

Repentance: The Missing Piece of the Gospel

Many of us have heard of the hellfire and brimstone preaching of the last century and are turned off by it. It seemed like those preaching were self-righteous bigots judging people who were not as bad as those people ranting and raving their condemnation. This scenario is probably a bit bigoted itself; how do we know what the preacher is feeling? But the practice by some in the 20th century caused many to react against all preaching on sin and judgment. Today, we have a gospel being preached that emphasizes the love of God to the neglect of the holiness of God. It preaches a half-god, like an old grandpa in the sky. Maybe some preachers overemphasized the holiness and wrath of God to the neglect of His love for us, but that shouldn't cause us to pendulum swing to the opposite heresy of a judgmentless god and a gospel without repentance.

Repentance is absolutely necessary before someone can get saved. Most of the time we don't even hear the idea come up when we hear the gospel, which means we are not hearing the complete gospel. The church today must get back to sharing the gospel in its fullness if we want to see our world change. So, what is repentance? Is it necessary for salvation? How can I share the truth of repentance without sounding like a hellfire and brimstone preacher? Let's answer these questions in the reverse order.

First, it might not be so bad preaching hellfire and brimstone. Jonathan Edwards did when he preached perhaps the most famous sermon of all time outside the Bible. The title of his sermon was, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." His text was Deuteronomy 32:35, "Their foot shall slide in due time." Edwards said sinners are "always exposed to sudden unexpected destruction." I remember hearing someone preach, "God is not angry with you." Edwards and the Bible would disagree. People might not want to hear that they are going to hell for their sins, but it is the truth. If it is true, then is it really loving not to warn people? Any moment, a person can die and then face the judgment; it is God's sovereignty and mercy that keeps them from slipping into hell at this very moment. Now there is a right way and a wrong way to share these truths. Bringing up hell the first time you talk to someone might not be the way to win them over. According to Colossians 4:5-6 we are commanded as believers: "Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person." Telling a stranger he or she is going to hell is probably not the way we season our message with salt, at least most of the time. Everyone's situation is different. But eventually people need to realize the consequences of their lifetime of actions if they don't repent. Many people have been shaken in the past when they hear the truths of God's holiness and wrath, awakening them to be open to hear about His love and provision of forgiveness.

This brings us to the second question, “Is repentance necessary for salvation?” The simple answer is, “Yes.” Let’s look at what the Bible teaches. Jesus began His ministry calling people to repent. Mark 1:14-15 states, “After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” Notice His basic message was “repent and believe.” On the day of Pentecost Peter addressed a large crowd, preaching to them the gospel. Acts 2:37-41 reflect how we are to receive the good news:

When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he testified and strongly urged them, saying, “Be saved from this corrupt generation!”

Peter sounded like a hellfire and brimstone preacher. Notice we are to be saved from this corrupt generation. We can’t embrace the corruption and be saved from it. We have to repent of our part in the corruption. Now some might suggest that the baptism is what brings about the forgiveness. What did Jesus say in Luke 24 just before He ascended up to heaven, which was right before the day of Pentecost? Pentecost was 50 days after Passover, which was three days before the resurrection and according to Acts 1:3 Jesus appeared to the disciples for 40 days after He rose from the dead and then ascended to heaven, which means Pentecost took place one week after Jesus ascended up to heaven. One week before Peter preached this message where he called the people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, Jesus made it clear what brings the forgiveness in Luke 24:46-49:

He also said to them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high.”

Notice repentance is what brings forgiveness of sins. Jesus clearly taught the absolute necessity of repentance for salvation. This is the gospel according to Jesus. We are to repent and believe. We also outwardly express that repentance and belief in baptism. When we get saved, we receive the Holy Spirit too, who helps us live the changed life God calls us to. When we repent and believe we are born again (John 3:3) and receive a new heart that wants to follow God (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-27). In Acts 3:19 Peter preached the gospel in a similar fashion:

“Therefore repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out.” He finished his sermon in verse 26: “God raised up his servant and sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your evil ways.” If you are still not convinced read Acts 5:31; 11:18; 20:21; 26:20; Psalm 51:17; Matthew 3:8 and 2 Timothy 2:25. Notice in all these passages we see that Jesus, Peter, Paul, David and John the Baptist all preached that repentance was necessary for salvation.

This brings us to our first question, “What is repentance?” This question is very important if repentance is absolutely necessary for someone to be saved, forgiven and reconciled to God. First of all, we must state that repentance is not a work. Ephesians 2:8-9 make it very clear that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ. If repentance was a work, then we would have to work to get saved. If repentance is where we stop sinning, then we would find ourselves in the conundrum where we have to stop sinning in order to be saved and get the power to stop sinning. Repentance is simply a part of real faith; it is an attitude of the heart, not the actions of meriting our salvation. The Greek word for repentance is metanoia, which literally means “after mind” or “change of mind.” Since it involved the whole person, we can state that repentance is a change of mind and heart about our sin. Before we repented, we loved our sin. We didn’t want to be saved from our sin. Notice in Matthew 1:21 it states why Jesus came: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” You have to want to be saved from your sin before you can get saved from your sin - that is what repentance is; you have a change of heart and mind toward your sin where you want to be saved, rescued from your sin, not just the penalty of sin, but also saved from the power and eventually even the presence of sin. Imagine this scenario: A person is holding a poisonous snake and cries out, “Someone help me, save me from this snake!” And someone comes up to him and gives his plan. He says, “Ok, on the count of three, you throw down the snake and I will cover it with this basket.” And the man with the snake replies, “I don’t want to get rid of the snake; I love the snake; I just want to be saved from it.” You would think that guy was looney. That is what it is like for someone to supposedly get saved from his sin without any intentions of getting rid of his sin. You have to want to be saved from your sin, before you can get saved from your sin - that is what repentance is. You can ask yourself three questions to determine if you have truly repented or not:

