

Followers of the Way

Repentance

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Malachi 4:1-6, Matthew 3:1-12

This is the sixth in our sermon series looking at the question: what does the LORD require of us? (Micah 6:8). So far, we have covered obedience, righteousness, justice, purity, and mercy. Today's theme is repentance – and what better way of looking at this than to see it through the lens of John the Baptist (John the Baptist, as he is traditionally called), who prepared the way for Jesus through preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:3).

In any consideration of repentance, it is a good idea to get two things straight in our minds at the start: what is it, and why do we need it? Repentance can be defined as heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it in the future, and walk in obedience to Christ. Repentance (like faith) engages the mind, emotions, and will:

Our mind, through intellectual understanding that sin is wrong;

Our emotions, through approval of what the Bible teaches about sin, causing sorrow for sin and hatred of it;

Our will, through our making a personal decision to turn from sin by renouncing it and determining to lead a new life of obedience to Christ instead.

Repentance is something that occurs in the heart, and involves the whole person in a decision to turn from what is wrong and displeasing to God. Genuine repentance will lead to a changed life, and this changed life is what the Bible means when it talks about the fruit of repentance – or, as John the Baptist expressed it, “fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Matthew 3:8). This fruit of repentance does not imply there is anything we can do to earn our salvation. But, “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17, see also James 2:26), so true repentance will bring about a manifestation of godliness in the life of the repentant sinner.

Mere sorrow for our actions – even deep remorse – does not make for genuine repentance unless it is accompanied by a sincere commitment to forsake sin (and although we often sin against other people, ultimately all sin is committed against God). A worldly sort of grief may involve great sorrow for our actions, and perhaps fear of punishment, too, yet cause no genuine renouncing of sin or commitment to walk a different path. Writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul rejoiced “not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (2 Corinthians 7:9-10).

Repentance changes us, and changes how God views us and acts towards us. The Bible tells us, "Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come upon them during the days of Hezekiah." ((2 Chronicles 32:26). By contrast, though Esau was sorrowful over having sold his birth-right, he was not genuinely repentant, so "could bring about no change of mind [on the part of God], though he sought the blessing with tears." (Hebrews 12:17).

Turning *from* sin in a genuine way is impossible without at the same time genuinely turning *to* God, and hence repentance and faith go together. It is not that we first turn from sin and then trust in Christ, or first trust in Christ and then turn from sin. Rather, both happen at the same time. When we turn to Christ for salvation from our sins, we are simultaneously turning away from the sins we are asking Him to save us from. Neither repentance nor faith comes first: they come together. The consequence is that we cannot have true saving faith without repentance for sin. Or, to put it another way, we cannot say we accept Jesus as Saviour but not as Lord, if by this we mean we are depending on Him for salvation without committing to forsake sin and to be obedient to Christ from that point. The New Testament authors understood so well that genuine repentance and genuine faith must go together that they often simply mentioned repentance alone, with the clear implication that faith was also included. So, for example, before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His disciples, "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" (Luke 24:46-47). Similarly, Peter told the crowd at Pentecost, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins." (Acts 2:38). And later, Peter said, "Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." (Acts 3:19). Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4) and to the church in Corinth, he wrote of "repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Corinthians 7:10). In each of these cases, saving faith is implied, though not specifically mentioned. And we see precisely this in the ministry of John the Baptist. Though we tend to concentrate on John's message of repentance, there was more to his preaching than just this, since the Bible is clear in saying John "preached the good news" (Luke 3:18). As Paul explained to believers in Ephesus, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." (Acts 19:4).

