

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Some important biblical couplets: Repentance and Faith

Today we begin a new series of talks which will take a look at some important biblical couplets. The first of these is repentance and faith. In the following talks we will consider: grace and truth; righteousness and peace; then finally, faith and hope.

If we turn to Acts 20:21 we will find repentance and faith together in the same verse. We read, *"Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."* Here the Apostle Paul is speaking to the elders of the Ephesian church (or assembly) and he is recounting his teaching amongst them during the time he had spent at Ephesus (see Acts 19:1-41). He had laboured amongst them for three years (Acts 20:31) and had fully declared the truth of God to them, keeping nothing back that was profitable to them.

In Acts 20:21 we have two essential elements of *"the gospel of the grace of God"*, Acts 20:24, and in our talk today we want to emphasise the absolute necessity of *"repentance toward God"* and of *"faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."* These are the first rungs of the ladder which lead us into the blessings of God. They are the unchanging basis on which God can save sinners, bringing them into *"the kingdom of God"*, Acts 20:25. Why then, I wonder, do we hear preachers speak so little about repentance? Are we failing to preach the Gospel which the Apostle preached? I trust, if this is so, we will see the error of our ways and repent.

Now that's interesting! Repentance is not confined to sinners who need salvation, but it has an application to believers as well. In fact, we also read several times in our Bibles of God repenting. So although in the context of Acts 20:21, repentance towards God certainly has sinners in view, we should not limit this truth only to sinners. The psalmist, David, who himself was a great sinner, shows a noble spirit when he says, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"*, Psalm 139:23-24. He had learned deep lessons, and in the spirit of repentance he wanted God to lead him through life.

Perhaps first we need to find out the meaning of the word, 'repentance'. I have enlisted the help of a good English dictionary as well as a good Bible dictionary. The basic meaning of repentance is to have a change of mind. Usually we would associate it with something sinful which needs to be repented of, so the change of mind would be followed by a change in our actions. There is also the thought of feeling regret, sorrow or contrition. Of course we must be careful in our thoughts when thinking of God repenting. He is Holy and never needs to repent of anything sinful. In Numbers 23:19 we read, *"God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man that he should repent."* So perhaps the thought in God repenting is that He is sorry about the things that have turned out to be so different from what He intended. Perhaps we should just quote one or two verses and move on, leaving this for your own personal study. In Genesis 6:6 we read, *"And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart."* Again in 1 Samuel 15:11 we read of God saying to Samuel, *"It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments."* Other Scriptures could be quoted - it's an interesting study but not an easy one!

Before we focus on repentance as we find it in Acts 20:21, it is interesting to see that repentance also applies to believers as well as to the unsaved. We've already thought of David, *"a man after God's own heart"*, (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22) who knew what repentance was and we could also consider Job, as *"a righteous man"*, (see Job 34:5) who said, *"Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes"*, Job 42:6. Turning to the New Testament, and the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, we see that in five of the seven letters repentance is urged (see Revelation 2:5, 16, 21-22, 3:3, 19). As believers we need to be reminded that so often in our Christian lives, we need to repent. To have a change of mind to be brought into line with the mind of Christ, just as the Apostle Paul says to the Christians in Philippi, *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..."*, Philippians 2:5. It is worth noting that the two churches who are not told to repent were Smyrna (the suffering church) and Philadelphia (the church of brotherly love). There is an important lesson here, I'm sure! Believers who are persecuted for Christ are more likely to be living true to His Name, and in close communion with Him. Perhaps we don't know much persecution in our country but the challenge for us, in our near apostate society, is to be characterised by the features which were found in the believers at Philadelphia.

At school, I learned to quote poetry by Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard. In his short poem, 'To a Louse', he begins by asking,

*'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!'*

If indeed we saw ourselves as others see us, we would perhaps have a change of mind about many things. However, our subject today is repentance which is towards God, and how much more important is it for us to see ourselves as God sees us! I think this strikes right at the heart of the truth of repentance toward God. When a man or woman takes God's side and they view themselves from His viewpoint - that is true repentance!

