

REPENTANCE

“So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” Romans 2:3-5

Why talk about repentance?

In today’s atmosphere of feel good religion and sweet, lovey-dovey philosophy, to declare that one’s stubbornness and unrepentance is damning one to God’s wrath, sending one to eternal punishment, is just not politically correct. One has to wonder at the insensitivity of the Apostle Paul when he wrote such a stinging attack on the corruption of man. Or, perhaps one has to wonder at the milquetoast mentality that has gained control of society. Since Paul (and the other apostles, not to mention Jesus) spoke so strongly on the subject of repentance, it behooves us to take a closer look at this Christian doctrine.

The ministry of John and Jesus.

The Bible tells us that when John the Baptist was born, his father uttered a prophecy about his role as a prophet. In Luke 1:76,77, he declared, “You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.” So, when John started his ministry

about 30 years later, he just went around telling everyone how sweet God was and how everything was cool, right? WRONG! Matthew 3:1 records the beginning of his ministry: “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’” He declared in verse 11, “I baptize you with water for *repentance*.”

Soon after the beginning of John’s ministry, Jesus launched his own ministry and took up the same call, as recorded in Mark 1:14,15: “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. *Repent* and believe the good news.’” In response to criticism that he was hanging out with the lower stratum of society, ‘tax collectors and sinners’, Jesus declared, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to *repentance*.” (Luke 5:31,32)

After his death and resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples while they were in hiding from the authorities, and as he ministered to their hearts he recalled to their minds their mission, at Luke 24:46,47, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance* and *forgiveness of sins* will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

The meaning of repentance.

What does repentance mean? The word in the Greek of the New Testament which we translate “repentance” is “metanoia”, which translated

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literally is “change of mind”. So the word repentance means basically a change of mind, but includes with it regret for one’s past course of life and a conviction to change one’s direction in living. When John the Baptist saw the religious leaders of his day coming to be baptized, he confronted them with this reality. Matthew 3:7,8, records his statement, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with *repentance*.”

In the famous incident where Peter asked Jesus how many times one should forgive one’s brother, in Luke’s account of it, Jesus says this: “So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he *repents*, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘*I repent*’, forgive him.” Here the word for repent is again a form of the word “metanoia” and carries with it the connotation of someone saying, “I’m sorry”. And certainly if there is a true “change of heart”, some regret or recognition of the harmfulness of one’s ways must be realized to cause true repentance.

Repentance involves the emotions.

A very clear instance of such an understanding is in Acts 2:36-38. On the occasion of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the resulting crowd to which Peter preached, this declaration was made: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ When the people heard this, they were *cut to the heart* and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter replied, ‘*Repent* and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

Just a few days later, a similar situation arose. This time a man was healed of his life-long infirmity. A crowd gathered, and Peter again preached the Word of Jesus. At Acts 3:17-20, he says, “Now brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. *Repent* then, and *turn* to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus.”

The recognition of sin.

Our Lord Jesus addressed the subject of repentance and his mission to all humanity in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He was initially dealing with the hardhearted attitude of the self-righteous Pharisees, but important understanding of the issue of repentance is contained in this parable. Luke 15:11-32 contains the whole story, about a son who decides he wants his inheritance in advance and proceeds to waste it all on decadent living. This once highly-respected son find himself in a distant country, working for a hard taskmaster, and not even allowed to eat the husks of the pods the pigs in his care were eating.

Now, consider the state of this young man. He starts in wealth, in prosperity. He turns to wantonness, and ends in abject poverty. He finds no satisfaction, and is caring for an animal that the Jews of that time were forbidden to eat; an ‘unclean’ animal. Basically, he is described as being in the most debased state imaginable. In verse 17 we are told, “When he *came to his senses*, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to

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him: Father, *I have sinned* against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father.”

The restoration of the Prodigal Son all began with a simple, “he came to his senses”. He became aware of an incredible sense of loss. He felt the absence of that wonderful relationship he had once enjoyed with his father. Then he made a decision: To return to his father and confess his sin, even if he only got to live as a slave in his father’s house. He had a “metanoia”, a change of mind and heart, which prompted a new direction in life.

Repentance touches the heart of the Father.

