

Spirit of Wisdom & Revelation

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By Charlie Avila

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Calling Sinners to Repentance

Evangelism Series #1

“Jesus said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.’” (Mark 2:17)

I recently heard an internationally known evangelist say on radio, “The Lord does not want anyone to perish, but all to come to salvation in Jesus Christ.” But this is not what the Bible says. I remember hearing a sincere Christian say, shortly after a few people accepted Christ and got saved, “That we all need to rejoice and be happy because the Bible says, ‘There is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who gets saved.’” But this is not what the Bible says. In our modern evangelical approach to evangelism, we have substituted the word “salvation” for the all-important word “repentance.” *The first word of the gospel is not salvation, but repentance.* Richard Owen Roberts is correct when he writes: “The first word of the gospel is not ‘love.’ It is not even ‘grace.’ The first word of the gospel is ‘repent.’ From Matthew through the Revelation, repentance is an urgent and indispensable theme that is kept at the very forefront of the gospel message.”¹ Many of us are just trying to get

someone to say a sinner’s prayer, when the Lord wants him to repent.

In this first message of a series of teachings on evangelism, I want to show you the heart and soul of the gospel message preached by these three: 1) John the Baptist, 2) Jesus the Lord and 3) the apostles of Jesus. You will see clearly that their message was one of repentance from works that lead to death. We repent when we renounce and confess our sins, and surrender our lives to the Lord.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was an incredibly powerful prophet and preacher. “He was a prophet, yes, and more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:9). He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb and when he was revealed to Israel, he preached a convicting message of repentance. The very first words out of his mouth were: “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (See Matthew 3:2.) He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers (snakes)” and asked them, “Who warned you to flee from the

¹ *Repentance*, Richard Owen Roberts, Crossway Books, a division of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL, page 23.

wrath to come?” (See Matthew 3:7.) In the next verse he says to them, “Therefore bring forth fruits worthy of *repentance*.” He also told them that he came to “baptize you with water unto *repentance*” (Matthew 3:11). His message in Luke 3 was just as penetrating and strong. He said, “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:9). This so convicted the people that they asked, “What shall we do then?” (See Matthew 3:10.) In Matthew 3:10-14, He told the “people, tax collectors, and soldiers” to repent. John was only the forerunner, preparing the way of the Lord and making His paths straight. He said that “crooked places” must be “made straight” and “rough ways made smooth” (3:5). His message brought such a change and conviction in the hearts of the people, that they went to John in the Jordan River “confessing their sins” (Mark 1:5). People openly declared that they had lied, stolen, cheated, coveted, dishonored their parents, and committed adultery. They did not pray a prayer of salvation; they repented of their sins. Why? Because there was One coming after John who was more powerful and worthy than him. He would baptize them, not with water, but with the Spirit and with fire. He would “burn up the chaff with quenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). In other words, if you thought John was rough, he was only preparing the way for Someone who was really going to deal with them! John used water; Jesus would use fire.

John’s brief, but powerful, witness came to an end when he confronted King Herod about his adulterous relationship with Herodias. John commanded him to repent, but Herod would not. For this, John ended up losing his head (Mark 6:17-29). Many years after his death, the apostles would remember John with these words, “John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of *repentance* to all the people of Israel. And as

John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose’ (Acts 13:24-25). Paul told the disciples at Ephesus, who were baptized with John’s baptism, “John indeed baptized with a baptism of *repentance*, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” (Acts 19:4). John had true success. He pointed everyone to the One who could really deliver them – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus the Lord

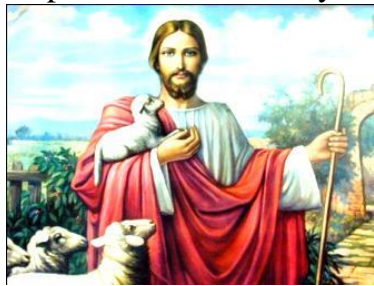
When John sat down, so to speak, Jesus stood up. He picked up right where John left off. The message was the same – repent! “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. *Repent*, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15). Did you notice the order? – “Repent,” then “believe.” As He began preaching, here is what He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to *repentance*” (Luke 5:31-32). He was not calling sinners to salvation, but to repentance. Jesus was at the house of Matthew the tax collector when He uttered these words. There were many sinners at the dinner table who heard the call to repent. Matthew recalls Jesus saying, “For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to *repentance*” (Matthew 9:13). We started this teaching with Mark 2:17, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to *repentance*.” Jesus is calling sinners to repentance. He was not calling them to a “sinner’s prayer.” He was not trying to get them “saved.” He commanded them to repent and turn away from their sins. This is the first word of His gospel.

