

REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE Pt. 4

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

In 1896 a pastor wrote a novel. One hundred years later, in 1996, experts ranked it as the tenth-most-read book in the world. The pastor was Charles Sheldon and the book was *In His Steps*. The story is simple. A tramp challenges a church to live up to what it believes. When the tramp dies, the pastor and the people in his church pledge to live their lives for one year asking themselves, "What would Jesus do?"

More recently a group opposed to gas guzzling SUV's published an ad which asked, "What would Jesus Drive?" A Christian doctor has written a book entitled, "What would Jesus Eat?"

I have often wanted to know, "What would Jesus say about a particular subject?" That is an excellent question to ask concerning the subject of repentance. We have looked at what John the Baptist meant by the word, but what would Jesus say?

Of the fifty-eight times the words "repent" and "repentance" occur in the New Testament, twenty of them are used about the ministry of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. This includes the fact that He sent the disciples to preach repentance, which will be discussed in the next chapter, and that in the story He told about the rich man and Lazarus, it is the rich man who says something about repentance. These twenty occurrences do not include the times Jesus used the word "repent" in the book of Revelation, which will be examined later when the ministry of John the Apostle is considered.

TO UNBELIEVERS

At the Beginning of His Ministry. According to Mathew and Mark, Jesus preached repentance from the very beginning of His ministry.

Matthew 4:17 When Jesus began to preach, His message was "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17). Since this statement is identical to the one by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2), what Jesus meant by repent is the same thing John meant. What John meant by repentance was that people should change their thinking from trusting their merit before God to trusting God's mercy for the remission of sins (See the previous chapter).

Mark 1:15 Mark says that Jesus preached, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk. 1:15). This is one of three places in the New Testament where repent and believe appear together (Acts 20:21 and Heb. 6:1). The relationship between repentance and faith in the New Testament is a puzzling problem. By far and away, most of the time faith is given as the one and only condition of eternal salvation (cf. John and Romans 4), but there are places where repentance is the one and only stated requirement for salvation (Acts 17:30, 2 Peter 3:9). As noted, three times repentance and faith are mention together (Mk. 1:5, Acts 20:21, Heb. 6:1). What is the relationship between repentance and faith?

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Since, in at least a few cases, repentance and faith are listed separately, they are not exactly synonymous. On the other hand, since each sometimes stands alone as the requirement for eternal life, they cannot be separated; that is, when repentance occurs alone it includes faith, and when faith occurs alone it implies repentance. When the forgiveness of sins is the subject, repentance and faith are inseparable. In Acts 20:21, repentance and faith are united by one article. Therefore, repentance and faith are not two steps to salvation; they are not temporally successive. They cannot be separated, but they ought to be distinguished.

As has been pointed out, others have come to similar conclusions. Calvin says, "Can true repentance exist without faith? By no means. But

although they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished" (Calvin, 3, 3, 5). Berkhof puts it this way: "The two cannot be separated; they are simply complementary parts of the same process" (Berkhof, p. 487). Chafer concludes, "It [repentance] is included in believing and could not be separated from it" (Chafer, Vol. 3, p. 373). For statements by Erickson and Spurgeon see the chapter on "the Problems with Repentance."

What does "repent and believe the gospel" mean? Mark does not record enough information **in this passage** to answer that question based on this context, but there is no reason to conclude that Mark meant something different concerning repentance than Matthew meant. Indeed, it would be highly unlikely, if not impossible, for Mark to have a different definition of repentance for John and Jesus than Matthew presented for them.

Moreover, as can be seen from the study of repentance in the ministries of John and Jesus, repentance is a change of mind about trusting one's self and trusting Christ (See comments on Mt. 3:2, 11:21-22). Repentance includes faith (See comments on Mt. 12:41). So, John proclaimed repent (Mt. 3:2) and believe (Acts 19:4) and so did Jesus (Mk. 1:15).

At the Call of Matthew. Shortly after Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector, He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Mt. 9:9-10). The Pharisees complained to His disciples, "*Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*" (Mt. 9:11). In answer to the criticism of the Pharisees Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Mt. 9:12). He went on to say, "For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mt. 9:13). This incident is repeated in Mark and Luke. Mark records that Jesus said, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call **the** righteous, but sinners, to repentance*" (Mk. 2:17) and Luke writes, Jesus said, "*I have not come to call **the** righteous, but sinners, to repentance*" (Lk. 5:32).