- 1. Do you see your sin as bad?***
- 2. Do you wish you wouldn’t have done it?***
- 3. Do you want to never to do it again?***

Then you have repented. I counseled a couple where the woman had committed adultery. She said she was sorry. I asked her if she wished she wouldn't have done it. She said no, she was glad she had done it. She didn't repent. The Hebrew word for repent is Shuv. It means to turn or return. We have to want to turn from our sin; that is repentance. Repentance means a change of mind and heart about our sin. It is not a work or merit; it is simply a desire to stop sinning. Billy Graham always included repentance in his gospel presentation, stating that you must be willing to forsake your sinful life. Notice it is about the will, not the actions. Repentance doesn't mean we stop sinning; it means we want to stop, but we recognize we can't stop, so we cry out to Jesus to save us. Those who reject repentance as necessary for salvation, usually truncate the gospel to a means of getting out of hell. It certainly entails salvation from the penalty of sin, but it is much more than that.

So how do I get saved? Repent and believe. Think of repentance and faith as two sides of the same coin - your heart. You recognize you are a sinner, and you see your sin as bad. You want to stop, but you can't so you cry out, "Oh God please save me from my sin and help me to stop sinning. I believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty I deserve to pay for my sin. Come into my life and rescue me and I will follow you from now on." Notice in this prayer it is a matter of the heart - you want to be saved from your sin and believe Jesus can rescue you. You want to follow Jesus now, so you surrender to Him as Lord; that is real faith. Romans 10:9-10 states, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confessed with the mouth, resulting in salvation." Some think this passage simply means we have to mouth the words "Jesus is Lord" to be saved. If that were true, then a mute person couldn't get saved. It would also mean a parrot could get saved. Imagine training a parrot to say, "Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord, auk!" The passage means you surrender to Jesus as your Lord, which means master.

Salvation is a matter of the heart, not the actions, but it leads to actions. John the Baptist addressed the crowd where some of them didn't have hearts of repentance. He demanded in Matthew 3:8, "Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance." Notice the fruit isn't the repentance; it is the inevitable result of the repentance. The repentance isn't a work, but it leads to good works, so much so that Jesus could say in Matthew 7:20, "You'll recognize them by their fruit." Even Ephesians 2:8-10 ends with good works:

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift - not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

The inevitable result of salvation by grace alone through faith alone is good works. That is what James meant by his statement that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). It is not a real faith unless it results in good works. We can't get the cart before the horse though. Some people say we are saved by faith and works, which is an oxymoron according to Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 11:6: "Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace." We are not saved by grace and works; we are saved by grace alone through faith alone that includes repentance, which inevitably results in a changed life with fruit to prove it. We can't get the cart before the horse, because works righteousness is a false gospel, which Paul warned us not to embrace. In Galatians 1:8 he cautions us, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!" We better only embrace the gospel Paul preached. He preached grace, not works. He preached faith. He also preached repentance as we have seen. Any gospel that leaves out repentance is also a half-gospel. Typically, churches that preach repentance as not necessary, call their people to repent. So, people are getting saved at these churches, but many are given a false assurance. They are told to say a prayer that includes belief and are told they are saved no matter what they do from there. Many pray the prayer and then never follow Jesus. They are not saved, but they think they are saved. We have just given them a false assurance. The Bible never calls us to pray a prayer; it calls us to repent and believe, outwardly expressing that belief in baptism. We must preach the whole gospel. Technically, the gospel is the truth that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins; He paid the penalty we were supposed to pay for our sins as our substitute, so that we could be united with Him in a personal relationship of love and lordship. But we must each personally receive the free gift of eternal life, before His death can be appropriated to us, before we are saved. The Bible is clear that we must repent of our sins and place our faith in Jesus, outwardly expressing that faith in baptism.

Repentance is necessary for salvation. We dare not preach any other gospel, which includes a gospel that avoids repentance. We want to be kind and gracious; we want to speak with words seasoned with salt. We may not want to start with hellfire and brimstone, but if we truly love people, we will call them to repent of their sin. We won't try to water down the gospel, preaching a lukewarm message that sounds like our surrounding culture. We will tell them the truth. God is angry with sin and will pour out His wrath someday. God is holy and must punish sin; either we pay the penalty ourselves, or we receive forgiveness through Christ. God is holy and He is loving. He has provided a way of escape. Will you take that way? Will you repent of your sins, believe in Jesus, surrendering to Him as Lord (Romans 10:9-10)? Then pray to receive Christ and outwardly confess that faith in baptism, expecting the Holy Spirit to come in and change you forever.