

Mark 1:1-5

The great Arthur W. Pink wrote: "One of the divinely predicted characteristics of the "perilous times" in which we are now living is that 'evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived' (2 Tim 3:13). The deeper reference of these words is to spiritual seducers and deceivers. Men with captivating personalities, men who occupy a prominent place in Christendom, men with an apparently deep reverence for Holy Writ, are beguiling souls with fatal error. Not only are evolutionists, higher critics and modernists deluding multitudes of our young people with their sugar-coated lies, but some who pose as the champions of orthodoxy and boast of their ability to "rightly divide the Word of truth" are poisoning the minds of many to their eternal destruction. Such a charge as we have just made is indeed a serious one, and one which is not to be readily received without proof. But proof is easily furnished. The Word of God teaches plainly that in this dispensation, equally with preceding ones, God requires a deep and sincere repentance before He pardons any sinner. Repentance is absolutely necessary to salvation, just as necessary as is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). 'Tor godly sorrow worketh repentance, not to be repented of" (2 Cor 7:10). It is impossible to frame language more explicit than that. Therefore, in view of these verses, and others yet to be quoted, we cannot but sorrowfully regard those who are now affirming that repentance is not, in this dispensation, essential unto salvation, as being deceivers of souls, blind leaders of the blind."

1) Introduction to the Doctrine of Repentance; 2) John the Baptist's Plow: A Call to Repent - v1-5; 3) What Repentance is NOT; 4) What Repentance IS

Introduction: We once had a very long dry-spell where we used to live - and nearly everything in the backyard died. The temperature was in the upper 90s for several weeks and it did not rain at all for at least a whole month in the Summer. Large sections of the yard not only died, but because they were places where people regularly walked and played, they simply turned into dirt. Eventually, we wanted to try to re-plant grass in those section. Having no idea how to accomplish this well, I simply threw grass seed, fertilizer, and water on those sections of the yard. But absolutely nothing happened. I even looked very closely and not a single blade of grass would grow for me. What was wrong? The ground was fallow. When soil is neglected, it is said to be "fallow" – i.e. it is uncultivated and not ready for seed to be sown. Interestingly, this notion of "fallow ground" is often applied to *people* in the Scriptures. Consider these two passages:

Jeremiah 4:3-4 For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: "Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. [4] Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, And take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My fury come forth like fire, And burn so that no one can quench it, Because of the evil of your doings."

Hosea 10:12 Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the Lord, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.

Then a distant memory flashed of Charles Ingalls from an old episode of *Little House on the Prairie* steadying the plow behind his donkey in the fields. *That* was the problem. The ground was all crusted and hardened. So, I took a flat-edged shovel and chopped up the ground - then scattered the seed, fertilizer, put down a little straw and some hay, and sure enough - wow - lush patches of beautiful grass started growing.

The plow has been the basic instrument for most of recorded history for the initial cultivation of soil in preparation for sowing seed or planting. "The primary purpose of ploughing is to turn over the upper layer of the soil, bringing fresh nutrients to the surface, while burying weeds, the remains of previous crops, and both crop and weed seeds, allowing them to break down. It also aerates the soil, allows it to hold moisture better and provides a seed-free medium for planting an alternate crop."

Application: *Repentance is the plow that makes the heart of man ready to receive the seeds of the gospel so that they will form deep roots and grow into healthy, fruit-bearing trees.*

Think of repentance and saving faith in Jesus as two sides of a coin. Repentance is the turning away of the sinner from his old way of life, from his attachment to and enslavement to sin, from his love for sin and self. Saving faith in Jesus is turning toward the Lord Jesus Christ as one's new master and relying upon His person and His work (His righteousness and His satisfaction of justice at the cross) *alone* as the basis of one's justification before God. There can be no saving faith in Jesus without repentance. And there is no repentance that is not accompanied by saving faith in Jesus. The two always go together although they are distinguished from one another.

WSC 85 What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?

Answer: To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.

The principal concern before us in this series of sermons is the biblical doctrine of repentance.

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines repentance thus:

WCF 15.1 Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

WCF 15.2 By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

The very first words from the Lord Jesus in the gospel of Mark are found in **Mark 1:15** ... "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

The Rest of Scripture attests to the absolute necessity of repentance:

Luke 13:3 Jesus said: "... unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Acts 11:18 *After seeing the Gentile, Cornelius, speak in tongues and receive the Holy Spirit, "[18] When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."*

2 Corinthians 7:10 [10] For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, ...

Acts 17:30 [30] Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

Isaiah 55:7 [7] Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the Lord, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.

When the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost was "pricked in their hearts" and asked Peter: "What shall we do?" Peter said: "REPENT, and be baptized..."

