

Reconciliation

Repentance

The ministry of John the Baptist preceded the period of Jesus' ministry with the aim of preparing the way for Jesus. His ministry marked a turning point in the way that God interacted with those that believed in Him. For people who had lived up until the time John commenced his ministry, God had promised that one day there would be a Seed who would come to save people. God had also provided to the nation of Israel His law and His word through the many prophets so that they would be able to come to know Him more, understand His will and receive direction for their life.

With John's ministry and the commencement of Jesus' ministry, a significant change came for the Seed had now been born into the world and the gospel (good news) of God's spiritual kingdom was preached. Those people who heard and believed would now be able to choose to be a part of God's spiritual kingdom. As part of this kingdom, God's law and His will would be written onto their hearts spiritually and they would come to know God and receive direction for their life spiritually, by the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Jesus spoke of this change and the enthusiasm and urgency that people would have to take up this blessing and enter God's spiritual kingdom with the following words.

Luke 16:16 " The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it."

The clear and strong message of John the Baptist was one of repentance. To enter into the kingdom there had to be true repentance of the life of sin that had been lived. In the same way that John's message of repentance preceded the message brought by Jesus regarding the kingdom of heaven, today before people can come to Jesus, we must go through the absolutely necessary step of repentance.

The message from John the Baptist was that people not only had to repent of their sins but also had to start living a life that reflected the fact that they were people who had repented. If people truly repented from their heart, this would always show in their life through them bearing fruit worthy of repentance. John warned that anyone who did not repent with a change in their life to reflect it was like a fruit tree that did not bear any fruit. Such a tree would be considered worthless, cut down and thrown into the fire. Speaking to the Jews who were descendants of Abraham, John warned them that they should not rely only on their bloodline. What was important was their obedience to God.

Matthew 3:8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9 and do not think to say to yourselves, ' We have Abraham as our father. ' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Paul, who had been given the task by Jesus of taking the gospel to the Gentiles, spoke of what his ministry was about. Paul's words indicate that the key objective behind all

that he had done in his ministry was to tell the unconverted Gentiles that they should repent, turn to God and live a life that reflected their repentant hearts.

Acts 26 vs 19 Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

Repentance, as preached by John the Baptist and also by Paul, means a complete change of mind and heart that comes from a person truly recognizing their nature of sin and being sorry for being a sinner. The person consequently commits to a new way of living their life by no longer trusting themselves but submitting to God to live a life of obedience to God's will rather than their own. True repentance results in a completely new direction in life with new priorities.

Without a person experiencing repentance, it is impossible to come to a point where there can be a true acceptance of the salvation and reconciliation that comes through Jesus Christ. If there is no true recognition of sin in our life, an understanding of how God views sin and no feeling of sorrow for it, then we will not recognize the need for a Savior to take the sin from each of us and there is no repentance. God sees our heart and knows whether true repentance resides there.

When each of us is able to see our sinfulness, irrespective of how many good acts we may commit or how wonderful we think we are (or others think we are), each of us will appreciate why the high price of the life of Jesus was required and turn to God with a grateful heart. All people without Jesus are considered by God to be sinners. Very often the people who have the greatest difficulty seeing themselves as sinners are those who consider that they live "good" lives. Sadly, some of these may even be under the delusion that their lives are pleasing to God but in fact all their "good" thoughts and acts without reconciliation to God count for nothing with God. No matter how "good" a person is, without being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, God sees the person as a sinner deserving punishment.

A person increasingly recognizes their own sinfulness and wickedness as they come to know God more. When we look at God and appreciate His holiness and perfection, we see ourselves as we really are. If we ignore God and only look at ourselves we cannot see ourselves as God sees us and we deceive ourselves by thinking that we are far better than we really are. This means that sins may not be recognized by a person in the early stage of their life as a Christian but will become increasingly clear and prominent as they spiritually mature and draw closer and closer to God.

When Paul was a strict member of the Pharisees he obeyed the law of God diligently and thought that he lived a life that pleased God. However, later with the Holy Spirit shining the spiritual light on his life and as he came to know God more, he could recognize the deep level of sin in his outward life. After his conversion and many years of serving God faithfully he says the following of himself.

Romans 7 vs 21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see

another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Jesus gave the parable of two men who went to pray before God in the temple. Obviously both believers in God, one was pleased with the good life he lived while the other saw himself as a sinner and begged God for mercy.

Luke 18 vs 10 " Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ' God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess. ' 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ' God, be merciful to me a sinner! ' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. "

Jesus said that the man who begged for mercy left the temple justified before God whereas the self-righteous person who was a sinner and could not recognize or admit to it, left without forgiveness. It is important to always remember that pride and self-confidence can be some of the greatest obstacles in establishing, developing and maintaining a strong relationship with God and with people. Jesus emphasized the need for spiritual people to be humble so that God is able to mold and shape us into His image.

