

Lost and Found (Part 2)

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Matt. 18:11, Luke 19:10). The traditional understanding of this purpose statement is that Christ came to give eternal life to those who stand eternally condemned. While Jesus came to do that too, that is not what this statement is saying. The context of these passages is not referring to those who are lost in the sense of eternally condemned but rather to those Israelites who are lost in the sense of wandering out of fellowship with God. In other words, Jesus is addressing saved Jews who are backslidden. That was demonstrated in [Part 1](#), where we studied the parables of the two sons (Matt. 21:28-32), the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7), and the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). In this article we will examine the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

Parable of the Prodigal Son

*And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.
Luke 15:11-16*

The prodigal is obviously a son from the start of the parable. The Scriptures are very clear on that point. Nothing can change his position as a son, not even his lifestyle.

All born-again believers are sons of God. Nothing can take away that unconditional inheritance. Regardless of lifestyle, sons are always sons. Behavior does not determine eternal standing with God. However, behavior does determine whether one receives the *conditional* inheritance, the status of firstborn son, which is not guaranteed.

The prodigal is a saved, but backslidden, Israelite – the kind Jesus came to seek and to save. This young man is lost, not eternally, but in the sense that he has destroyed his fellowship with the Father. He is miserable, wallowing in sin. The prodigal represents the publicans and harlots in Israel, the “vice” sinners whose deplorable spiritual condition was obvious to everyone. Nevertheless, the prodigal repents!

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I

have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. Luke 15:17-19

True repentance is always preceded by coming to oneself. Before a child of God can get right with God, he must see the awfulness of his way. There is a sense of guilt, of remorse; a change of mind that prompts a turning from sin, a behavioral change. For the prodigal it is the realization that he has been wasting his life in riotous living. Yet there is no need to perish with hunger. He awakens to his need to get right with the Father by admitting his failure and asking for deliverance from his condition. He realizes he is not *worthy* to be the father's son, though he never questions his actual standing as a son. With contrite heart, he will ask to be reinstated as a hired servant, a mere employee.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Luke 15:20-24

Of course, the focus of the prodigal son parable is not the son; it is the Father. Thankfully, God always has open arms to receive back wayward saints, and all heaven rejoices over their return. Of course, the Father is not eager to receive back to fellowship an unrepentant saint. His reception is based on repentance.

Notice the terminology used by the Father in v.24, *My son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found*. It is important to remember the prodigal is a son – a saved sinner – restoring fellowship with his father. The fact that he is “lost” cannot mean he is unsaved. In context, it must mean he is wandering away from the father but later returns. This young man is revived. What a gracious, loving heavenly Father, who is always ready and willing to receive back home a repentant child. He is eager to kill the fatted calf and celebrate!

The Legalist Son

There is one other aspect to the parable that is often forgotten: the other son. He stays home and does not waste his life in riotous living. However, he has a self-righteous attitude, as seen in his response to the father.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the

servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. Luke 15:25-32

The stay-at-home son is angry and envious that the father will go to such great lengths to receive home the scoundrel, whereas the father sees it quite differently. The prodigal is no longer “dead,” in the sense of being separated from the father, and no longer lost. He is alive and found! The father graciously receives him back home.

Why would Jesus tell a story of this nature? It seems He is identifying the two groups of sinners in His day that He sought to restore to fellowship with God. The prodigal son apparently represents the licentious publicans and harlots who get right with God. But the stay-at-home son seems to represent the legalistic scribes and Pharisees whose outward life was conforming, but inwardly, they were spiritually corrupted. Most of them never repented.

Does this latter group represent the attitude of some fundamentalists, who view themselves as righteous for holding true to biblical doctrine, avoiding licentious living, serving in their local church, reading their Bible regularly, and doing other things to make them spiritual? Because they have not wandered off into left field, they think their life is acceptable and well-pleasing to the Lord. But they are relying on a “to-do list” of sorts to make them spiritual. But isn’t it possible to wander off into right field, thinking that conservatism is next to godliness? This is nothing less than legalistic sanctification, which Paul condemned in the book of Galatians.

Meanwhile, their heart is not in true fellowship with the Lord, for the dependence is on self rather than the Lord. This kind of person often resorts to hoity-toity, condescending comparisons with prodigals to make themselves feel good. No one would admit to this condition, of course, and that is part of the problem. What is needed is a long look in the mirror of God’s Word!

Two Different Ends

The legalistic son bemoans the fact that the father has never thrown a party for him. He feels gyped, reminding the father he has remained at home all through the years and has never disobeyed his father’s commandments. Really? What son *never* disobeys? Self-righteousness oozes from this man’s pores in contrast to the returned prodigal who views himself as unworthy of being the father’s son.

Why is this son so angry? I believe it is because the returned prodigal is given the best robe and a ring. The robe is reminiscent of Joseph's coat of many colors that had infuriated his brothers, not merely because Jacob seemed to favor Joseph, but because it denoted his status as firstborn son. Along with that status came privileges, such as receiving a double inheritance – later evidenced by Jacob blessing Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh – and leadership responsibilities, but also the right of succession. Furthermore, the firstborn son was recognized as the spiritual leader of the family in the father's absence.

