

# Matthew 3:1-12

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[ 0 : 00 ] Matthew chapter 3. I want to talk to you this morning about the difficult subject of spiritual presumption.

! Spiritual overconfidence of being presumptuous.! In this section of Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist appears, doesn't he, saying, Repent! Turn back to God now and confess all of your sin. Get right with him before the King comes, before Jesus Christ appears. Get ready for him. And in these early verses of chapter 3, we're told, aren't we, that John the Baptist's preaching attracts crowds from Judea.

And Jerusalem, from all that region. And they're all swamping in to get ready for the arrival of King Jesus. They're being baptised, being cleansed, getting ready for Jesus.

But the danger of spiritual presumption is also a big theme in this passage. It is how John rebukes another group of people who appear later on.

[ 1 : 26 ] If you look at verse 9, He says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, Do not presume to say to yourself, We have Abraham as our father.

You see, there is a problem with the Pharisees and the Sadducees over confidence in spirituality. They're overconfident, aren't they?

They've got a false sense of spiritual security. They're presuming something about themselves. And John says, Do not presume.

Stop presuming. I think he does that in connection with three things to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Stop presuming, first of all, in your false religion.

In your false religion. If you don't know who the Pharisees and the Sadducees are, that's okay.

They are the leading figures of the Jewish religion of the time.

[ 2 : 30 ] But oddly, in Matthew's Gospel, this is one of only two times where the Pharisees and the Sadducees are mentioned together. Normally, the Pharisees and the Sadducees are arguing with each other.

Over theological issues. But here, Matthew says in verse 7, The Pharisees and Sadducees came to the baptism. Now, why is that important?

Why is Matthew telling us that? Well, Matthew is showing us here that they represent the whole theological spectrum of Judaism at the time.

So they are here to represent Jewishness, if you like. To represent Jewish religion in Jesus' day.

And their response to John the Baptist is representative of the whole religious system to John the Baptist. And it's not a good response.

[ 3 : 33 ] I think it's pretty obvious that the Pharisees and the Sadducees are not here to be baptised and repent like everybody else, are they? Look at how John welcomes them to this kind of mission event that is out in the desert.

Verse 7, You brood of vipers. It's incredible, isn't it? People turn up late to the evangelistic meeting. Welcome. Come and have a cup of coffee.

You know how you do it. No. You brood of vipers. You snakes. You children of snakes. These Jewish religious leaders are not here to repent like everybody else, are they?

But they're here to check out the situation. They're here to survey what is going on in the wilderness with John the Baptist. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they are the kings of the day of religious observance, aren't they?

They're well behaved. They're highly respected. They know their Bible inside out. They're the cream of the religious establishment. But they are not here jumping in line to be baptised.

[ 4 : 49 ] They're not repenting. As John is asking people, they're not getting ready for Jesus. Because even though Jesus is coming and they need to get ready, being religious like the

Pharisees and Sadducees is a block to them, isn't it?

Because they are presuming in something. They are presuming in their religiosity and it makes them feel so virtuous.

It makes them feel that they are okay with God and he's okay with them. And so repentance, turning back to God, is totally unnecessary, isn't it?

It's just a no-brainer. It's totally unnecessary for somebody like that. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus calls the Pharisees whitewashed tombs.

It's a great illustration. It's a great put-down. What is he saying there? He's saying that their religion is like a covering that conceals the corpse within.

[ 6 : 04 ] Their religiosity, it is like a whitewash of paint that covers the rot and the sin and the death that is there underneath.

It is to wash over rotten hearts with a white paper-thin veneer of religiosity.

And so, that is why John says that they are poisonous. They are snaky, slithery characters. They are venomous.

They are vipers. Because their poison is something that is bottled up and sold to everybody else.

And it's sold as something that will help you.

It is spiritual poison served in a medicine bottle. And so many people of the day are swallowing the teaching and the life of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

[ 7 : 09 ] In chapter 23, Jesus calls them the blind guides. And it is presumption that their way of doing religion, the poison of ritualism, of ceremonialism, of outward religious performance, that makes you feel so right when actually you can be so wrong.