The spiritual relationship between sinners who repent and God is reflected in Jesus' parable about the prodigal son. In that parable a son takes his share of the inheritance and then chooses to go and make a life for himself in a distant land. With wasteful living he soon spends all his inheritance and is left penniless. In poverty and despair, he seeks to return to his father's house to ask for forgiveness and ask to be one of his father's slaves.

We read that the father sees the son when he still is far away and runs to him and kisses him. Even though the son knows the wrong he has committed and does not think that his former relationship with his father can be restored, the father eagerly greets him, puts the best clothes available on him and celebrates the son's return. The father says that the son was dead but is alive again.

Luke 15 vs 21 And the son said to him, ' Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son. ' 22 " But the father said to his servants, ' Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. '

When the prodigal son asked to take his inheritance and his father agreed to give it to him, he chose to leave and separate himself from his father. Due to the son's choice and resulting separation, the father mourns over the fact that the son is effectively dead to him for he may never see him or have a relationship with him again. However, the father hopes for his son to return and restore the father and son relationship that once existed but it is up to the son to choose to return to the father's

household. When the son returns, the father not only greets him but celebrates his return. He readily accepts him back as his son rather than a slave and the son once again receives his full inheritance. It is important to recognize that the son has to put aside his pride, recognize his sorry state, leave the life he chose, and decide to seek his father's forgiveness.

In a similar way, the sinner is separated from God the Father through their own choice and is considered spiritually dead by God. However, once the sinner recognizes their own sinfulness, decides to leave the old life behind and seeks to be reconciled to God, the Father does not reject the sinner but rather provides a pathway for this reconciliation to take place. The sinner, once alienated from the Father, is forgiven and accepted back as a child of God. The person who was dead to the Father is made spiritually alive again.

When the sinner returns humbly to God, He sends His Holy Spirit to live in their spirit making it alive to Him. Paul tells us that this union of our spirit and God's Holy Spirit makes us one spirit with God.

1 Corinthians 6:17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

When the risen Jesus Christ met Saul (later called Paul) on the road to Damascus He told him of the ministry he was to have to the Gentiles. Jesus had accomplished all that He had been sent to earth to do and now He told Saul that the people were blinded to spiritual things, living in spiritual darkness without the light of God, under the power of Satan and without forgiveness of sins. He told Saul to transform this so that the people could be reconciled to God, become spiritually alive and receive the inheritance of eternal life.

Acts 26:17 I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.

God's desire in the New Covenant is for people to regain what we had before our fall into sin through a heart-held belief in Jesus Christ. If we possess this, we are able to be seen by God as being free of sin, able to become spiritually alive to Him, able to receive His Holy Spirit within us and able to live a spirit-led life for Him.

Belief

A commitment to God must mean an acceptance of what Jesus said and a heart positioned to follow Him and obey Him, turning from the sinful life. Some people claim that they do believe in Jesus, perhaps have been baptized and even may have said the sinner's prayer however there are some of these who have never accepted Jesus as Lord of their life.

A true belief must mean that we accept Jesus as Lord of our life. This means that He now rules our life and we put Him first and live for Him. If He is Lord, the way we live our life, the things we hold as being important, our words, thoughts and actions should all reflect our obedience to Him and should therefore reflect His character. A

heart that truly believes in the Lord Jesus will cause a person to live for God, seek to know God's will and daily try to live in obedience to it.

The belief that is spoken of as being necessary for reconciliation to God is a belief that is sourced from our heart. It is far more than just mouthing words of belief or going through a religious ritual without the person undergoing the ritual actually having a true belief. It must always be more than just a mental acceptance of the Lord Jesus which has never journeyed from the mind to the heart.

Romans 10 vs 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 13 For " whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. "

The belief that stems from only our mind may be due to our experiences during our upbringing, cultural expectation, pleasing particular people, a fear of death, a desire for eternal life, a liking for spiritual experiences, following particular religious rituals, or perhaps a fear of what may happen after death to an unbeliever. These people may be in a situation where they may know about Jesus but they have never repented of their sinful life nor truly confessed Jesus as Lord of their life. When Jesus is truly Lord of our life, He owns it, is in charge of it, directs it and we submit in obedience to His rule.

Faith is a gift from God which enables us to believe. Once faith is acted upon, it enables us to believe what we cannot see. Hannah Whitall Smith has the best explanation of faith that I have come across, speaking of it in this way.

