

REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE Pt. 3

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Because the meaning of a word is determined by its usage, to determine the meaning of the words “repent” and “repentance” in the New Testament, each occurrence of these words in the New Testament should be carefully examined. The Greek words for “repent” and “repentance” occur fifty-eight times in the New Testament (The verb appears 34 times and the noun 24.). Some of these references refer to the same occasion (For example, Mt. 11:21 and Lk. 10:13) or to the same thing (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:4, Lk. 3:3; Acts 13:24, 19:4). Therefore, the New Testament mentions repentance about 41 times.

John the Baptist was the first person in the New Testament to preach repentance. Eight of the fifty-eight occurrences of repent and repentance refer to his ministry. He preached “repent” (Mt. 3:2). He proclaimed that those who did repent should bring fruit fitting the repentance (Mt. 3:8; Lk. 3:8) and he practiced a baptism of repentance (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Acts 13:24, 19:4).

JOHN’S MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE

Change Your Mind. John the Baptist preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Mt. 3:2). Several clues in this passage indicate that by “repent” John meant a change of mind.

In Matthew 3:9 John says, “Do not **think** to say to yourself, ‘We have Abraham as our father’” (According to Luke, John said, “Do not begin to say to yourselves...” See Lk. 3:8). The Jews of John’s day were of the opinion that being a son of Abraham was a “pledge of safety” (M’Neile), that because they were the descendents of Abraham they had a part in the world to come (Edersheim, Barclay).

Thus, John is telling people who thought that they would enter the kingdom because they were descendents of Abraham that they must “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”; that is, they must not *think* that because they are descendents of Abraham they will enter the kingdom. Obviously, they must think something else, which John mentions later, but the point is that when John the Baptist said, “repent” he meant “change your mind” about what you think it takes to enter the kingdom.

Another indication that by “repent” John meant a change of mind is that he says “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8). John distinguishes between repentance (an inward change of mind) and the fruit of repentance (an external change). Commenting on this verse, M’Neile, a Cambridge professor, who wrote a commentary on the Greek text of Matthew, says “repent” means, “not merely penitential sorrow, but a change of nous” (nous means, “mind.”). Therefore, by “repent” John means a change of mind, not a change of behavior. The repentance is the root; the change in behavior is the fruit.

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So, John is telling people that they must change their minds about thinking that their ancestry would get them into the kingdom. They thought they had merit before God; they needed to change their minds about that. To say the same thing another way, they were *trusting* their merit.

If they had to change their minds *from* thinking that they had merit to enter the kingdom, what did they need to change their minds *to* in order to get into the coming kingdom? If they had to cease trusting their merit, what must they trust? Anyone who knows anything about the Bible knows that the answer is: they must cease to trust their own merits and trust the mercy of God.

Trust Christ. John's message also includes that people were to trust Christ. Matthew records that he says, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt. 3:11). Paul's comment is, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (Acts 19:4). Concerning John the Baptist, the Gospel of John says, "There was a man sent from God, whose name **was** John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe" (Jn. 1:6-7). Commenting on this last passage, Westcott, a Cambridge professor, who wrote a commentary on the Greek text of the Gospel of John says, "the basis of his (John the Baptist) preaching was repentance—inner self-renunciation—the end was faith." John's message definitely included the need for trusting Jesus Christ.

To sum up, to people who thought that because they were the descendents of Abraham they had a part in the world to come (Mt. 3:9), John the Baptist proclaimed "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:2), and believe on the one who is to come (Mt. 3:11; Acts 19:4; Jn. 1:7). In other words, for John the Baptist, "repent" meant change your mind about trusting your merit to get into the world to come to trusting the mercy of God. In his doctoral dissertation, Wilkin reached the conclusion that the message of repentance preached by John the Baptist was that people should "give up their old attitude, which was essentially a self-righteous one" and "adopt an attitude of humble recognition of their sinfulness and need of God's mercy and forgiveness" (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 98).

JOHN'S BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE

Matthew 3:11 Those who repented were baptized (Mt. 3:6). John says that this was a baptism "unto repentance" (Mt. 3:11). What is a baptism unto repentance?

In the Greek text, the word translated "unto" (eis) can mean, "in order to get" or it can mean, "because of" (See *A Manual Grammar of the Greek*

New Testament, H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, p. 104). The people of Nineveh repented "at" (eis) the preaching of Jonah (Mt. 12:41). They did not repent in order to get the preaching of Jonah, but **because** of his preaching. John's Baptism was not in order to get repentance; they were baptized **because** they had repented.

Mark 1:4 Mark sums up John's ministry by saying, "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4). As compared to Mathew's account, Mark adds the phrase "for the remission of sins."

John preached "repent" (Mt. 3:2) and those who repented, received the remission of sins. The New Testament connects repentance to the remission of sins (Acts 3:19, 5:31. See comments on Luke 24:47 and Acts 2:38). Those who repented (and had their sins forgiven) were then baptized. That order is clearly seen in Matthew's account (cf. Mt. 3:3, 6, 11.