In modern Christendom, some people have tried to deny the link between repentance and saving faith, leading to a kind of hyper-Grace. It is a terrible mistake, leaving many in a perilous position before God, weakening the Church, undercutting evangelism, and selling short the millions who face an eternity in hell unless they turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

Which brings us to why we need repentance. We need it because God is holy, just, and righteous. He abhors sin, and cannot bear to be near it. His eyes are too pure to look on evil (Habakkuk 1:13), and anything impure that comes into His presence will be burned up with fire. When Jesus came to earth the first time, he announced his mission mandate in the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, concluding on its proclamation of "the year of the LORD's favour" (Luke 4:17-18, quoting

Isaiah 61:2). When He comes again, it will be to complete the fulfilment of this prophecy (finishing the sentence He ended half-way through first time around), by bringing in “the day of vengeance of our God.” (Isaiah 61:2). This is what Malachi describes: “Surely the day is coming: it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evil-doer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them.” (Malachi 4:1). The Bible speaks a great deal about judgment, hell-fire, and damnation. It is not kindness to fail to tell people about this, but the opposite – an abrogation of responsibility, an act of cowardice, and a betrayal of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus repeatedly affirmed the reality of hell (see Matthew 5:22, 5:29, 5:30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:33, Mark 9:43, 9:45, 9:47, Luke 12:5, 16:23), and tells us to “[teach people] to obey *everything* I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20, emphasis added), not just those parts we find easy or congenial. If the Church is to recover its power, and the true Gospel is to be heard in more than just a few isolated pockets of our nation, we must start telling people what repentance is, why it is needed, and what the future will look like for them without it.

Anyone who thinks they are at heart “a good person” sees no need for repentance, and why should they? I have heard it said that when John Wesley went somewhere for the first time, he preached for several days on hell, damnation, and repentance before offering the beautiful message of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Because the light looks more beautiful and desirable by contrast with the dark: as Paul says, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23). Unless people realise the end of their life on earth does not mean an end to their existence, but a continuation of it in another dimension – that there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun – they will not turn. And, to counter the glib and flippant remarks often made in response to this realisation, we need to say it in words of one syllable: hell will not be more exciting, and your friends will not be there, because in hell there is no friendship, nor joy, nor anything else good, but only pain, suffering, torment, and an absence of anything that makes life worth living. Contrast this with what Jesus offers to those who turn to him in repentant faith: “life in all its fullness” (John 10:10). Or, as Malachi puts it, “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,’ says the LORD Almighty.” (Malachi 4:2-3).

And so, we come to the situation in our nation. It is not difficult to spot parallels to what was going on in Israel when “John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea” (Matthew 3:1). Then, as now, the people were oppressed and ill-used by self-serving politicians, compromised religious leaders, and the exactions of a corrupt officialdom. Luke’s version of the story gives clues to what was going on, because John told tax collectors, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to” (Luke 3:13) and told soldiers, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.” (Luke 3:14). But his harshest words were reserved for the Pharisees and Sadducees: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance ... The axe is at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3:7-10, Luke 3:7-9). As in those

days, so now “[God’s] winnowing fork is in his hand, and [the days are soon coming when] he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:12, Luke 3:17). The time is urgent as never before, for the return of the Lord Jesus is close at hand, and that day will “burn like a furnace.” (Malachi 4:1). In the absence of repentance and a genuine turning, the LORD will indeed “strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:6).

Yet there is hope, because God is good and merciful: “As surely as I live,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.” (Ezekiel 33:11). God’s heart yearning is for our people to turn and for our nation to turn – to turn away from sin in heartfelt repentance and to turn to Him with saving faith, that we might live. “Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11). It is for this reason He has promised, “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:5). In the same way God sent John the Baptist, we might expect that in these latter days the spirit of Elijah will again be at work before the second coming of our Lord. A latter-day John the Baptist needs to arise, to be “a voice of one calling in the desert” (Matthew 3:3, Luke 3:4, Isaiah 40:3).

