

Repentance and Discipleship

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 January 2017

[0:00] From that time Jesus began to preach saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. So, fishing, that classic American pastime, makes an appearance in this morning's readings.

Do we have any fishermen or fisherwomen in the congregation? Anyone? Alright, we have a couple. Excellent. Now, I have to admit that fishing is a hobby I once tried to take up, and it just did not work out for me.

Anyway, when I was a college student, one of my mentors, who was an Anglican priest of the old school, I guess I would say. He was probably born in the wrong century. Told me that if I were going to be an Anglican priest, I should know how to fly fish.

I took him up on his advice when he offered to teach me fly fishing. I accepted it. Now, have any of you ever given fly fishing a try? No.

[1:22] Right. Yes. Now, if it's done right, it is like a beautiful art form. It has all of the grace of ballet. It's graceful. Done poorly, it is a great way to hook yourself right in the face.

Those who know me know that I'm more than a little bit clumsy at times. Long story short, I thought I was looking all cool and casting and everything, and then I hooked my glasses.

It was all fun and games until I almost lost an eye. And then I lost my enthusiasm for it, so I guess I will never be the perfect Anglican priest.

Now, fishing comes up in this morning's gospel. What are we supposed to make of that statement of Jesus? I will make you fisheries of men. How does that relate to the call to follow Jesus that we see at work in our passage?

And how does that call relate to the message that Jesus was preaching, what he was proclaiming about repentance? Well, I want us to look at the relationship between the proclamation and the call this morning.

[2:30] So look with me in Matthew chapter 4. We see in verse 17 the content of Jesus' preaching. From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Jesus is preaching repentance. And what do we see Jesus doing in the next few verses? Well, let's look again. While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

And he said to them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And immediately they left their nets and followed him. Now the pattern is essentially repeated in the next couple of verses, as James and John are called.

They too leave everything behind and follow Jesus. And the call to follow Jesus that we see extended to these guys is to be disciples.

And to truly be a disciple is to be a fisher of men. To make other disciples, in other words. So, how does that all fit together?

[3:47] The call of Jesus to be and to make disciples is inseparable from the proclamation and practice of repentance. Repentance. We aren't going to be effective at making disciples if we are not disciples ourselves.

And there is no such thing as discipleship without repentance. Repentance. Now, it's a word that doesn't always come up very often.

Has almost kind of a scary ring to it, doesn't it? When we hear it, we might think of those people who beat their backs bloody with lips, or that angry guy on the street corner who likes to shout at everyone as they walk by.

But what does it really mean? And why is it so important? It must be important because if it weren't, Jesus would not have had it as such a central part of his preaching here.

So what is repentance? I'm glad you asked the question. Our catechism asks, What does it mean for you to repent?

[5:00] Answer. To repent means that I have a change of heart. Turning. From sinfully serving myself to serving God.

As I follow Jesus Christ. I need God's help to make this change. Repentance is turning. A turning from my sins, my desires, my plans, and my will.

A turning towards God. Through his grace in Jesus Christ. Something that we cannot do in our own power. Something that we cannot do without God's grace.

But something that we must do. Because that is something that is non-negotiable in the life of the Christian. Speaking of repentance.

Anglican writer and theologian J.I. Packer compares it to soldiers in formation being given the order to do an about face and march. He says, It means that the soldiers are being told to turn their backs on the direction in which they were going.

[6:06] And start marching in the opposite direction. From the way they were going before. That's what repentance is. By instinct, we walk at a distance from God.

And God says, Turn around. Face me. And walk towards me. That walking away from God.

Isn't that a perfect description of where we are by nature because of sin? What walking in the way of sin looks like? That's what sin does to us.

It causes us to run from God. It causes us to chase after distractions. To chase after wicked desires. To chase after idols. And one day, if we never turn around, it will cause us to march right over the edge of a cliff.

When Jesus is calling his hearers to repentance, what is he saying? He's saying, Turn around. Face me.

[7:13] And walk towards me. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It's close. It is drawn near. And why is that? Isn't it because Jesus has drawn near?

