

“A BROKEN AND CONTRITE HEART”

This passage is the first part of what is considered to be the prologue of Mark’s Gospel, a prologue that extends up through verse 13. These 13 verses contain everything that Mark chooses to tell us about the events that took place before the start of Jesus’ public ministry. Here Mark is setting the stage for what he is about to tell us about Jesus Christ. And he begins by telling us about this strange figure, this wild man, who comes on the scene just before Jesus himself enters the picture.

Mark introduces John with a citation from three OT texts. He only mentions Isaiah, but the quote is also drawn from passages in the books of Exodus and Malachi. All three of these OT passages (Isa. 40:3; Ex. 23:20; Mal. 3:1) describe God’s promise of a messenger who would prepare his people for the saving work that he was about to do in their midst. In Exodus 23, God promised an angelic messenger to go before his people and lead them into the Promised Land. This angel would bring them to the place that God had prepared for them. And therefore, it was absolutely crucial that they listen to him. God said, “Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.” Israel had to listen to the voice of that messenger if they were going to take possession of the land.

In Malachi, the Lord promises to send a messenger to pave the way for his own arrival in the midst of his people. This messenger would prepare the people for the Lord's coming by purifying and refining them. And they needed to be purified, because, as Malachi says, "who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"

And then in Isaiah, God promises that he will send a voice to announce the good news that God is going to lead his people out of the exile caused by their sin, and that he will come and make his dwelling among them once again.

Mark presents John as the messenger that was foreshadowed and promised in these three OT passages. He is a prophet sent from God. And that, in and of itself, was quite a claim. At the time when John came on the scene, Israel had not had a prophet for some four hundred years, stretching back to the days of Malachi, the last of the OT prophets. You can imagine how, over the span of those four hundred years, the people of Israel must have clung to what God had promised in the OT. They were waiting for the return of the Lord. They were waiting for a messenger to come and announce that it was time to get ready for the coming of their God, a messenger whom Malachi identified as a prophet patterned after the great prophet Elijah.

And John fit the bill. He dressed like Elijah. He lived in the wilderness like Elijah. He ministered in an area that had close associations with the ministry of Elijah: the area

around the Jordan river. John's appearance out in the wilderness was an indication that the Lord was on the move.

John came as a forerunner. He came to prepare the way for the Lord. I have told you before about one part of my experience when I was in Uganda last year. Everywhere we went, feverous preparations were being made in anticipation of an upcoming visit from the Queen of England (a visit that had political significance, because Uganda is a former British protectorate). Ditches were being dug for miles along Entebbe Road, the main highway in Kampala. The Queen was coming, and the Ugandan government wanted to get things cleaned up.

In a similar vein, John was sent to clean things up in Israel. He made preparations for the beginning of Jesus' public ministry by calling people to repentance. This was the key feature of John's ministry. He did not tell people what they wanted to hear. He did not soothe their consciences, assuring them that God was not upset about all the ways they were failing to keep his laws. No. His preaching took aim at guilty consciences and was intent on exposing people's sin. John had to preach this way, and so does every preacher who seeks to be a faithful servant of Jesus Christ. For this is the only way that people will ever be prepared to welcome the Lord. J.I. Packer puts it this way:

“[K]nowledge and conviction of one’s sin, in its guilt, pollution, and ugliness, and of God’s displeasure at it, must precede faith, since no one will come to Christ to be saved from sin till he or she knows from what sins salvation is needed...[I]t would be the worst advice possible to tell a troubled person to stop worrying about his sins and trust Christ at once when that person had not yet come to the point of clear-headedly desiring to leave all sinful ways behind and be made holy. To give this advice...before the heart is weaned from sin would be the way to induce false peace and false hopes, and so to produce ‘gospel-hypocrites.’” (*Quest for Godliness*, 298)

We cannot receive Christ unless we first see our desperate need for forgiveness. We are not ready to welcome Christ if we still cherish sin, any sin, in our hearts. It is only those who are truly broken over their sinfulness, those who are remorseful for their transgressions, who find acceptance with God. Each of us needs to come to see what was expressed by Bernard of Clairvaux when he said,

“What need is there now to enumerate the individual miseries of the soul; how it is burdened with sins, enveloped in darkness, enslaved to pleasure, itching with lusts, subject to passions, filled with delusions, always prone to evil, bent to every sort of vice – in a word full of shame and confusion?” (cited in Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.25)

That is what we are, every single one of us, whether we admit it or not.

Jesus' way of summarizing the Law of God, which we read earlier in the service, is especially helpful in exposing our sin. It shows us that the Law is not fundamentally a list of prohibitions, but two positive commands: love God with your entire being, and love other people in a way that reflects the natural concern that you have for yourself. When we think of God's Law in these terms, it is not very hard to see that we live in constant violation of it. Do I really love God more than anything else? And, even if I say that I do, what is there in my life that gives any indication that this is true? Do I rejoice at being able to come to public worship each Lord's Day? Or am I anxious to get home so I can do what I really want to do? Do I treat the Word of God as the only food that can nourish my soul? Or is my Bible collecting dust on a shelf? Is the Sabbath day a source of spiritual delight and refreshment for me? Or do I look for joy and refreshment in other things? Do I look for happiness in the same places that the people of this world are looking for it: in television shows, sports, movies, computer games, and the internet; in dining out, playing, shopping, and accumulating worldly goods; in having parties, attending concerts, and going on vacations? Where do I seek joy? What do I believe will really make me happy? Where do I look for rest for my weary soul?