Let me read three further verses:

In Acts 17:30 after the Apostle Paul had quoted from their own poets, he said to his audience in Athens, *"And the times of this ignorance God winked at [or overlooked]; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent."*

In Romans 2:4 we read, *"Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?"*

And in 2 Peter 3:9 we read, *"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."*

Many other verses could be quoted and are worthy of our consideration, but we are limited in our time today. These verses bring before us the fact that repentance is not 'an option' but a commandment from God, in response to the preaching of the Gospel. There was a time, perhaps when man could plead ignorance (but even then, God's greatness and glory were declared in His creation), but now in the Spirit's day, when the full Gospel is preached, God commands everyone to repent (Acts 17:30). The judgement day is coming and the Lord Jesus Christ, who today is preached as the Saviour will in that day be the righteous Judge of all. Those of us who have turned to God in repentance, surely have no room to boast! We read that it is God's goodness which led us to this position. Peter was answering the critics of his day who were asking *"Where is the promise of his coming?"* (2 Peter 3:8) We are certain that Jesus is coming soon! He will fulfil His personal promise to those who follow Him, *"I will come again, and receive you unto myself"*, John 14:3, but God's longsuffering love desires that *"all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). God is eager to bless us - but it can only be on the basis of our repentance towards Him.

We could not leave this subject without considering the parable Jesus told of the two sons. In fact He told two different parables which begin, *"A certain man had two sons"*, and in both repentance is the lesson taught. You can read the two parables in Matthew 21:28-32 and Luke 15:11-32. Perhaps in Matthew the focus is on the repentant son, whereas in Luke the focus is on the welcome the father gives to his repentant son. In Matthew 21:28-32 we read of a father asking his two sons to work in his vineyard. One said, *"I go, sir"* but never went, and the other said *"I will not"*, but later repented and went. It was very obvious which of them had done the will of his father. What a clear illustration of the fact that the son who had a change of mind, followed through and did the work! This is true repentance.

In Luke 15:11-32, we read of a younger son who couldn't wait to leave home, but in the far country things were not exactly as he had hoped they would be. In desperate circumstances, spent up and hungry, he *"came to himself"* (Luke 15:17). This was more than remorse or feeling sorry for himself; this was true repentance. He was sorry for what he had done and was prepared to do something about it! True repentance is the first step to blessing. We read, *"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.

Let's look at this in a little more depth. He said, *"I have sinned"* (Luke 15:18). In our society today, the idea of sin is almost disregarded. Men and women will do whatever they want, and will then say almost anything to justify their actions. I believe we have reached the times when good is spoken of as evil, and evil is spoken of as good!

Not only did the younger son reach this point where he confessed he was a sinner, but he realised that God took account of his sin. This, I believe, is fundamental to our understanding of repentance toward God. To realise that while our sin is against ourselves and our fellowman, it is principally against God! So in his confession the younger son said *"I have sinned against heaven, and before thee"* (Luke 15:18) Yes, he had wronged his father but he realised that heaven was looking down. God and the holy angels were watching and at the conclusion of the story they were rejoicing!

In Luke 15, I believe we see the concern of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the blessing of mankind. We see a picture of the willingness of the Son in the man who goes after the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7); in the woman who searches diligently for the lost coin we see a picture of the work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 15:8-10); and in receiving the returning son we see a picture of the welcome of the Father (Luke 15:11-32). Luke 15 merits further study and you will find wonderful gems in the detail: e.g. I understand the terms “*a far country*”, Luke 15:13, and “*a great way off*”, Luke 15:20 have more or less the same meaning, so we can conclude that the moment the son’s heart was turned and he took a step on his way home - the father was on his way, running to meet him. How wonderful is that!

