

## REpent YE, AND BELIEVE THE GOSPEL

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 9:10-13

And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth: I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

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The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel.

Every one of us, at some time or other, has been worthy of being sent to jail. By that I mean that there is no one of us who has not at some time or other done something which could have gotten him a jail sentence -- inadvertently going against a traffic light or stop sign, exceeding the speed limit, walking on forbidden grass, crossing streets in the middle of the block, spreading gossip about our neighbors, to name only a representative few. And in a much more all-inclusive way, every one of us has sinned against the law of God in some major or minor way. Every man who ever lived, with the single exception of Jesus Christ, has been guilty of sin.

Who, then, needs to repent? The obvious answer is "Everybody, including me." But one of the things which proves our own desperate need of repentance is that we can always see some one else's need of repentance much more readily than we see our own. With a beam in our own eye we try to pick the mote out of our brother's eye. Wherever we are falling short of the perfection that is in Jesus Christ, wherever we are dissipating time, energy, strength, or talent on that which is unworthy; wherever we choose the good instead of the best; wherever we resist change that would make our work more effective or more productive; wherever we resist reform which would make the world a better place in which to live -- there we need repentance.

Forgiveness, and remission of the consequences of sin, always depend on repentance. When Peter asked Jesus how many times one should forgive, Luke's account says that Jesus made repentance a condition of forgiveness. "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him." In human relationships, repentance is necessary to prelude to forgiveness. If a man should steal your pocket-book, and then come to you asking your forgiveness, but without making any offer to restore to you what he had stolen, would you forgive him and welcome him again into your confidence and friendship? Likewise in man's relationship with God, there must be true repentance, and a genuine sorrow for sin, a concern for sin, a willingness to make restitution where possible, or else God's forgiveness must be withheld. To forgive an unrepentance man is only to confirm him in his sinning, and to send him back to sin again.

God is always eager, willing, and waiting to receive the sinner who will repent and turn from his wickedness to the ways of righteousness. The story of the Prodigal Son is Jesus' masterful illustration of that truth. No man is so far from God, no man is so sinful, that he cannot be received on condition of repentance. But first it is necessary for the sinner to "come to himself," to confess, "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee." When he sincerely fills this requirement, the heavenly Father is always waiting eagerly, expectantly, to take him back into the fellowship which has been broken and destroyed by rebellion and sin.

God's willingness to forgive is manifested at its highest and best in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, who came to save men from the consequences of their racial and individual sins. When Jesus entered upon his ministry, he sought out sinners. The Pharisees were horrified at the kind of company he kept; but Jesus replied to their criticisms, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick... I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

In preparation for the coming ministry of Jesus, John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, saying, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." When Jesus began his ministry, his first teaching was: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; Repent ye, and believe the gospel." Jesus came to save sinners, but their salvation is contingent upon faith in God and in his Son, and then repentance which will restore the lost relationship between the sinner and God. Jesus cannot save any man IN his sins. But he can save any man FROM his sins, on conditions of repentance.

This life is the period of probation during which time is granted to men to repent. If man repents, and exercises faith in Christ, he may claim the grace of God unto salvation. His sins will be cancelled, blotted out, remembered no more. But the Scriptures tell us that every man will be judged, and rewarded, or punished, according to his works. Grace cancels sin, but the degree and quality of salvation will depend on each man's worthiness, as manifested by his works. Therefore, it is necessary that one who has repented should continue repentance as an on-going process, not a one-time act. Each day will disclose other hidden sins of which we were totally unaware before. Each day will disclose to the seeker new ways of doing things, new processes and principles of life, which require repentance from the old, and acceptance of the new. Even though you long ago repented and gave yourself to Christ, you need to repent again today. You will need to repent again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, as you go on to perfection.

What is repentance? Several Greek and Hebrew words, with varying meanings, are translated "repentance" in the King James Bible. One meaning is to have a feeling of care, or concern, or regret for sin, but without any abandonment of it. It is possible for a man to have a consciousness of sin, and even to be sorry for it, yet to make no attempt to abandon it. Another meaning of repentance is "to turn over," "to turn unto," "to turn about." In other words, it means a turning from sin, and a turning to God. In the words of Isaiah, it means to "cease to do evil; learn to do well."

Another meaning of repentance is "to have another mind," or "to change the mind." This kind of repentance involves a deep, radical change which affects the whole nature and personality -- mind, will, body, and spirit. It means having sorrow not only because one is caught and forcibly restrained from continuing in sin, not only a dread of punishment, but a genuine sorrow for a wasted or misused life, sorrow from the grief which we have caused God, and a determination to do all we can to make up for lost time -- to turn from sin to God. As Paul says in II Corinthians 7:10: "For Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death."

The kingdom of heaven is at hand; it is available and high to every man, now and at all times. But the first step to entering it is to "repent ye, and believe the gospel." You must leave your sins outside the kingdom. You must turn your face in a new direction; you must change your mind completely; you must feel a genuine and godly sorrow for the sins already committed, and a resolve to do them no more.

Perhaps you think you have repented already. Remember that repentance is a continuing and continuous process. In the new environment of the kingdom, you will discover imperfections of which you were never aware before, and will need to repent of them. You will always need to repent of yesterday's and shortcomings today, to live each day a little better than the day before. So it is to those who have repented, as well as to those who need to begin to repent, that we repeat again the words of Jesus: "Repent ye, and believe the gospel."