

January 21, 2018

*Mark 1:14-15: **“Repent and Believe”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson for this morning says: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:14-15).’” There are a lot of words in these two verses that we may or may not understand. Please allow me to take some time at the beginning of this sermon to make sure that we know what it all means before we move to the main point.

Jesus says: “the time is fulfilled.” Every detail in time, and especially what has been declared in Scripture, has formed a framework with one purpose in mind - to reveal the heart of God in Jesus of Nazareth and bring salvation. Yes! Even all of the drip drops of water to the final drip led to a Sea of Galilee by which the Savior might come and walk on the waves and rescue us from drowning in sin and forever death. The apostle Paul helps us to understand: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal. 4:4-5).”

The time is fulfilled, “and the kingdom of God is at hand.” The kingdom of God is God’s gracious rule and reign through Jesus. He rules all things in order that we might come to faith, remain in faith, and reach our final destination with him. He is the king of truth, and through his truth, all is accomplished. And so, this kingdom is at hand, provided that his truth is in you. It is here - even now in all those who believe in Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. You are in his kingdom. And, the kingdom that is currently by faith and unseen, but at hand in our Lord Jesus, who will come to judge the living and the dead, will one day be seen in all its glory! As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:18: “The Lord [the king] will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his *heavenly* kingdom.”

Access into this kingdom is clearly indicated by Jesus in the words, “repent and believe in the gospel.” The gospel is the good news that the Son of God became one of us in order to live a perfect life in our place. Our self-centeredness has made it impossible for us to think, say, or do anything as it should perfectly be in love toward God. But, Jesus has done it for us. He obeyed the law perfectly on our behalf, and he endured the punishment that we deserve for our failure, so that all who believe in him might be declared perfect and forgiven. And what does it mean to “repent” and “believe?”

In the narrow sense, repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit as he takes the law recorded in the Bible and touches our consciences (that little judge in us all) with terror over sin against God. The little judge in us all pronounces us “guilty!” and in that guilt, we mourn over our offenses and fear death as well as the prospect of meeting the perfect God. To repent means to see sin as utterly sinful and to loath it instead of loving it as one anticipates the moment of facing judgment. If we are bothered by the little judge in each of us, then what will happen when we meet the perfect judge who knows all things?

To believe means to have faith. It is the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith by the Gospel. He gives us saving knowledge of Jesus, so that we might trust, rejoice, and find comfort in Him and the forgiveness of sins. We are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who suffered and died in our place, and this comforts the little

judge in us, takes away the guilt and delivers us from terror. The command to believe does not assume that it is in our power to believe. Rather, God commands “believe!” and it is accomplished by him. We believe, and we say “I believe” passively, as an echo of the heart because of the work of God in us, as Paul writes: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 1:8-9).”

Now, having spent this time explaining our text for this morning, what’s the main point of the message today? It is easy for the Christian to look at our Gospel lesson and say something like this, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I have already repented and believe. I’m a Christian! Time to leave all that sin, death, repentance, and believe stuff behind. It’s time to move on to other issues that are more relevant to my life. Isn’t the Christian life really about being good and doing good? It’s about doing my part and God will do his part. It’s about God giving me a good life, quality living with other Christians, feeling good, right?”

What if I were to tell you that the command to repent and believe is not merely for the unbeliever out there, but for every Christian, every day? What if I told you that being good and doing good is no guarantee of anything? Let’s start with repentance and what our Lutheran Confessions state:

In the case of a Christian such repentance continues until death, for all through life it contends with the sins that remain in the flesh. As St. Paul testifies in Rom. 7:23, he wars with the law in his members, and he does this not with his own powers but with the gift of the Holy Spirit which follows the forgiveness of sins. This gift daily cleanses and sweeps out the sins that remain and enables man to become truly pure and holy [SA III III:40].

If you don’t like the quote from the confessions, how about Jesus when he says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me (Luke 9:23).” What else is repentance but the daily putting to death of the sinful self that doesn’t want to die? And what is the meaning of Thomas’ words when after being told that Lazarus is dead, he says: “Let us also go, that we may die with him (John 11:16)?” And finally, there is Paul who writes, “I die every day (1 Cor. 15:31).”

Now, let’s consider the command to believe in our Gospel lesson. Please allow me to quote from our Lutheran Confessions again [FC SD IV:34]:

It does not, however, mean that faith accepts righteousness and salvation only at the beginning, and then delegates this function to works, as if works should henceforth preserve faith, the righteousness that has been received, and salvation. On the contrary, in order that the promise that we shall not only receive but also retain righteousness and salvation may be very certain to us, Paul ascribes to faith not only our entry into grace but also our present state of grace and our hope of sharing the glory of God (Rom. 5:2). In other words, he attributes to faith alone the beginning, the middle, and the end of everything.

The maintenance or preservation of faith is just as vital today as the day when we started to believe. Good works do not preserve faith. God preserves faith through the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord’s

Supper. However, though good works do not preserve faith, our evil works will destroy faith. Furthermore, while we love because Christ loved us, good works do not save us. One more time, the Lutheran Confessions:

Therefore, we must begin by diligently condemning and rejecting this false Epicurean delusion that some dream up, that faith and the righteousness and salvation we have received cannot be lost through any arrogant and intentional sin or evil work but rather that when Christians follow evil lusts without any fear and shame, resist the Holy Spirit, and intentionally proceed to sin against their consciences, they nonetheless at the same time retain faith, God's grace, righteousness, and salvation . . . Faith does not remain in those who lead a sinful life, lose the Holy Spirit, and reject repentance [FC SD IV:31,33].

Again, evil works destroy faith, good works do not preserve faith. Rather, God preserves our faith through the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. "It is clear from God's Word that faith is the only real means through which righteousness and salvation not only are received but also preserved [FC SD IV:35]." Jesus promises, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand (John 10:27-28)." Dismiss the Gospel, Baptism (and we live our Baptisms in Repentance and Forgiveness), stay away from the Lord's Supper, and in time you will surely fall into hell no matter how good you think you are.

The heart of the Christian life is to repent and believe the good news. It is not something that is only for those folks who are unbelievers. It is for Christians who still have their sinful natures and continue to struggle in a messed up, sinful down here. And yes it's true that we Christians follow Jesus by doing good works just as Andrew and Simon immediately left their nets and followed him. But we should never think that leaving our nets and following Jesus leaves behind repentance and the preservation of faith in the Gospel. Andrew and Simon never left their nets and followed Jesus in such a way that they avoided troubles in life and war with their sinful natures. They were compelled to live in repentance and the maintenance of their faith, and they feebly did the good works that God gave them and accomplished in and through them. We especially see this in the record of Simon Peter. Only by the grace of God were any of the apostles faithful and did their duty. Still being faithful and doing their duty never saved them, nor did it produce a great life down here. It produced a cross of suffering for a Savior who had loved them with an everlasting love.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott