17. THE CALL TO REPENTANCE

*H*aving examined how Jesus dealt with individuals and having studied the parables and figures He used to illuminate truth for the disciples, we now turn our focus to the rich doctrinal content of the message He proclaimed to the multitudes. Here we will explore the principal themes that flavored Jesus' discourses, and weigh the popularized gospel of today against the Savior's own teaching. In the process, we will attempt to gain a clearer understanding of the terminology Jesus employed. Most of the current controversy regarding the gospel hinges on the definitions of a few key words, including *repentance*, *faith*, *discipleship*, and *Lord*. In this final section, we will study those terms and see how Jesus Himself used them.

We begin with a chapter on repentance, because that is where the Savior began. Matthew 4:17 records the dawning of Christ's public ministry: "From that time [the imprisonment of John the Baptist] Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' " I noted in chapter 5 that the opening word of that first sermon characterized the theme of Jesus' entire earthly ministry. We have further observed that He described His own objective thus: "to call . . . sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31). Repentance was a recurring motif in all His public sermons. He stood boldly before the stiff-necked multitudes and proclaimed, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (13:3, 5).

THE MISSING NOTE

When was the last time you heard the gospel presented in those terms? It is not fashionable in the twenty-first century to preach a gospel that demands repentance. How did the message

of today become so different from the gospel according to Jesus? As early as 1937, Dr. H. A. Ironside noted that the biblical doctrine of repentance was being diluted by those who wished to exclude it from the gospel message. He wrote, "The doctrine of repentance is the missing note in many otherwise orthodox and fundamentally sound circles today."[1] He spoke of "professed preachers of grace who, like the antinomians of old, decry the necessity of repentance lest it seem to invalidate the freedom of grace."[2] Dr. Ironside, himself a dispensationalist, denounced the teaching of extreme dispensationalists who taught that repentance was for another age. "Our Lord's solemn words, 'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish,' are as important today as when first uttered," Ironside wrote. "No dispensational distinctions, important as these are in understanding and interpreting God's ways with man, can alter this truth."[3]

Even in his day Ironside recognized the dangers of an incipient easy-believism. He wrote:

> *Shallow preaching that does not grapple with the terrible fact of man's sinfulness and guilt, calling on "all men everywhere to repent," results in shallow conversions; and so we have myriads of glib-tongued professors today who give no evidence of regeneration whatever. Prating of salvation by grace, they manifest no grace in their lives. Loudly declaring they are justified by faith alone, they fail to remember that "faith without works is dead"; and that justification by works before men is not to be ignored as though it were in contradiction to justification by faith before God.*[4]

Nevertheless, many prominent dispensationalists continued to advance the notion that preaching repentance to the unsaved violates the spirit and content of the gospel message. Dr. Lewis

Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* listed repentance as one of "the more common features of human responsibility which are too often erroneously added to the one requirement of *faith* or *belief*."[5] Chafer noted that the word *repentance* is not found in the gospel of John and occurs only once in Romans. He pointed out also that in Acts 16:31 Paul did not tell the Philippian jailer to repent. Chafer viewed that silence as an "overwhelming mass of irrefutable evidence [making it] clear that the New Testament does not impose repentance upon the unsaved as a condition of salvation."[6]

THE DISCARDING OF REPENTANCE

Voices today continue to promulgate the same ideas. *The Ryrie Study Bible* includes a synopsis of doctrine that lists repentance as "a false addition to faith" when made a condition for salvation, except "when [repentance is] understood as a synonym for faith."[7] Another influential teacher says essentially the same thing: "The Bible requires repentance for salvation, but repentance does not mean to turn from sin, nor a change in one's conduct. . . . Biblical repentance is a change of mind or attitude concerning either God, Christ, dead works or sin."[8] Even a seminary professor writes, "Repentance means to change one's mind; it does not mean to change one's life."[9]

These writers and others have thus redefined repentance in a way that evacuates its moral ramifications. They write it off as simply a change of mind about who Christ is.[10] This kind of repentance has nothing to do with turning from sin or abandoning self. It is utterly devoid of any recognition of personal guilt, any intent to obey God, or any desire for true righteousness.

That is not the kind of repentance Jesus preached. As we have

seen repeatedly, the gospel according to Jesus is as much a call to forsake sin as it is a summons to faith. From His first message to His last, the Savior's theme was calling sinners to repentance — and this meant not only that they gained a new perspective on who He was, but also that they turned from sin and self to follow Him. The message He commands us to preach is the same: "repentance for forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:47).[11]

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

Repentance *is* a critical element of conversion,[12] but do not dismiss it as simply another word for believing. The Greek word for "repentance" is *metanoia*, from *meta*, "after," and *noeo*, m"to understand." Literally it means "afterthought" or "change of mind," but biblically its meaning does not stop there.[13] As *metanoia* is used in the New Testament, it *always* speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin.[14] In the sense Jesus used it, repentance calls for a repudiation of the old life and a turning to God for salvation. [15]

Such a change of purpose is what Paul had in mind when he described the repentance of the Thessalonians: "You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). Note three elements of repentance: a turning to God, a turning from evil, and the intent to serve God. No change of mind can be called true repentance if it does not include all three elements. The simple but all too often overlooked fact is that a true change of mind will necessarily result in a change of behavior.

Repentance is not merely shame or sorrow for sin, although genuine repentance always involves an element of remorse.[16] It is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead.

Nor is repentance merely a human work. It is, like every element of redemption, a sovereignly bestowed gift of God. The early church, recognizing the authenticity of Cornelius's conversion, concluded, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18; cf. 5:31). Paul wrote to Timothy that he should gently correct those who oppose the truth, "if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25). If God is the One who grants repentance, it cannot be viewed as a human work.

Above all, repentance is not a presalvation attempt to set one's life in order. The call to repentance is not a command to make sin right before turning to Christ in faith. Rather, it is a command to recognize one's lawlessness and hate it, to turn one's back on it and flee to Christ, embracing Him with wholehearted devotion. As J. I. Packer has written, "The repentance that Christ requires of His people consists in a settled refusal to set any limit to the claims which He may make on their lives."[17]

Repentance is not simply a mental activity; genuine repentance involves the intellect, emotions, and will.[18] Geerhardus Vos wrote:

> *Our Lord's idea of repentance is as profound and comprehensive as his conception of righteousness. Of the three words that are used in the Greek Gospels to describe the process, one emphasizes the emotional element of regret, sorrow over the past evil course of life,* metamélomai; *Matt.21:29 – 32; a second expresses reversal of the entire mental attitude,* metanoéom, *Matt. 12:41, Luke 11:32; 15:7, 10; the third denotes a change in the direction of life, one goal being substituted for another,* epistréphomai; *Matt. 13:15 (and parallels); Luke 17:4; 22:32. Repentance is not limited to any single faculty of the mind: it engages the entire man, in-*

> *tellect, will and affections. . . . Again, in the new life which follows repentance the absolute supremacy of God is the controlling principle. He who repents turns away from the service of mammon and self to the service of God.*[19]

Intellectually, repentance begins with a recognition of sin — the understanding that we are sinners, that our sin is an affront to a holy God, and more precisely, that we are personally responsible for our own guilt. The repentance that leads to salvation must also include a recognition of who Christ is along with some understanding of His right to govern people's lives.

Emotionally, genuine repentance often accompanies an overwhelming sense of sorrow. This sorrow in and of itself is not repentance; one can be sorry or ashamed without being truly repentant. Judas, for example, felt remorse (Matt. 27:3), but he was not repentant. The rich young ruler went away sorrowful (19:22), but he was not repentant. Nevertheless, sorrow can lead to genuine repentance. Second Corinthians 7:10 says, "The sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret." It is difficult to imagine a true repentance that does not include at least an element of contrition — not sorrow for getting caught; not sadness because of the consequences; but a sense of anguish at having sinned against God. In the Old Testament, repentance was often shown with sackcloth and ashes, the symbols of mourning (cf. Job 42:6; Jonah 3:5 – 6).

Volitionally, repentance involves a change of direction, a transformation of the will. Far from being only a change of mind, it constitutes a willingness — more accurately, a determination — to abandon stubborn disobedience and surrender the will to Christ. As such, genuine repentance will inevitably result in a change of behavior. The behavior change is not itself repentance, but it is the fruit repentance will certainly bear. Where there is

no observable difference in conduct, there can be no confidence that repentance has taken place (Matt. 3:8; cf. 1 John 2:3 – 6; 3:17).

Real repentance alters the character of the whole man. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said:

> *Repentance means that you realize that you are a guilty, vile sinner in the presence of God, that you deserve the wrath and punishment of God, that you are hell-bound. It means that you begin to realize that this thing called sin is in you, that you long to get rid of it, and that you turn your back on it in every shape and form. You renounce the world whatever the cost, the world in its mind and outlook as well as its practice, and you deny yourself, and take up the cross and go after Christ. Your nearest and dearest, and the whole world, may call you a fool, or say you have religious mania. You may have to suffer financially, but it makes no difference. That is repentance.*[20]

Repentance is not a one-time act. The repentance that takes place at conversion begins a progressive, lifelong process of confession (1 John 1:9). This active, continuous attitude of repentance produces the poverty of spirit, mourning, and meekness Jesus spoke of in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3 – 6). It is a mark of every true believer.

THE FRUITS OF REPENTANCE

When Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17), those who heard Him understood the message. With their rich heritage in Old Testament and rabbinical teaching, His hearers would not have been confused about the

meaning of repentance. They knew He was calling for far more than simply a change of mind or a new perspective on who He was. Repentance to them meant a complete surrender of their will and an inevitable change of behavior — a new way of life, not just a different opinion. They realized He was calling them to admit their sin and turn from it, to be converted, to turn around, to forsake their sin and selfishness and follow Him instead.

After all, the Jewish concept of repentance was well developed. The rabbis held that Isaiah 1:16 – 17 described nine activities related to repentance: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Note carefully the progression: beginning internally with a cleansing, repentance then manifests itself in attitudes and actions.

The Old Testament was filled with rich truth about repentance. Ezekiel 33:18 – 19, for example, says, "When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, then he shall die in it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness, he will live by them." Second Chronicles 7:14 is a familiar prescription for repentance "[If] My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." Isaiah 55:6 – 7 gives the Old Testament invitation to salvation, and repentance is a key element: "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." Jonah 3:10 says, "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it."

Look carefully at that verse from Jonah. How did God evaluate the Ninevites' repentance? By their *deeds*. It was not that He read their thoughts or heard their prayers, though an omniscient God certainly could have seen the reality of their repentance that way. But He looked for righteous works.

John the Baptist also demanded to see good deeds as proof of repentance. He preached the message of repentance even before Jesus began His ministry (cf. Matt. 3:1 – 2). Scripture records that when the religious hypocrites came to John for baptism, "He said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance' " (Matt. 3:7 – 8).

What a greeting! It was a far cry from saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, here are our esteemed leaders." We do not know why they had come for baptism, but obviously their motives were wrong. Perhaps they were trying to gain favor with the people or be associated with John's popularity. Whatever their reasons, they had not really repented, and John refused their overture. He condemned them instead as religious phonies.

Why was John so harsh? Because these hypocrites were poisoning a whole nation with their fatal deception. Nothing about their behavior indicated that they had truly repented. There is a critical lesson here: If repentance is genuine, we can expect it to produce observable results.

What are the fruits of repentance? That is the question the tax-gatherers asked John the Baptist (Luke 3:10). His answer to them was, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to" (v. 13). To some soldiers who asked the same question, his response was, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages" (v. 14).

In other words, there must be a sincere change in one's life-

style. A person who has genuinely repented will stop doing evil and begin to live righteously. Along with a change of mind and attitude, true repentance will begin to produce a change in conduct.

Radical change was also what the apostle Paul considered proof of repentance. Note how he described his ministry to King Agrippa: "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring . . . to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, *performing deeds appropriate to repentance*" (Acts 26:19 – 20, emphasis added). That true believers will show their repentance with righteous behavior was obviously a crucial element of Paul's message.[21]

THE GOSPEL AND REPENTANCE

Repentance has always been the foundation of the New Testament call to salvation. When Peter gave the gospel invitation at Pentecost, in the first public evangelism of the postresurrection era, repentance was at the heart of it: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

No message that eliminates repentance can properly be called the gospel, for sinners cannot come to Jesus Christ apart from a radical change of heart, mind, and will. That demands a spiritual crisis leading to a complete turnaround and ultimately a wholesale transformation. It is the only kind of conversion Scripture recognizes.[22]

In Matthew 21:28 – 31 Jesus used a parable to illustrate the hypocrisy of a profession of faith without repentance:

> *"But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the*

> *vineyard.' And he answered and said, 'I will, sir'; and he did not go. And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, 'I will not'; yet he afterward regretted it and went. Which of the two did the will of his father?"*

You may wonder why Jesus did not include a third son who said, "I will" and kept his word. Perhaps it is because this story characterizes humanity, and we all fall short (cf. Rom. 3:23). Thus Jesus could describe only two kinds of religious people: those who pretend to be obedient but are actually rebels, and those who begin as rebels but repent.

Jesus told the parable for the benefit of the Pharisees, who did not view themselves as sinful and disobedient. When He asked them which son did the will of his father, they correctly answered, "The latter" (Matt. 21:31). In admitting that, they condemned themselves for their own hypocrisy.