1) John the Baptist's Plow: A Call to Repent - v1-5; 2) What Repentance is NOT; 3) What Repentance IS

1) John the Baptist's Plow: A Call to Repent – v1-5

[1] The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [2] As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You." [3] "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.' " [4] John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. [5] Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

Point: The wilderness of Judea where John suddenly bursts onto the scene preaching is "the rolling bad lands between the hill country of Judea to the West, and the Dead Sea and lower Jordan to the East, stretching northward to about the point where the Jabbok flows into the Jordan. It is indeed a desolation, a vast expanse of barren chalky soil covered with pebbles, broken stones and rocks..."

Point 2: This wilderness was surrounded by towns filled with people. John's message was anything *but* flowery or complicated.

- **The Jewish context he preached to:** 1) The Pharisees had all but destroyed the Biblical text by burying it under layer after layer of rabbinic traditions, 2) the Sadducees rejected the supernatural elements of Scripture. 3) the dominant Messianic expectation of the time was that he would be a temporal deliverer from political oppression *rather than a Savior from personal sin*, 4) The Jewish people believed in and taught justification by works of obedience to God's law assisted by God's grace.
- **His message: "REPENT"** "In the original the word used by the Baptist indicates a radical change of mind and heart that leads to a complete turnabout of life."
- **A call to turn away** – From sin, idolatry, false teachings. Remember that our Confession of Faith defines repentance unto life as "an evangelical grace."

- **Plowing the conscience to be ready to receive the gospel seed:** The consciences of men are as it were fallow-ground – they are hardened by sin and unbelief. The farmer could scatter seed in such a field, but none of the seeds would germinate, take root, grow, or yield fruit. And there is nothing anyone can do to plow their own fallow conscience. The ground is stony, hard, and sun-baked. Everything in it is dead. There is spiritual blindness and deafness – and indeed hostility to all that is righteous and true.

Illustration: Haven't you shared the gospel with someone who was dead, fallow-ground? You speak to them of sin – and they do not tremble. You speak to them of the cross and they do not respond. You speak to them of the coming judgment of God and there is no effect. Paul said in **Romans 3:18** - **describing the state of the unregenerate, sinful man:** "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Application: And so I say to you – you who were born and raised in the bosom of a Bible-believing, gospel preaching church – you who could beat 98% of earth's entire population at Bible trivia – you who have named Christ before the elders, before the church, at prayer meetings, at Bible studies – *have you experienced this* "radical change of mind and heart that leads to a complete turnabout of life?" **Now, you may, by God's grace alone, not remember a time when you were hardened in sin – because God graciously granted you repentance and faith when you were very young.** Whatever the case may be: Do you see your sin with revulsion and do you have an intense desire to discard it? Are you too busy noticing and discussing the faults of others to notice the logs, no, the entire forests hanging out of your own eyes? *We all have so much sin – so many logs in our eyes – so much that is wrong with us... We should always be much more troubled by our own sinfulness than we are by the sinfulness of others.*

Application 2: Fallen man is not on trial before God! The trial has already happened – the verdict is in:

Galatians 3:22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin

Romans 3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

We are criminals under a death sentence – and all that needs to happen is for us to miss just a few heart-beats which will usher us into eternity. **Do you know true repentance?** Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as the one you now follow, the one you long to worship and obey, your Master and Savior, the one you would gladly lay your life down for rather than displease Him? Do you know Him as the One who died upon the cross specifically for you and *your sins*?

2) **What True Repentance is not:**

1. **It is not trembling under the preaching of God's Word** – many a man and woman once moved to tears by preaching are now in hell. Felix was "terrified" by Paul's preaching – Acts 24:25. People are often momentarily stirred by the thought of eternal judgment... but quickly forget and continue on with their lives.

Acts 24:25 Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you."

2. **Being “almost persuaded” is not repentance** – Acts 26:28, Agrippa was “almost persuaded” by Paul to become a Christian. The great Augustine knew that Christianity was true for about a year before he finally repented and was baptized. Many “receive the Word with joy” but are soon seen to be “stony-ground hearers.” Even Pharaoh himself was willing to admit “I have sinned against the Lord your God.” ***People may come to realize that they “ought” to yield to God and may even confess the faith to be true – but the “almost Christian” is just as condemned as the Satanist high priest or the outspoken atheist.***
3. **Humbling yourself under sin is not repentance** – When the servant of God met and rebuked Ahab for stealing Naboth’s vineyard and having Naboth killed, we are told in **1 Kings 21:27** “... he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning.” Yet, in the very next chapter of 1 Kings – Ahab rebels against God again... **Application:** Oh sure, we’ll reform our lives from time to time, turn over a new leaf, etc. but remain firmly attached to our lusts. ***It is very possible that you might be afraid of hell, but not afraid of sinning.*** Pink wrote: “If hell were extinguished, so would be the repentance of many church members. O mistake not fear of the wrath to come for a holy hatred and horror of sin.”
- **True repentance is a holy hatred and horror of sin itself**, not just the punishment thereof.
 4. **Confessing sins is not repentance** – This may be one way repentance shows itself. But remember Judas Iscariot said in Matthew 27:4, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood!”

