

ONE WHO IS MORE POWERFUL

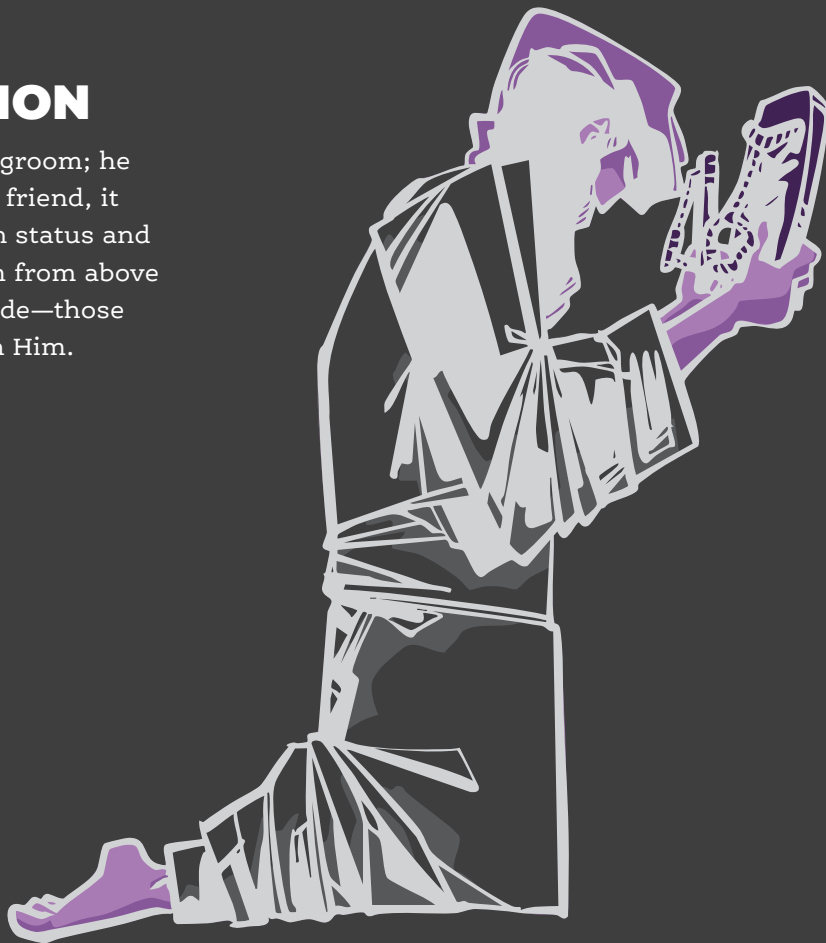
MAIN POINT.

Our lives must elevate Jesus instead of ourselves.



CHRIST CONNECTION

John the Baptist said he wasn't the groom; he was the friend of the groom. As the friend, it was his responsibility to decrease in status and to elevate Jesus. Jesus is the Groom from above who came to give His life for His bride—those who receive His Word and believe in Him.



This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Matthew 3:1-12

WE ELEVATE JESUS WHEN WE REPENT

MATTHEW 3:1-6

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" 3 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! 4 Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him, 6 and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

WE ELEVATE JESUS WHEN WE'RE AUTHENTIC

MATTHEW 3:7-12

7 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? 8 Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. 9 And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. 10 The ax 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. 11 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. 12 His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out."

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Our lives must elevate Jesus instead of ourselves.

Leaders: May we live in a way that reveals “fruit consistent with repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

WE ELEVATE JESUS WHEN WE REPENT

MATTHEW 3:1-4

“John’s lifestyle declares that he lived fully for the will of God, not valuing possessions, comfort or status. Blinded by our society’s values, we too often preach a Christianity that merely ‘meets our needs’ rather than one that calls us to sacrifice our highest desires for the kingdom. Too many Western Christians live a religion that costs nothing, treats the kingdom cheaply and therefore does not demand saving faith. Saving faith includes believing God’s grace so sincerely that we live as if his message is true and stake our lives on it. May we have the courage to trust God as John did, to stake everything on the kingdom (13:46) and to relinquish our own popularity, when necessary, by summoning others to stake everything on the kingdom as well.”¹

MATTHEW 3:3

“In Isaiah, God is pictured as coming to his people, exiled in Babylon, to deliver them and to lead them home. Matthew applies the passage to John and Jesus—John being the voice of one crying in the wilderness whose mission is to prepare the way of the Lord, Jesus being the Lord who is coming to save his people. In biblical perspective, initiative is with God in creation, revelation, and redemption. God creates; God reveals himself; and God comes to man to save him. In many religious systems, man is seen as discovering God and establishing himself before God, whether through ritual, works, goodness, asceticism, knowledge, or otherwise.”²