Now, of course, before we were walking away from God. Because deep down, we know that God is holy and that we are unworthy. That's why Adam ran from God and hid in the Garden of Eden after he had sinned, right?

We see that pattern again and again. But the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Free and full pardon through the blood of Jesus Christ is offered to all who will repent and believe the gospel. We don't have any reason to be afraid anymore. So by God's grace, there is no reason to keep running. To keep marching towards destruction.

We can turn and start walking towards God. And we must. There is no other way. Repentance is non-negotiable. The 7th century saint and bishop Isaac of Syria went so far as to put it this way.

[8:24] This life has been given to you for repentance. Do not waste it in vain pursuits. There are only two options before us.

We will be following one path or the other. We will either be wasting our lives. Walking away from God. Running after things that will never satisfy our hearts.

Or we will turn around and start walking towards Him. When we turn and walk towards Him in love, in gratitude, in awe, in obedience, we will find more and more that those things that we were marching toward before, that apple cliff that was looming on the horizon, we will see that those things cannot compare.

Then we can see things as they really are. As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon put it, nothing teaches us about the preciousness of the Creator as much as when we learn the emptiness of everything else.

In our gospel passage this morning, we see Jesus calling sinners to repentance in His preaching. And we see Jesus in practice, in action, calling sinners to be His disciples.

[9:49] And those two callings are inseparable. What does Jesus have to say about discipleship? We see it in Luke 9.23. And He said to all, If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.

So isn't it obvious that repentance is essential for the calling to be a disciple? If we are going to follow Jesus, we must take up our cross.

We must stop running. We must turn around. We must walk towards God. And that can be a costly thing, can't it?

Repentance is costly. Discipleship is costly. It is so costly that sometimes we don't even like to talk about it. It's so costly that we might prefer to ignore it.

And so often we do. Talking about repentance and about discipleship by extension, going back to what Dr. Packer said, he says this, The basic problem with fallen human nature is that we all want to be independent of God.

[11:06] God says stop it. And the reason why the theme of repentance is neglected, as it is, not only in modern secular society, but in the church, is because it's a costly thing to repent.

It does mean reshaping your life in quite a radical way. And people, just because they find it too costly, a prospect, they try to devise a way of being Christian that doesn't involve anything as radical as a about-turn quick march.

And I believe, my brothers and sisters, that that is where the contemporary church in the West really is. We find repentance too costly.

We find discipleship too costly. And so we try to devise a way of being Christian that doesn't require anything so costly. There is no way to be Christian without these costs.

We cannot march in two directions at once. But that doesn't mean that we don't try. We do. Is there any wonder that our society is in the mess that it's in?

[12:24] We who are tasked with being salt and light have divided loyalties. We have forgotten what it means to repent. We've forgotten what it means to be disciples.

And the world notices that we are not any different than the world. So what's the answer? What does being a disciple look like?

Billy Graham put it this way. To be a disciple is to be committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and committed to following Him every day.

To be a disciple is also to be disciplined in our bodies, minds, and souls. Committed to Jesus and committed to following Him every day.

Disciplined in our following of Jesus. And that is hard. That is so hard that we have no hope of doing that without God's grace.

[13:23] But we can do it even if it is imperfectly and it will be with God's grace. And we must seek to follow Jesus every single day.

Graham says elsewhere, many Christians want the benefits of their belief, but they hesitate at the cost of discipleship. Does that sting a little bit?

It does. It does for me, that's for sure. We are called to leave everything to follow Jesus.

Knowing that we will gain everything in Jesus. We like the gain, but we don't like the loss. And so we find ourselves lukewarm.

And find that we are not the disciples that we are called to be. Now in our gospel passage, we see Simon, Andrew, James, and John being called by Jesus to be disciples.

[14:31] Being called by Jesus to follow Him. And what do they do? They drop everything and leave it behind and they start walking towards God. And they really left everything behind.

Nets, boats, fodder. And the stuff that they left behind wasn't stuff that in and of itself is even bad. They left behind obviously their plans for their lives.