See the previous paragraph). Therefore, it is repentance, not baptism, which is for the remission of sins (Wilkin, dissertation, pp. 41, 142). The baptism is an act of identification with those who have repented and are waiting for the Messiah.

Luke 3:3 Luke echoes Mark's summary. He says that John the Baptist preached "a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Lk. 3:3). It is the same expression that was used in Mark 1:4. The remission of sins is connected to repentance.

Thus, those who repented received the remission of sins and then they were baptized as an identification of those who had recognized their need of God's mercy and were waiting for the coming of the Messiah (Mt. 3:11).

Acts 13:24 In the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidian, Paul preached. The purpose of his sermon was to proclaim justification by faith (Acts 13:39). The content of his sermon was designed to accomplish that purpose. In the course of his sermon he said, "After John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel" (Acts 13:24). Paul does not explain the baptism of repentance. Since he does not bother to give any explanation, it is safe to assume that he uses the word "repentance" the same way that John did,

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namely, of a change of mind from one's merit before God to a need of God's mercy. Baptism was the symbol of that change of mind as well as an indication that they would be ready to place their faith in the coming Messiah. In short, repentance here is giving up self-righteous thinking and recognizing one's sinfulness and need of forgiveness (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 85).

If Paul had meant something other than what John did, then he would have had to say so. Furthermore, whatever his understanding, it would have been consistent with justification by faith or he would not have mentioned it at all, since, in that case, it would have defeated his purpose.

Acts 19:4 At Ephesus, Paul asked some disciples who had been baptized by John the Baptist, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (Acts 19:2). When they told Paul that they had not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit, Paul told them, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (Acts 19:4).

As is the case with Paul's reference to the baptism of repentance by John the Baptist in Acts 13:24, there is insufficient information in this passage to define exactly what Paul's understanding of John's use of repentance was. Again, as in Acts 13:24, since Paul does not bother to give any explanation, it is safe to assume that he uses the expression, "baptism of repentance," the same way that John did (See comments on Acts 13:24).

JOHN'S FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

Matthew 3:8 To the religious leaders John said, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Mt. 3:8). This statement demonstrates that there is a difference between an internal change of attitude and an external change of action. The internal change is the root and the external change of action is the fruit. As M'Neile says, "the fruit is not the change of heart, but the acts which results from it."

What does the fruit John had in mind look like? Matthew does not specifically record the answer to that question. There is, however, a clue in Matthew and a specific answer in Luke. Mathew says that when people were baptized by John, they were "confessing their sins" (Mt. 3:6). The confession of sins was part of the fruit of repentance, not the repentance (*Systemic Theology*, A. H. Strong, p. 834).

Luke 3:8 According to Luke, when John told people to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Lk. 3:8) and they asked, "What shall we do then?" (Lk. 3:10), John replied,

The message of John the Baptist was "repent," that is, change your thinking from trusting your merit before God to trusting God's mercy for the remission of sins...

He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise. Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages (Lk. 3:11-14).

In response to John's preaching they ask, "What shall we do?" meaning "what shall we do that is worthy of repentance?" John gave them a detailed list of what fruit looks like. Tax collectors should not collect more in taxes than is required. Soldiers should not misuse authority by intimating anyone or accusing anyone falsely and by being content with their wages. In short, the fruit of repentance consists of sharing, being honest and being content. Those who have trusted God's mercy should show mercy.

Summary: The message of John the Baptist was "repent," that is, change your thinking from trusting your merit before God to trusting God's mercy for the remission of sins, be baptized as an indication of your change of attitude and as an indication of your being prepared to trust the coming Messiah and bring forth external fruit fitting your internal change of thinking. Those who have trusted God's mercy should show mercy.

In terms of John's message of repentance the sum is: To people who thought that because they were the descendents of Abraham they had a part in the

world to come (Mt. 3:9), John the Baptist proclaimed “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 3:2), and believe on the one who is to come (Mt. 3:11; Acts 19:4; Jn. 1:7). In other words, change your mind about trusting your merit to get into the world to come and trust the mercy of God.

Harry Ironside put it like this,

Those who submitted to his (John the Baptist) baptism were practically saying: “In this act I declare my change of mind, my new attitude toward myself, my sins, and my God. I own my unworthiness, and I cast myself upon the infinite mercy of God, looking to Him for deliverance, counting on Him to forgive my sins

and graciously fit me for the reception of the King and a place in the Kingdom of the heavens (Ironside, p. 30).

Ironside added, repentance is “the confession that one is utterly without merit, and if he is ever saved at all it can only be through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ironside, p. 36). When Bernard of Clairvaux was dying, monks spoke to him of his merits. His response was, “Holy Jesus, Thy wounds are my merits” (Ironside, p. 44). ■

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