3) What True Repentance IS

By it [i.e. repentance unto life] a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, **so grieves for and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God**, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

Listen to Paul’s description of the new life all believers have in Christ: Romans 6:1-6 [1] What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? [3] Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? [4] Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness of His* resurrection, [6] knowing this, **[Notice: this is in the indicative mood – it is an accomplished fact]** that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

Where True repentance exists – there has been a liberation from enslavement to sin – and the creation of a new nature, a born-again nature that now detests sin. And thus, all believers exclaim with every fiber of their being **Romans 7:15** “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.”

- It is not merely that I'm willing to admit I'm a sinner, not merely that I confess my sins, not merely that I fear eternal judgment and damnation – *but there is now the positive existence of real hatred of sin*. That which was once my master – has become my mortal enemy.
- **Question:** Do you hate your sin *because it is sin*? Do you hate it because it is contrary to God?
- **The apostolic call to turn in faith toward Jesus Christ *always implied a turning away from sin.***

Repentance is no easy business. In Thomas Brooks' classic work: "Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices," under the head of "Satan's Devices to Draw the Soul to Sin," Device #6 is:

By persuading the soul that the work of repentance is an easy work, and that therefore the soul need not make such a matter of sin. Why! Suppose you do sin, saith Satan, it is no such difficult thing to return, and confess, and be sorrowful, and beg pardon, and cry. 'Lord, have mercy upon me!' and if you do but this, God will cut the score," and pardon your sins, and save your souls.

Remedy: The first remedy is, seriously to consider. That repentance is a mighty work, a difficult work, a work that is above our power. There is no power below that power that raised Christ from the dead, and that made the world, that can break the heart of a sinner or turn the heart of a sinner. Thou art as well able to melt diamonds, as to melt thine own heart; to turn a rock into flesh, as to turn thine own heart to the Lord; to raise the dead and to make a world, as to repent. Repentance is a flower that grows not in nature's garden. 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil' (Jer. 13:23). Repentance is a gift that comes down from above." Men are not born with repentance in their hearts, as they are born with tongues in their mouths..."

Repentance – we are not able to do it – it is granted by God alone - it is an “evangelical grace”:

Acts 5:31 [31] Him God has exalted to His right hand *to be* Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

Acts 11:18 [18] When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

2 Timothy 2:25 [25] in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,

Ezekiel 11:19 [19] Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, ...

Hear Jesus' own words: John 3:7-8 [7] Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' [8] The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

This is why every preacher of the gospel – every Christian lay-person who has unsaved family and friends *must go to their knees and pray* – for man's problem has never been that he just isn't sufficiently interested in divine things – it is that all men are in need of *God to intervene – for God the Holy Spirit to exert the very same power upon the blind / dead sinner that was exercised upon the lifeless body of Jesus in the tomb when He was raised back to life.* Men are in need of supernatural

grace from Almighty God.

Point – the motive to repent given by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1 is – “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”: What is meant by “the kingdom of heaven?” In volume 3 of his *Systematic Theology*, the great Charles Hodge wrote:

“Every believer receives Christ as his king. Those who receive Him in sincerity constitute his kingdom, in the sense in which the loyal subjects of an earthly sovereign constitute his kingdom. Those who profess allegiance to Christ as king constitute his visible kingdom upon earth. ... It is said to consist in “righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” – Romans 14:17

It was the kingdom of God that Jesus brought – and those who are the faithful subjects of that kingdom have repented of their loyalty to their former king: *sin and self*.

John’s message to the world is the same as the message of all OT prophets, and of Jesus Himself – Turn away from rebellion, and return to God. Repent of your sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: To experience true repentance, we must come to grips with the *justice* of God in pronouncing us guilty and sinful. We must agree heartily that such a verdict is right and just – and we have no excuses, no special pleading, no defense. We are furnished with a marvelous example of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 23:36-43:

Luke 23:36-43 [36] The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, [37] and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." [38] And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. [39] Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." [40] But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? [41] **[repentance]** And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." [42] **[Faith in Jesus]** Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." [43] And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Question: Has the plow cut through the fallow ground in your heart, so that the gospel seed can take root? When you consider God’s indictment and the punishment thereof, do you heartily endorse and agree? And is your hope in Christ *alone*? Are you too overwhelmed with the evil that resides in your own heart that you don’t have time to neatly catalog the faults and sins of others? Paul told the pagan Athenians:

Acts 17:30-31 [30] Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but **now commands all men everywhere to repent**, [31] because He 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."