WE ELEVATE JESUS WHEN WE’RE AUTHENTIC

MATTHEW 3:7-9

“John again reminds his listeners that they dare not trust in their ancestral credentials or believe that they alone are legitimate candidates for inclusion in the people of God. Matthew’s two-pronged emphasis, introduced in chaps. 1–2, thus continues: the messianic age brings new people into God’s kingdom and excludes others who thought themselves secure. The Messiah is the true Son of Abraham (1:1-2); apart from him there is no salvation.”³

MATTHEW 3:11

“John was indeed a great man (11:11-14), but he derived his greatness from the even greater One whom he served. To illustrate the contrast between himself and the Messiah, John thought of the lowest of all tasks (removal of another person’s sandals), and then said he was even below that. He was voicing the impossibility of comparison between his humanity and the Messiah-King’s deity.”⁴



CONTEXT

John the Baptist fulfilled prophecy: He cried out in the wilderness and prepared the way for the Messiah (Isa. 40:3). John was like a king's herald, who went ahead of the king to smooth the road for easier travel and to announce his upcoming arrival to a town or city. After roughly four hundred years of prophetic silence, John called the people back to God, much like Elijah did in 1 Kings 18. During this period, the Pharisees and Sadducees were like religious political groups; most of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, belonged to one of these groups. The Pharisees, the larger and better-liked of the two, obsessively followed the law in an effort to earn righteousness, developing "the oral law as a 'fence around the Torah,' which included detailed interpretations, applications, and amplifications of the written Scriptures to enable people to obey them properly."⁵ They were known for a legalistic approach in their relationship with God. The Sadducees, typically aristocratic landowners, adhered only to the first five books of Scripture. While the two religious groups disagreed on many issues, both believed Jewish heritage ensured their status before God, a false security both John and Jesus exposed.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Repentance

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). This is the human response to God's salvation, in other words, how we turn to Him and accept what He's done for us.

LEADERS' PRAYER

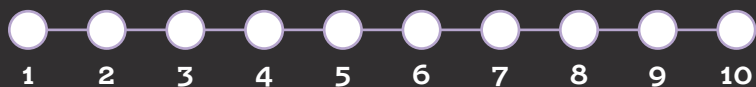
GOD, THANK YOU FOR OFFERING SALVATION THROUGH YOUR SON, NOT THROUGH OUR EFFORTS OR LINEAGE. WE CAN'T BOAST IN OUR SALVATION BECAUSE WE DID NOTHING TO DESERVE IT. HELP US TO ELEVATE JESUS IN THE WAY WE LIVE OUR LIVES—TO DISPLAY FRUIT OF REPENTANT HEARTS.



KICK STARTER

RATE IT!

How easily can you tell when something is fake (1=I can't tell; 10=It's always obvious)?



These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **IF SOMEONE GAVE YOU THE OPTION TO HEAR GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS FIRST, WHICH WOULD YOU CHOOSE? WHY?**
- **WHAT HAVE YOU NOTICED ABOUT NEWS ON TELEVISION? DOES IT LEAN MORE TOWARD BAD NEWS OR GOOD NEWS?**
- **WHY IS IT HELPFUL TO SURROUND OURSELVES WITH PEOPLE WHO TELL US WHAT WE NEED TO HEAR INSTEAD OF PEOPLE WHO TELL US WHAT WE WANT TO HEAR?**

If you watch the news on television, you probably notice more bad news than good news. Culture leans toward bad news and thrives on emotional reaction. But when it comes to truth in our personal lives, we lean away from the bad parts. We want to hear only what's good. Today, our lesson shows that sometimes the hard truth is what we need to hear most.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Do any of us strive to be fake? Do any of us want people to look at us and see a hypocrite, an impostor? Probably not. We want people to see who we really are—to be known. At the same time, we fear being known because people will see the worst parts of us—qualities and insecurities we so desperately try to hide. Want a little hope? Actually, a lot of hope? God knows you (Ps. 139:1). He knows every single part. He has always known you—your failures, your sin, your fears, your questions, your worries, your insecurities, your shame. He doesn't want you to pretend or to hide any of it from Him. God calls you to bring what He already knows and lay it all down in exchange for abundant, authentic life. How? Confess and repent of your sin, throw off all the things that hinder you (Heb. 12:1), be transparent with the Lord, and walk in the joy of being known by Him.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Our lives must elevate Jesus instead of ourselves.

WE ELEVATE JESUS WHEN WE REPENT

READ MATTHEW 3:1-6



WHAT WAS JOHN'S FIRST WORD TO THE CROWDS? WOULD HIS MESSAGE ATTRACT CROWDS TODAY? WHAT MESSAGES ATTRACT PEOPLE NOW?

John's first word was "repent." Basically, John told God's people, the Jews, that they weren't living like God's people and that they needed to confess their sins and live in a way that pleased Him. John called them out! Today, this message isn't attractive; calling people up to God's standard is often offensive, even in our churches, so we refrain from pointing out sin and the need for repentance. **We center our messages on love, acceptance, and forgiveness (all good and true), but if we leave out repentance, then we leave out humanity's need for a Savior: Jesus.**



DESCRIBE JOHN'S LIFESTYLE. WHY DID HE LIVE THIS WAY? SHOULD WE?