A father would often identify the firstborn with the gift of a royal robe and a signet ring, symbolizing the father's authority being bestowed upon the special son. That appears to be what is happening in this text. But why does this make the self-righteous son so angry? Because *he* is the eldest son, not the returned prodigal. Luke 15:12 clearly identifies the prodigal as the younger son, so the father is choosing to break with tradition and bestow the firstborn status on the younger son rather than the elder.

Why would the father do this? Because the younger son is clearly the more spiritual of the two. Though he has wandered, he has fully repented in great humility and is now in full obedience and submission to the father. The older son, on the other hand, is outwardly conforming, but inwardly angry and self-righteous. His heart has not changed. Consequently, the father views him as less spiritual, but reminds him that he is also a son and, therefore, entitled to the father's riches as well.

We would be remiss to ignore the spiritual lesson Jesus is sharing in this parable. Previously, Jesus had told the scribes and Pharisees, *the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you (Matt. 21:31)*. Although this infuriated the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus explained why they would receive the lesser status in the kingdom. *For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him (Matt. 21:32)*. The publicans and harlots, because they had repented of their backsliding when John preached, would be given greater status in the Messianic kingdom, the honor of ruling and reigning with Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees, because of their continued corrupt heart, would be of lesser status in the kingdom.

The application to twenty-first century Christianity should be clear. Beware of self-righteous, legalistic sanctification! Don't rob yourself of the status of firstborn son, or you will be lesser in the coming kingdom.

[Lost and Found \(Part 1\)](#)

It is terrible to be lost, but wonderful to be found.

*For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.
Luke 19:10*

Many commentators interpret this verse as meaning Jesus came to give eternal life to those who are eternally condemned. The New Testament sometimes speaks of unsaved persons as being lost. *2 Cor. 4:3, If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost.*

However, the word *lost* is not predominantly used in the Scriptures of those who are unsaved, and the first century Jews would not have understood it as referring to those who are eternally lost. The preponderance of times the word *lost* is used in the New Testament, it is used of saved people who are floundering in sin. They have wandered away from the Lord, and in that sense, they are lost. How then can they be saved? By being delivered from their sinful self-destruction.

A saved person who is living in carnality is temporally lost to some degree and needs to be found. Incidentally, in those instances where the word *lost* is used to refer to carnal, but saved people, the word *saved* is used in many of those cases to refer to their repentance and return to the Lord. In that sense, they are *found*.

Yes, Jesus also came to earth with a burden to see eternally lost people get saved from sin and receive eternal life. That is the emphasis of John's Gospel. But that is not how Jesus uses the terms *saved*, *lost*, and *found* in the Synoptic Gospels. The first two years of His preaching ministry were mainly focused on convincing the Israelite nation to repent and turn back to the Lord, for they were like lost and wandering sheep, needing to be rescued from national destruction.

Two Types of Sinners

In seeking and saving the lost, Jesus repeatedly encountered two groups of people in Israel that were polar opposites in one respect, but very much alike in another. The first group, comprised of scribes and Pharisees, were the self-righteous fundamentalists of Jesus' day. They were more focused on the letter of the law than the spirit of the law (see Matt. 5:21-6:18), fully expecting their keeping of lists and standards to make them spiritual. Priding themselves in strict observance of the law, they condescended to those who had "lower standards:"

*God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners,
unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican (Matt. 18:11).*

Instead of comparing themselves to God and seeing how far they were from Him in fellowship, they compared themselves to "sinners" and felt good about their spiritual condition. They were self-righteous, yet carnal, nonetheless.

At the other end of the spectrum were the publicans (tax collectors that defrauded citizens) and harlots (promiscuous women). Needless to say, for

every promiscuous woman, there was at least one promiscuous man, so this was not limited to women. The publicans and harlots represented the carnal element of the nation, those who were living licentiously. For those who insist these seedier elements of society had to be eternally lost, consider the present day church of Jesus Christ, which is plagued by many who are saved, yet living in fornication or adultery. Indeed, in 1 Cor. 6 Paul had to warn the Corinthian believers not to use their bodily members – which were now Christ's – as the members of a harlot. He was dealing with the sin of fornication in the church.

Jesus treats both groups – scribes and Pharisees, on the one end, and publicans and harlots, on the other – as “sinners,” but He never calls into question their eternal standing with God. Yet he deems them both lost and in need of repentance.

Doesn't the use of the word *lost* imply they were eternally lost and in need of eternal life? No, that is an assumption that has been made by many, but it is not consistent with the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus refers to both groups as if eternally saved, but in need of restored fellowship with God. That can be clearly demonstrated from several parables.

Parable of the Two Sons

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him. Matthew 21:28-32

Notice the vineyard owner has two sons. Sonship is evidence of an eternally secure relationship with God. Furthermore, both sons are asked to work in the Father's vineyard; again, evidence of right positional standing with God. Unbelievers have no connection with the Father's vineyard.