What did Jesus teach in His parables? While talking to tax collectors and sinners, He



concluded one of His parables with these words, “I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over *one sinner who repents* than over ninety-nine just persons who need no *repentance*” (Luke 15:7). In the next parable He said, “Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over *one sinner who repents*” (Luke 15:10). Notice again that Jesus did not say, “There is joy over one sinner who gets saved.” There is joy when a sinner “repents.” Peter took up this same theme in 2 Peter 3:9 when he wrote, “The Lord is...longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to *repentance*.” The Lord wants “all” to come to “repentance.” Again, this verse does not say, “...that all should come to salvation.” Yes, of course, God wants people to be saved, but first He wants them to repent.

Today’s evangelical messages are so weak, powerless, and ineffective because we are not calling people to repentance. So many of our churches, pastors, and evangelists present Jesus holding a soft, cuddly lamb. This Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. This Jesus would never hurt or offend people because they might be too sensitive to hard words. Can you just picture Jesus conducting “user-friendly” church services that conclude with a salad and Starbucks coffee after the service to try to win lost sinners? Perhaps we missed verses like Matthew 11:20-21, “Then He (Jesus) began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, *because they did not repent*: ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, 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.’” Jesus even condemned an entire city (Capernaum) to hell, and warned of the coming “day of judgment” (Matthew 11:22-24). Jesus warned in Matthew 12:41, “The men of



Nineveh will rise up in the day of judgment with this generation and condemn it, *because they repented* at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.” If Jonah, who was far less than Jesus, could bring 120,000 people in Nineveh to repentance through his preaching, how much more should people repent with Jesus’ preaching. Their condemnation is far greater.

But this message of repentance is not only for “sinners.” This is a message for the church. Jesus told the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:5, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; *repent* and do the first works, *or else* I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you *repent*.” He said to them to “repent, or else!” The church of Pergamos heard this message from Jesus: “*Repent, or else* I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth” (Revelation 2:16). If someone tells you, “repent, or else,” that person means business. The Thyatira church, which was overrun with sexual sins, was given this warning, “And I gave her time to *repent* of her sexual immorality, and *she did not repent*. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, *unless they repent of their deeds*” (Revelation 2:21-22). The Sardis church, which had a reputation of being alive, but was actually dead, was told in Revelation 3:3, “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and *repent*. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.” Finally, Jesus confronted the Laodicean church with these words, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and *repent*” (Revelation 3:19). Before we can call sinners to repentance, the church needs to repent. How can we tell them to repent if we are unwilling to do so? They will not believe our message if they don’t see it in our actions. We must practice what we preach if we are going to have any credibility with unbelievers.

The Apostles of Jesus

The apostles of the Lord did not change the message. They also preached that men should repent. Jesus told His disciples in Mark 6:11, “And whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!” After hearing these words from Jesus, we are told in the next verse, “So they went out and preached *that people should repent.*” In the great commission statement of Luke 24:47, Jesus commanded His disciples “that *repentance* and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” How can people be forgiven unless they are willing to repent?

The book of Acts is full of the message of repentance. When the crowd asked Peter what they needed to do, he said to them, “*Repent*, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). After the lame man was healed at the gate Beautiful, Peter told the “men of Israel” that they needed to “*Repent* therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). People could not be converted or forgiven until they had repented. Many of us want a refreshing from the Lord, but we’re not willing to repent. Refreshing comes from repentance. When angrily questioned by the Sanhedrin council about their evangelistic activities, the apostles responded that “God has exalted (Jesus) to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give *repentance* to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). When Simon the sorcerer tried to buy the gift of God with money, Peter rebuked him in Acts 8:22 with these words – “*Repent* therefore of this your wickedness, and pray to God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.” When the Jewish believers

realized that Cornelius’ conversion was a work of God, they declared, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles *repentance* unto life” (Acts 11:18). The apostle Paul taught the “elders of the church” in Acts 20:20-21 that “I kept back nothing that was helpful but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, *repentance* toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” Did you notice the order again? – *Repentance toward God and then faith toward the Lord Jesus.* After sharing his conversion testimony with the king, here is what the apostle Paul said in Acts 26:19-20, “Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, *that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.*” Do you see the order again? – Repent, turn to God, and show that you’ve truly repented by doing works befitting repentance. Didn’t John the Baptist say in Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8, “Therefore bear fruits worthy of *repentance*?” One paraphrase version reads, “Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God.” In Damascus, Jerusalem, and all the region of Judea, Paul preached that men should “repent, and turn to God.”



Why Repentance?

It is absolutely critical for you to answer the all-important question of “Why?” Why should you call sinners and saints to repentance? Again, the apostles in the book of Acts had the answer. Paul boldly announced to the idolatrous people of Athens this startling truth about their current idol worship: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but

now God commands all men everywhere to *repent*” (Acts 17:30). Before we look at the next verse, verse 31, that gives us the answer, let’s examine this verse carefully.

