

*Even 16 years after leaving the industry, I still tend to think a bit like a farmer.*

One of my favourite parables, is the parable of the sower (Chapter 4). I like the way it talks about how **we** can be like different soil types, in the way that the Word of God either grows in us, or whether it withers and dies...

And with the Bible reading this morning, I couldn't help but think of "Preparing soil, so that it's in a good condition for planting."

*In the irrigation area at the moment, I think most people have got their fields worked down to the right tilth, so it's not too cloddy, and not too shallow, and they've put down their fertiliser and they've hilled it up... And they've prepared the soil. All they need now is to wait for the right time, get a bit of rain or add some water, and it's ready to plant...*

*The farmer prepares the soil, to give their seed the very best chance, of growing into a bountiful crop... When it comes to farming (as with a lot of things), preparation is very important.*

And the Gospel of Mark, begins with a message of preparation.

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way,

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,' "

And **tada** John the Baptist appears...

....

When Mark introduces Jesus, he doesn't introduce us to a little baby boy, born in a manger – he introduces us to a full-grown **man** – a man who is the Son of God (no less) – the Son of God, who would **die** (in order to save us), but the Son of God, who we need some preparation to meet...

And to facilitate that preparation, John the Baptist appears...

And the way he's described:

- out in the wilderness;
- clothed in camel's hair;
- wearing a belt;
- eating bush tucker...

might tell **us** that he's living an alternate lifestyle of sorts, but to anyone familiar with the Old Testament, he's an image of the prophet Elijah... And this is important:

The last words of the Old Testament, are these: Malachi 4:5&6

<sup>5</sup> "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of YHWH comes. <sup>6</sup> And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Alright, so the last verses of the Old Testament, **Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet**. And now the first verses of the Gospel of Mark, there's John, cutting an image of Elijah, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord...

- His **task**, was to make a road for God.
- His **method**, was teaching.
- The **content** of what he taught, was “Turn from your evil ways, and turn back to God.”

And essentially, that has to be the same starting point, for when we preach the good news today... “Turn from your evil ways, and turn back to God.”

<sup>4</sup> John appeared, baptising in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the people came, from Judea and Jerusalem (That's like saying, “from the heart of the Bible Belt, they came”), confessing their sins...

...

It's pretty clear to me as I read this, “Baptism isn't some kind of magical or religious rite, that's going to make someone righteous before God – it's not Baptism itself that saves– it's the change of heart...”

A key word for us here, is the word “repentance”. What does it mean to repent???

It's pretty important. When John the Baptist preached, he preached the need for the people to repent. In V15, when Jesus preached, His message was the same: **the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.**" In Chapter 6, when Jesus sent the disciples out to preach, **they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.**

What's the common factor here? Repentance... There is no 'coming to Jesus' without repentance. There is no **salvation** without repentance. There is no **genuine conversion**, without repentance...

So, what is it?

Well, in the Greek, the word is μετάνοια, meaning "change of mind; repentance; conversion". One Greek Dictionary, puts it like this:

*to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness – [it's] 'to repent, [it's] **to change one's way...***<sup>i</sup>

It then makes the point that our English understanding of "repentance" might focus on the sorrow or contrition that a person experiences because of sin, but the Greek μετάνοια, *seems to be more specifically the total change, both in thought and behaviour, with respect to how one should both think and act.*<sup>ii</sup>

....

Now, that's quite a bit different to a gospel that's sometimes preached today.

There's a bit of a modern-day heresy, that's becoming more popular at the moment – I've referred to it (in the past) as “easy-believism”... And what it does, is it **redefines** “repentance”. It picks up on the literal Greek of μετάνοια (metanoia) – “change of mind”... and they teach that “repentance is to change your mind about who Jesus is”... – just believe in Jesus, and He will save us from our sins... **Add** a ‘belief in Jesus’ to your current life, and you're saved... And it totally ‘plays down’ any part, of “change of behaviour”...

