

Who Needs to Repent? (Part 1)

Repentance – A Change of Mind? Or Something More?

If repentance is not essential to salvation – that is, to the gospel of grace – then why is it in the Bible? What is repentance? To whom does it apply?

According to John 16 the Spirit convinces lost people of sin and righteousness and judgment. That being the case, it can rightfully be said that the Spirit's conviction results in a change of mind. A "change of mind" is the technical meaning of the word *repentance*. However, the word *repentance* is never used in the salvation context of John 16.

It seems that is because repentance requires more than a mere change of mind. It also requires a change of behavior, or else it is not true repentance. If that is the case, then repentance is a work, or involves works, and that is why repentance is never used in a salvation context – because salvation is not of works! This point can be demonstrated from the book of Jonah.

Sackcloth and Ashes: God Saw Their Works

Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So the people of Nineveh believed God. Jonah 3:4-5a

What did the people of Nineveh believe? Did they believe they were going to hell and that they could be given eternal life if they changed their ways? No! Jonah's message was simple, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." The people believed that particular message and expected Jonah's God to destroy Nineveh. So what did they do in response? In Matt. 12:41, Jesus said the people of Nineveh repented. Notice the specific aspects of their repentance:

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Jonah 3:5-8

From the king down to the rank-and-file citizens, the people did not merely have a change of mind. They also changed their behavior, and behavioral

change is works. That is made clear in vs. 9-10:

Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. Jonah 3:9-10

The people are hoping that their behavior change will prompt God to not only change His mind but also His behavior toward them. In other words, they are hoping God will not overturn Nineveh and kill them all. They want God to turn away from His fierce anger. Obviously, on God's part, He is not repenting of sin, but of His intended behavior toward them. He is about to kill them, but stops.

Notice v.10: God saw their works. Yes, their works! For the Ninevites to repent and turn from their sin was not only to have a change of mind about their behavior, it was to change their behavior too (which God calls works!).

If the Ninevites had changed their minds at the preaching of Jonah, but that change of mind had never precipitated a change of behavior, I believe God would have destroyed them, and Jonah would have gone back to Israel, telling his fellow countrymen, "they did not repent." Because when there is no behavioral change, there is no genuine repentance. But they did repent, when the king ordered them to fast and cover themselves with sackcloth and cry out to God. All of that is works, and God says so. Because of their works of repentance, God spared them. The Ninevites not only changed their minds, they changed their behavior. Thus, God repented; He changed His mind and His intended behavior or course of action.

Nineveh Spared From Temporal Destruction

Incidentally, it seems God's sparing of the city of Nineveh is not to be equated with salvation from eternal condemnation, but rather salvation from temporal destruction. Nowhere are we told these pagan people believed on Jehovah for eternal life. Rather, they turned from their extreme wickedness and thereby avoided destruction of their nation. It is also critically important to point out that when God spared Nineveh, He not only spared the people, but the beasts, the cattle, because the people had put sackcloth and ashes on them also and forced the cattle to fast, keeping them from eating and drinking. What were the beasts spared from? From hell? No, beasts don't go to hell (or heaven, for that matter). They were saved from temporal destruction. That being the case, what were the people of Nineveh spared from? From hell? No, from temporal destruction.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Nineveh was the capital city of ancient Assyria, just as Washington, D.C. is the capital of the United States. If our nation's leaders had truly repented after September 11, 2001, and the American people en masse had consequently turned back to God, as Christians we would not have assumed the citizens had become born again, saved from

eternal condemnation. Instead, we would have understood it as people turning from their wickedness and getting serious about God again (repenting), perhaps returning to church. But that is not the same as salvation. The repentance of a nation could lead to salvation, because of hearts becoming more tender to spiritual things, but it certainly would not be the same as salvation.

Why, then, do we assume differently with Nineveh? When Nineveh repented, the Assyrian nation was spared. Period. Do we find any indication in the Bible that the Ninevites will be in heaven? No. As a matter of fact, later in history the nation reverted back to its wicked ways, invaded and destroyed Israel (the ten tribes of the north) in 722 BC, and was subsequently destroyed after God sent Nahum the prophet to tell of the city's doom.

