

# How to Pave a Road for the Gospel

## Matthew 3:1–10

I want to read a quote from Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the beloved *Little House on the Prairie*. She describes her first encounter with a mystery object while on a wagon journey with her parents in 1894 that took them through Topeka, Kansas. As I read the quote, see if you can guess the mystery object.

In the very midst of the city, the ground was covered by some dark stuff that silenced all the wheels and muffled the sound of hoofs. It was like tar, but Papa was sure it was not tar, and it was something like rubber, but it could not be rubber because rubber cost too much. We saw ladies all in silks and carrying ruffled parasols, walking with their escorts across the street. Their heels dented the street, and while we watched, these dents slowly filled up and smoothed themselves out. It was as if that stuff were alive. It was like magic.

Can anyone name what Laura Wilder is speaking about? It is asphalt. Today, this dark, resilient material covers more than 94% of the paved roads in the United States.

The United States had few paved roads prior to the twentieth century, and most were of poor quality. In towns, most roads were unpaved until the late nineteenth century, and in rural areas most roads were little more than dirt paths into the twentieth century. Federal programs during the 1910s and again during the 1950s eventually provided the United States with adequate roads for motor vehicles.<sup>1</sup>

But the story of asphalt begins thousands of years before the founding of the United States. The first recorded use of asphalt as a road building material was in Babylon around 615 B.C., in the reign of King Nabopolassar. In Hugh Gillespie's book entitled *In A Century of Progress: The History of Hot Mix Asphalt*, he notes that "an inscription on a brick records the paving of the Procession Street of Babylon, which led from his palace to the north wall of the city, 'with asphalt and burned brick.'" We know also that the ancient Greeks and Romans were

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<sup>1</sup> "Roads," Encyclopedia.com, accessed September 12, 2015, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Roads.aspx>.

familiar with asphalt and used the substance to seal their baths, reservoirs, and aqueducts.<sup>2</sup>

There is a very important road in the New Testament that was paved for a special purpose. It was not paved with asphalt, but it was certainly paved. A great man paved this road. His name was John. In fact, Jesus says of John that he was the greatest man to have ever lived (Matthew 11:11). The Bible says John came preaching. You may say, “Well, Kyle, I thought you said he came paving.” Yes! “Yes, to which question? Did he come paving or preaching?” Yes! He did both. Actually by coming on the scene preaching, he was paving.

The word for preaching in the original language is *kēryssō*. It is a word with a picture in it. It pictures a herald, a proclaimer, a public crier. These heralds would do two things: they would announce the king was coming, and they would also prepare the road that the king would travel. They would make sure it was smooth and ready.<sup>3</sup>

In our sermon series through Matthew 1–4 entitled *The King is Coming*, we have arrived at chapter 3. In chapter 1, we find the birth of the King. In chapter 2, we find the worship of the King. In chapter 3, we find the forerunner (or herald or paver) of the King.

John’s job, duty, and purpose in life was to prepare a road for the gospel. Verse 3 says he was to prepare a way for the Lord and make his paths straight. He was not preparing a way for a plan, but for a person—the Person of Jesus Christ.

**Transition:** There are certain things in John’s life that are transferrable to us. Just as he paved a way for the gospel we can mirror his efforts to pave a way for the gospel to our homes, to our jobs, and to our neighbors. So let’s mirror what John did.

## **1. We pave the road by calling people to repent (verses 1–3).**

John paves the way for the Messiah by telling people they need to repent (verse 2). It is the Greek word *metanoeō*. Here is what the word repent does not mean:

- It does not mean that someone repents of his or her sin and there is no change of life.

Repentance always leads to a change of life—always!

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<sup>2</sup> “History of Asphalt,” National Asphalt Pavement Association, accessed September 12, 2015, [http://www.asphaltpavement.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=21&Itemid=41](http://www.asphaltpavement.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21&Itemid=41).

<sup>3</sup> David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 50.

- It does not mean a person simply recognizes and admits they have sinned.
- Here is what repentance means—a radical change.

I have had people tell me that they feel secure in their eternal destiny because they were born a Baptist. Friend, you may be born a Baptist, but you were not born a Christian. There has to be repentance. Repentance is a deep **realization** in your heart **you have sinned** against God. It is more than regret. Non-believers experience regret all the time. Repentance is taking responsibility for your sin. It is not a selfish regret, but a godly sorrow.

