

Did you catch the first command Jesus gives in Mark's Gospel? First, He says the time has come and the kingdom of God is at hand. Then comes the command: repent. Repent is the first thing Jesus tells people to do. That word becomes the key word whenever He meets someone. It basically sums up all of what He taught, what He preached, what He wanted His miracles to bring about in people's lives: Repentance.

Now repentance has a fairly simple definition. It means to turn. To turn away from one thing and to turn *to* something else. It's like driving a car and making a U-turn. Repentance is a U-turn from one direction to another,

I heard about a basketball player whose team kept struggling game after game. In his frustration, he said, 'we need to turn things around here 360 degrees.' His resolve is admirable, but that athlete sure needed a refresher course in geometry: 360 degrees is a full circle. That brings you right back to where you started from. To turn a bad situation around and make it good you need to make a **180**-degree turn. Repentance is like that. You don't come back to where you started, 360 degrees. Repentance means you're headed in the opposite direction you were once going, 180 degrees.

When Jesus uses the word repent, He's calling people to turn away from anything that leads away from Him and to turn instead toward Him. Then comes His second command: believe. Believe not just anything but believe in Jesus. Trust Him. Turn toward Him. Hold on to Him.

Repent and believe is the heart of Jesus' message when He speaks or does something. He says and does much more, but this is the gist, the summary, the heart of His ministry: repent and believe. Repent of sin. Believe, because He has come to remove it. And He will!

Why? Because the time had come. The time had been fulfilled. Time as Jesus uses it here is not so much a calendar date, like AD 30. It's more like the right time, a decisive time. Like in World War II when the Allies decided on just the right day for the Normandy invasion: D-day. Preparation, morning tides on the beaches, the element of surprise, even the weather all had to come together; all had to be just right. It wasn't just June 6, 1944; it was the day. And the day, just the right day, changed history. Jesus is saying that now, since He's arrived on the scene, the prophecies from the Old Testament were fulfilled in Him. History now turns in a different direction.

Jesus is the decisive turning point in the history of this world. Everything changes because He has arrived. The exact date is not that important, but that

He came into this world **is**. Everything changes. All of history turns on what Jesus would do.

And what **would** Jesus do? He says the kingdom of God is at hand. Now usually when we think of a kingdom, we picture some country or place. The United Kingdom is found on a map, and within its boundaries are England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. But Jesus isn't so much talking about a geographical place when He says kingdom. No, He's talking about the rule or reign or authority or power of God in this world and in our lives.

In Handel's Messiah is that incredible musical piece called the Hallelujah Chorus. One of the most memorable lines is "And he shall reign forever and ever." Did you catch the word in that line? He shall **reign** forever and ever. He shall **rule**. That's the kingdom of God. His reign, His rule.

Are you starting to get the picture of what Jesus' first sermon was saying? The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come. And who is standing there, who is saying this? **Jesus** is. All of **time** was leading up to this moment. All of **history** would turn on Jesus and what He would do. He **is** the kingdom of God. He has come.

But not in the way the people back then were expecting. They were expecting the Messiah to get rid of the political oppression of foreign domination. They were expecting that there would be no more poverty, famine, or hunger. They were expecting a place that would be safe and protected, where animals and children could play together without fear, like the prophet Isaiah had talked about: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain" (Is 11:6-9a). They were expecting that sin would be destroyed and everyone would worship the true God. "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (11:9b).

But Jesus turns those expectations upside down. The way and the when of this Messiah they had all wrong. Jesus selects fishermen to be His first followers, not a powerful army. He doesn't hand out money and the best houses to those who believe in Him, but simply calls them to follow Him. He doesn't play it safe but is arrested and crucified. He doesn't do away with sin in this world but forgives it. His death on the cross forgives it.

Oh, the day will come when all those expectations will come true. At the end of time, Jesus will return in power and glory. Children will safely play with wild

animals and snakes that we'd expect to be poisonous. Sin will be destroyed, and we will hunger no more. But until then, the kingdom of God is Jesus stepping into **this** world and calling people to repent and believe. So, when we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come," we're praying that Jesus comes to each one of us. And when He does, He calls us to repent and believe.

So repent, turn away from anything that would lead you away from Him and believe; turn **to** Jesus. Now comes the hard part—what this does in our lives. Once again, Jesus turns everything upside down. He turns our lives inside out. He changes the direction we so often want to go.

I remember once seeing a T-shirt. It had a school of fish all swimming in one direction. However, in the midst of those fish, one is swimming in the opposite direction. This fish has a cross where its eye would be. Most of you know that the fish is an ancient symbol for Christianity, for Christians, for Jesus. That's why you see a fish decorations like this beautiful wooden one somebody gave to me as a gift this past week. So on this shirt, the one fish, the believer, has turned around 180 degrees and is headed in a different direction.

A Christian often finds himself or herself going against the flow while living day-to-day in this world. That's because, as Martin Luther said in the first of his Ninety-five Theses, the **entire life** of believers is to be one of repentance, a complete turnaround from the sin and unbelief that's natural to us.

What does that look like? Start with something as simple as what you do when you do something wrong. Now the direction most people go when they've messed up is to avoid taking responsibility. They blame someone else. They say they were only doing what everyone else was doing. They were only acting out on their anger. They say what they did really wasn't **that** bad. Maybe they'll call it a lifestyle choice or that their parents are the ones at fault. It's in the genes, and so they were predisposed to be this way. And so on.

Remember, Jesus calls for us to **repent**. He says take responsibility for what you've done wrong. He says confess it to Him. He says don't make excuses like the rest of the crowd but come before Him with repentant hearts and seek His forgiveness. So, the confession of sins at the beginning of the service is not just a part of the liturgy we do every week. The confession of sins is **actually** turning **away from** the sin in our lives, in whatever form it takes in the breaking of God's commands, and turning **toward** Jesus, because He **does** forgive, freely and abundantly!

But don't do this just on Sunday. Martin Luther's Evening Prayer begins by thanking God for keeping you safe this day. Then the next petition says, "I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong." **That's**

repentance. *That's* turning *away* from the sin and turning *to* Jesus. And then believe that Jesus forgives you for the sake of His death on the cross. He's alive, risen from the dead, and He has the authority to forgive all sins. So, praying a prayer like this every night when you go to bed is doing what Jesus wants you to do: repent and believe.

Of course, confessing our sins means changing direction in very real, sometimes painful, close-to-home ways in our lives. To repent is to turn away from anything that leads away from Jesus.

I think about the four fishermen whom Jesus called to follow Him; Peter, Andrew, James, and John. There they were going about their own business, their fishing business, cleaning their nets by the Sea of Galilee, and suddenly their lives were changed, turned around, in that *now* they were to catch people for Jesus. Today, most fish swim in the direction of not saying anything about Jesus. We're told to keep our faith quiet. Don't talk about it. We're not to impose our religion on others. Church is private and not to be shared in public.

But Jesus says repent and turn to a different direction. You are called just like the disciples to share the Good News about Jesus with others. Because the time is right. The time has come. Jesus is here, and He rules. He is the kingdom of God. You have been forgiven by His death and resurrection! You have a new life! So repent and believe. Find those areas in life that are leading you away from Jesus, make a 180-degree turn away from them, and turn to Him. Believe in Jesus.