God is now *commanding all men everywhere to repent*. God is commanding. God is not suggesting or recommending or even encouraging men to repent. God is commanding that they repent. We have no option but to obey. Repentance is a commandment of the Lord. And notice the all-inclusive language employed by Paul – *all men everywhere*. No one is left out. It was not a message for the Athenians in Athens. It was for “all men everywhere.” God will not overlook our ignorance any longer. He is commanding us to repent of our sins and turn to Him. Now, verse 31 tells us why we should repent. This is the foundation for all repentance. Here it is: “BECAUSE He (God) has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” Why should we repent? *Because the Father has set a day of judgment when Jesus will judge the world in righteousness*. The proof that there will be a day of judgment is that He raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus told us in John 5:22-23, “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” All judgment is in the hands of Jesus.

The very basis of Paul’s instruction on the “new creation” and “being reconciled to God” was grounded on the truth that “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:10-11). It is this “terror from the Lord” that moves us to persuade men. *We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*. The Christians will be judged for their works, good or bad. The apostle John taught us that we could actually have “boldness in the day

of judgment,” but only if we abide in the agape love of God (1 John 4:17-18). When Paul wanted to teach believers not to judge one another, he appealed to this last day judgment: “But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore” (Romans 14:10-13). You shouldn’t judge others simply because it’s wrong, but because you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This judgment will be so awesome and powerful that Jesus even said in Matthew 12:36, “But I say to you that for *every idle word* men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” How many idle words have I spoken?

If John the Baptist came preaching repentance, and Jesus preached repentance, and the apostles all taught that men should repent, why doesn’t the modern-day church preach this message? Pastor Richard Owen Roberts, who was quoted above, donated his private collection of 9,000 books to the Billy Graham Center Library. He has been a life-long student of revivals and spiritual awakenings. Of his 9,000 books (mostly of revivals), he says that almost none of them deal with repentance. Why are some of our megachurches emphasizing only a “positive” message so we make sure no one gets offended? *The message of repentance is not a negative message!* Acts 3:26 says, “God raised up His servant Jesus, He sent Him first to you *to bless you* by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” It is a blessing from God when He turns us from our wicked ways. This is repentance. Someone once said, “It’s better to be sobered by the saddest truth than deluded by the merriest lie.” Paul warned, “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers

to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Our ears must be tuned to repentance. This is the message of the hour.

The Foundation Stones of Hebrews

Hebrews 6:1-2 is a very powerful portion of Scripture. The writer of Hebrews lays out for us the six foundation stones or “elementary principles” of the Christian faith. What is particularly insightful about these verses is *the order in which they were given*. Here are the six foundation stones: 1) Repentance from dead works, 2) Faith toward God, 3) the Doctrine of Baptisms (plural), 4) Laying on of Hands, 5) Resurrection of the Dead (Rapture), and 6) Eternal Judgment. Notice what is listed first. It is repentance. The very foundation of our Christian walk begins with “repentance from dead works.” Notice that it is listed before “faith in God.” We repent, and then have faith in God. Remember that Paul taught us that “godly sorrow produces *repentance* leading to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10). After we repent and believe in the Lord, then we can be baptized. And notice that we are to teach a “doctrine of baptisms.” There are three baptisms for every believer – 1) Baptized into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), 2) Baptized in water (Acts 8:36-39), and 3) Baptized in the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16). Once a person repents, believes in Jesus, gets baptized (all three), then we can lay hands on him and launch him into ministry. When we finish our ministry and die, then we wait for the final resurrection to get our new body. The eternal judgment of God wraps everything up. Can you see how Hebrews 6:1-2 gives us the overview of the Christian life? But it all starts with repentance. As I said at the beginning, repentance is the first word of the gospel. It was true in the gospels; it was true in the book

of Acts; and it is true here in the book of Hebrews.

In summary, John the Baptist commanded people to “repent” as he preached a “baptism of repentance.” He called on people to “bring forth fruit worthy of repentance.” Jesus Christ told us to “repent and believe the gospel.” He came to “call sinners to repentance.” He even rebuked whole cities because they would not repent. The Lord’s apostles went everywhere preaching that “men should repent.” The great commission calls us to preach “repentance in His name among all the nations.” Throughout the book of Acts the apostles emphasized the importance of “repentance.” At every turn, we see the apostles preaching repentance to Jew and Gentile alike. Hebrews 6 shows us that it is the first foundation stone of the Christian life. Before we can have “faith in God” and receive “baptism,” we must “repent from dead works.” Our evangelistic call is not merely to get people to pray a prayer, but to change their lives. They must renounce the hidden works of darkness and embrace the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Repentance is the word for this hour. Let’s throw off the weak and inconsistent messages that keep people in their sins. Let us call everyone, sinner and saint alike, to repentance that leads to life. The kingdom of God is here. Jesus has arrived. We must repent and believe the gospel. Amen.

In the next teaching, we will look at how to bring sinners to repentance.

“Father, I thank you that through your kindness and goodness, You are leading me to repentance (Romans 2:4). Repentance is a blessing from God. I don’t want to be like Esau who found no place for repentance. I’m laying the ax to the root of my sins. I renounce every dark and hidden thing that causes me and others to stumble. You are calling me, a sinner, to repentance. Jesus Christ my Lord has broken the power of sin over my life! Amen!”

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