

Mark 1:9-15 "Repent and Believe" 2/21/21

Rev. A. B. Earle, of the Second Baptist Church in Brooklyn told a story of a dark sinner who wanted to enter heaven - He so desired it that he visited there in a dream - Unfortunately the angel at heaven's gate turned him away - Telling him that it was not obvious that his faith in Christ was genuine because he was still holding on to many of his favorite sins

The angel instructed him that he must return to earth to find the most precious thing that could be found in this world - Before he could gain his admittance into heaven

Then I am sure of heaven, he said - Because I know what the most precious thing in the world is - He went to a mint where the best specimens of gold could be found, and obtaining the purest piece possible, he returned up to the pearly gates, sure that heaven would be opened to him

Again, he found the gates closed and bolted against him - He was told his gold was not the most precious thing - That heaven's streets are paved with gold

He returned to earth again - This time he obtained the most exquisitely beautiful specimen of jewelry - Nothing richer or more beautiful could be found on earth - He carried this up, but found the door still shut against him

He was told that everyone was clothed in such glorious robes - That no one used jewelry there - It might be special on earth - But it was really of no value in heaven - He must return to earth and continue his search

This time he was walking in the garden of a gorgeous park, under the coolness of the trees - He was thinking over what that most precious thing could be, when his attention was attracted to a beautiful little child lying on the grass under the shade of those trees

She had her innocent face turned towards heaven, in a sweet sleep - Just then the dark sinner approached this little child, stood over her for a moment, and in deep thoughtfulness, looked at her trusting face

The sinner, reviewing his own life full of guilt and wickedness, and contrasting it with the innocence of that beautiful child, drew a deep sigh of regret and sorrow over his life of sin, and repenting of his misdeeds, a tear dropped from his eye

He instantly found himself at Heaven's gate - But this time he found that the gates were opened wide to him - He received a hearty welcome from the heavenly ones, who said: This time, it is obvious that your faith in Christ is real - Because you have brought the most precious thing that can be found on earth, the Tear of Repentance¹

This is of course just an illustration - Our Scriptures teach that on the day we arrive at heaven's gate, there will be no second chance - We will already have repented and accepted forgiveness through Jesus - Or we will be turned away

George Whitefield mentioned in his journal that during his first voyage to Georgia, the ship's cook had a bad drinking problem - When the cook was reprovved for it and other sins, he boasted that he would be wicked until the last two years of his life and then he would reform

Whitefield added that within six hours of the time the cook made his boastful statement, he died of an illness related to his drinking²

I am obviously never going to tell you to put off that moment where you accept Jesus as your Savior - And be forgiven of your sins - Because we never know the day nor the hour when we will be called out of life in this world

¹ Inspired by and very loosely adapted from an illustration by Rev. A. B. Earle, Second Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY, from: Incidents Used...In His Meetings, published in 1888, © public domain

² 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching, Michael P. Green, © 1982, 1985, 1989 (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI)

The point of my opening illustration is to highlight the seriousness of repentance - Truly a tear of sorrow for our sins is precious in God's sight

I come before you with a little hesitancy today - Jeremiah preached repentance, and they threw him into a pit - Daniel said repent, and they dropped him in the lion's den - Amos' message of repentance brought him into conflict with the High Priest

John the Baptist proclaimed repentance in the wilderness, and they cut off his head - Next, Jesus continued to tell people to repent, and you know what they did to Him

Repentance is however such an important topic, that it must be proclaimed - Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus beginning His ministry by preaching repentance - The very first words that Mark records spoken by Jesus may be found in today's reading

We read in Mark 1:14b-15 "Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."³

These first words spoken by Jesus in Mark give the core of his teaching: that the long-awaited Messiah has arrived to break the power of sin and begin God's reign on earth - Jesus' words are good news because they offer freedom, justice, and hope

We are called to act on this message by repenting and believing - The problem with repentance is that too often we look at other people's sins and do not think we have much to repent of ourselves

The news media keeps us well informed of the most awful things - Terrible violent crimes seem to abound in our society - Then after hearing of all the miserable wrongdoings of others, we look at our own sins

³ Scripture quoted has been taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version,