And you know, you only have to walk out into the street, don't you, into Ealing, to see that sadly the teaching and the poison of the Pharisees and Sadducees is still alive today.

The poison is still in the veins of people today. It's still in the veins of Ealing and of London. This is a city, isn't it, where mysticism and religion and ceremonial religion is as popular as ever.

I'd say it's on the up actually. And the mosques are packed, aren't they, on Fridays? Absolutely packed. The Catholic churches have queues and queues of people outside of them.

The temples have queues of people doing religion. And the last thing we need is more religion, isn't it? Ealing has got religion in bucket loads, in shed loads.

[ 8 : 42 ] And it makes us feel so good. It makes us feel so right. But it's poison. It's killing us.

It's killing Ealing. Because it veneers over our deepest needs, our deep sinfulness, the death that is within, with a paper-thin veneer of religiosity.

And to get presumptuous like that means that we don't think we need Jesus and we're not ready for him. We're alright. We're okay.

You know, you can live a very, very religious life and actually you can be rebelling against Jesus at the same time. You can be very religious and you can be a million miles away from God because at the heart of it all there is this presumption that we're good enough.

That's what it is. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they come to John but they don't need repentance, they don't need to get ready for Jesus. It is spiritual presumption.

[ 9 : 53 ] And in all their impressive ceremonialism they meet God's true prophet and it is like hitting a brick wall isn't it? They're hit with the reality of who they are, you brood of vipers.

And Jesus sees through it, doesn't he? Verse 10 even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down, thrown into the fire.

It's shocking. That's the Pharisee isn't it? He stood tall as a tree and he looked so good. And actually he is the tree that God has planted in the Old Testament.

If you read the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 5 it speaks of God planting a vineyard. His tree that he looks to for fruit. But at his ankles this Pharisee has an axe waiting to chop him down and it will remove him and he'll be thrown into the fire.

And that folks is the danger of spiritual presumption. John says stop presuming in your false religion.

[ 11 : 08 ] Secondly though he says stop presuming in your true privileges. In your true privileges. There is a real danger here isn't there in religiosity with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in false outward religion.

But actually as you look at the text more perhaps the greater danger for them is complacency in true and real privileges that come with true religion.

Because when you delve into the problem of the Pharisees and the Sadducees their false sense of security does not come from being pagans does it? It does not come from worshipping some other gods.

But it is from their real association with true biblical religion. To the religion of Abraham. Verse 9 This is the issue isn't it?

Don't presume to say to yourself we have Abraham as our father. John he's put his finger on it there hasn't he?

[ 12 : 23 ] He is saying that the basis of their presumption of their false security is a family connection with Abraham. It's not that their idol worshippers in the absolute sense.

They've actually got something right here haven't they? They're talking about Abraham. They're talking about the religion of Abraham. Now Abraham was the man that God graciously chose back in the book of Genesis to bless.

And he promised Abraham that he would make a great nation from him and from his children.

Abraham's family was going to be God's family.

Absolutely amazing privilege. True worship not false worship but true worship God said was going to come through Abraham's family.

God would be worshipped through him and through his offspring and those who became part of that family if they were outsiders. And so here they are the Pharisees and the Sadducees they come to John's preaching and they've got the DNA.

[ 13 : 35 ] They've got the family tree. They've got the birth certificates. And their sense of spiritual security and pride comes from their ethnic familial connection to Abraham their ancestor.

They are Abraham's biological children. And so the blessings and the promises of God automatically belong to them.

It is by familial association with Abraham that they are automatically okay. Or so they think. So they think.

The problem is here that privilege the privilege of being Abraham's family does not work when it leads to presumption.

They are presuming that simply by owning that privilege they are okay with God. Let me try and illustrate this for a second.

[ 14 : 42 ] Think of a child who is born into a rich family Downton Abbey kind of style. So he's born and he is the heir of the family estate.

And he is born into incredible privilege. He's got all of this to look forward to. But that prospect, that privilege, that thought rather than making him grateful and modest makes him more and more arrogant.

More and more presumptuous. And as he grows up, he becomes a teenager, he grows up, becomes a young adult and he begins to despise his parents and treat his home like a hotel. He no longer behaves as part of the family and he loses all love for his brothers and sisters. And his privilege becomes ugly.

