

Repentance

“Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” Acts 20:21

By: Jim McKendrick

The gospel is the heart of the Christian message. Without the gospel Christianity has nothing of value to offer this world. The world can attain a certain degree of health, education and welfare but only the gospel offers true hope beyond this world and changes people so they can be a help to others in this world. If we get the gospel wrong we have no real message. Paul would take this further by saying if we get this message wrong then we are accursed (Gal. 1:8.) He told the Ephesian elders the message he preached both publicly and from house to house was “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is my observation both personally and by reading others that one of the characteristics of the gospel that is sadly missing or misunderstood today is the first aspect of the preaching of the gospel – repentance toward God. If we fail to understand repentance then we have a nonexistent belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. For if we do not repent then there is no need for, nor understanding of, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God’s View Of Man

So it is imperative that we understand the meaning of repentance. To understand the necessity of repentance we need to see what God thinks of who we are in His sight. Isaiah in his prophecy says metaphorically, “the whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds and bruises, and putrefying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment” (Isa. 1:5-6.) Paul, in the New Testament in Romans chapter 1 will tell us we are not thankful, we have not glorified God as God, we have changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image like corruptible man, we have changed the truth of God into a lie and we choose not to retain God in our knowledge. So therefore God has given us up to uncleanness, to vile affections, and a reprobate mind. These are not very politically correct or pretty pictures of humanity (Rom. 1:18-32.)

Man’s Self-Estimation

But that is not the picture we have of ourselves. Paul will remind the Corinthian believers in 2 Corinthians 10:12 that we commend ourselves for we compare ourselves with ourselves. We really don’t think we are too bad. After all look at the wonderful accomplishments and advances that mankind has made over the years. And as long as we look horizontally we can agree with that assessment. Even at an individual level as long as we look around we can always find people worse than we are. We pride ourselves in paying our bills, being faithful to our wives, being kind to our neighbors, etc. Conversely, there are those we know of or read about who are not faithful and do not meet their obligations.

Thus we need to repent. We have a wrong concept of God and His holiness and a wrong concept of ourselves and our sinfulness. But what does it mean to repent? A working definition is: “Repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of desire and purpose which effects a reversal of man’s intellect, emotion, and moral decisions.” Did you notice that there are three aspects to the subject of repentance? There are the mind, the emotions, and the will. If any of these is missing there is not true repentance.

Steps To Correct Understanding

In John 16:7-8 we read that one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to convict (convince) the world of sin and righteousness and judgment to come. Thus the gospel preacher’s first responsibility is to present the subject of sin to his hearers. Sin is the problem of mankind and of each individual in this world. Modern psychology has done a wonderful job of taking sin out of the conversation and for the evangelical world to follow modern psychology is a tragic mistake. We need to get back to the subject of sin in our preaching. If we will faithfully preach the gospel the Holy Spirit will convict the sinner of his sin. The process of repentance is for a person to be convinced of the reality of sin and the fact that they are a sinner. This is first a mental assessment.

Secondly when the sinner has considered the reality of sin and the fact that they are a sinner and as a result of their sins they are doomed to a lost sinner’s hell there will follow an emotional reaction. First there will be a sorrowing for sin as he begins to understand his guilt before a holy God. But sorrow is not repentance. Paul in 2 Corinthians 7:10 tells us that “godly sorrow works repentance.” Sorrow for sin and repentance are often confused in the gospel message today. Sorrow for sin is a necessary prerequisite toward repentance, but is not itself repentance. Sorrow for sin is only part of the process toward repentance. To tell a person just to be sorry for their sins only short-circuits the gospel and leads to a false understanding of true repentance – and more tragically – to a false profession.

The third aspect of repentance is to point the sinner to the only provision out of his dilemma. The cross of Christ and its provision will be a wonderful sight to the one who has come to the realization that he is a sinner on the way to hell and understands his guilt before God. Then he makes a conscious decision to cast himself on the mercy of God and the provision of Calvary and when he does, then God saves him.

Real Life Repentance

The prodigal son of Luke 15 is a wonderful example of repentance. First there was the mental realization of his condition and “he came to himself” (Lk. 15:17.) Then there was the emotional reaction of his sin: he recognized his unworthiness to be called a son (v. 18.) Last but not least, he arose and cast himself on the mercy of his father, finding to his utter amazement and joy a father that was ready to forgive him and receive him back home (vv. 20-24.)

This same process is necessary for believers as well as unbelievers. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3 we have churches that needed to repent. The Lord wrote letters that revealed their waywardness and called upon them to repent. We need to be conscious as churches and individuals of the Holy Spirit's conviction in our lives of that which is not right, and having come into the knowledge of our sin, turn from our sinful attitudes and practices and find the Lord waiting to forgive and restore us to a rightful condition before Him.