And often, those who preach an “easy-believism”, will say that anyone who teaches that we have to change our behaviour, is preaching ‘legalism’...

But here in the Gospel of Mark, the people heard the preaching of John the Baptist, and they came, repenting and confessing their sins... That's a picture of a complete turn-around – not just in thinking, but a complete change in thought and behaviour...

They realised that their current life, was so full of sin, and so they came and confessed their sins – it was something they wanted to be rid of...

And yet, in many western churches today, you'll hear the message, “Believe in Jesus”, but you **won't** hear the message “Repent of your sins”... Whereas true repentance – the only repentance that counts, is **both**...<sup>iii</sup> Believe in Jesus, **and** repent of your sin...

And this got me thinking: “How often do we pray prayers of repentance in our church?” And most Sundays, we do pray a prayer of repentance, but not all.”.... But in many churches today, whether they be liberal, or even in many churches who claim to be ‘evangelical’, you’ll almost never hear a prayer of confession being prayed.... There might be prayers of ‘coming to Jesus’, or prayers of commitment, but not so many prayers of “God, I turn from this sin”...

I guess the point is, “Christian conversion, is a **complete** turning from evil, toward God”, and it’s not just a mind-set; nor is it just a keeping of rules and regulations...

We turn from evil toward God, with our attitude, **and** our behaviour...

In V5, they came, **confessing their sins**...

The fact that it’s talking about the plural here – alright, they didn’t confess their sin (singular) – they confessed their sins (plural)... – “confessing their sins”, shows that the dominant idea is that of individual<sup>iv</sup> faults or individual wrong-doings, that need to be confessed... It’s not just a general turning to believe in God... Any **genuine** turning to believe in God, will **always** be accompanied by ‘specific repentance of sins’ ‘and confession of sins’

There is no heart further from salvation, than a heart that sees no need for confession...

I remember the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, who came to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was a pretty good fella, <sup>Luke 18: 13</sup> **But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'**

Guess which one Jesus said was justified... The one who confessed...

Righto. Let's move on...

John, was a mighty prophet... But he was only ever the supporting act... He said, "After me, there's one much mightier than I coming... I'm not even worthy to do up his shoe-laces... I'll baptise you with water, but He'll baptise you with the Holy Spirit..."

The task of a preacher, is to point to the one who is greater – our Lord Jesus Christ... You haven't come here this morning to hear me (I mean, why would you? I'm a nobody.) ... You've come to learn about the Lord Jesus Christ – the Son of God...

When it comes to preachers, there **are** some truly amazing orators – thoroughly entertaining public speakers.... but if their message is mostly about :

- 'good advice for living'; or
- 'self-help'; or
- 'how to fix your marriage'; or
- 'how to get rich'; or

- ‘how to get your kids to talk to you again’, they’ve missed the point entirely... The job of the preacher, is to teach the need for repentance and confession of sin, and to always point to the Good News of Jesus Christ... It’s **always**, all about Jesus...

We preachers – we’re nobodies, and that’s the amazing thing – God uses nobodies, to point to the most important somebody. He uses nobodies, to point the world to His Son...

So, Jesus Himself came to be baptised by John... Not because **He** needed to repent of sin (He was sinless),,, but something Spiritual happened at the baptism of Jesus.... As **He came up out of the water, immediately** he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

For Mark, he doesn’t spend any time explaining it – for him, that’s just what happened...

- Jesus was baptised
- **immediately** we have the sign that the Holy Spirit is upon Jesus.
- And there’s a public announcement from heaven, “You are my beloved Son, and I’m very pleased with you.”...

Now, some people feel they don’t **need** to be baptised...

**Jesus** didn't need to be baptised for the repentance of sins, but at His baptism, His heavenly Father was very pleased with Him ...

Mark doesn't tell us **why** Jesus was baptised – it just seems that it was 'very appropriate' that He was... In the Book of Mark, Jesus teaches a lot about the 'Kingdom of God', and it seems to me, that Baptism is like a citizenship ceremony, of becoming a citizen of the Kingdom of God....