They left behind their work. They left behind family. They left behind stuff that if we use it rightly is actually good. They didn't stop at acknowledging by their actions that following Jesus is more important than following their sinful desires.

although I think it's pretty obvious that they did do that. They acknowledged by their actions that Jesus is more important than even the good things. Jobs, families.

They proved by their examples that we need to put following Jesus before everything else. Even work, even family, even the good plans that we have for ourselves.

[15:37] They drop everything and they started walking towards God because that's what disciples do. You can't have discipleship without repentance.

You can't have repentance without discipleship. And you can't be a Christian without both of those things. And that's not all. To be a disciple is to seek to make other disciples.

These men were called as disciples at the same time that they were called to make other disciples. Isn't that remarkable? Those callings are not separated, are they?

I think we see a couple of stark reminders that are implied here. First, we aren't being faithful disciples if we're not involved in the task of making disciples.

The other thing I think is implied is that we're not going to be effective in the task of making disciples if we're not disciples ourselves. If we are concerned about our friends, our neighbors, our loved ones who don't know Jesus, and I hope that we are, if we're concerned about the state of our culture, we need to do the difficult task taking a long, hard look at ourselves and our own lives and our own shortcomings.

[17:03] It is true that God is the one who is making disciples, who is converting hearts, who is bringing people to faith and repentance. But it's also true that God ordinarily chooses to work through the ministry of his people.

God allows us, calls us, and empowers us to be part of that task. Are we going to be effective at making disciples, at being fishers of men, at calling others to faith and repentance, if we are not practicing repentance and discipleship ourselves?

Of course we're not. Now, I don't think that it's any accident when we look out over the ages at how authentic revival has started.

It has tended to begin with widespread repentance within the church. Christ's church is awakened from slumber, is jarred from lukewarmness, and the church repents and recommits to discipleship. Then, what happens? Then it starts to spread, doesn't it? Because disciples make disciples. Brothers and sisters, let's pray with all of our hearts and cry out to God that that would be us in this time and in this place.

[18:32] Because the world is in darkness and is in desperate need of the light that is found only in Jesus. Repentance, discipleship, making disciples.

It's all essential and it's all connected, isn't it? The call to repentance, discipleship, and making disciples goes out to each one of us this morning no matter where we are.

Maybe some have never repented, have never turned to faith in Christ crucified, never found forgiveness of sin through His blood and started walking towards God.

If that is you this morning, I plead with you not to delay. To turn to Christ in faith now and commit your life to Him. And those of us who have repented, who do know Christ, who have committed to being His disciples, we're not off the hook.

We are called to a lifetime of repentance, a lifetime of discipleship, a lifetime of following Jesus, a lifetime of walking towards God.

[19:41] And sometimes we get stuck. We dig in our heels. We find ourselves enamored, once again, with the things that we thought we had turned from. We get apathetic.

We get bogged down by the sin that can cling so closely, and we stop moving forward. The call goes out to each one of us this morning to enter more deeply into repentance, to enter more deeply into discipleship.

So let's recommit ourselves together this morning, right here, right now, by God's grace and through the power of His Spirit to being a community of disciples that make disciples.

We in this together? Yes. Repentance is costly. Discipleship is costly.

But it is worth the cost, my brothers and my sisters. To quote Dr. Packer one last time, the end, of course, of walking Godward is that fellowship with God becomes a real and rich reality more and more as one lives the life of repentance.

[20:55] And those of us who by God's grace have begun to do it testify, if asked, the joy of the new life of being closer and closer to the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

And isn't that what it boils down to? The joy of the new life of being closer and closer to the Father and His Son, Jesus.

By God's grace and His power, let's lay down our burdens, our distractions, our idols. Let's lay down all that we have at the foot of the cross of Christ.

Take up the cross of discipleship and start pressing forward with a new determination towards home, towards the Father who loves us, towards the Savior who died for us.

Trusting that whatever we might lose and it might be everything is nothing compared to the joy that will be ours in Christ Jesus.

[22:00] In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.