Repentance also carries the idea of not only feeling deep agony and brokenness over sin, but also **turning from your sin**. At salvation, you experienced a quick and decisive break with sin. You may obey the desires to sin, but you do not have to! There are no excuses for sin.

“Well, this one sin really has a hold on me; this one sin carries with it a strong compulsion; or this one sin has an unstoppable craving.” At salvation, we have been given the power and grace to say “no” to sin. That does not mean we are sinless or will be while we are on this earth, but it does mean we will sin less and less and less. Only Jesus is sinless.

Jesus insisted that we have not truly repented of any sin that we are still committing. Repentance involves a change of mind with a resulting change of action.<sup>4</sup> If someone says, “I would like to be saved, but I do not really feel sorry for my sin. I guess I am not really broken over my sin.” If someone says that, something is really, really wrong, because at salvation, people are repentant!

We must call non-believers to repentance and not merely to a mental assent of information. I am not saying that a person feeling broken about their sin makes them saved, but I am saying that a person who comes to Jesus will be broken about their sin. There will be repentance.

Isaiah 64:6 says we need to repent not only of our sin, but also of our “righteousnesses” (righteous deeds). That means even the “good things” we do are stained with selfishness, wrong motives, and sin. They are not good enough because they are not perfection. Even our tears of repentance need to be washed in the Blood of Christ.

When is the last time that your sinfulness has brought you to your knees before God? If

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Elliff, *A Passion for Prayer: Experiencing Deeper Intimacy with God* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2010), 117.

we are not careful, our religious activity (attending church, putting money in the plate, etc.) will make us self-righteous. You are called away from religious activity to a real, living, authentic relationship with Jesus.<sup>5 6</sup>

**Transition:** John called people to repent and so should we. We pave the road for the gospel by calling people to repent and by calling people to a simple relationship.

## **2. We pave the road by calling people to a simple relationship (verses 4–6).**

John preached in a wilderness. When you hear the word *wilderness*, you make think of lush, green foliage with birds squawking loudly and the sound of a lion’s roar. After all that is what a wilderness looks like in movies. The wilderness where John was preaching was much different. It was actually a desert—a dry area that experienced small amounts of rainfall, in which the living conditions are hostile for plants and animals and there is very little vegetation.

John lived here. It is in this desert that John would pave a road for the gospel. People would travel this road from Jerusalem, Judea, and the regions around Jordan (verse 5). It would take months for people to make this journey, so this was not a one-day evangelistic crusade. John spent weeks, maybe months doing this work.

When the news of John’s message started to spread, the people started coming. They were leaving their homes, their cities, their places of worship, and everything that was familiar to them in order to travel to this desert.

Wouldn’t it make sense for John to go to the cities where the people where instead of going to desert and making the people come to him? The fact that John was in the desert proves two things:

1. It fulfilled a prophecy found in Isaiah 40:3.
2. It called people away from their familiar surroundings.

John called people away from the religious system of the day. He called them away from

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<sup>5</sup> The term “kingdom of heaven” is mentioned 32x in Matthew and from my study is synonymous with the phrase “kingdom of God” used in the other gospel records.

<sup>6</sup> There is a really interesting connection between the last verses of the Old Testament and the first verses of this chapter. Malachi 4:5–6 speaks of God sending Elijah. The Elijah of the New Testament is John the Baptist (Luke 1:17). Elijah has already come, but God was going to send a prophet in the spirit and power of Elijah—John.

their religious organization—away from the religiosity of the day to a genuine moving of the spirit. He called them to desolation. In other words, he was saying, “Let’s stop going through the motions. Let’s stop ‘doing’ religion.”

Someone told me recently, “I feel like at my church we are just going through the motions. We are just ‘doing’ church. We are not coming to fall on our faces in adoration before God, but just coming to dispel a duty or maybe even keep a tradition.”

Whenever you start “doing” church, something is wrong. Church is not something we do. It is something we are. We are the church, the redeemed people of the ages. When we gather on Sunday, we are commanded to worship. We have made “church” so complicated and so foreign to what we find in the New Testament. We have attached so many things to it that are not biblical. We gather for worship; worship is the essential.

John is calling people away from their man-made, complicated religious activity to a simple relationship with Jesus Christ. John preached this message with his lips and with his attire. His appearance was a sermon—a simple sermon. He wore camel’s hair, which was very tough and durable, but certainly not comfortable. He wore a leather belt, which like the camel’s hair was known for its durability, not fashionableness. He did not care about what other people thought or how other people lived. He would live with the minimal necessities needed to exist.