The first son initially refuses to work in his father's vineyard, but he later repents and goes. According to the interpretation given by Jesus, this son represents the publicans and harlots who are not right with God at first, but later repent at John's preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom and submit to the baptism of repentance. The other son agrees to work for his father, but then never does. This latter son epitomizes the self-righteous religious leaders who claim to be doing the will of God, but whose self-righteous hearts are not right with Him.

Imagine how infuriated the Pharisees become when Jesus tells them the

publican and harlots will go into the kingdom of God before them, the religious leaders! Why will this happen? Because the sinners have believed the message of John and repented of their lifestyle. Of course, the Pharisees are sinners too, but they can't see it and so do not repent.

Some may question how the word *sinners* could be used for saints. But are there not sinning saints? The word *sinners* in this context simply means they are carnal sons of God. It is important to take note that both groups – the scribes/Pharisees and publicans/harlots – are expected to be in the kingdom, but the repentant publicans and harlots will go before (i.e., precede) the unrepentant Pharisees, signifying a greater status for the repentant. As a result of bringing forth the fruits of repentance, the righteousness of the publicans and harlots exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The publicans and harlots, now revived, will be great in the millennial kingdom, while the scribes and Pharisees will be least (Matt. 5:19-20).

We read of these two groups of sinners in another passage of Scripture.

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. Luke 15:1-2

Once again, Jesus encounters the two polar groups of sinners in Israel. Jesus is accused by the self-righteous sinners (scribes and Pharisees) of eating with the vice-sinners (i.e., those guilty of vices, the publicans and sinners). Nevertheless, both are eternally secure believers, as will be clearly demonstrated in the following parables.

Parable of the Lost Sheep

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. Luke 15:4-7

In the parable, the shepherd owns all one hundred sheep! This clearly pictures their standing before God as eternally secure. One becomes lost by wandering. That cannot mean unsaved, for salvation cannot be lost. In the metaphor, the sheep (incidentally, it's not a goat) is an Israelite who wanders away from God through sinning. The shepherd, Jesus Christ, goes after the lost sheep, because He came to seek and to save that which was lost. *Lost*, in this context, cannot mean eternally condemned. *Lost* here means eternally saved, but not right with God.

Jesus did not come to call the righteous Israelites to repentance; he came to call sinning Israelites to repentance. Righteous Israelites, in context, are not merely those who are eternally saved, but those who are right with God. In v. 7, they are called *just persons that need no repentance*. Some like to say the word *just* refers to positional righteousness, that is, justification. It does in some other contexts of Scripture, but not here.

The word *just* can also refer to practical righteousness, that is, progressive sanctification. For instance, in Matt. 1:19 Joseph, after learning of Mary's pregnancy, determines to put her away privately (in other words, he will not divorce her publicly), because he is a *just* man. That doesn't mean he is saved, justified. Rather, it means he is a good, righteous man who acts uprightly in his everyday living.

When Pilate washes his hands to demonstrate his innocence in the matter of judging Jesus, he says, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." Pilate is obviously not saying Jesus is eternally justified in the eyes of God. He is saying Jesus is innocent, upright. Thus, context helps to determine how the word *just* is being used. In the parable, it seems there is joy in heaven whenever Christians get right with God, in this context, Jews repenting and turning back to Jehovah. Indubitably, there is also joy in heaven when eternally lost people become eternally saved, but that's not the point here.

Parable of the Lost Coin

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth. Luke 15:8-10

The woman owns all ten coins, just as the shepherd owns all the sheep. The fact that one sheep or one coin becomes lost, does not mean the owner forfeits ownership. It simply means the thing owned is temporarily lost and needs to be found. In both cases, though, notice the aggressiveness with which the owners go after what belongs to them. Jesus, out of a heart of love, goes after His sheep that are wandering, whether first century Israelites or twenty-first century Christians.

Why are angels joyful about Christians getting right with God? The answer is marvelous. One day Satan and his host of angels will be deposed by Christ, and Jesus will rule in His kingdom, along with those saints who have lived uprightly. The same heavenlies, including earth, that are today ruled by Satan and his minions will one day be ruled by faithful saints, with Christ as the ultimate ruler. God's holy angels are eager to see Satan deposed and righteousness ruling in heaven and earth. Unrepentant saints are counterproductive to that goal, because they are not becoming qualified to

rule and reign the heavens on behalf of Jesus Christ. When saints are not living for God, they are not preparing themselves for their ultimate purpose of glorifying God by ruling over heaven and earth. Angels are, therefore, joyful when saints get right with God and stay right with God.

Who Needs to Repent? (Part 2)

If repentance is not required for those who are eternally condemned to have eternal life, how is the concept used in the New Testament? There are three main answers to that question, the first of which is, by far, the most predominant and will be addressed in this article.

