

“Light for Turning”

Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

I don't know about you, but I haven't always had the best associations with the idea of repentance. The command to “repent” makes me think of a sweaty, jowly television preacher on a glitzy stage, shouting and stomping angrily about how horrible everyone outside the church is and how they're going to bring the wrath of God on us all if they don't *repent*. “Turn or burn,” they might say, and it often sounds to me as though they take some amount of pleasure in the thought of sinners roasting in hell. Or repentance makes me think of a scruffy, half-wild person marching down the street wearing a sandwich board saying, “Repent! The end is nigh!” If you want to be a good, respectable preacher, you don't spend too much time dealing with repentance or you end up like those guys, ignored and on the fringes, or shouting and stomping at people who don't really understand the gospel. Respectable preachers have more nuance than that.

And that's a shame, because the preaching of Jesus featured repentance quite prominently. In fact, here we are at the beginning of Mark's gospel, listening in on the first words of Jesus recorded by Mark, basically a summary or thesis statement of the message Jesus is bringing, and here's what He says: “The time has come! The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” That sort of message would fit better on a sandwich board on a street corner than it would in a respectable sermon in a respectable downtown cathedral.

And yet repentance is one of the pillars of Jesus' preaching. We can't deny that, nor should we try to. It's unfortunate that some people in the church have turned the concept of repentance into a blunt instrument used for smacking people into silence, because we've given a bad reputation to a beautiful idea. We're turned repentance into a conversation ender, a way to shut down our opponents and stoke those who agree with us by casting the blame for our ills on those bad people out there who refuse to repent. *They're* the problem. In reality, repentance should be a conversation starter, or at least part of a larger, more winsome conversation.

We've given it a bad reputation by exiling it to the unpleasant fringes of our spiritual lives and presenting it poorly, when in reality it's a beautiful idea. At the very least, the message of repentance gives people an alternative to some of the more soul-killing messages of our age. There are many in our world who insist that we are nothing more than very complex machines, or that we are simply well-dressed animals. And while we affirm that we are a part of God's creation and we are indeed physical beings, the claim that we are nothing more than complex machines removes any real element of free will from our lives. If our lives and thoughts and motives and memories are the product of nothing more than physical, mechanical processes, you only have the illusion of choice or change or freedom, because the decisions you make are the result of chemical and physical processes you cannot really control. But the call to repentance gives us an alternative: change is really possible, life doesn't have to continue like it has, and there is real hope.

There really is good news in repentance. Again, we're in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, and we're hearing the first words out of Jesus' mouth as recorded by Mark. This is a time to set the stage and to make it clear what Jesus is about. And what does Jesus say? Because the time has come and the kingdom of God is near, therefore repent and believe the good news. Repentance and good news

are side by side in the message of Jesus. They're not opposed to one another, they're partners. Each of the four gospels begins Jesus' ministry with a different type of sermon or focus: Matthew focuses on the kingdom of heaven, Luke focuses on the good news to the poor, John focuses on miraculous sign-acts that reveal Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man, but Mark pairs repentance with believing the good news.

But how is repentance good news? If you tell me to repent, doesn't that mean that you think I'm screwed up and need to change? Sort of. Again, repentance in our culture has been wrongly presented as being nothing more than "turn or burn," and that's barely a caricature of biblical repentance. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word that we normally translate as "repent" is most often a word that means to "turn," and its regular use is literally to turn from one direction to another as you walk or go about your way. We'll often see phrases in the Old Testament like "turn from your wicked ways" or "turn from your evil;" that's repentance. But the deeper implication is that repentance means changing direction on your journey, because the spiritual life in the Old Testament is often thought of as a pilgrimage. Today we talk about your "walk with God;" it was a bit more literal in ancient Israel. Worship of God involved multiple, regular journeys to Jerusalem for sacrifice and feasting and celebration. There were certain times of year when, at least in theory, the entire nation would go on a pilgrimage to gather together at the temple in worship of God. When Moses instructs the people to continue teaching God's laws to future generations, what does he say? "Talk about them when you sit at home and *when you walk upon the road.*" Spirituality was something done on the way. When the people sinned and refused to repent, the threat was that they would be taken into exile in a foreign land; their spiritual and physical journey would be such that they would be unable to make their pilgrimage home.

And so to repent is to literally change your direction. While you're on your journey, look ahead of you to see which direction you're going and where your steps are leading you, and if your pilgrimage is taking you toward the temple of some other god or goddess, *repent*, turn your steps, and head in the right direction. "Life is a journey," you'll often hear people say, or, as Tom Cochrane put it, "Life is a highway," and they're right. And on that journey, the people of God ought to be reminding us, calling us, to be aware enough of our steps to see where we're going.