John was radically devoted to God and to the message God had given him to share—even if it was offensive. John lived sacrificially, unconcerned with worldly comfort; none of it mattered. He staked his life on the reality that God's kingdom was supreme—and it was coming. Does God expect all of us to live in the wilderness and survive on bugs and honey? Not likely. **But He does call us to live sacrificially, wholly devoted to Him. He calls us to share the gospel boldly, even when it's offensive to our culture. He calls us to live with eternity in mind instead of striving to make this world our home.**



WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN? WHERE IS IT? HOW DID IT "COME NEAR" (V. 2)?

We hear "kingdom of heaven," or "kingdom of God," and think the phrase refers to heaven only, where God dwells on His throne and where believers spend eternity. But the kingdom of heaven exists in a few ways. First, as the King of kings, Jesus ushered His kingdom to earth; His presence here meant God's kingdom had come in a new way. Jesus was Immanuel, "God with us," who came near to offer us a place in His kingdom. Next, because Christ now dwells in every believer through the Holy Spirit, God's kingdom is here, now—the rule and reign of God within us. We are living stones and spiritual houses in God's kingdom (1 Pet. 2:5). And still in another sense, though the kingdom of heaven has already come through Jesus's birth and through His Spirit, it is also yet to come—when Jesus will bring His kingdom fully. This kingdom will remain forever, free of sin and pain and death. Jesus will restore all of creation, making all things new, and believers will worship Him forever (Rev. 21:1-5). **Because of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father, we get to live as citizens of God's kingdom here and now! We don't wait for eternity! Because Jesus came near and offered His life, we are God's sons and daughters, called to live for His kingdom rather than our worldly kingdoms.**

WE ELEVATE JESUS WHEN WE'RE AUTHENTIC

READ MATTHEW 3:7-12

WHAT IS JOHN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS? DOES IT SURPRISE YOU? EXPLAIN.

Leaders: Share context about the Pharisees and Sadducees. John didn't use confusing language or soften his message. He called the religious leaders a "brood of vipers"! John knew they hadn't come to repent and be baptized; they came to assess and critique him and then report back to the religious court. **John called out the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, for claiming to belong to God but living for themselves—for their reputations, their pride, and their personal gain—and for leading others to do the same.**

WHAT DOES JOHN MEAN IN VERSE 8? HOW CAN OUR LIVES CONTRADICT THAT WE FOLLOW JESUS? WHY HAS THIS BECOME "NORMAL" FOR BELIEVERS?

John's message was simple: If you belong to God, then live like it. How often do we need to hear the same message? How often do our lives contradict the worship songs we sing with our lips? Our words are profane and full of gossip; our actions are selfish, prideful, and unloving; our priorities are worldly. We don't reflect our King. If we've repented—confessed sin and turned from it and toward God—then our lives should display the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). **Instead, we've normalized lukewarm faith over authentic faith and labeled holiness and godliness as "radical."** Why? Because we strive to fit into a worldly kingdom—a kingdom in which we're no longer citizens. **The truth is that God wants every part of your life. Is this radical? Sure. Will you be different from the world? Absolutely. You'll be like your King, reflecting His kingdom.**



WHAT DOES JOHN SAY WON'T MAKE PEOPLE RIGHT WITH GOD (V. 9)? WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DO PEOPLE POINT TO TODAY TO SAY THEY'RE RIGHT WITH GOD?

Many Jews relied on their ancestry, basing their security in God's kingdom on being Abraham's descendants. Today, people point to their families too, claiming security in someone else's faith. People claim church attendance or biblical knowledge as proof. They point to good morals as evidence of being right with God. **The only way we are saved from sin and secure in God's kingdom is through surrendering our hearts and enthroning Jesus there, by confessing Christ as Lord and repenting of sin.** Jesus is our way to the Father (John 14:6).

WRAP-UP



IN WHAT AREAS OF YOUR LIFE HAVE YOU LET IT BECOME NORMAL TO LIVE LIKE THE WORLD? WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE SO THAT YOU LIVE AS A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN?

God wants us to be real and desires for us to follow Him authentically. He isn't fooled by our efforts at *pretending* to follow Him. But we live in a culture that specializes in faking it. Think about it: How easily can we fake a perfect life on social media, when in reality, life is falling apart? So, is it really that surprising when this spills over into our walk with God? **We've gotten good at faking intimacy with the Lord. We've normalized living like the world in certain areas of our lives.** Maybe you use the same language as unbelievers in your classes. Maybe your priorities look like the world's priorities, and your time doesn't reflect that you value God's Word, prayer, or godly community. Maybe you date like the world dates and justify being in a relationship with someone who brings you down spiritually. Maybe you sometimes lie or sometimes cheat. The world tells us that all of this is *normal*. **But God's Word calls us up—to a standard of holiness, even if it requires sacrifice, even when it's not easy. The good news is that Jesus showed us the way.**