Even when set alongside the great men and women of God described elsewhere in the Bible, John the Baptist counts as an extraordinary character. Jesus called him “more than a prophet” (Luke 7:26), said that “among those born of women there is no-one greater than John” (Luke 7:28), and explained John was the person who fulfilled God’s promise to send a forerunner to make smooth paths for the coming of the Messiah: “This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you.’” (Luke 7:27, quoting Malachi 3:1). And Jesus applied another Old Testament Scripture to John, too, in direct reference to the prophecy in Malachi 4:5: “if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 11:14-15). Jesus uses that expression “He who has ears, let him hear” when the subject-matter is figurative or obscure, to rouse the attention of the listener and make us apply our minds to what is said. The phrase is also used in the parable of the lamp on the stand (Matthew 4:23), the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:9, Mark 4:9, Luke 8:8), the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:43), and when Jesus talks of salt losing its saltiness (Luke 14:35). It should cause us to ponder the meaning for our own time and place.

As I ponder these things, I believe there is a message today for our fellow-citizens, for our nation, for the Church, and for us as individuals:

Message for non-Christians: Hell is real. Judgment is real. Damnation is real. Hell is not a place you want to go, but the sad truth is, it is the destination for all eternity for anyone who does not accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Being a “good person” as the world reckons these things will not save us, because the standards against which we are judged are not those of fallen humanity, but those of a perfect, holy, just, and righteous God. Do not let another hour pass of being in danger of that judgment. Jesus did an incredible thing when He died on the cross for the sins of all the world, and conquered death by His

resurrection. By taking the punishment we deserve, He allows God to be both just and merciful. Repent and turn to Him. God will treat Christ's righteousness as though it is your own, you will be able to stand before Him spotless and blameless in His sight, and you will have the assurance of spending an eternity with Him in heaven.

Message for the nation: Our nation's many sins have come up before God. Our unrighteousness is a stench in His nostrils, our worship of false gods an affront to His name, and our apostasy like spitting in his face after all the blessings He has showered on us. We are a hair's breath away from God coming to strike the land with a curse, but there is still time. We desperately need His people to stand in the gap for this nation in confession and repentance. God longs to see the hearts of the fathers turn to the children, and the hearts of the children turn to the fathers. This is true as regards the epidemic of fatherlessness in the land, but it also applies to the nations that are our (natural or adoptive) children. We have been a father to many, but have often been an abusive parent, and these relationships need to be healed.

Message for the Church: When John the Baptist ministered, the religious establishment felt secure in their own interpretations of the Scriptures, and confident of salvation by virtue of being blood descendants of Abraham. But, rather as their equivalents in Jeremiah's time mistakenly thought God would never allow His temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed (Jeremiah 7:4, 7:10, 7:14), they were wrong. John confronted them on this point: "do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you, that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." (Matthew 3:9). No matter how glorious our history or how fine our traditions, no matter how many programmes we have and what worthy activities we undertake, God will not be pleased if we compromise with the world or rely on things we should not be relying on. Though it will pain and grieve Him, He will destroy our modern-day temples if this is what is needed to bring about His purposes. He seeks a pure and spotless bride, not one sullied by contact with things we should have no part of.

Message for us: Perhaps you have previously only heard a message of hyper-Grace, and consequently have accepted Jesus as Saviour, but not as Lord. If this is you, please think long and hard about what you have heard today, and whether there is anything you need to do to change your stance before God. For the rest of us, there is a job to be done: to witness to an unbelieving people, to repent on behalf of a backslidden nation, to speak into an apostate Church, and to be ministers of God to prepare straight paths for our returning Lord. For this is the four-square Gospel: that Jesus is Saviour, Healer, Baptiser, and soon-coming King. Huge numbers in our nation have never heard the true Gospel. When John the Baptist came speaking God's Word after a long silence following the final prophecy of the Old Testament canon in the book of Malachi, people responded eagerly: "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River." (Matthew 3:5-6). We may get a pleasant surprise at the reaction when our nation again has the chance to hear the true Word of God preached. That is between them and God. But as for us, let us be about our business of making straight paths for Him in these days.

Amen