When we get to the New Testament, repentance takes on some slightly different nuances. There's a bit less focus on the pilgrimage and a bit more focus on getting your head in the right place. To repent is to change your mind, to be converted, to shift your allegiance from one god or way of thinking to another. For the New Testament writers, repentance often involved getting rid of idols, because they lived in a cosmopolitan world full of options and temptations to just add Jesus to the pantheon of other gods and goddesses, or to claim Jesus as your Lord while also relying on magic charms for protection. So repentance means getting your heart in the right place, getting your head on straight, getting your allegiances figured out.

And this is powerful stuff we're talking about. When Jesus pairs repentance with good news, He's not kidding. Things happen when people repent. One of our readings came from the book of Jonah, after the part about him being swallowed by the whale, when Jonah finally heeds God's command to call for repentance from the Ninevites, the hated enemies of Jonah's people. Jonah has to repent first, because he doesn't want to give his enemies the option of turning; he'd rather see them burn. But at last he repents, he turns his way toward Nineveh, as God commands, and when

Jonah preaches a bare minimum message of repentance, the entire city repents almost immediately. And even though the city was so bad that it was only forty days from being destroyed, God gives them another chance. Repentance is powerful stuff.

So why does repentance figure so prominently in the preaching of Jesus? What does He mean when He calls the people to repent? And what exactly is the good news? The reality is that we could spend weeks preaching on those topics, and many people have written dissertations exploring their meanings. But Jesus had a message for the people of that time, and that message still has impact on us today. His call was for them to stop disbelieving in the good news, to stop walking in the way that led them away from the good news, to turn and embrace the message of the gospel that Jesus brought.

We have to remember that Jesus was primarily preaching to people who were probably quite religious. Some of them were clearly more strict than others, and others had certainly slipped into dangerous and destructive lifestyles, but probably most of them would have been raised in a generally religious Jewish atmosphere. They would have known pretty well what their Scriptures said, and they would have heard many sermons on what God expected of them. Their nation clearly was not where God wanted it to be, since they were being occupied by the Roman Empire and there were still unfulfilled promises that God had made to His people, but on the whole, most people probably thought they were trying to go in the right direction. And yet Jesus calls them to repent. When Jesus sends out His disciples on their first mission to spread the word, Mark says that their message was to repent; this was the core of Jesus' message. Repent and believe the good news.

They needed to turn from the direction they were going because there were many theories on how best to follow God — some followed a strict adherence to the law, some took a more philosophical view, some lived a more monklike-lifestyle of self-denial and asceticism, and some tried to start violent revolutions — but none of them were proclaiming the good news that Jesus preached. The gospel message, the good news, is that this man Jesus is the Messiah promised by God, He is the Lord of creation, He is God with us as one of us. And more than that, the good news is that the things Jesus did in His healing, teaching, forgiving, casting out demons, embracing the outcast, inviting the lost, breaking chains of oppression — and, ultimately in His faithful death on the cross — the way that Jesus showed us is the way approved by God and blessed by God. If you want to know how God will be faithful to all His promises and how He will show His love for this world, look at what Jesus did. This is the gospel.

And so the need to repent comes in any part of a person's life that does not lead them in that direction. If there is part of you that hates your enemies rather than loves them, repent. If there is part of you that trusts in your possessions for salvation, repent. If there is part of you that builds an idol out of work or family or success or happiness, repent. If there is part of you that believes the sinner or the outcast is too far from God to have hope, repent. If there is part of you that thinks sickness and death are stronger than God, repent. If there is part of you that expects to find God somewhere other than Jesus or through some means other than the cross, repent and believe the good news. Jesus' context and His audience were very different than ours, and yet in many ways the paths that they were tempted to walk on were not that different than ours. They had just as many sinners to look down upon, just as many enemies to hate, just as many false messiahs vying for their trust.

And the thing we need to keep in mind is that the call to repent so often comes to those who are the last to think they need to hear it. Many people in Jesus' audience thought of themselves like that. The Old Testament prophet Amos called his people to repentance, and he did so in an era of wealth and power and luxury. Everything seemed to be going well for them, and on the surface no one would think it was time for repentance. But Amos hits them again and again with examples of the injustices they allowed to continue, the pride they fostered, the hope they placed in false gods. And God called to them again and again, gave them warning after warning, and they refused to turn their course.

Jesus and Jonah and Amos and so many other voices from the Bible call us to remember that the time of repentance comes much sooner than we usually think. The question we might ask is how we know when it's time for repentance. How do I know if there's something in my life that I need to repent of? And the answer is that we can't always look to our circumstances to tell us when it's time to repent, because sometimes everything appears fine on the outside when in reality we're desperately in need of turning toward God. The beginning of the gospel for anyone — sinner or saint — is to repent and believe, because there will be some area in your life in need of repentance, some path in need of correction, some destination in need of changing. And so you know when it's time for you to repent by diving deep into the message of Christ, by believing His good news, and asking His Spirit to guide you, and seeing if your way lines up with His way.

Do that today, now, regularly, every day: dive deep into the message of Christ, and ask His Spirit to reveal your need for repentance. Believe the good news!

Benediction: The time has come! The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! Go out as repentant people proclaiming with your lives the good news you believe.



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