*You see something, and thus you know that you have sight; you believe something, and thus you know that you have faith. For, as sight is only seeing, so faith is only believing. And as the only necessary thing about seeing is, that you see the thing as it is, so the only necessary thing about believing is, that you believe the thing as it is. Recognize, then, the extreme simplicity of faith; that it is nothing more nor less than just believing God when He says He either has done something for us , or will do it; and then trusting Him to do it.*⁹

Hannah Whitall Smith goes on to say that we daily believe in people (scientists, news reporters, builders, bus/train drivers, baby sitters etc.) yet we cannot trust God.

Is it possible that you can trust your fellow-men and cannot trust God? That you can receive the "witness of men," and cannot receive the "witness of God"? That you can believe man's records, and cannot believe God's record? That you can commit your dearest earthly interests to your weak, failing fellow creatures without a fear, and are afraid to commit your spiritual interests to the blessed Saviour who shed His blood for the very purpose of saving you, and who is declared to be "able to save you to the uttermost"?¹⁰

Faith is defined in the book of Hebrews as ... the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11 vs 1). The hope of a believer is based on the promises contained in the word of God and as the promises are placed in our mind and applied to our heart by our spirit we are able to accept and stand on them. Paul

tells the Corinthian church in his second letter that as believers in Jesus Christ, they can rely on God to fulfill all His promises in their life.

2Corinthians1vs20 For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.

Even though we cannot experience God through our five senses, we still believe in Him through faith. Our faith is supported by our knowledge and experience with the spiritual realm and an inner knowing that fills our heart. We come to know that God is faithful and that we can totally rely on what He has said. As we know the promises in our heart, we speak and act as though they have already taken place in our natural life. When we believe in this way there is absolutely no doubt in our heart and we cannot be swayed by what we see, hear and experience in the natural realm, which may not support or confirm what we believe in our heart. We live our life by our faith rather than by what we see (2Corinthians5vs7). Rather than living our daily life by only relying on our five senses, we also live it according to our sixth sense through faith. Such faith is the evidence that the spiritual world, of which we have become citizens, is as real as the material world that surrounds us.

True unshakable faith is so important to God that His word tells us that it is impossible to please Him without it. Our faith is only real when we live our life in accordance with what we profess our faith to be. Romans10vs17 states that we can develop our faith by spending time allowing the word of God to be applied to our soul and spirit. As we keep our mind firmly on the word of God our faith will be strengthened. We are justified before God and reconciled to Him through our faith, receive the Holy Spirit by faith and then are daily transformed into the image of Christ by living for Him by faith as well.

As we have seen, the heart is the center of the soul, and determines how each of us lives our daily life and what we hold as being important in our life. A belief that is held in a person's heart will therefore determine the person's thoughts, words and actions. Although on the odd occasion we may depart from what is held and believed in our heart, we will always turn back to act consistently with it.

From this perspective it becomes easy for each of us to look at the way we live our daily life to honestly see what the beliefs of our heart are and what or who is held as being most important in our heart. Heart-held beliefs in God will be reflected in our desire to make Him most important in our life, living to please Him, and our obedience to our conscience, the word of God and other ways in which God may lead us. It is reflected in how each of us shows love to people, how we spend our time, our priorities in life, our trust in God, what we spend our money on, our level of charity, our compassion, our level of selfishness, what music we listen to, what movies/TV shows we watch, what books we read, who our close friends are, our words and our daily thought life.

This is what the gospel (good news) is all about for it is news that we are able to put our sinful life behind us and become spiritually alive to God, stepping out of darkness into His light. Individuals are able to now draw near to God to know and love Him, truly follow in Christ's footsteps by living a new life of being obedient to God's will and being assured that we will be able to go to heaven, where He has gone before us.

Each of us must come to realize that God looks at the individual not the church group we belong to or other relationships we may have or the beliefs held by members of our family. No pastor, priest or any other person can give another person an assurance that they will receive eternal life with God because they do not know what belief is in the person's heart. Only God knows a person's heart and each person must examine their own heart to see if true belief resides there.

The term "Christian" was used to describe the disciples of Jesus shortly after His death and resurrection (Acts 11 vs 26). A true Christian is a follower of Christ and therefore any person who commits to being a Christian should try to yield to God in the way that Jesus did during His life on earth. A follower of Christ has the objective in their heart of becoming like Christ. They hear what the Holy Spirit teaches and are obedient so that they can be transformed into Christ's image.

9. Smith, H.W., 1832-1911, The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life.

10. Smith, H.W., 1832-1911, The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version ®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Bible text from the New King James Version® is not to be reproduced in copies or otherwise by any means except as permitted in writing by Thomas Nelson, Inc., Attn: Bible Rights and Permissions, P.O. Box 141000, Nashville, TN 37214-1000.