And I want to encourage you – if there's anyone here today, who's never been baptised,,,, why not??? We're not saved by getting baptised, but when we repent, and believe in the Lord Jesus, the visual sign of our change of allegiance (from the Kingdom of this world, to the Kingdom of God), is Baptism... And if God was pleased when His Son was baptised, I reckon He's pleased when we are too...

But I'll tell you what Baptism isn't... Baptism **is not** the point at which all of your troubles are going to disappear...

Some people feel that:

- if I get baptised, then my walk with God is going to get a whole lot better;
- **I'll** be so much more committed;
- it'll make sin easier to resist;
- temptations are going to get easier....

**Not at all...**

Once Jesus was baptised, the Spirit **immediately** drove Him out into the wilderness, and He was there for 40 days, being tempted by Satan... **he was with the wild animals, and**

the angels were ministering to him. That's all Mark has to say about it. He doesn't describe the temptations...

To Mark, all that matters:

- is that Jesus was tempted;
- He was in a place of danger;
- He was in a place of loneliness; and
- in that place, God ministered to Him....

Isn't that beautiful...

And often (Not always, but often), for a period of time following someone's baptism, the devil has a real 'go at em'... You see, the devil doesn't like it when we take a step of commitment to God. And the Devil can't hurt us (God won't let him)... All he can do is tempt us... When we are baptised, and filled with the Holy Spirit, we've been prepared for the Ministry of God,,, and Satan tries to throw 'a spanner in the works', by tempting us to sin...

But here's the lesson:

- through temptation;
- in times of danger;
- in times of loneliness;
- in times of need,,,,,,

The Lord will minister to us – He will provide our needs...

And you know, in those sorts of times, the temptation might be to cry out, "But God, you don't know what it's like....." Ha ha... Doesn't He???? He sure does... He's been there.

...

I find it interesting, that it was The Spirit, who **drove** Jesus out into the wilderness...

A lot of Christians – when they're wondering how they're meant to be serving God, they think:

- what's my passion?
- what do I enjoy doing?
- what am I good at?
- what'll be fun????

and if it feels good, and if it feels like we can do it, well “That must be where God's calling me to be”...

And so:

- apparently God rarely calls pastors to ministries west of the Great dividing range;
- Almost never does he call a family with university aged children, hundreds of km from the nearest university; and
- apparently He delays his call to move, if it means changing schools...
- And it's amazing how the call of God is so much clearer, when it is to a beautiful, cool, coastal climate.....

Now, I want you to hear this, “Do not confuse **your** desires, with the will of God.”...

**Often.** (not sometimes) **Often.** (Maybe even “usually”):

- the call of God will be to a place that you don't want to go.
- it'll be to a task that you don't want to do; and
- maybe even, to love a person you don't want to love...

The Spirit **drove** Jesus out into the wilderness – to a place of tough times – to a place of temptation – to a place of loneliness... How much more, do you think the Spirit needs to drive us:

- to go where we don't want to go;
- to do what we don't want to do;
- to be where our best friends are not;
- to serve in a ministry that isn't that much fun...

But get this:

When we are obedient, and we **do** go where the Spirit leads – **even if the Spirit has to drive us there**, the Lord goes with us. He ministers to us. And you know what??? There's no place I'd rather be, than with the Lord: Smack bang, in the middle of God's will – there's no better place to be...

And there's no greater joy, than to experience the provision of the Lord:

- strength in the face of temptation
- provision in the place of need;
- a friend in the place of loneliness...

So, Jesus came through His 'wilderness experience', and so will we...

I just want to say something though, about 'wilderness experiences'... Some people talk about 'a wilderness experience' as a time of dryness and 'being away from God'... Biblically, it's nothing of the sort... The wilderness experience may be a time of physical and emotional dryness, but it's a time of spiritual strengthening and upbuilding... And don't we need that, hey....

