

Entrance to the Kingdom is Through True Repentance

Matthew 21:28-32 • 2020-10-25



There are a lot of political debates happening right now. And a lot of politicians are saying just what they will do if they are elected. I'm sure we all understand how that works. The politician says they will do something. Then if they win, we get to find out if they will really do all the things which they said they would. It doesn't matter which candidates win. Many promised things will not get done. But should that really surprise us? Politicians aren't the only ones who know how to say the right things regardless of whether they will do them. We also know how easy it is to just say the right thing. That approach might fly in politics, but it doesn't fly in God's kingdom. Merely saying the right thing might help politicians get into office, but it won't help anyone get into the kingdom of God. Jesus warned about the dangers of merely speaking what is right. In fact, Jesus teaches that you cannot enter God's kingdom by merely saying the right things. What good is it if you can say the right thing but never turn from our sin? Today we will look at what Jesus says in Matthew 21 to find out how entrance to the kingdom of God is through true repentance.

Jesus was in the temple courts speaking to the chief priests and the elders of the people. All of these men would have been educated in the Word of God. They were respected for understanding the Scriptures. So, you can imagine how much it bothered them when someone like John the Baptist had come along calling them all to repent. Most of the spiritual leaders of the people had rejected his call to repent. That is why they also hated Jesus' call to repent.

The call to repentance is still often rejected today -often by those who know God's commands. Examine the main teaching of today's most popular churches. If there's one thing which is strikingly absent from much of today's preaching it is repentance. Sure, many will talk about doing the right thing. But what happens if it never amounts to more than lip service? Is the call for repentance there? The largest churches aren't the only ones which shy away from preaching repentance. I did a quick scan of all the content of online reviews of Christian churches in our small town.. I'm sure there are many local churches preaching about repentance. But that was not what the online reviewers liked most about any of them. None of the top-rated reviews mention anything about repentance. They all speak of feeling comfortable or of the people being friendly. They talk about liking the preaching and about messages of doing good. That is all okay. But if no one ever feels uncomfortable about sin during any part of preaching, then a preacher has failed to do what John and Jesus did for all who listened. One online reviewer said that the sermon during their visit to a local church was all about the need to preach the gospel. That is great to hear. The reviewer, however, pointed out that the entire 50-minute message failed to have even one single mention of the need for repentance. Another reviewer of a local church did mention the preacher talking about sin. But that reviewer gave a one-star review and attacked the pastor for talking about sin and the need for repentance. The call to repentance is not popular.

This is just a small example of a problem which we all share. We all naturally hate to hear that we must repent of sin. That's how it was for the spiritual leaders in Jesus' time. When the chief priests and elders heard Jesus' preaching of repentance, they interrupted him in the temple courts and questioned his authority. They wanted to know why he thought he had the right to call people to repentance.

Jesus in turn responded by teaching them a parable comparing the mindset of two different sons. The father said to one of his sons, "Go today and work in my vineyard." That son responded by basically saying, "No. I don't want to." He was rebellious. But later on, he changed his mind and went. The Father said the same thing to his other son. That son responded with full respect to his Father, "Yes, sir! I will." But then he didn't go and work. Jesus concluded by asking, "Which son did what his Father wanted?" The answer seems so obvious. It was the sinful, rebellious one who later changed his mind, who repented.

Mere lip service is empty service in God's kingdom. Both sons in Jesus' parable were guilty of sin. But only one of them repented. The other did not. Jesus is presenting us with two types of people. On the one hand there are those who are guilty of sin and rebellion and then repent. And on the other hand, there are those who claim to be loyal but also sin and do not repent. They look good when they have to, but not before God.

And lip service doesn't get any better if we just say we'll get around to obedience later. There is always an urgency in obeying God's commands. He doesn't ask us to obey him whenever we feel like it. His commands are for us today. "Go *today* and work in my vineyard." To rebelliously fail to obey him today is to sin against him today. To give mere lip service to him today is to lie about your sin today. Both attitudes are wrong for us today.