Some gossip, a few cuss words, and some mean thoughts do not seem all that bad - Especially when compared to the murders, rapes, and drug deals we hear about in the news

There is a huge problem with that way of thinking - We should not be measuring our righteousness against the behavior of criminals - God's Word says, in 1 Peter 1:15 "but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,"

Our standard of holiness is not to be other people - But our standard is the Lord's example - We need to compare our actions against the righteousness of our Lord Jesus

J. Vernon McGee told a story about three swimmers - And some of you may have even heard Dr. McGee tell it himself, if you have listened to the "Thru the Bible" radio show - He was an excellent Bible teacher, and all of his shows are available online

In Dr McGee's illustration:

- One is an excellent swimmer - A lifeguard or maybe even an Olympic swimmer
- The second is an average swimmer - The type who can keep their head above water - But is not winning any races
- The third person is misnamed in this story because this person is not a swimmer at all - This is the person who has never learned to swim

Next Dr. McGee challenges us to imagine these three people loaded into a helicopter, taken 40 miles out to sea, and left there in the water without a boat or life jacket

The person who could not swim would be lost right away, of course - The average swimmer could hold on a while - And if the water is warm the excellent swimmer might last several days - But in the end, 40 miles of ocean would prove to be too much for any swimming ability - All end up needing to be saved

This story illustrates the way humankind puts different values on sin - We tend to think people like a murderer, a drug dealer, or a child molester as the worst of sinners

Other sins, like lying or adultery we tend to view as less serious - And some sins, like jealousy, gossip, or evil thoughts, we might place on the lowest level of seriousness

In Dr. McGee's illustration, the worst sinner would be the person who could not swim - The medium sinner would be the average swimmer - And the excellent swimmer, the person who sinned at the lowest level

Yet 40 miles out to sea they are all equal - Like every resident of this planet, they are all in need of a Savior⁴ - The truth of the matter is that in God's eyes "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"

That's from Romans 3:23 - Notice that it doesn't say some have sinned - And neither does it say most have sinned - With the lone exception of our Savior Jesus, ALL have sinned

We hear of the most horrific sins in the news - Terrorism and other violence - Unspeakable crimes and atrocities - And then we look at our own lives - Maybe our sins do not look so bad when compared with those on the front page of The Asbury Park Press or The Star Ledger

The problem is that sin is sinful - It always does damage - Maybe we do not have lots of innocent victims like the sinners in the newspaper's headlines - But even if we just hurt ourselves, our sins still do damage

Because even the slightest sin hurts the sinner - Something like an evil or immoral thought does not seem to do much harm - But it separates us from God - And damages us in the process

Therefore, our first step in repentance is to recognize our own sinfulness - We need to be willing to admit that Romans 3:10 is talking about us when it says "None is righteous, no, not one"

⁴ Thru the Bible Commentary, J. Vernon McGee, © 1981, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

And that in spite of how kind and loveable all of us are - Romans 3:23 is still correct when it says that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

John Locke, the famous English philosopher said, “Repentance is a hearty sorrow for our past misdeeds, and a sincere resolution and an endeavor to the utmost of our power, to conform all our actions to the law of God.

It does not consist in one single act of sorrow, but in doing works suitable for repentance; in a sincere obedience to the law of Christ for the remainder of our lives.”⁵

Repentance is not just something we do when we first come to Christ - It is something that is ongoing in our walk of faith - As believers, we need to continue to repent of our sins - To love one another and to maintain our ongoing relationship with God

Finally, notice that God has a part in Repentance - In the 19th chapter of the book of Acts, we read of the Apostle Paul encountering people who had repented - But who had not heard the Good News of Jesus

They had turned from their sins - But were not filled with the Holy Spirit - That is God’s part - If we are willing to turn from our sins - And call upon Jesus for forgiveness, asking Him to be our Savior - God will send the Holy Spirit into our lives

And with God’s Spirit, we receive many excellent things - The book of Galatians tells us, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, (and) self-control”⁶

In conclusion, I have just used more than nineteen hundred words - To say the same thing Jesus said with eighteen words, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel”⁷

⁵ James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, © 1988 (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL)

⁶ Excerpted from Galatians 5:22-23

⁷ From Mark 1:15