You will notice, too, that the father interrupts his son before he can say, “*Make me as one of thy hired servants*” (compare Luke 15:19 with Luke 15:21). The blessing of God is not according to our great need but according to the greatness of His heart! “*Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet*”, Luke 15:22. In realising something of this wonderful position into which we have been brought, the Apostle John wrote, “*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons [or children] of God*” 1 John 3:1.

Returning to Acts 20:21 we see that repentance toward God must be followed by faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. To receive the forgiveness and blessing of God we need both of these essential elements of the Gospel.

Looking again at a good English dictionary as well as a good Bible dictionary, the basic meaning of faith is “to believe.” To have complete trust or confidence in someone or something. It may surprise you but the word ‘faith’ is only mentioned twice in the Old Testament, but ‘to believe’ is the Old Testament equivalent to ‘faith’ in the New Testament. Interestingly, one of the references to faith is found in Habakkuk 2:4 and the Apostle Paul quotes this in three of his epistles (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38). The other is Deuteronomy 32:20.

However, we have a wonderful biblical definition in Hebrews 11:1 where we read, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” In this chapter we have listed for us some of the examples of great men and woman of faith in the Old Testament. The chapter has been divided into four sections following the introduction in Hebrews 11:1-3:

- Faith that saves Hebrews 11:4-7
- Faith that sees Hebrews 11:8-22; and
- Faith that suffers Hebrews 11:23-40.

We are left in no doubt of just how vital faith is for the whole of our Christian lives. We will again consider ‘living by faith’ in the last talk of our series, but for today our focus is on the ‘faith that saves’. Faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

The jailor in Philippi asked Paul and Silas, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” and received the answer, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*”, (see Acts 16:30-31). Now perhaps, like repentance, we seldom hear preachers preaching, “*You must be saved*”, but how vital this is! Salvation is a personal thing; we cannot be saved for others. God in His goodness often blesses in families and in the reply given to the jailor we need to understand that his salvation would be the means by which those in his house would hear and respond to the Gospel for themselves, and not that his personal salvation availed for his house. If we read Acts 16:32 we will see that this is the case; because of the jailor’s faith, Paul and Silas got the opportunity to speak “*the word of the Lord*” to all that were in his house.

In Romans 3:25 we read concerning Christ Jesus, “*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.*” He alone is the Saviour; we read, “*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” Acts 4:12. Could we consider this subject without quoting from John 3:16-17, “*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. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*” And again in 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 abides on him.*” Many more Scriptures could be quoted but these are sufficient to show that our salvation is centred in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ: His death upon the Cross of Calvary; and His triumphant resurrection from amongst the dead.

Having repented toward God we need to have faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. If we have any doubt as to the deity of Christ, turn to John 1; Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 and be convinced that the One who became man never ceased to be God. There was no one else who could undertake the work of redemption because “*All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*”, Romans 3:23. God’s holiness demanded that the “*Lamb of God*” (see John 1:29, 36) should be sinless, and so the perfect Man was perfectly suitable to be the perfect sacrifice and, as a consequence, we have a perfect salvation. The fact that Christ has been raised from the dead and is now living as a glorified Man in heaven at the

right hand of the Father, surely gives us the assurance that our salvation is perfect and can never be taken away from us. Faith in Jesus Christ, His person and His work is that which gives us hope. *"Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast"*, Hebrews 6:19.

You will have noticed that we have said nothing about the *"works of repentance"* nor the *"works of faith."* Although there would have been merit in looking at this aspect of these truths, I did not want to confuse the main focus of our talk today that repentance and faith are gifts of God. Too many people think that they can do 'good works' to merit God's favour; they cannot! Saving faith is contrasted with the futility of works or law keeping. Paul teaches this in Romans 3:21 through to Romans 5:1 where he concludes *"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* If you read Hebrews 11 you will find that the commendation of those listed begins, *"By faith... By faith... By faith..."* So our justification is on the principle of faith, without which it is impossible to please God (see Hebrews 11:6).

Let me end by quoting from Ephesians 2:7, *"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."*

May God bless you all.

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