So much so that his inheritance is given to others. when privilege leads to presumption and arrogance, it does not work.

[ 15 : 53 ] And the right response for that boy was to realise how blessed he was, how fortunate he was to have been born into this family with such privilege, to humble himself with thanksgiving before his parents and gratefully and joyfully receive what was due to him.

privilege is not meant to lead to presumption, but it's meant to lead to penitence.

Penitence, it's an old-fashioned word, isn't it? It just means to be humble before God, to be thankful to him, and to have the same faith that Abraham had when he trusted in God, and humbled himself, knowing the privileges God had given him.

And the greater the privilege, the uglier it gets when we are responding with presumption. And that is what the Pharisees and the Sadducees are doing, isn't it?

They have the privilege, they've got the DNA linking them to Abraham, and that really is a privilege. privilege. They are given, as Paul says in Romans 9, the covenants, the law, the worship, the promises, the glory, they are incredibly privileged.

[ 17 : 21 ] But that privilege is meant to lead them to penitence and faith. And without repentance and penitence, the privilege isn't worth a thing.

John says, doesn't he, that God can create children of Abraham like that out of stones. Their privilege has made them presumptuous. Don't let your spiritual privileges lead you to presumption, but rather to penitence.

Don't presume in your privilege. I think this is a thing that we need to hear, something that I need to hear, because we are very privileged. in this church.

What are some of the things that we presume to say to ourselves? I am in a Christian family. My parents are Christians.

Let me say that if that is you this morning, you are immensely privileged to be in a Christian family. There is no greater privilege in this life than to be born into a Christian family with Christian parents.

[ 18 : 32 ] It was a joy to have Gabriel baptised a few weeks ago. And it is a joy to baptise a child and a parent. And Gabriel, he will be raised with the instruction of the Lord.

He will be raised as a member of God's church. Gabriel, he doesn't know it yet, but he is immensely privileged to have that. but that privilege is never meant for him to kick back and say, you know, my mum and dad are Christians, I'm fine.

Never, ever. It is meant to leave him to personal penitence. And sometimes I think perhaps we don't know how privileged we are.

Do we realise how privileged we are to be here right now? If you are a member of this church, I know that there are going to be some new members coming up soon, and if you've been baptised into God's church, if you receive the Lord's supper here, these are all outward privileges that mark you out from the rest of the world.

They are outward privileges that God uses to work in your life. They are the real means of grace in your life, and they put you at a massive advantage to everybody else.

[ 19 : 59 ] They give you a spiritual advantage, and those things that you can see and touch and taste in church are to be enjoyed. We are to make the most of them.

They are to move you to repentance, and not to presumption. The privilege of being in this church, to glory in and enjoy and revel in that, not to presume in it.

Now, Jesus really drives the knife in on this later in Matthew's gospel. Just turn to Matthew 11 with me. Matthew 11, if you've got a Bible.

verse 21 to 22. Jesus says, Woe to you, Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida.

For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it would be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

[ 21 : 09 ] privilege, you see, is supposed to lead you to penitence. And so Jesus there, he is saying, isn't he, that on the judgment day, it will be better for Tyre and Sidon, they're two cities famous for their sin and rebellion and immoral behaviour in the Bible.

It will be better for those towns and those cities than for the towns who have received the privilege of having Jesus with them there in that generation.

It would be better on the day of judgment for people who have never received those privileges than for those who have had them but responded with presumption and not penitence.

It would be better to be a member of ISIS than a person who has had the privilege of growing up in a church and in a Christian family and who walks away from Jesus in presumption.

And you see that is the problem with the Pharisees and Sadducees, isn't it? They have these amazing privileges but they refuse to repent. They use them in presumption, in spiritual overconfidence.

[ 22 : 31 ] and so this church needs to know how privileged it is, not to be scared of that but to enjoy that and revel in it like the boy who is born into a rich family to receive those privileges with thankfulness and with humility.

And if you're in a Christian home especially, that is true for you. But even if you're here Sunday by Sunday, you have been given a great spiritual advantage and we need to follow that up with true repentance.