First Century National Israel Needed Repentance

Of the fifty-nine verses that use the words *repent* (Gr., *metanoeo* and Gr., *metamelomai*) *repentance* (Gr., *metanoia*) twenty-nine (nearly half!) are directed toward national Israel in the first century. As will be demonstrated, these usages have nothing to do with salvation from eternal condemnation, though they are quite commonly “gospelized.” God was calling His covenant people to repent of their disobedience, and to turn their hearts back to Him, or else they would face temporal destruction. Of course, in hindsight we know the nation did not repent and therefore faced the prophesied judgment of God in AD70, when the Romans invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the nation.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) focus on the specific message preached by John the Baptist and Jesus – and later the apostles (Mark 6:12) and the seventy (Luke 10:1-10)– who offered the kingdom of heaven to the nation of Israel, and only to Israel (called “the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Luke 10:6). The offer was predicated on obedience, which required repentance on the part of the nation, for the national heart was far from God. To be sure, Jesus and the apostles were also concerned with salvation of any individual Jews who were eternally lost. Thus the Holy Spirit included the Gospel of John in the canon of Scripture, and the purpose of that particular Gospel is evangelistic, as clearly stated in John 20:31. It seems the focus of the other Gospels is not evangelistic, per se, but a call for the nation to repent and thereby turn from sin and return to the Lord. In essence, Jesus and John the Baptist were emphasizing the importance of 2 Chronicles 7:14.

In other words, the Synoptics hone in on the Gospel of the Kingdom, which is distinct from the Gospel of Grace. The former is for those who are positionally saved, but in need of repentance, whereas the latter is directed at those who are positionally lost and in need of depending on Christ alone for eternal life. There is a big difference. Some might think that because the word “Gospel” has been traditionally used for the first four books of the New Testament that they all are referring to the same Gospel of Grace. But

there are actually two Gospels in the New Testament, and thus the word "Gospel" could refer to either one.

The Purpose for National Repentance: Revival

An assumption is typically made by evangelicals that the Jews, at the time of Christ's earthly ministry, were mostly lost and in need of eternal salvation, but that appears to be upside-down. I believe it is unwise and inaccurate to press the overarching message of the Synoptics into the mold of the Gospel of Grace. That happens because of long-standing assumptions about passages such as the following:

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. Mark 1:14-15

Like John, Jesus also preached the Gospel of the Kingdom. But somehow expositors frequently see only the last phrase of this passage – *repent ye, and believe the gospel* – and use that as the basis for proclaiming that salvation is by repentance and faith. However, they totally miss the context. When taken together with the entire verse, as well as the previous, the phrase *believe the gospel* clearly applies to the Gospel of the Kingdom, not the Gospel of Grace. The Israelites were to believe that God had sent Jesus to usher in the Messianic kingdom. In response, they were to turn back to Jehovah in righteousness.

A related assumption made by some expositors is in regards to the phrase, *many believed on Him*, or other similar phrases. They stumble over the word *believed*, assuming it must refer to faith for eternal salvation. However, do not saved people need to believe for sanctification? Does not a sinning Christian need to believe that God will forgive and cleanse when he confess his sins (1 John 1:9)? I would submit that this "believing" was not unto eternal salvation in these contexts. It was the culmination of the revival! Multitudes of these already-saved Jews were repenting of sins and getting right with God, experiencing revival in their lives, and the natural result was that they embraced Jesus as the Messiah they had been waiting for. They believed on Him, not as their Savior from eternal condemnation in this case, but as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. More consistent with the context of Matthew's Gospel is the premise that the Jews were predominantly saved when Jesus began His public ministry.

It is important to consider how the Jews were eternally saved in Old Testament times. In any era, salvation is by faith alone. *Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness (Rom. 4:1)*. What, then, was the state of the Jews at Christ's first coming? As God's covenant people, they were believing God about a coming Messiah. That is evidenced by the overwhelming revival that began under the ministry of John the Baptist. Furthermore, the nation was not participating in idolatry, but rather was worshipping Jehovah God and offering blood sacrifices at the Temple. Not to

mention, they were observing the feasts and the Sabbaths. Granted, religious observances do not make one eternally saved. However, would these facts not be overwhelming evidence that the nation was predominantly believing in Jehovah rather than unbelieving? And would not their spiritual condition be consistent with Christ's quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10?

For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Isaiah 6:9-10, as quoted by Jesus in Matt. 13:15)

It seems the people were saved, but hard-hearted. The word choices used by Jesus are instructive. *Lest they ... be **converted***. This is the Greek word *epistrepho* and, in this context, means "to revert" or "to turn again." Jesus is saying the nation had willfully grown calloused in heart, dull in hearing, and blind in spiritual vision. By the time of Christ's arrival, the nation was in desperate need of revival. They needed to "turn again" to Jehovah. One who is unsaved doesn't need to "turn again" to the Lord. This is for saved people who have grown apathetic and indifferent to spiritual truth and godly living. Those in such a condition are in need of healing (cf, "heal their land," 2 Chron. 7:14).

To demonstrate the spiritual healing needed in Israel, Jesus and the apostles did many miracles.

