

Baptism Part Two

Shortly before Jesus Christ began his ministry John the Baptist, as foretold in scripture, prepared the way for the messiah by preaching repentance:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."¹

I usually avoid using the word "repent" because it is one of those words whose meaning has changed over the years and has a negative connotation. The concept of repentance though is an important element in the teachings of Jesus Christ:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"²

The apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost addressed the crowd there and explained that the recent events were the fulfillment of prophecy and the work of God, he finished with this:

"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.³

When the people ask "what shall we do?" the apostle Peter tells them step one is to "Repent and be baptized". We've previously had some discussion of baptism. What does it mean to repent? The general meaning of repentance is a change of mind. More specifically in the Bible repentance is defined as a turning away from sin and a turning to God. Sin (another one of those loaded words) is thoughts or behavior not in agreement with God's will. This can be expressed either by failing to do something required by God or by doing something contrary to God's instruction. Our culture is a product of thousands of years of human activity, much of it not in agreement with God. You and I therefore since we are a product of this culture, begin our walk with God by understanding our vital need to repent. The apostles Paul and John put it this way:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.⁴

¹ Matt 3:1-8

² Mark 1:14-15

³ Acts 2:36-41

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.⁵

Even the individual who lives in perfect agreement with contemporary society, or perhaps it would be better to say especially the individual who lives in perfect agreement with contemporary society needs to repent. We all need to stop what we're doing and take a careful look at ourselves and bring our thoughts and actions into agreement with God's word. James gives some good advice on this topic:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.⁶

Jesus Christ strongly stated the vital need for repentance:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them — do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."⁷

These stern warnings are motivated by God's great love for us. Do not miss this crucial point. Jesus Christ also said this:

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."⁸

Jesus Christ instructed his apostles to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Clearly the apostles understood that first the individual must understand the need for repentance and then be baptized. Notice the quotation from Acts chapter two quoted earlier, the people after hearing the apostle Peter's message who "were cut to the heart" were the ones who asked "what shall we do?" and were the ones told to "Repent and be baptized, every one of you".

This pattern continues; notice these other examples from the book of Acts:

"Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you — even Jesus."⁹

⁴ Rom 3:23-24

⁵ 1 John 1:8-10

⁶ James 1:22-25

⁷ Luke 13:1-5

⁸ Luke 15:8-10

⁹ Acts 3:17-20

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.¹⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.¹¹

Since ancient times this is how it has been. The population at large, the major portion of society has always lived in rebellion to God. I have made this point before (look at the essay "Most People Don't Get it"). It is no wonder that this teaching on repentance and baptism seems strange. But this is an important truth. Mere involvement in some religious activity is no guarantee either. Religious activity must be in agreement with God's instruction. Notice Christ's messages to seven churches in Asia contained in Revelation chapters two and three. Just because a church says they have some connection to Jesus Christ does not make it so. Note Christ's stern words of warning but also gentle words of encouragement here:

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."¹²

To conclude this discussion I want to remind you that it is the love of God that prompted words of rebuke, the same love that prompted the sacrifice of Jesus. We show our love for God by obeying his instructions just as Jesus obeyed the father. This is how we overcome the world.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.¹³

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¹⁰ Acts 20:20-21

¹¹ Acts 26:20

¹² Rev 3:14-22

¹³ 1 John 5:1-5