V14

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Mark doesn't tell us how long this is after Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness... But it was after John was arrested, that the time was right for Jesus to begin proclaiming the good news of God.

**John's** task, was to prepare the way for God, by preaching repentance... But John's message of repentance, was too offensive... And of course, we know from the other Gospels, that not only was John arrested, but he was eventually beheaded, because the king's floozy didn't like his message to repent from sin...

But this didn't faze Jesus... He stepped in, and began preaching **almost** exactly the same message: Once John had been rejected, the time had arrived.

the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

That's the road to conversion... - The road to citizenship in the Kingdom of God – repent and believe in the gospel."

Repentance without faith in the Gospel, is trying to be a better person, but that won't get us into the Kingdom of God.

Believing that Jesus has saved us from our sins, without repentance, is a half-hearted mindset of wishful thinking, but it won't get us into the Kingdom of God...

But to **repent and believe in the gospel**. – there's the Kingdom of God – right there...

It's a complete turn-around. "Christian conversion, is a **complete** turning from evil, toward God". It's not just a mind-set; It's not just a keeping of rules and regulations...

We turn from evil toward God.

- We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- We believe He has the power to save us.
- We believe that when we confess our sins, He forgives us of those sins;

And so we repent;

- and we confess
- And we not only **say** that Jesus is Lord;
- Our whole life is submitted to Him, **because** He is Lord

It's a complete turn-around.

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,

once again we hear those words of invitation:

"Repent and believe in the gospel."

And Lord, we are so aware, that repentance involves confession...

Sometimes we've begun to embrace a shallow, worldly notion of discipleship –  
belief without change...

Ah Lord God,  
We don't only want to be half-hearted for you...  
Nor do we want to be caught in a striving to make ourselves righteous...

Lord, we believe. We believe the Gospel.  
We believe the good news of Jesus Christ.  
We believe that Jesus died, to save us from our sins;  
We believe that He rose again, conquering sin and death...

Lord we thank you, that Your free gift,  
is that when we confess our sins,  
You forgive us of all unrighteousness.

Lord,  
we confess our pride;  
selfishness  
materialism  
We confess that our hearts have been drawn to immorality;  
to greed  
to hatred...  
And not only have we been drawn – we've embraced them.

God, have mercy on us – sinners....

And Lord, I want to thank you, that as we leave this place,  
we're not full of sin. You've taken it away...

And Lord, I thank you for this new chance of holiness;  
No – more than a chance – an assurance of holiness.

Lord, we commit our lives to you.  
 And just as the Spirit drove Jesus,  
 to where he probably didn't want to go,  
 Because You are our Lord,  
 You have the right to drive us:  
 And we look forward to the adventure,  
 as You are with us, when You drive us to serve,  
 where and how, we would never have chosen.

You are with us in the place of loneliness;  
 You are with us in the place of danger;  
 In the place of need;  
 And in the place of sorrow and despair.

And we give you thanks,  
 in Jesus' name,  
 Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., 1996. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains.*

<sup>ii</sup> Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., 1996. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains.*

<sup>iii</sup> In fact the predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoia* as change of mind plays very little part in the NT. Rather the decision by the whole man to turn round is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas.

Hence, there can be only one way for the man wishing to escape judgment. He must repent, so that his whole life is changed and brought into a new relationship with God

repentance is now no longer obedience to a law but to a person. The call to repentance becomes a call to discipleship. So repentance, faith and discipleship are different aspects of the same thing (Mk. 1:15, "Repent and believe").

Goetzmann, J., 1986. μετάνοια L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology.*

<sup>iv</sup> The use of the nouns chiefly in the plur. shows that the dominant idea is that of individual faults committed against the law or one's brother. The sinner, the *hamartōlos*, is, according to the traditional Jewish view, the man who does not abide by the law and the Pharisaic interpretation of it. Thus he was put on the same level as the tax-collector

Günther, W., 1986. ἁμαρτία L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology.*