Now, notice the father’s reaction to the return of his son. In verse 20 we find, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was *filled with compassion* for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” When the son begins his speech about being a slave in the house, the father, instead of lambasting him with a rebuke and correction, cuts him off and orders a feast of celebration, puts the best robe in the house on him, and treats him as royalty. When the older son objects to such royal treatment for one who has “squandered his inheritance on prostitutes”, the father says in verses 31, 32, “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

The incredibly inspiring element in all this is the attitude of the father, whom Jesus was using as a picture of our Heavenly Father. It seems obvious that the father was out there everyday, looking down the road, hoping to see his son returning.

On that day, he saw him coming. “While he was still a long way off”, he saw the boy, his heart broke for him, he ran and embraced him and fully welcomed him back into the house.

What is that saying to us? The answer is given in Luke 15:7, “I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” Heaven has a party when a sinner comes to God. Those who think they have no need to repent are no cause for celebration.

The kind who need repentance.

Jesus illustrated this difference again in Luke 18: 10-14, describing two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisees were religious superstars in Jewish society, keeping strict observance of the Law of Moses and the traditions of their ancestors. The tax collector was one of the most despised personalities of the time. They are described as going up to the temple to pray. Their attitudes are set in stark contrast.

“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like all other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”

Wow! What a contrast! One so proud of himself, looking down on those around him, having nothing to repent of in his own eyes; the other one too aware of his own unworthiness to even look up to heaven, begging for mercy. Note the conclusion of Jesus: “I tell you that this man, rather than

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the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In both cases, the Prodigal Son and the tax collector, there was a realization of having failed, of being in a culpable situation, guilty of serious wrongdoing and a sincere decision that forgiveness was needed, and a new course of life was called for. They both knew that they had sinned. Both found a repentant heart.

What about sin?

In modern society the word “sin” is an instant turn-off. Use that word and you have just lost your audience. It is not politically correct. That suits the devil just fine. For the devil knows that if you don’t believe you have sinned, you won’t feel the need to repent and be forgiven. If you don’t repent and ask for forgiveness, you can’t take advantage of God’s provision in Christ to cover your sins and take you back into his house, a place of intimacy with Him.

Consider the Apostle John’s statement on this subject. 1 John 1:8,9 says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we *confess our sins*, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

God grants the ability to repent.

The interesting thing is, repentance is a gift from God. When the gospel of Jesus Christ was first delivered to non-Jews in the house of Cornelius, it caused a stir in the Jewish Christian community. Finally, they decided this was of God and in Acts 11:18 declared, “So then, God has even *granted*

the Gentiles *repentance* unto life.” Even the ability to repent is a gift from God, not something we can work up in ourselves. Paul reinforces this conclusion in 2 Timothy 2:24,25 when he reminds Timothy that, “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will *grant them repentance* leading to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

The Holy Spirit convicts of sin.

When Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit in John 16:8-11, he described the work of the Holy Spirit as one of convicting hearts. “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of the world now stands condemned.”

So the Holy Spirit is the one who works on a person’s heart to bring an awareness of guilt and responsibility for sins, who enables the person to feel sorrow and remorse for those sins, and to bow before God in confession of those sins. The Holy Spirit is the one who works in your life to lead you past repentance to a righteous standing with God because of faith in what Jesus has done on the cross. He died for your sins so that you may live for Him.

The object of repentance.

Repentance from dead works has an objective: That

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the Christian should enter into a love-relationship with the Living God and be used of God to reach out to others with the message of reconciliation. Paul states as much in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21: “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should *no longer live for themselves but for him who died* for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

Dead to sin, alive to Christ.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, teaches the same thing in a slightly different wording. “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” (Romans 6:11-14) Drawing on the Israelite practice of offering sacrifice as an example, Paul says in Romans 12:1, “Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God’s

mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship.”

The object of repentance has been consistently expressed throughout Scripture. God is not just looking for an excuse for sins, he is looking for a change in our living. In Psalm 34:14 it is expressed succinctly: “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” To pursue a study of what that means in detail would take this far beyond our present concern. That is actually a life-long adventure, led by the Holy Spirit and built on God’s Word. It requires all your years to learn in greater and greater depth the will of your Creator and Father, God. But it all begins with this step: Repentance.

We invite your response to this message. If you feel led to contribute to this effort, send correspondence to:

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