Repentance Is a Work

Salvation from eternal condemnation is never by works. Repentance is a work. Thus, we read in Jonah 3:10, "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way." God seems to define repentance from sin as a work of turning from sin. The way repentance is used in the Scriptures requires not only a change of mind but also a change of behavior.

The point is that while we can insist on repentance meaning only "a change of mind" – which, again, is the meaning of the Greek word – repentance is virtually always accompanied by something else (either explicit or implicit) that demonstrates one has repented. For example, "repent and be baptized," "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins," "repent and be converted," "bring forth fruits meet for repentance," "repent and do the first works," "repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes," "repent of their deeds," "repented not of the works of their hands," "be zealous therefore and repent," etc. That is why repentance is a work and not included as part of salvation from condemnation, which is by faith alone. On the other hand, faith is not a work, as we have seen from Rom. 4:5.

As stated earlier, repentance can certainly prepare a person to be more open to the gospel, but repentance is not a requirement for being saved. Indeed, a person can repent and yet not be saved, if he has not depended upon Jesus for eternal life. As a matter of fact, lots of people have repented but are not saved. For instance, drug addicts that get overwhelmed by their sin because it has destroyed their lives may seek out help from a rescue mission or a church or a support group. They grow sick and tired of the effect of drugs in their life, for it has destroyed them – their job, their family, their relationships. Their mind becomes changed about drugs. They may go so far as to give up drugs, perhaps with the help of a support group like AA, or a clinical detox program, or even biblical principles. They might even say, "Jesus helped me to get over my drug problem," and assume they are saved. But that does not mean they have gotten saved.

There are many reformed drug addicts and alcoholics in our country who are not saved. Their repentance results in turning from their sin, but the best we can say about them is that they have reformed, because the conquering of their habit was a work. It might make them more open to the gospel, now that

they can think straight, but it doesn't make them saved. Here's my point: it seems repentance is not merely a change of mind; it is a change of behavior, and that is works. We know works can have no part in salvation; thus, I believe that to require repentance for salvation is to include works in salvation.

A Word to My Fundamental Brethren

At this juncture, I want to be clear on something. Some of our dear fundamental brethren say that repentance is required for salvation, but they define repentance strictly as a change of mind or turning to Jesus. They would never say repentance is a turning from sin or sins. As a matter of fact, that was my position for many years. I even referred, at times, to salvation as a two-sided coin of faith and repentance, because that is what I had been taught. So I am gracious and accepting of men like that, and appreciate them, even though I now articulate my position a bit differently than they would. I accept their position because it upholds the gospel of faith alone, and I appreciate men that stand for a gospel of faith alone, apart from works. I trust they would say the same of me.

Nevertheless, I would humbly challenge them to reconsider saying that repentance is required for salvation, even if they define repentance only as a change of mind. Here's why: the practical definition of repentance in the Scriptures seems to be not only a change of mind but also a turning from sin, a change of behavior. Indeed, that definition is held by the majority of evangelicalism. In fact, many Greek lexicons include behavioral change as part of the definition of repentance. For instance, the *Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Zondervan, 1970) adds this definition for the verb repent: "to make a change of principle and practice, to reform." What is difficult to get around is that many Scripture passages seem to suggest there has been no true repentance unless there has also been a change in behavior.

Again, I quote John the Baptist, who said to the Pharisees, "Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8). If there is no fruit of repentance, one wonders if there has been any repentance. We begin to understand why Calvinists tend to judge Christians by their behavior: because they believe repentance is required for salvation, and if a person doesn't act like a Christian, he must not have repented.

In conclusion, I believe all the references to repenting and repentance in the New Testament are non-salvific; that is, they have nothing to do with getting saved. In fact, the word repentance is hardly ever used to refer to lost people; it is predominantly used of saved people. When it is used of lost people, it is used in a general sense of their need to turn from sin to God, but not in the sense of being saved from eternal condemnation. That will be demonstrated in the following articles.