

“Return To The Lord”

Built in to the message of the prophets was the appeal to repent. These men were sent by God to expose sin and urge the guilty to repent. Often the appeal was framed as a challenge to return to the Lord (Isa. 6:10; Jer. 3:1; Jos. 6:1; Mal. 3:7). For instance, Joel's appeal to Judah was for the people to repent of their sins. "So rend your heart," and "return to the Lord your God" (Joel 2:13).

Through the distribution of His judgments (locusts, drought, desolation), God intended to admonish His people to come out of their sin and back to Him. It was His loving purpose to prompt a change in their direction.

The essential definition of repentance has not changed through the dispensations. We can, therefore, use Joel's statement as the basis for our understanding of returning to the Lord. And this study can find application for those who have been baptized but have left their God.

Repentance is a change in direction. The simple word "turn" shows that to be so. Those guilty of sin (before or after baptism) need to turn; a change of direction is needed. If you've been letting the world influence your thinking, your speech, your conduct, your dress or attitude, you need to change your direction. If you've abandoned the assembly, harbored ill-will in your heart, accepted false teaching, helped false teaching advance, participated in party strife or refused to grow, God seeks a change in your direction. Repentance is a change in your direction, turning from your sin to the Lord (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

Repentance occurs in the heart. Observe in verse 12 of Joel 2, "with all your heart." Everything we do before God ought to be done with a whole heart. Repentance, to be complete and genuine, must come from a whole heart: a heart of reverence for God, love for God; a heart influenced by the cross of Christ. Repentance should be the product of a heart of mature responsibility toward everything that is holy and right. The conviction of sin from the Word should be let in, so that repentance finds its' true and good expression.

Repentance is not just a ritual. "So rend your heart, and not your garments..." It was customary among the Jews to express their emotions in very public, visible ways. To this day in middle eastern cultures, when a family member dies, there may be public weeping and wailing; throwing dust in the air; beating the breast and the rendering of garments. The problem to be noted here is, the emotion must not be ritualized and confused with true repentance. The fact that someone may cry in public or come down an aisle doesn't assure wholehearted repentance. Repentance is a personal decision to leave sin behind and come to God. It is a decision of heart, productive of good fruit. It may be accompanied by some open expression, but the essence of the matter lies in the heart and the results in life.

Repentance is made possible by a gracious God. "Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love..." If you are alive to hear the Word, be convicted and repent, thank God that you have such a blessed opportunity. Thank Him for the precious blood of Christ. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." If you are alive today, you can repent. Thank God for the time He has given you to return to Him, but don't presume upon His grace and providence. "He relents from doing harm," but the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. Repent while there is time.

If you are reading this as one convicted of your sin, now is the time to repent. If you just plan to repent someday, that isn't good enough. Ask God to relent, turn from your sin and enjoy peace with Him through the Lord Jesus Christ.

- by Warren E. Berkley

A Big Commitment

Rock star Rod Stewart, himself twice divorced, verbalized the casual attitude toward marriage he and millions of others have acted out. He said, "I think marriage vows should be changed, because they've been in existence for 600 years, when people used to live until they were only 35. So they only had to be with each other for 12 years, then they would die anyway. But now, it's

a big commitment because you're going to be with someone for 50 years. It's impossible. The vows should be written like a dog's license that has to be renewed every year."

Stewart's statement reminds us that millions have simply lost their way as regards marriage and God's will for it. Men have by and large rejected what the Lord has to say about marriage and divorce. Marriage – as God would have it - certainly is a big commitment.

We are not denying that marriage is rough, tough work, sometimes more sour than it is sweet, more hurt than it is happiness, more give than it is receive. Anybody who says it isn't has never been married. But none of that changes the fact that a marriage must be based on commitment, not convenience, if it is to last. A good marriage is not easy but neither is it impossible. What is required is a deep-seated commitment to the will of God and one's mate.

- by Dan Gulley

Forgiveness (6th in a series)

Since we are to forgive others "*just as God in Christ also hath forgiven you*" (Eph. 4:32), it seems very appropriate to study how God forgives. We've learned that He 1) is willing to forgive, 2) is 'aggressive' in forgiving us, 3) places conditions on us in order to be forgiven, 4) forgives absolutely, 4) forgives permanently, and 5) forgives repeatedly. We should imitate Him in all these ways when others sin against us.

Finally, let us observe that forgiveness does not always remove all the consequences of our misdeeds. Some examples will illustrate our meaning:

1) A man is abusive of his wife and children. For years he is negligent and mean. Finally he 'comes to himself', repents, and asks their forgiveness. They forgive him, but it is unreasonable to imagine that his family will ever be rid of the terrible scars that have been inflicted. He is forgiven, by his family and by God, but that family has been changed forever by his wrongs.

2) Another man cheats on his wife. Thankfully he realizes how horribly he has sinned against her and God. He begs forgiveness, and it is granted by both. But things are not the same as before he made those wicked choices. She decides to divorce him (her rightful choice). He is forgiven, but he must live alone the rest of his life.

3) In a moment of uncontrolled rage a man strikes another. The blow inflicts a mortal wound. He is arrested, convicted, sentenced. He mourns, repents, and seeks forgiveness. Can he be forgiven? Of course! But he must still suffer the consequences of his deed.

Forgiveness is a wonderful thing - but, how much better to live so as to limit the need to approach God and man seeking it.

- by Greg Gwin