

## Repentance Begins and Ends with Jesus

### Mark 1:1-8 (CSB)

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight! <sup>4</sup> John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals." <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

What should a sermon on repentance sound like? Should there be yelling and shouting as I call down fire and brimstone down on you for being puny, miserable sinners who need to completely change your lives before you are consumed and swallowed up in the weeping and gnashing of teeth of hell? Should it be a talk, a top ten list: 10 facts you should know about repentance? (That's an actual article title, by the way.) Instead of coming up with a gimmick, we simply go to the Bible. And today the Bible teaches us that repentance begins and ends with Jesus.

A quick glance at Mark 1:1-8 seems to be more about John the Baptizer rather than about Jesus. But the opening line sets the tone: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (verse 1) This is the start of a gospel or good news account. The good news of what? Of Jesus Christ, the Son of God - Christ, a title that means "Anointed One," referring to a person chosen for a specific task, the one anointed for the task for saving all people of the world as his name Jesus literally means "he saves." How can he save people? He saves people as the Son of God, as one powerful enough to save everyone. This is the start of his account, the one anointed to save the world as the Son of God. We begin with Jesus, asking, "Are you ready to meet him?"

I figure many of you did some getting ready just over a week ago for Thanksgiving. You vacuumed the carpet, cleaned the windows, scrubbed the toilet, wiped down the table, washed the floors, and probably even patched up a couple of small, nagging odd jobs around the house. For me, that was tightening up the legs on our chairs that had become loose due to use. Then you put on a clean outfit after taking a shower because you were dirty from all that cleaning. All that was just to prepare visitors to share Thanksgiving with, with family who always tells you, "You don't have to clean for us," but you know that you still actually did need to.

If that's how we get ready to meet guests at our homes, how would we get ourselves ready to meet Jesus Christ, the Son of God? That's where John comes in. This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That means that it's time to get ready, but how do you get ready to welcome the Son of God? God tells us, "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!" (verses 2-3) To get ready for the coming of the Son of God, it's more than just a spit polish on our home and our lives. To be ready for the Son of God to come to us, we have to ask ourselves, "Am I straight with God?" God expects a perfect, straight path from you to him. He doesn't tolerate straying. He doesn't accept coloring outside of the lines. You don't get bonus points for having a wavy, curvy, detouring lines in life to him. Are you straight with God?

Maybe you are very cognizant of your sins already. You're tormented by how often you stray from God, how often you make choices contrary to his commands, how try as you might but you don't always speak well of other people, how thoughts of lust pervade in your mind, discontentment reigns as you focus on all the things you think you should have but don't, how contempt for others is worn on your sleeve as you can't let go of what they've done against you.

Maybe you're not so very cognizant of your sins. Maybe you have come here thinking, "I'm straight with God. I don't need to repent about anything. I didn't do anything really bad today. I mean, I'm even at church." Is pride in ourselves, in our good actions, in our perceived perfection creating a crooked path in our life, that we make our own path to God according to our design instead of his? Have I fooled myself into thinking I am straight with God when I'm not? When we try to make our own path to God, we will never get it right, never get it straight. It will only ever lead us away. Our created paths to God will only ever lead us to our own spiritual destruction. We cannot make our path to God straight on our own.

Since we are trying to get ready for Jesus, how do we get straight with God? Listen to John. He preaches repentance. As the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were coming to hear him, John called out their crooked lives of sin, their self-

made paths to God. They were not straight with God. He preached in order to lead them to recognize their sin, their imperfections, their crooked paths. The people saw their crooked ways that were leading to their spiritual destruction and were cut to the heart by them and sorrowed over their sin.

But John did not just leave the people with a message of, “You’re crooked. Good luck trying to fix that.” He didn’t preach just to make people feel all guilty and judged. He also proclaimed the solution: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As John’s sermon had showed the people how crooked their lives were, how unprepared they were to meet the Son of God, they also learned how to have their crooked lives straightened out: be baptized. Have God wash away your sin. Have God correct your crooked life, not through a whole bunch of effort or choices or to-do lists, but be washed. It’s passive. Have God do this for you. Have God fix you. Wash and be cleansed before God. Wash and be made straight with God.

Repentance is not just recognizing your sins and being sorry for them and trying not to do them again. The critical part of repentance is clinging to God’s promises, trusting that simple water combined with his Word actually washes and cleanses you spiritually, that just a little water and God’s Word turns our crooked lives into straight paths for the Lord. With baptism, God causes us to trust that he has really forgiven all our sins – past, present, and future. With baptism, God makes us straight with him.

The baptism that John proclaimed and performed is the same baptism that we have today. The spiritual straightening those people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem experienced as they were baptized is that same straightening God does to us with our baptisms. As the Holy Spirit cleansed them and forgave their sins, so also he does with us in our baptisms. “But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:4-6) Through baptism, God creates and strengthens our trust in his forgiveness of our sins causing us to believe that he has made us straight with him.

And God used simple, plain, ordinary water to accomplish this for us. He wanted you to think about this cleansing all the time as we encounter water so many times during each day: every time you take a drink, every time you wash your hands, every time you take a shower. All these encounters with water can remind you that God has worked repentance in you. He has changed your heart to not only recognize your sin but also strengthen your trust in him that he has made you straight with him. In baptism, you were washed, you were cleansed, you were forgiven, you were made straight with God.

Being made new, we live on a straight path to God. Live that straight path. Push aside those lustful thoughts and think of the how you can honor God. Govern your tongue that the words you say about others only serve to build them up, help them, speak well of them. Stop focusing on the things in life that make you miserable with discontent and instead count how richly God has blessed your life. Stop holding on to your hurt and anger and instead forgive as God has forgiven you. That’s walking the straight path that God has put you on through repentance, through your baptism. And when your path deviates, God will call you to repentance again and your baptism will serve to cleanse you over and over again in life, continually making you straight with God.

We are all going to meet Jesus. How will we be ready for him? By the repentance he works in us, repentance which begins and ends with Jesus. He causes us to see and mourn our crooked paths in life. By our baptism, God has made us straight with him. By our baptism, he has caused us to trust him for that forgiveness of sins through water and his Word. Now we live a life of repentance for him because he has made us straight with him. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.