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. Matthew 4:23 (see also Matt. 9:35)

And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. Luke 10:9

Certainly, these signs and wonders were for the purpose of corroborating Christ's ministry as the Son of Man sent by God. But they were not only for that end. They were also pictures of what the coming Messianic Kingdom would be like – a world in which the curse of sin will be largely lifted.

The Penalty for National Rejection: Temporal Destruction

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand ... Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. Matt. 3:1-2, 5-6

Are we to conclude this is eternal salvation? Notice in the passage that *all* Judaea, and *all* the region round about Jordan responded positively to his preaching, submitting to his baptism of repentance, confessing their sins. That is certainly not the way to be eternally saved, as we have seen in a previous chapter. Salvation is by faith alone, not by confessing sins. We should be quick to label this a sweeping revival! That is, until the religious leaders of Israel stepped in and poured cold water on what God was doing.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Matthew 3:1-12

While many of the individual religious leaders were undoubtedly lost (particularly, the Sadducees, who denied the supernatural, and undoubtedly some of the Pharisees, who were not believing God but depending on keeping the law as their salvation), they all knew better! There was no excuse for any individual Israelite to be lost, especially the religious leaders. Jesus said to Nicodemus, *Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? (John 3:10)*. So John the Baptist went right on with his message of repentance for the nation. Perhaps national repentance would help to open the eyes of any unsaved, individual Israelites, so they could see their personal need for salvation by faith alone. Would not a nation-wide revival of saints in America, for example, be a tremendous catalyst for the spread of the gospel, making the overall spiritual climate more conducive to unsaved individuals being more open to salvation in Jesus Christ?

Notice how John condemns the national religious leaders. It is not a pronouncement of *eternal* condemnation, for he is addressing the national need. It is a pronouncement of *temporal* destruction. They are urged to lead the nation in bringing forth fruits meet for (*worthy of*, Luke 3:8) repentance, turning from sins. John condemns their thinking that national identity (*We have Abraham to our father*) equates to right fellowship with God. No, they must repent nationally! If not, a metaphoric "axe" would chop down the national tree, and those refusing to repent would be cast into a metaphoric "fire," symbolizing the fires of God's judgment. Again, this prophecy was fulfilled in AD70, when Rome burned Jerusalem and cast the bodies of thousands of Jews into the burning fires of the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), an unquenchable fire. John does not refer to it as an "eternal"

fire but an “unquenchable” one. The fires in the Valley of Hinnom were said to burn perpetually.

Woe Unto Thee!

This warning of temporal judgment was quite serious. After being rejected in some of the Galilean cities where He had done the greatest miracles, Jesus rebuked them.

Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. (Matt. 11:20-22)

Because Chorazin and Bethsaida never repented, despite their repeated exposure to the Galilean ministry of Christ, their judgment (in AD70) would be more oppressive than that of Tyre and Sidon, which were repeatedly destroyed by enemies (Babylonian, Persian, Greek) but later rebounded. Indeed, the Romans were much more ruthless to the Israelites when Titus invaded and conquered the land. The long, grueling invasion was torturous for the Israelite nation, which could have repented and avoided it all.

A Parallel for New Testament Saints

I would suggest the spiritual condition of Israel in the first century is much like the spiritual condition of the church of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century – spiritually anemic. First century Israel was spiritually oppressed and not in possession of the national Messianic promises because of disobedience. Like their forefathers who had been delivered from Egypt in the Passover, they were saved people, but wandering in a wilderness of their own, never obtaining the promised land inheritance. What a tragedy! Yet the church in the twenty-first century is similarly oppressed by worldliness, fleshliness and lack of faith, characterized by defeat rather than victory. Do Christians realize their present spiritual condition will affect their future millennial existence?

While the Gospel of the Kingdom was originally intended for early first century national Israel, it has enormous spiritual application to the present day church of Jesus Christ. As Israel needed to repent, lest it face fiery judgment at the hand of the Romans, so Christians must repent lest they face the fires of God’s judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Every man’s work shall be made manifest:for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss:but he himself shall be

saved; yet so as by fire. 1 Cor. 3:13-15

Peter said, *Judgment must begin at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17)*. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us, *Our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29)*.

Oh Christian, *Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 4:17)!*

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.

[What Must I Do to Be Saved? \(Part 2\)](#)

In [Part 1](#) we concluded from the Scriptures that salvation is not by repenting of sins, but by belief – faith alone. Furthermore, one does not become saved by praying or walking an aisle or asking Jesus into the heart, or crying out for help, or making a public profession in church. Nor is salvation by any other work. Salvation is not by doing (and that includes repenting); it is by believing!

However, in order for a person to believe, he must be convinced by the Holy Spirit of his need, prompting a change of mind.

The Spirit Convinces of the Facts of the Gospel

On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples about the Holy Spirit's ministry in the world.