The coarse camel’s hair would typically be used for tents, but John used it for clothing. Most people’s belts would be made out of linen or silk, not rough and tough leather. This was a protest against the pervading luxury of his day that sapped people of their spirituality. John was not elaborate in his clothing or his food. There was nothing elaborate or attractive about John. He learned to live simply. He called them away from lavishness and to holiness.

Jesus would later place the same emphasis in His messages. Jesus taught that it is all too easy for wealth to entice people into wasting their time on earth, replacing the Creator with what He has created.<sup>7</sup>

John was splashing water in their face and showing them that what really matters is not how affluent you are in society, how many acres you have, how many tractors you own,<sup>8</sup> or what

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 3524–4525.

<sup>8</sup> This is bringing the truth of the gospel to bear on the context in which I am currently serving.

dollar amount is on your paycheck. We are not living for those things. We are living for a person. We are not living for what is down here. We are living for what is up there. John is saying, “See it in my clothing. Everything you are living for will one day burn and never return.” Spend your money, devote your time, and give your life for what will last for eternity—Jesus Christ.

David Foster Wallace was a non-believer. Not long before his suicide, he spoke these words to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College:

Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough . . . Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly.

And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you . . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is . . . they’re unconscious. They are default settings.<sup>9</sup>

Have you complicated your relationship with Christ? What have you attached to Christianity that Jesus never attached? What have you attached to your worth that Jesus never attached? Be sure to keep it simple.

**Transition:** We pave the path for the gospel by calling people to repent, calling people to a simple relationship with Christ, and finally . . .

### **3. We pave the path for the gospel by calling people to their desperate condition without Christ (verses 7–10).**

In verses 7–10, John’s personality is reflecting his clothing: coarse, strong, and hard-hitting. He is very hard on two groups of people that came to see the baptisms and possibly came to be baptized. He called them snakes (vipers)! These vipers were desert snakes very familiar to John the Baptist. They looked like a stick. You may remember Paul being bitten by a snake that was camouflaged among sticks (Acts 28:3–5).

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 34.

John called the Pharisees and Sadducees worse than vipers. He said they were the sons of vipers. They were the offspring. Their father was a snake, and they were a product of their father. Satan is that old serpent (Revelation 20:2). These two groups attended religious settings, but they were not genuine believers. They carried his venom.

The Pharisees saw themselves as the guardians of the law and its tradition. They were equally zealous about the oral law and the ever-growing, burdensome, and virtually useless body of tradition that was fast replacing the Bible.<sup>10</sup> They had so many rules. Most of them were things not to do. They said “no” to so many things that they believed it would require God to say “yes” to them.

The Sadducees were theological liberals. They denied the bodily resurrection, angels, and anything that could not be proved with logic. One preacher said that is why they are so “sad-you-see.”

The Pharisees believed in the resurrection and the Sadducees did not. These two groups were on different pages in a number of ways and yet on the same page in one way: they both believed that their Jewish heritage made them right before God.<sup>11</sup>

May God help me to get this truth across! These two groups of people were in the lineage of Abraham. They were great-great-great grandchildren of Abraham. They were Jews just like John the Baptist and Jesus. They grew up believing that salvation was just for them (and maybe a few Gentile proselytes).

John wanted these people to admit that their Jewishness did not guarantee them a right to stand before God. Family heritage does not equal repentance. The only way to salvation is repentance. By being baptized, people for giving evidence that they were repenting. They were renouncing dependence on self. They were saying, “There is nothing inherently good in me.”

John was bringing these people to this realization: “Everything that I thought would get me to God, everything I have been relying on is rubbish. It is bankrupt. I have been placing my faith in a sinking boat. Just because I am a Jew does not mean I am God’s child.”

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<sup>10</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition*.

These people had a profession of faith in God, but there was no life change. They were not bearing fruit. John said they were in danger of being cut down and thrown into the fire.

## **Conclusion**

People in churches all across America need to come to the same realization. If you have been placing your faith in church attendance, being born into a Christian home, being a moral person, or anything else other than a personal relationship with Jesus, then you are on a road that is paved with lies. That road leads to hell, not to Jesus. False teachers and deceivers have paved that road to trick you. You need Jesus!

Notice what the Bible says in verse 2: “the kingdom of heaven is near.” And now notice what the Bible says in verse 10: hell is near. Everlasting life through Jesus is near, but so is eternal torment. You are on one of these roads right now!



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