

Repentance and Righteousness

Introduction

The subjects of repentance and righteousness often arouse strong emotions amongst Christians because they are both foundational doctrines but also because they touch us deeply; they relate to our deepest needs of acceptance and self-worth. Leaders often have strong opinions about the doctrinal aspects because they are trying to deal with church members whose behaviour is sometimes troublesome. It is important, therefore, that we examine scripture carefully and try to let it instruct us, rather than simply try to justify our own beliefs.

In this study we will try to address two fundamental issues:

1. What and when do we need to confess and repent?
2. When and how are we made righteous?

Our Tradition

Repentance has largely gone out of fashion in presenting the Gospel, in reaction to the puritan preaching of fiery judgement: “Sinners in the hands of an angry God”. It has been replaced by the appeal to God’s love: “If only you knew just how passionately God loves you, you would come running to His open arms”. A person responding to this gospel of love is then typically encouraged to pray the “sinner’s” prayer, asking for forgiveness for their imperfect character. They are then told that they are forgiven and now have eternal life.

We are then taught that to continue to be forgiven we need to keep confessing our sins and asking for forgiveness as often as we are aware of having sinned – keep short accounts with God. We are taught that we are sinners, saved by grace and though we should slowly grow in righteousness, we will inevitably repeatedly fail in our struggle against temptation.

Salvation Repentance

So what do the scriptures teach about repentance for salvation?

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mark 1:15

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations

Luke 24:47

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out **Acts 3:19**

“God has granted repentance that leads to life.” **Acts 11:18**

We can see from these scriptures that repentance is to be preached as an integral part of the Gospel and as a pre-requisite for salvation. But what is not so obvious is the nature of that repentance. Mark's quote above points us in the right direction. The "good news" Jesus proclaimed was "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near." The proper response to that news is "Repent and believe that the time has come and the kingdom of God has come near."

Repentance for salvation concerns our belief about the Kingdom; it is not focussed on our own imperfect nature:

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' **Acts 26:18**

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. **Col 1:13**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. **1 Peter 2:9-10**

Repentance, which means to change direction, is about turning from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, from the Kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of Jesus, from being "not a people" to becoming a member of God's people.

This is the biblical language of repentance for salvation. If we talk instead about lying, cheating, being selfish and unkind, being lustful or covetous, then we are directing people's focus to their imperfect character rather than to the kingdom of which they are an unwitting part.

Telling someone they will one day have to face a judge to answer for their wrongdoing may be true, but it does not direct a person to the kind of repentance that is required.

A person does not need to be convicted of their personal sinfulness to be saved; they need to be convinced that their world-view is wrong. They are on their life journey, doing their best to make progress towards a better future. Then one day they meet someone who tells them they are headed in the wrong direction. If they are convinced, they will be hugely grateful! They will regret all the time and energy they have spent heading in the wrong direction and turn round and start heading in a new direction. Whether they are a great sinner or not is not particularly relevant.

Repentance for salvation is a change of world-view, a change in our whole way of thinking. It is much more like changing political affiliation, or emigrating to another land. Indeed it is a change of religion – from our former beliefs to believe that Jesus is God-become-man to bring us to the righteous and loving Father.

The sinner's prayer, therefore, should not be "I have sinned. Please forgive me", but "I have been heading in the wrong direction; going along with the lies and deceit of the kingdom of this world. I want to turn from all that and follow the light and truth of Jesus, God's Son".

Salvation Forgiveness

We have seen that salvation repentance is kingdom-sized. In the same way, forgiveness is kingdom-sized.

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" **Acts 3:19**

"... in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." **Col 1:13**

Salvation forgiveness is not concerned with individual sins, or our imperfect character, but with sin as a barrier between us and God. **All** our sins are wiped out; we receive forgiveness for all our sins, those past and those future. All are forgiven for those who become children of God.

"Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" **Acts 10:43**

For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy...
"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." **Heb 10:14,17**

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" **Ephesians 1:7**

Salvation forgiveness is a New-Covenant promise of God. God is no longer sin-conscious towards those who are born again.

Fellowship Repentance

Having repented for salvation, been baptised in water and born again by the Holy Spirit we are forever made righteous; cleansed and forgiven for our sins. Christ Himself has become our righteousness:

For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy...
"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." **Heb 10:14,17**

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption. **1 Cor 1:30**

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. **2 Cor 5:21**

There is nothing more that needs to be done for our sin. Jesus has already done it all:

So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. **Hebrews 9:28**

If we are totally and forever forgiven as children of God, what is the place of ongoing repentance and confession for a believer? Teaching about confession for Christians is often based upon a misunderstanding of:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” **1 John 1:8-9**

In this opening passage of his letter John is talking about the Gospel he has proclaimed to them; the Gospel through which they were saved; the Gospel that demands repentance from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light (v5-7). Those who deny their need for repentance are deceived, but those who confess their previous deception are made righteous (v8-10). Thus 1 John 1:8-9 are about a person responding to the Gospel and coming to faith; they are not instructions for believers (see "If we confess our sins..." at the end of this document). Instructions for believers come in the next chapter:

“If anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” **1 John 2:1**

Here there is no requirement for confession and repentance. We already have a full-time advocate with the Father whose atoning sacrifice is forever sufficient. We are not supposed to live with a continuing reminder of our sin. As believers we live in the wonder of continuing forgiveness because Jesus' death was sufficient for us. We are now to live in the joy of knowing that Jesus is our righteousness.

“Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” **Rom 5:1**

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **Gal 3:27**

The Holy Spirit convicts unbelievers of sin, but His work for a believer is to convict them of their righteousness in Christ:

Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus ... You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. **Rom 6:11,18**

And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. **1 John 2:28**

In Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. **Col 2:10-14**

Our conscience can condemn us even though we know God does not. The devil is the “Accuser of the brethren” (Rev 12:10). Paul warns us to guard against the fiery darts of the evil one by wearing the breastplate of righteousness (Eph 6:14). Whose righteousness do you suppose we wear? Ours? No! It is Christ’s righteousness that we wear. The devil wants us to be sin-conscious; God wants us to be Christ-conscious:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. **Col 3:1-4**

Do you feel Teflon-coated clean? All-the-time clean? That your sin and shortcomings do not and cannot make you dirty or give you a guilty conscience? That you do not need to confess your sins to God in order to draw near to him with joy and confidence? It is the work of the Holy Spirit and our responsibility as disciples to convince ourselves of these great biblical truths.

We need to know our sins are forgiven as a free gift, with nothing at all for us to contribute. But in order for us to have a clean conscience we also need to know that Christ is our righteousness. Our identity is Christ, not mucky me. My conscience is his conscience, my confidence is his confidence, my righteousness is his righteousness. We need to know this, not simply as doctrinal truth, but as a felt reality.

We do not need to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness if we are born again. If the Holy Spirit is living in us He changes our hearts so that we do not want to sin. But if we do, “we have an advocate...” John tells us that when we belong to God and believe His truth, our hearts will be at rest and not suffer from condemnation:

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us. **1 John 3:19-24**

Although we naturally repent when the Holy Spirit does reveal sin to us, sometimes we become hardened to our sin and it takes some more drastic action from the Lord to confront us with our folly:

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ...but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. ... afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. **Heb 12:7-11**

‘Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent. **Rev. 2:5**

Holiness matters because we have turned away from darkness to Light and we want to walk in the light and truth. We want to enjoy fellowship with the Holy Spirit and with one another. We will want to talk to God about the areas where we fall short of God’s glory because we will want His help to grow more like Christ. We are likely to confess our short comings and thank Him for His grace and forgiveness.

The problem with seeing repentance as a daily requirement for dealing with sinful acts is that it encourages us to see our relationship with God as being performance-based. It feeds unbelief, self-righteousness and tends to make us compare ourselves with others:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? ... Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. **Gal 3:1**

Sin consciousness stifles our growth. It hinders our fellowship with God. It leaves us with a tainted conscience which makes us feel dirty and unable to approach God with confidence. The boast of the New Covenant over the Old is that it gives us a clear conscience (at least it should do!):

The Old Covenant sacrifices were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper ... How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences from dead works so that we may serve the living God! ... Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **Heb 9:9, 14, 10:22**

Fellowship Forgiveness

There is a place for repentance, confession and asking for forgiveness: in our relationships with each other:

“forgive our sins as we forgive others...” **Matt 6:12**

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." **James 5:16**

Sin creates barriers and difficulties between believers:

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. **1 John 1:7**

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. **Matt 18:15**

If we have turned from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of Light, we will want to walk in light and truth with one another. We will want to deal with any relationship issues that arise between us and we will be gracious and merciful in response to the grace and mercy we have received from Jesus.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **Eph 4:32**

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **Col 3:12-13**

Discipleship

Discipleship is about believing God, trusting His promises and living out the life of confident faith He calls us to. For us to do this, we need to be far more conscious of Christ in us than sin in us. Constant reminders of our sin do nothing to help us move in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Look over the scriptures quoted in this study and ask yourself "What is the Spirit trying to convince me of?"

We need to fix our eyes on Jesus, His righteousness, His indwelling presence, His favour, His promises:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. **Eph 3:16-21**

If we confess our sins...

John's use of the word "we" in "If we confess our sins..."(1 John 1v9) has led many to think that John is saying that Christians should confess their sins. But if we follow John's argument through, and notice how he uses "we" then we can see he must be talking about unbelievers coming to faith.

From vv1-5 John clearly means himself and his fellow apostles when he uses "we". But in v6 he writes:

"If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth."

Here, John cannot possibly be meaning himself when he writes "we". He is using "we" to imagine himself in the shoes of an unbeliever. In v7 he continues to imagine himself as that unbeliever coming into the light of the Gospel:

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

In v8 and v10 it is again clear that he uses "we" to imagine an unbeliever, but this time one who rejects the light:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." ...
"If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us."

So that leaves us with the "we" in v9:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Who is John meaning by "we"? Well, in both the preceding and following sentences he clearly means an unbeliever who has encountered the Gospel of Light – one who either accepts or rejects the message. It makes no sense at all for John to suddenly be talking about Christians at this point. It is obviously the same people he has in mind since v6: unbelievers encountering the Gospel who either reject the idea that they are sinners in need of forgiveness, or who confess their need to Jesus and turn to Him for saving forgiveness. V9 is about what happens when an unbeliever comes out of darkness into the light. Chapter 2 is about living as a believer. There, the answer to our ongoing sin is the eternal advocacy and sufficiency of Jesus - see especially 2:1-2 and 2:12.

So, in conclusion, this famous passage in John's letter is NOT an instruction to believers to keep confessing their sin, but an instruction to unbelievers coming to faith. God does not want us to keep remembering our sin. He has forgiven it. He wants us to remember and celebrate Christ who is our righteousness – "Set your minds on things above, not on things below" Colossians 3:1-3.