

REPENTANCE -A CHANGE OF MIND

Zacchaeus had a radical about-face when Jesus came into his life. Such a change of mind involved regret or remorse for what had been amiss in the past. It would be quite wrong to place the chief emphasis on the change in his style of life. That was a consequence. The central point was that Jesus, the Saviour, had found the lost and brought salvation to him and his family. Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries with the call, "Repent!" This is the only imperative Jesus used in His preaching of the kingdom of God. For Jesus this was the expected consequence of the nearness of the kingdom, in His own person.

This about-face that is needed in all lost human beings is what God Himself works, through His grace. No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him. God works this by His gracious power. That same power is active also in baptism, for it is a means through which God works a change of heart, and imparts the forgiveness of sins. Jesus makes it very clear that without sorrow for sin and God's bestowal of faith in Him people are lost. It means forsaking everything that prevents a total turning to God. For Zacchaeus, it meant that he acknowledged Jesus as Lord, that he changed his attitude to accumulating wealth and placed half of it at the disposal of the needy, and that he promised to restore what he had taken fraudulently. This showed that he was a changed man. However, the visible changes weren't the chief thing, but that Jesus had come into his life. The rest was response. The chief thing was conversion to God in Jesus Christ, who seeks out the lost, and who, as the Son of Man, suffered to redeem the lost.

The point that conversion is not what a human being achieves is clear from a passage in Matthew. Jesus took a child, and told His disciples, "*Unless you are turned, and become like children, you will certainly not enter into the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 18:3). The chief thing that Jesus saw in the child was that it received everything. Everything it needed was given to it. It didn't think, as unregenerate adults usually do, of what it had earned or deserved. To be a child is to be little, to need help, and be receptive to help. He who is converted becomes little before God. Like the tax collector in the temple, the converted person humbles himself. The children of the heavenly Father are those who simply receive from Him. He gives them what they cannot give themselves (Mt 10:27).

This child-like reception is true of repentance. It is God's gift, and yet it is a most necessary requirement. From the point of view of unregenerate man, it is impossible; but God makes it possible. When Jesus said that it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, His disciples remarked that it was impossible. They got the point. Jesus replied that what is impossible with men is possible with God. Zacchaeus is a clear case of a rich man who had a reputation as a "sinner", yet in whom Jesus worked what for men is impossible. Salvation came to him and his family.

What Jesus teaches about repentance doesn't drive people to torture themselves about penitential works. Nor does it drive them to despair. Faith and joy are closely connected. Jesus the Saviour awakens joyful obedience for a life according to God's will. Repentance brought Zacchaeus into a close relationship with God, even though his fellow-Jews shunned him as a "sinner" and, unlike Jesus, refused to enter his house and eat with him. For repentance is what God works by His grace in hearts that God makes receptive and joyful. In other words, repentance in this sense is not Law, but Gospel. He who had been perishing has been sought and found.

Jesus' apostles had the same approach. Jesus had summed up their task this way: "*Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations*" (Lk 24:47). It was not, as it is for Billy Graham, "*Repent, and come up and register your decision!*" but "*Repent and be baptised... and you will receive the promise of the Holy Spirit*" (Ac 2:38-39). Peter connected conversion with baptism. The book of Acts is full of this message of repentance (Ac 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). It is, again, both man's task, and God's gift. The apostles based their preaching on Jesus' completed work as the Redeemer, and they linked repentance and faith. In Acts 20:21 it is expressed as "*repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus*" We praise God that the goal of repentance is final salvation, and that we, the lost, have, like Zacchaeus, also been found.