

There Is No Grace Without This Oft-Forgotten Step

This is a question I have been asking myself lately because of the overwhelming message of grace that is being preached. Have I taken the doctrine of repentance too far? For nearly 10 years my message has been simply repent, be transformed by the Word and build an altar in the secret place. I realize this is not the only message that should be preached, it's just the part that the Holy Spirit has burned into the DNA of who I am.

I have heard people say that we shouldn't focus on repentance all the time. I have heard others say that I am too hard when it comes to the sermons I preach. But as I ponder in my heart and read the Scriptures, am I really being too hard or am I preaching what Jesus commanded. What if the messages we are hearing proclaimed say it's good news but really it is just empty words?

What I have seen over the past several years is that American Christians want the maximum amount of blessing with the least amount of sacrifice. We want all the promises of God and bypass the prerequisites that God demanded in order to release those promises. Some would say that we are no longer following the Old Testament; it's void now because of the finished work of Christ. So where do we stand on all of this? Have we taken the message of repentance too far or is it just right? Are we a backslidden culture or am I just religious? God help me to find out.

The first word of the gospel is not "love" or even "grace." The first word of the gospel is "repent." I have found that repentance is used from the book of Matthew all the way into Revelation. John the Baptist was the forerunner of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repentance does not follow the

forgiveness of sins. How can we suppose that a person can be forgiven of sin while resisting the mandate of repentance?

John's message is so needed in this hour. Multitudes are trying to receive the Lord, yet their path has never been made straight by repentance. You cannot assume Christianity unless like John said, "you bring forth fruit meet for repentance." But what about Jesus? "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15, NASB).

Repentance is not only the entrance to the kingdom; it is the roads, sidewalks and pathways that we navigate on. Have you come to a place where you are bearing only fruit without thorns? Have you been so transformed that you have no need to change? If the answer is no, then the message of repentance is necessary. It should not be hard. I personally believe that when one repents Christ gives the grace to be transformed. That is the power of the gospel.

So John the Baptist's message was repentance and Jesus preached repentance; so what about when Jesus commissioned His disciples to preach? "They went out and preached that men should repent" (Mark 6:12). What did Peter preach on the day of Pentecost? "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts 2:37-38)

So from John the Baptist all the way through Jesus' ministry and on the day of Pentecost the strategy never changed: Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins. So repentance was the inaugural message that brought Christ forth; it was the message that birthed the church as well. How can we expect to see others born again if we are not preaching the message that

gave birth to the church?

I am almost finished, but let me drive this point a little further.

When Paul, the apostle of grace, was giving an account of his obedience to Christ before King Agrippa he said, "So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:19-20).

When Paul was addressing the elders in Ephesus he said, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:18-21).

My prayer is that God will lift the words of Paul from off the pages of 2 Corinthians and wake us up in America. Paul gave a warning when he said, "I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced" (2 Corinthians 12:21). What the Apostle Paul is letting them know is that a simple confession is not good enough; there must be an actual repentance from the life you once lived before Christ.

If that is not enough, nearly sixty years after the birth of the church Jesus came to John the Revelator on the Isle of Patmos and gave him a message for the seven churches in Asia. Out of the seven churches, five of them were told by Jesus to

repent. So from John the Baptist to Jesus in the book of Revelation, repentance was the common theme. Why is repentance so uncommon now?

Have we gone too far with the message of repentance? Maybe some have preached it from a bad heart, belittling people and browbeating those to cover up their own folly. But others have preached it because they desire for all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. I personally will not quit calling the church to repentance until we see the results that mirror the book of Acts. If repentance was the message that produced that kind of a move of God then I will carry on. Will you go with me and make the stand?

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