And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.
John 16:8-11

The Holy Spirit reproves (i.e., convinces) lost people of the facts of the gospel so they have a basis for getting saved. This is essentially the same message preached by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:1-4:

I declare unto you the gospel ... by which also ye are saved ... how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

In John 16 we are told the Spirit of God convinces lost people of three things, with the intent of changing their mind about these three things.

First, He convinces of sin. Take a woman who never before thought of herself as a sinner until you came along and shared the gospel with her. You show her verses about her sinful state:

Romans 3:10, There is none righteous, no, not one.

Romans 3:23, For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Romans 5:12 Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.

The Spirit takes the Word and, through your witness, convinces the woman she is a sinner. Then, you tell her of Christ's righteousness – how Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God died and shed His precious blood to pay the price for her sin – and how His righteousness can become her righteousness.

Romans 5:8-10, But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

2 Cor. 5:21, For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

The fact that Jesus has ascended to the Father (John 16:10) is evidence of His righteous life, His vindication by God, resulting in His resurrection from the dead, and His exaltation. He is now seated at the right hand of the Father, a place of authority over sin, death, hell, and Satan.

Finally, you tell the lost woman about judgment – how she is under a sentence of condemnation apart from receiving the atonement of Christ. The only way she can receive the gift of eternal life is by faith alone.

Rev. 20:15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

Romans 6:23, For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

John 3:16, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

That is the message of the Gospel in a nutshell, which the Spirit of God uses as the basis to convince sinners of their need for a Savior. Apart from the Spirit-filled witness of a Christian sharing the gospel and apart from the Spirit convincing, the woman mentioned above will never be saved. But when those two powerful dynamics come together, the woman will have her eyes

opened to truth, so that the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ can shine in. At that point, her thinking is changed, but she is still not saved. She must believe, that is, depend on the blood atonement of Jesus for forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Of Sin, Because They Believe Not

The wording of John 16:9 is critically important, "Of sin, because they believe not on me." The Holy Spirit convicts of sin because of the lost person's unbelief. Lost people do not believe on Jesus Christ, in the sense that they do not depend on Him for salvation. That is their great sin.

I find it instructive that Jesus does not say, "of sin, because they are drunkards and thieves and liars and adulterers, etc," although they are. He does not say, "of sin, because they have broken the ten commandments," although they have. The clear emphasis of the Spirit's accusation is on sin, because they believe not on me. The essence of every sin is unbelief, which is a rejection of Jesus Christ.

How should this teaching of Jesus instruct our gospel presentation? We should never tell lost man he must repent of his sins in order to be saved. Rather, we should tell him he must believe on the blood atonement of Jesus Christ to be delivered from eternal condemnation and pass from death unto life. Our message must be consistent with the Spirit's conviction.

How then does a lost person become saved? When the Spirit of God convicts a sinner of his sinfulness, so that he sees himself as condemned before a holy God, then his thinking about himself has been changed. When the sinner sees that Jesus – the crucified, resurrected Savior – is the answer to his need, then his thinking about Jesus has been changed. All that is necessary for salvation is belief. In other words, when a lost person has a Spirit-prompted change of mind, he is a candidate for salvation, but he is not yet saved. He must believe on Jesus to save, based on what he knows to be true. It's that simple.

He might pray at the time or he might not pray; that doesn't matter. What matters is if his heart of unbelief changes to a heart of belief. When it does, that one is instantaneously saved to the uttermost! He passes from death unto life. He is justified by Jesus, reconciled with God, regenerated, born again. From that day forward, the new believer is equipped to repent of individual sins, as the indwelling Holy Spirit reveals them through the Word, working toward the goal of making Christ Lord of his life.

The Error of Lordship Salvation

Our Calvinist brethren insist that repentance – in the sense of turning from sin or sins – is required for salvation, along with belief. But I believe this negates belief by combining faith with works. This error inevitably leads to "Lordship salvation," if one is consistent in applying this definition of repentance. Lordship salvation is a perversion of the doctrine of repentance, for it essentially teaches that in order for one to be saved, he must make Christ Lord of his life. It sounds good, except they define

“making Christ Lord” as forsaking all known sins. To suggest that an unbeliever must make Christ Lord of his life in order to be saved is to suggest the impossible and implies a works-based gospel.

Critical to understanding the gospel is the teaching of Jesus in John 16:9 – “of sin, because they believe not on me.” Jesus is emphasizing that the Holy Spirit indicts sinners, not by listing all of their individual sins and calling for repentance on each point, as Lordship salvation implies, but rather by convincing of the all-encompassing sin of unbelief. Thus, in our presentation of the Gospel, we should take the same approach. In one short verse (John 16:9), Jesus wipes out the tenets of Lordship salvation and provides a biblical understanding of salvation by faith alone.

One of the things Satan delights to do is muddy the waters on the gospel, and he does that anyway he possibly can. He injects works into the gospel in myriads of ways. Perhaps the most subtle way he has done this is by creating the two traditional theological systems: Arminianism and Calvinism and their views of perseverance. Oddly enough, while Arminianism and Calvinism are typically described as being polar opposites, they are actually very closely related. While Satan has successfully kept these two systems of theology arguing with one another for more than four centuries, as to which one is right about the gospel, the subtle irony is that neither is right about the gospel. They have a common thread of error.