Which mindset fits your life today? Are you guilty of rebellion? Or are you guilty of trying to get off the hook by merely saying you'll obey him? Consider the ten commandments. "You shall have no other Gods." On the one hand you could say, "Okay God. I won't ever put anything above you." But what good is such sentiment if you end up spending today failing to put God first? For many Christians, sports, leisure, or careers and wealth become their treasure. And where their treasure is their heart is. In secret idolatry many break the first commandment as they fear, love, or trust in many other things above God. Someone might say, "I've kept the second commandment." But they don't use God's name to

pray and praise like they ought. Someone could say, "I've kept the third commandment." Meanwhile they don't always regard the Word as holy and gladly hear and learn it. The Bible is treated like a chore list of rules instead of a treasure box of truth. The third commandment is broken today. Some might say, "I honor the fourth commandment" but they mock those in authority. They might be politicians, but God put them in authority over us. We sin against God if we fail to honor them. Others might claim, "God I won't ever murder and break the fifth commandment." But what about the times they failed to put others first who are in need? Some could say, "Yes, Lord. I will keep the sixth commandment." But do they honor marriage in thought and action, or only in words?

I could go on with more of the commandments. But I think you get the point Jesus makes for us. Merely saying that you will obey God isn't good enough to give entrance into his kingdom. If you were to look at the two different sons which one would you have to say you are today? Both needed to repent. One didn't

The word for repentance in the Greek includes the idea of a changing of the mind. Repentance is not merely saying the right thing after you did wrong. It means changing your mind about what is right and wrong. We by nature, are all like that first son who hated his Father's commands. But we can also be like the second son. He also hated what his father commanded. He just wouldn't say it out loud. He knew how to say the right thing in order to look good. That is the trap and mindset that a Christian can fall into. The only thing that separates an unrepentant Christian from the rest of the world is that they offer God lip-service. They know how to say the right thing, but they can't do it. And they cannot enter God's kingdom with a heart that still loves what is evil. They also cannot serve God.

Jesus warned that failure to repent means failure to enter into his kingdom. *Jesus said to them, "Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him."* The spiritual leaders of the people couldn't yet enter God's kingdom. They had not yet repented and believed. We dare not approach God the way a politician might approach the debate stage looking for favor and votes. God knows when we only offer lip service.

Notice how Jesus never says that sinners enter the Kingdom of God because they said or did what was right. It is not by words or works that anyone can enter the Kingdom. Jesus speaks of people entering the kingdom of God through "the way of righteousness." It is the only way into God's kingdom. That righteousness is not found in fooling ourselves about our sin. The sinful people in Jesus' time entered the kingdom of God because they repented and believed the preaching of John. Though they believed they were guilty sinners, they had a new mindset towards sin. In repentance they turned from sin to God. They saw Jesus as the lamb of God who alone could take that sin away. Hating sin, they then loved the one who washed them from it.

"The way of righteousness" is found in what Jesus has done for us. God is not like us or like a politician that he should ever fail to do what he said he would do. He promised to come to bring us his righteousness. And he willingly, lovingly, graciously did so without hesitation. Can you picture as Son who always said, "Yes, father. I will." That was the man Jesus. He perfectly signed up to carry out the work that had to be done in his father's vineyard.

And he didn't just say he would do it. He did what neither son in the parable was capable of doing. Without hesitation he did everything perfectly the first time. As the true, perfect, and eternal Son of God he came to do what none of us ever could do: be the perfect and obedient Son. His Father had spoken from heaven regarding him, "This is my Son, with him I am well pleased." He was holy. He was perfect. His righteousness is ours through faith. Repentance means despairing of our own righteousness, hating sin, and turning to the righteousness of God. That righteousness will never fail us. To remove all our unrighteousness and fulfill the Father's will the Son of God gave up his life in the place of every sinner. And he lives forever as our risen Lord, freely granting his righteousness to all who repent and believe.

The tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom of God because they repented and believed. You and I enter the kingdom of God through repentance and faith in Christ. That alone is the way of righteousness.

Now today, because we know the Father's great love, we produce fruit in keeping with repentance. We keep his commands in love and repent when we fail. Anything else is not repentance but the unrighteous love of sin.

Politicians aren't the only ones who know how to say the right thing even if they don't mean it. We do too. But we know that lip service and merely saying the right thing won't do when it comes to the kingdom of God. The Lord looks for true righteousness. He offers it in Jesus Christ to all who repent and believe. With a new change of mind regarding sin we repent, believe, and find full entrance into the kingdom of God. The kingdom is ours through the perfect obedience of the Son of God. Heaven will be filled with tax collectors, prostitutes, and yes, even politicians who didn't keep their word. We know there's only one Son who responded perfectly to the Father's will. Through faith in him we gain entrance to the kingdom of God with true repentance.