And not just walk out of here thinking that by being here that is enough in of itself. These are the two main reasons why these people are not in the river being baptised with everyone else.

They think they secure because all they see in the mirror is this veneer of religious practice and they've misunderstood how their privileges work. And so could it be that actually for you this morning the greatest obstacle for Jesus in your life could be the very things that are meant to lead

you to him.

Your church, your Christian religion, your privileges. let them lead you to humble repentance and not to presumption.

[ 24 : 04 ] False religion, true privileges. Thirdly, John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees, stop presuming in your fruitless repentance. In your fruitless repentance.

Repentance. What is John's answer to their problem? What are they supposed to do about this?

Well he tells them in verse 8, he says bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

The telltale sign of repentance is that it brings fruit, doesn't it? God is looking for fruit from his privileged people.

He is looking for the fruit that delights him. Juicy, sweet, ripe, lovely fruit.

It is possible to have someone who enjoys the privileges of being part of God's people, who enjoys the means of grace and yet remains unrepentant because they're unfruitful.

[ 25 : 10 ] There is a kind of repentance, isn't there, which is just lip service. And it's not the real thing, it is unfruitful.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees have a pious aura around them, and they can make all the right signs, they can go through the motions, they can give up all the right signals, but they're not really doing it, are they?

Paul speaks about people like this in Romans chapter 2, they're very religious people there, but he says to them this, do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

And this is the shock of this passage, isn't it, verse 10 again, even now that the axe is laid at the fruit of the tree, and every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

And this is what has happened with the Jewish religion of the time, and it's the whole trajectory of Matthew's gospel if you read it. It has the kingdom of God being taken away from those who have the Jewish privileges, and it's given to those who have true repentance and faith.

[ 26 : 37 ] It's given to the Gentiles, isn't it? It's given to a centurion and some soldiers, and a woman from Canaan. Paul says in Romans 11, the branches were broken off in order that the Gentiles might be grafted in.

The image of a tree in the Bible is huge, isn't it? Back in Isaiah, we mentioned it earlier. God plants this vineyard and he's looking for fruit from his people.

Isaiah chapter 5 verse 7, I looked for righteousness and justice, but there was none. That is the fruit that God is looking for, the true fruit of repentance, for righteousness and justice, the fruit that is seen in our relationships with one another, the fruit of love and joy and peace and kindness and goodness and self-control.

And it's no surprise that some of the most fruitful people that I know are also the most repentant people. There's a connection, isn't there?

The most loving, generous, kindest, patient people are often those who have the greatest sense of their sin and the greatest desire to repent.

[ 28 : 06 ] and I'm so glad that I get to spend time with people like that on a Sunday. It works out, doesn't it, that as we come to Jesus in true repentance, as our outward privileges lead us to an inward change of heart and we bow down before him and worship him and we ask for forgiveness, our sin is actually washed away.

he cleanses us truly and deeply and completely and as the clouds of our sin part, his love covers us and it delights us and when that happens we are free to bear fruit, aren't we?

As one Christian theologian writes in the 17th century, no sooner is the cloud of sin scattered by repentance than pardoning love shines forth.

In repentance the conscience is turned into a paradise. You see that is where true repentance takes you.

When you truly turn back to God with your sin it will always do more than religious stuff alone can do for you. Jesus Christ will never just whitewash you but he will cleanse you and remove the sin and the death within and he will make you into a new creation and he will give you eternal life and that is where our privileges are leading us not to presumption but to the river of repentance and to the king who cleanses so let me challenge you this morning repentance really do it really repent this passage is really about what outward religion is for now actually

[ 30 : 21 ] I don't think John the Baptist has a problem with outward religion or Jesus but it's how you use outward religion isn't it there is outward religion to get you feeling godly in some kind of worship of some sort to whitewash over your sin and there is true outward religion the stuff that we do in church that we see and touch and taste and experience that truly privileges you it's what we do here week by week but that outward act of worship cannot stop there because it is meant to lead you to inner repentance so make the most of it make the most of it don't presume in false religion in true privileges is but truly repent and bear fruit let's pray to to to to to to!

to