In order to understand what Jesus is saying here, it is imperative that one understand what Jesus thought of the Pharisees. On another occasion, He Himself said what He thought.

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:9-14).

Obviously, Jesus thought that the Pharisees were trusting in themselves that they were righteous. That is what is going on in Matthew nine. Jesus is saying that the Pharisees felt that they were righteous (M'Neile). They did not feel that they needed a physician or a savior.

He is also saying that He came to call sinners to repentance—that is, call them to change their minds about themselves, to see that they are sinners who need a savior and, obviously, trust the Lord. Plummer says that the Pharisees "were in far worse condition than the toll-gathers, because they did not know their own sinfulness."

Wilkin says it simply: "They had self-righteous attitudes," and Jesus exhorted them "to change their attitudes" (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 104).

Being sick and needing a doctor is a good illustration of what the Lord means by repentance. As sick people need to recognize that they are sick and need to trust a doctor to be healed, sinners need to recognize their spiritual sickness (sin), and trust Him who heals spiritual disease, namely Jesus, by whose stripes we are healed of sin (1 Pet. 2:24). The problem is that some will not admit they are sick and will not go to the doctor.

To the Cities. A little later in Jesus' ministry, Matthew says,

Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the

Repentance is a change of mind about trusting one's self and trusting Christ.

mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Mt. 11:20-22).

The Jews did not believe Jesus was the Messiah even though He did miracles. Furthermore, they thought that they were righteous as compared to the Gentiles. Jesus is saying that had Gentile cities seen the miracles that He had done in Jewish cities, they would have repented. In other words, the miracles that Jesus had done had not changed the minds of the Jews, but had the Gentiles seen these miracles, they would have changed their mind about Him, and they would have believed in Him. Plummer says their problem was “not violence or sensuality, but indifference.” He adds,

Self-satisfied complacency, whether in the form of Pharisaic self-righteousness or in that of popular indifference, is condemned by Christ more severely than grosser sins. A life that externally is eminently respectable may be more fatally antichristian than one that is manifestly scandalous.

Luke records that Jesus said, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes” (Lk. 10:13). As in Matthew’s account, the Jews thought that they were better than the Gentiles, but Jesus is saying that if He had done mighty miracles in Tyre and Sidon, Gentiles cities, the people in those cities (Gentiles) would have changed their minds about Him, and they would then have sat around in sackcloth and ashes.

Sitting in sackcloth and ashes is “an attendant emotional response, which would have occurred subsequent to (their) change of attitude” (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 47). It was the fruit of repentance, like the Ninevites who changed their mind (Jonah 3:5a) and then they as a result put on sackcloth and ashes and turned from their wicked ways (Jonah 3:5b-9).

To those Seeking a Sign. Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You” (Mt. 12:38). Jesus said that “the men

of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here” (Mt. 12:41).

In Matthew 11:21-22 Jesus gave a hypothetical comparison. Now He gives an actual case, the case of the Ninevites who repented at the preaching of Jonah. The way the word “repent” has been used in Matthew so far, and especially the way it was used for a similar situation in Matthew 11:21-22, suggests that “repent” here is a change of mind. Moreover, what the book of Jonah says is that “the people of Nineveh believed God” (Jonah 3:5). “Their repentance consisted in believing in God,” and “their subsequent turning from their wicked way (Jon. 3:6-10) was the fruit of their repentance and not the repentance itself” (Wilkin dissertation, p. 110-111).

Luke records,

And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, ‘This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation and

condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here’ (Lk. 11:29-32).

Jesus had done miracles in their midst, but they attributed His miracles to the work of Satan (Lk. 11:14-15). They “sought from Him a sign from Heaven” (Lk. 11:16). Jesus declares that they were

“spiritually corrupt” and, therefore, they demanded “an extraordinary” sign “to prove conclusively that He was indeed the Messiah” (Geldenhuys). They wanted “direct testimony from God Himself.... such as a voice from Heaven or a pillar of fire.” They wanted to be “miraculously convinced” (Plummer).