You see, we really are miserable sinners. We run this way and that looking for something to satisfy our longings, but we fail to keep the one command that is designed to provide rest for our restless hearts – the command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We need to see the misery of our condition. We need to repent. For this is the only way that the gospel can truly be good news, glad tidings, for us. Jesus did not come for people who think that they are healthy. He came for those who know, who admit, and who hate the fact that their souls are sick with the incurable disease of sin.

What kinds of sins do you suppose those people were repenting of when they went out to John in the wilderness? What were the sins that broke their hearts and caused them to see that their souls were filthy and in need of washing? They were the same sins that you and I struggle with. These people had failed in their responsibilities towards God and towards their fellow men; they were discontented; they were lazy and irresponsible; they were proud; they lusted; they hated; they refused to forgive; they gossiped; they spoke harsh and unkind words; they failed to honor their parents; they failed to instruct their children in the ways of the Lord; they failed to love their spouses in the way that God intended. These people were no different than you and I. They believed in God. They went to church when they were supposed to. They did not live in the gross immorality of their pagan neighbors. Yet what did John say to them? He told them that they were filthy. He told them that they needed to be cleansed. He told them that they, though they

were Jews, had to submit to a ritual that was reserved for Gentiles who converted to Judaism: the ritual of baptism. These people thought that they were God's people, but John told them that they were living as those who were outside of the covenant. He told them that they had to repent.

None of us is as good as we think we are. None of us is as upright and blameless as the image that we try to project before others. We are masters at the art of self-justification and rationalization and the erecting of facades. So often, we are like the basketball player who instinctively denies having committed a foul, even though the opposing player is laying on the floor with a bloody nose. We can try to justify our actions; we can try to argue that we are right and that others are wrong; we can try to fool other people; we can try to numb our own guilty consciences; but we can never change the fact that our sins, every single one of them, whether great or small, is an offense against Almighty God. And we cannot hide our sin from him. He knows our hearts, yours and mine. And this is why there is only one thing that really matters: do you have a broken and contrite heart? Do you see yourself as a transgressor? Do you know that you are truly deserving of God's condemnation? This is the first part of repentance. We have to turn away from our sin before we can turn to God.

But there is a difference between the self-knowledge that the Holy Spirit uses to bring people to repentance and an introspection that places people under the weight of a

crushing spiritual despair. We see a sad example of such spiritual despair in the life of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's accomplishments as our sixteenth president are simply astounding, and in many respects he really did live up to his nickname as "Honest Abe." But when it came to his religious beliefs, Lincoln was never a professing Christian. By his own admission, he would have liked to have been more devout than he was. But he simply could not believe the gospel, falling under what one of his biographers calls "a crushing sense of worthlessness." He had a firm belief in the providential workings of his Maker, but he was never able to place his personal trust in the God of the Bible. As Lincoln himself once confessed to a friend, "probably it is to be my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did." These are not the words of a repentant man, but of a man who feels abandoned. (Guelzo, 462-3)

The point of John's call for repentance was not to drive people to despair, but to point them to the only One who is capable of solving the problem of sin. That is why Jesus came - to provide the solution to the problem of sin. Here is Alexander Whyte:

"Sin was his errand in this world. He would never have been in this world at all, either preaching sermons, or doing anything else, but for sin. He could have done everything else for us without coming down into this world at all; everything else but take away our sin. And thus it is that our sin is the true key wherewith to open

up all He ever said, and all He ever did, while He was with us in this world. And thus it is also that unless your sin is ever before you, neither Jesus Christ Himself, nor His coming, nor any of His texts, nor any of His sermons, will ever be understood by you.” (*The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 116-117)

Jesus came to settle the problem of sin. That is why repentance is required of everyone who would come to him. He will not heal you if you do not think you are sick.

Briefly, the reason why John refers to Jesus as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit is because it is only by the work of the Spirit that we can receive the benefits of Christ’s redeeming work. It is the Spirit who brings us under the weight of the conviction of sin and produces faith and repentance within us. I will have more to say about both baptism and the Holy Spirit in next week’s sermon, when we consider the text that deals with Jesus’ own baptism.

But the main point of this text is this: you cannot welcome Jesus unless you have a broken and contrite heart. You cannot have fellowship with Jesus unless you are like those people who went out to the wilderness and believed John when he told them that their filthy souls needed cleansing. Never let yourself think that your sins are only mildly

Sermon on Mark 1:1-8
OT Reading: Malachi 3:1-5

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displeasing to God. For it was sin, your sins and mine, that caused Jesus to go to the cross.

Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great,

Here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.

Mark the Sacrifice appointed! See Who bears the awful load!

'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God.

(“Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted”)