How Jesus' rebuke must have stung them! "Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you" (v. 31). The Pharisees lived under the delusion that God approved of them because they made a great show of their religion. The problem was that it was only a show. They were like the son who said he would obey but did not. Their claim that they loved God and kept His law amounted to nothing. Those Pharisees were like many today who say they believe in Jesus but refuse to obey Him. Their profession of faith is hollow. Unless they repent, they will perish.

Tax-gatherers and harlots have an easier time than Pharisees getting into the kingdom because they are more likely to recognize their sin and repent of it. Even the worst of sins will not keep a sinner out of heaven if he or she repents. On the other hand, even the most impressive Pharisee who shelters his sin

and refuses to acknowledge or repent of it will find himself shut out of the kingdom. There is no salvation apart from the repentance that renounces sin.

There are many today who hear the truth of Christ and immediately respond as did the son who said he would obey but did not. Their positive response to Jesus will not save them. The fruit of their lives shows they have never truly repented.

On the other hand, there are many who turn their backs on sin, unbelief, and disobedience, and embrace Christ with a faith that obeys. Theirs is true repentance, manifested by the righteousness it produces. They are the truly righteous (1 Peter 4:18). And that is the ultimate aim of the gospel according to Jesus.

1. H. A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937), 7.

2. Ibid., 11.

3. Ibid., 10.

4. Ibid., 11.

5. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 3:372.

6. Ibid., 376. This was a curious conclusion to a section Chafer began by affirming "as dogmatically . . . as language can declare, that repentance is essential to salvation and that none could be saved apart from repentance" (p. 373). Chafer's apparent self-contradiction turns on his definition of repentance: he saw it as simply a change of mind (p. 372), a turning from unbelief to faith. Repentance as he defined it has no reference to sin and contrition. He declared that repentance in the context of salvation is nothing more than "a synonym for the word *belief*" (p. 377). Thus, in Chafer's system, calling people to faith in Christ is

the same as preaching repentance. One concludes that Chafer would have preferred to eliminate the word *repentance* from the gospel presentation altogether and thus avoid the risk of confusing "the glories of grace" in the minds of those who understood repentance as something more than simple faith (p. 378).

7. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 1950.

8. G. Michael Cocoris, *Lordship Salvation — Is It Biblical?* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1983), 12.

9. Thomas L. Constable, "The Gospel Message," *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 207.

10. Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 176.

11. Note that this is Luke's record of our Lord's Great Commission. Luke is the only one of the evangelists to record Jesus' words about the content of the message He was commissioning the disciples to preach. Repentance is clearly the heart of the gospel call He was commissioning His disciples to take into all the world.

12. Berkhof writes, "True repentance never exists except in conjunction with faith, while, on the other hand, wherever there is true faith, there is also real repentance. . . . The two cannot be separated; they are simply complementary parts of the same process." Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 487.

13. "The predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoia* as a change of mind plays very little part in the NT. Rather, the decision by the whole man to turn around is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas." J. Goetz-

man, “Conversion,” in Colin Brown, gen. ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:358.

14. W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1981), 3:280.

15. “It demands radical conversion, a transformation of nature, a definitive turning from evil, a resolute turning to God in total obedience (Mk. 1:15; Mt. 4:17; 18:3). . . . This conversion is once-for-all. There can be no going back, only advance in responsible movement along the way now taken. It affects the whole man, first and basically the centre of personal life, then logically his conduct at all times and in all situations, his thoughts, words and acts (Mt. 12:33ff. par.; 23:26; Mk. 7:15 par.). The whole proclamation of Jesus . . . is a proclamation of unconditional turning to God, of unconditional turning from all that is against God, not merely that which is downright evil, but that which in a given case makes total turning to God impossible (Mt. 5:29f., 44; 6:19f.; 7:13f. par.; 10:32 – 39 par.; Mk. 3:31ff. par.; Lk. 14:33, cf. Mk. 10:21 par.).” J. Behm, “*Metanoia*,” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:1002.

16. Thayer’s Greek lexicon defines *metanoia* as “the change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds, and have determined to enter upon a better course of life, so that it embraces both a recognition of sin and sorrow for it and hearty amendment, the tokens and effects of which are good deeds.” Joseph Henry Thayer, trans., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 406.

17. J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1961), 72.

18. Cf. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 486.

19. Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom of God and the Church* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 92 – 93.

20. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 2:248.

21. See appendix 1.

22. "Conversion as Jesus understands it . . . is more than a break with the old nature. . . . It embraces the whole walk of the man who is claimed by the divine lordship. . . . 'To be converted,' embraces all that the dawn of God's kingdom demands of man." Behm, "*Metanoia*," 4:1003.