Eternally Secure

As already stated in a previous chapter, Arminianism says that in order to stay saved your behavior must be consistent with the gospel and, if it is not, you can lose your salvation. Calvinism says that in order to be saved, one must repent of his sins – and by that is meant a turning from individual sins. Furthermore, Calvinism teaches that if a person who claims to be saved does not consistently live according to the gospel, he was never saved in the first place.

There is theological error in both Arminianism and Calvinism. Both systems perpetuate doubt about salvation, by making eternal security conditioned on present behavior. That is unbiblical and robs saints of assurance. But in the Scriptures, eternal security is never conditioned on present behavior. It is conditioned on Christ’s finished work. Both of these theological grids lead to constant doubt – “am I saved, or not?” Here’s how: both systems pervert the gospel by combining the doctrines of progressive sanctification and justification, making them mutually inclusive. Doing so forces a theology upon the Scriptures that is not found in the Bible and thereby leads people astray.

God’s will is not for His children to doubt their salvation. To that end, God has given us numerous assurances of our eternal security, and it has nothing to do with us, nothing to do with our behavior.

John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word,
and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall

not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

John 6:38-40 For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 10:27-30 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one.

Non-Calvinists Marching to the Beat

In our day we also find many non-Calvinist dispensationalists who are insisting on repentance as part of salvation, that is, repentance defined as turning from sin or sins. Why are they doing this? Because they are weary of Christians who don't live and act like Christians. We certainly appreciate their frustration. Nevertheless, the answer to the problem is not to resort to unbiblical doctrines regarding the gospel. That only compounds the problem.

What is happening, as a result, is that evangelists are coming into our churches and Bible colleges and preaching that if you are not regularly seeing victory in your Christian life or if you don't have a desire to be holy, then you are not saved, and you need to get saved. Then they manipulate the wording of their sermons and their invitations to convince many non-victorious Christians to get "saved" again – and sometimes again and again.

Oh the confusion and error they are perpetuating in the minds of Christians! The next time that saint struggles in his Christian walk, he will have the tendency to doubt his salvation and think he never was saved in the first place. The "get lost" evangelists, as I prefer to call them, prey on those folks, and the end result is that Christians never get the help they need. This is devastating for Christianity. What non-victorious, carnal saints need is not to somehow get saved again, as if that were even possible! They need to learn the Christ-life for victory, and it's so simple.

Those who are convinced of Calvinism's "perseverance" doctrine tend to accuse faith-alone preachers of teaching easy-believism and antinomianism (licentious living). But consider the following:

- If pastors and evangelists will preach the clear gospel message by faith alone, and ...
- If they will explain salvation, not as walking an aisle or making a profession or praying a prayer, but rather as dependence on Christ alone, and ...

- If they will refuse to undermine assurance of salvation but rather undergird it by right theology, and ...
- If they will teach believers the Christ-life for victory, and ...
- If they will warn of the saints' coming appointment at the Judgment Seat ...
- Then the biblical gospel will be upheld, saints will be confident in their salvation, holiness of life will be promoted, the church of Jesus Christ will be victorious and prepared for the coming kingdom of Christ.

The problem today is that these things are largely absent from our so-called Bible-preaching churches!

What Must I Do to Be Saved? (Part 1)

How does a person become a born-again child of God? What must one do to become saved? Join a church? Get baptized? Take communion? Be kind to the neighbors? Do unto others as they do unto you? Repent of sins?

The answer to every question, including the last one, is "No!" The Bible is clear that salvation is by grace, through faith alone, not of works.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Titus 3:5

The Philippian jailer cried out to Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Their answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." Curiously, Paul did not say, "repent of your sins." Nor did he say, "repent and believe." He simply said, "believe." Does this imply that repentance and belief are one and the same, so that Paul didn't need to mention repentance since he had mentioned belief?

In the next several articles we are going to study the biblical doctrines of belief and repentance. We will define the words and see how the concepts are used in the Scriptures. The objective will be to determine whether or not repentance is considered part of salvation. Does one need to simply believe, or believe and repent?

Facts About Repentance and Belief

Fact #1: The verb *repent* (Gr., *metanoeo*) and noun *repentance* (Gr., *metanoia*) are used a total of fifty-eight times in the New Testament.

Fact #2: The verb *believe* (Gr., *pisteuo*) is used two-hundred forty-eight times in the New Testament, more than four times than *repent*!

Clearly, *believe* is the more dominant word, and there is a reason for that, as we shall see.

Fact #3: The words *repent* and *repentance* are never used in the book of Galatians

Galatians is the key book in which Paul gives a defense of the gospel. In that epistle Paul many times makes the claim that justification is by faith, but he never mentions repentance.

Fact #4: The words *repent* and *repentance* (with respect to man) are used only once in the book of Romans.