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Jesus says that they would not be given any other signs, except the sign of Jonah. Luke omits the explanation that Jonah was a type of the death and resurrection of Christ (Mt. 12:40), but that explanation is implied (Plummer).

He then adds that the Queen of the South, a Gentile, came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon. There are a number of contrasts here: 1) between a Gentile Queen and the Jews, 2) between the ends of the earth and here, 3) between Solomon and the Son of Man, and, perhaps, 4) between a woman and men (Plummer), but the point is that "she believed the report she heard" while the Jews "rejected Him in their unbelief" (Geldenhuys). Her response is a condemnation of the response of the Jews. To make matters worse, a greater than Solomon was present.

Jesus goes on to say that the people of the Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. Again, Gentiles readily responded, whereas the Jewish generation did not. They "hardened themselves in unbelief" (Geldenhuys). So, the response of the people of Nineveh is a condemnation of the response of the Jewish generation of Jesus' day. Again, to make matters worse a greater than Jonah was in their midst.

The repentance in Luke 11:32 is changing one's mind about Christ. The Jews did not believe He was the Messiah. In contrast, the Queen of the South came "to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (Lk. 11:31), and she accepted what he said. The people of Nineveh repented; that is, they accepted him as a messenger from God and "believed God" (Jonah 3:5). Jesus was calling His audience "to accept Him and His message before it was too late" (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 48).

At the Falling of the Tower. Jesus preached, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3). "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:5). The Galileans thought that people who experienced a calamity must be extremely sinful (Lk. 13:1-2, 4), implying that they were not sinful, or at least, as sinful as they were.

People believed that the disaster was a punishment for sin (Jn. 9:2. See Morris). According to these

Galileans, a "calamity was the judgment upon the sufferers for exceptional wickedness" (Plummer). God allowed people to be overtaken by such disasters because they were "exceptionally sinful" (Geldenhuys). Extraordinary calamity was an indication of exceptional sin.

Jesus insists that these people had not been "singled out for a horrible death because they were worse sinners than others" (Morris). He reminds them that they are all sinners (Plummer), seizing the opportunity to tell them that they need to "repent." In this context, "repent" obviously means to change your mind about who you are. You are a sinner who needs a savior.

At the Complaint of the Pharisees. Later in Christ's ministry, the Pharisees again complained when Jesus ate with sinners (Lk. 15:1-2. See 5:30). In reply, Jesus told three parables. He said "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance" (Lk. 15:7). "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Lk. 15:10).

The first parable is about a lost sheep (Lk. 15:4-7). The Pharisees had a saying "There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world" (Plummer). Jesus says, on the contrary, there is more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who need no repentance (Lk. 15:7).

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The ninety-nine sheep represent the Pharisees and scribes, "whose care about legal observances prevented them from feeling any need of repentance" (Plummer). The Pharisees had a self-righteous attitude, thinking they were better than others and able to enter the kingdom on the basis of their own merit (Lk. 18:9). They didn't think they needed God's mercy. The contrast in this passage is not between righteous people and people living in sin. It is between self-righteous people, who feel no need for repentance, and sinners who are much more likely to change their mind about their sin and realize their need for God's mercy. Repentance in this passage is a change of mind from a self-righteous attitude that does not see a need for God's mercy to an attitude

of realizing one's sinfulness and therefore a need for God's forgiveness.

The second parable is about a lost coin. This time instead of saying there is joy in Heaven Jesus spoke of "*joy in the presence of the angels of God*" (Lk. 15:10). The Pharisees complained (Lk. 15:2). "The angelic estimate of the facts is very different from that of the Pharisees" (Plummer). In the presence of angels there is joy. The point is the same as the one made in verse seven, namely, in contrast to the Pharisees who saw no need for God's mercy, sinners, those who recognize their sinfulness and need for God's mercy, cause rejoicing in Heaven.

Geldenhuis says,

In no other religion in the whole world does one come to know God as the One who in His love seeks the lost person to save him through His grace. In the writings of other religions we see how man seeks and yearns for God, but in the Bible we see how God in Christ seeks man to save him for time and eternity. Because the Savior has paid with His precious blood for the redemption of man, every soul has an infinite value in God's sight and the way to the throne of grace lies open to everyone who desires to enter.

