your confirmation, not your Reformed theology, not your years of church attendance — constitutes the righteousness required to stand before the Coming One. These things may be genuine goods. They are not a ground.

3. The arrival of Jesus should produce awe, not familiarity. John — the greatest prophet, the one who has been waiting his entire ministry for this moment — protests that he is not worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals and does not belong in this transaction. The appropriate affective response to this chapter is not comfortable recognition but reverent astonishment. What is happening at the Jordan is not a warm religious ceremony. The heavens are opening. The Father is speaking. The Spirit is descending. Something unprecedented is occurring, and those who have become overly familiar with Jesus — who can speak of Him without weight, sing of Him without tears, read of Him without wonder — need to sit in this scene until the awe returns.

4. The righteousness you need has already been fulfilled. Jesus submits to a sinner’s baptism not because He needed it but because you do. He steps into your position. He takes your place in the water. He earns what you cannot earn and the Father ratifies it — “with whom I am well pleased.” If you are in Christ, that pleasure rests on you. The verdict the Father pronounces at the Jordan is the verdict that will be pronounced over everyone who has been buried with Christ in baptism and raised with Him in new life. You do not need to produce a righteousness the Father will be pleased with — Jesus produced it. Believe it. Stop living as though the verdict is still pending.

5. The judgment John announces is real, and the winnowing has begun. The chaff and the wheat are not separated at some indefinite future point — the Coming One arrives with the fork already in hand. This is not a metaphor for gradual moral sorting. It is an eschatological announcement: the arrival of the Messiah inaugurates the crisis of judgment, and there are only two destinations. The appropriate response to this passage is not to nod at the urgency and move on, but to ask honestly: is there genuine fruit in your life? Not perfection — fruit. The evidence that the root has changed. If the honest answer is no, the text offers a clear alternative: the Coming One baptizes with Spirit and fire. Come to Him and receive what John could not give.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 3 is one of the most theologically dense chapters in the New Testament despite its brevity. It accomplishes a Trinitarian disclosure — Father, Son, and Spirit each identified in a single moment — before the formal Trinitarian language of Matthew 28 frames it explicitly. It establishes that Jesus’ mission is the fulfillment of the entire prophetic-covenantal framework of the Old Testament, not a revision of it. The phrase “to fulfill all righteousness” is not a minor subplot; it introduces the governing logic of Matthew’s entire Gospel — that Jesus comes not to abolish but to fulfill, and that His fulfillment is vicarious, accomplished in the place of sinners who cannot fulfill it

themselves. The chapter also teaches, through John's confrontation, that God's covenant purposes cannot be thwarted by religious presumption — He is not bound by human constructions of election, and the axe is genuinely at the root.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 3 is a cornerstone text for the Reformed doctrine of the active obedience of Christ. Jesus' submission to baptism "to fulfill all righteousness" is not merely an act of moral exemplary humility — it is the beginning of His covenantal performance on behalf of His people, the same performance that will culminate in the cross. The Father's declaration of pleasure is not earned in this moment alone; it ratifies the entire person and mission of the Son as the one who will live perfectly in the place of those who have not. The Reformed tradition has consistently read the baptism of Jesus as the inauguration of His priestly, prophetic, and kingly work — confirmed by the Spirit, commissioned by the Father. Furthermore, John's stripping of Abrahamic presumption is a direct anticipation of Paul's argument in Romans 4 and Galatians 3: the covenant family is constituted not by descent or religious identity but by faith in the Coming One and the righteousness He provides. The Spirit's descent also previews Pentecost — the promised Spirit-baptism is not a second-stage blessing but the fulfillment of the entire covenantal promise of renewal (Ezekiel 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29).

Main Takeaway

The kingdom of heaven has arrived, and it arrived in a person — not a program, not a religion, not a system of moral improvement. Jesus came to the Jordan and did what you could not do: He fulfilled all righteousness in your place, received the Father's full approval, and was equipped by the Spirit to finish the work. Your heritage cannot save you. Your religious resume cannot save you. Only the one about whom the Father said "with whom I am well pleased" can save you — and He is offering to bring you into that pleasure. Repent, believe, and stop trusting anything else.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating John's confrontation of the Pharisees as primarily a moral sermon about hypocrisy.** This misses the deeper diagnostic. John is not calling the Pharisees to be more sincere about their religion — he is declaring their religion, as they have structured it around hereditary and institutional privilege, incapable of saving them. Preaching this as "be genuine, not hypocritical" leaves untouched the very idol John is dismantling: the false security of religious identity and ethnic

belonging. The pitfall produces a sermon against bad religion that leaves good religion in place as a functional savior.

- **Flattening the baptism of Jesus into an example of humility.** “Jesus was baptized, so we should be humble and obedient too” captures almost nothing of what this scene is doing. The baptism of Jesus is a theological event of the first order — a Trinitarian disclosure, a prophetic fulfillment, and an enacted anticipation of the atonement. Preachers who spend the bulk of their time on v. 15 as a “lesson about submission” have not yet arrived at the text. Press the question John himself raises: why does the sinless one submit to this? The answer is the gospel.
- **Preaching the Spirit’s descent as primarily about spiritual gifts or Pentecostal empowerment.** The dove-like descent of the Spirit in this passage is not primarily about what the Spirit does in the believer — it is about what the Spirit does in and for Jesus at the inauguration of His public ministry. It is the anointing of the Servant-King (Isaiah 61:1), not a template for a post-conversion experience of power. Pentecostal and Charismatic readings that appropriate this scene primarily for the believer’s Spirit-experience import an interpretive framework the text does not invite.
- **Underemphasizing the eschatological urgency of John’s message.** The axe at the root, the winnowing fork, the unquenchable fire — these are not rhetorical ornaments. They announce that the Messiah’s arrival is a crisis, that history has reached its hinge, and that there are only two possible outcomes. Preaching that softens this into “John had a challenging speaking style” or treats the judgment language as merely rhetorical removes the weight that makes the good news of Jesus’ baptism genuinely good. The two must be preached together.
- **Missing the “us” in verse 15.** Jesus says “it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” — John is included. This small word opens up the partnership structure of redemptive history: God has worked through human instruments (prophets, forerunners, priests) to accomplish His purposes, and even the fulfillment of righteousness has a human instrument dimension. John’s ministry is not merely setting the stage — it is genuinely participating in fulfillment. Overlooking this loses the corporate and redemptive-historical texture of the scene.
- **Failing to preach the Trinitarian disclosure explicitly.** Matthew 3:16–17 is the first fully explicit Trinitarian scene in the New Testament — Father speaking, Son present in the water, Spirit descending visibly. Many expository treatments of this chapter work around the Trinitarian structure without ever naming it directly. This is an opportunity to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a fourth-century theological invention but is embedded in the very grammar of the Gospel narrative at Jesus’ public inauguration. Name it. Explain it. Let the scene’s full weight land.