In the context where it is used (Rom. 2:4), Paul is not speaking of justification, per se, but rather, He is stating a general principle that God's forbearance and goodness lead men to repentance.

Fact #5: The words *repent* and *repentance* are never once used in all the gospel of John!

Yet the express, stated purpose of John's Gospel is evangelism.

But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. John 20:31

Some have suggested that pointing out this fact is making an argument from silence. However, the following fact makes that a moot point.

Fact #6: John the apostle uses the word *repent/repented* twelve times in the book of Revelation, but never in reference to salvation from eternal condemnation.

The point is that John clearly knew and understood the doctrine of repentance, but did not see a connection between repentance and salvation, which is consistent with the other New Testament writers. The premise of this article and the ones to follow will be that repentance is not essential to eternal salvation, and that is why John omitted repentance from his gospel.

It is critical to understand the significance of the above facts. In the books of the Bible that mostly intensely deal with salvation, justification, and the gospel, the words *repent* and *repentance* (in any form) are never used, except for once, in a general sense in the book of Romans. Don't let these facts fly by you. There is a reason repentance is not mentioned as part of salvation in these books, and we shall see why as we go along.

How then are we saved?

It is important to let the Bible speak for itself.

John 1:12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16, 18 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 3:36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

John 6:40, 47 And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.

John 11:25-26 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

John 20:31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

Acts 16:31 Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

Romans 3:22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.

Romans 4:3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.

Galatians 3:22 But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

Belief, not Repentance

Dozens more could be listed. In fact, there are at least one hundred references in the New Testament, pointing to belief as the way one receives eternal life. Belief in what? In order to be saved from eternal condemnation, one must generally believe that Jesus is the Christ (i.e., the Messiah), the Son of God, and that He offers eternal life to all who come to Him in faith. More specifics will be provided in a moment, but the point to be made here is that salvation is not by repentance of sins, but by belief.

Notice that one does not become saved by praying or walking an aisle or asking Jesus into the heart, or crying out for help, or making a public profession in church. Nor is salvation by getting baptized or going to church or having religious beliefs or being a good person. All of these things are works. Salvation is not by doing; it is by believing! According to each of the above verses, and many more that could be quoted, salvation is by believing, not by repenting of sins.

“Easy Believism”

Some of a more Calvinist persuasion, who would say salvation must include repenting of one's sins, charge those who teach “faith alone” with promoting “easy believism.” It is intended as a pejorative term, accusing “faith alone” advocates of making salvation too easy. Without repentance, they say, one's salvation is shallow, a mere profession. It is ironic that those who come from a reformation heritage and would claim the reformation mantra of sola fide (a Latin term, meaning “by faith alone”) actually require faith plus repentance for salvation. But faith plus repentance is the same as faith plus works, as will be demonstrated below.

Yes, believing is easy, but that is because no work is involved. That's why the gospel is often referred to as “God's simple plan of salvation.” But mere professions are not the result of teaching faith alone for salvation. They are the result of doctrinal error that is widely dispensed in churches, namely, incorrect teaching about belief. By the way many preachers articulate the gospel and invitations to receive Christ, they lead listeners into thinking salvation is obtained by walking an aisle or praying a prayer or giving public profession of gospel facts. That is wrong, it is deceptive, and it leads people to confusion and error. Nevertheless, the way to remedy this error is not by overreacting and including repentance as a requirement for salvation. Rather, it is to teach correctly about belief.

What is belief?

Belief is simply conviction of the facts that leads one to depend upon those facts. Many of a Calvinist ilk claim that an unsaved person is unable to exercise faith, because faith is a work, they say. Which, of course, begs a question. What about repentance? If belief is a work, then is not repentance also a work? Yes, Calvinists freely admit as much. To get around an unsaved person working for salvation (by repenting and exercising faith – which, they say, is impossible because man is totally depraved or, better, “totally unable”), Calvinism teaches that regeneration precedes repentance and faith. In other words, to those whom God has sovereignly chosen, He bestows new life, literally making them born again. Only after that happens,

can one repent of sins and turn to God in faith, thereby becoming converted. Thus, one error leads to another.

But is faith a work? Not according to the Scriptures.

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Romans 4:5

The Holy Spirit of God makes it very clear that faith, or belief, is not a work. If I believe the promises of God, that means I am convinced they are for me, and I am depending upon them. I can say I believe the promises, but if I never depend upon them, I really don't believe. So a person can say they are a Christian all they want, but if they have never depended on Christ's promise to save them from eternal condemnation, they are not truly saved. They may know about salvation, but if they don't depend upon Christ to save them, they are not saved!

Let's develop this a bit further. Believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life demands one know why they need eternal life. Suppose a man never heard the gospel before. He knows nothing about Jesus or eternal life or why he needs it. If he is going to believe – which means to depend on Jesus for eternal life – he must have a basis for belief. He needs to know who Jesus is and why he needs eternal life. That is where the Holy Spirit and a Christian witness come into the picture.

In Part 2 we will explore the ministry of the Holy Spirit in changing the minds of sinners.