In the Story about Lazarus. In the story Jesus told about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus, the rich man in Hell said to Abraham, "*I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him [Lazarus] to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment*" (Lk. 16:27-28). When "*Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them'*" (Lk. 16:29), the rich man said, "*No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent*" (Lk. 16:30). "*But he [Abraham] said to him [the rich man], 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead'*" (Lk. 16:31). Abraham said they had the Scripture, which they should "hear" (Lk. 16:29), meaning they had the Scripture that speaks about Christ, and they should believe in Him. Moses (cf. Deut. 18:15) and the prophets (cf. Isa. 52:13--53:12; Dan. 7:13-14, 27) predicted the coming of the Messiah, yet when He came, the nation refused to believe in Him.

In his reply to Abraham, the rich man used "repent" in place of "hear" (Lk. 16:30) and, when

Abraham responds, he says that if they will not "hear" the Scripture, they will not be "*persuaded though one rise from the dead*" (Lk. 16:31). That was prophetic because even after Jesus was raised from the dead, people did not believe, but the point here is that Abraham linked "hear" with "repent" and added "persuaded" as well. Thus, "repent" in this passage is listening to the Scripture and believing in Jesus.

At the End of His Ministry. After His resurrection, Jesus said, "*Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem*" (Lk. 24:46-47). The phrase "*in His name*" connects the preaching of repentance and remission with His death and resurrection (Morris).

Based on Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning His death and resurrection, the disciples were to preach repentance and remission of sins to all nations. Israel had been instrumental in having Jesus killed. Now it was to be preached that the Scriptures were fulfilled in Him and they were to change their minds about Him in order to be forgiven. It is clear that is what Jesus meant, and that is what the disciples understood from Peter's sermons in Acts.

CONCERNING BELIEVERS

On one occasion Jesus used the word "repent" for a believer instead of an unbeliever. He said, "*Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him*" (Lk. 17:3-4).

Jesus says that if a brother (fellow believer) sins against you, you should **rebuke** him, which obviously means talk to him. You are to "call his attention to his wrong behavior (and not slander him behind his back!)" (Geldenhuis).

If the brother who has sinned against you repents, you are to forgive him even if he sins seven times in one day and seven times says, "I repent." The seven times is not to be taken literally (Plummer), as if to say on the eighth time you are not forgiven (Morris). Jesus made this clear elsewhere (Mt.

18:21-22). The point is unlimited forgiveness (Plummer).

What is the nature of repentance in this passage? The repentance is apparently not a change in behavior because the brother sins seven times in one day. It is in something he says (cf. "saying"). Based on the Lord's use of "repent" in the book of Luke prior to this verse, it is reasonable to assume that the repentance here is like the one who sinned saying, "by what you said (cf. "rebuke"), I see your point and you are right; I change my mind about what I have done." As one commentator put it, "The pardon to be granted to our brethren has no other limit than their repenting, and the confession by which it is expressed" (Godet).

Summary: When Jesus told people to repent in order to be forgiven, He meant that they should change their minds about trusting their own righteousness. Imbedded in that message is the idea that you must trust someone (or something) else. So, to people who trusted their righteousness before God (Lk. 18:9), Jesus preached repentance, that is, a change of mind **from** trusting their righteousness **to** trusting God's mercy (Lk. 18:13).

Would it be possible for people to realize that they should not trust their righteousness and then not

trust the righteousness of Christ? When people are trusting their own efforts to obtain salvation and repent (change their minds about that), they of necessity have to place their faith somewhere else. The gospel is the message that faith for salvation is to be placed in Jesus Christ. Wilkin concludes that, while that may be logically possible, Luke does not seem to conceive of "someone recognizing his sinfulness and need of grace and forgiveness and then refusing to believe in Jesus Christ." Wilkin adds that as far as Luke is concerned "true repentance leads to faith in Christ" (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 62).

"Repentance is not opposed to grace; it is the recognition of the need of grace" (Ironside, p. 10). "Repentance is the sinner's recognition of and acknowledgment of his lost state and, thus, of his need of grace" (Ironside, p. 11).

When Dave Drummond, a fellow pastor and a dear friend, read this manuscript and got to this point, he suggested that I should say that repentance is a transfer of trust from self-righteousness to the Savior. That says it well—very well. ■

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