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Turn! A Better Life Awaits You

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TEXT: Matthew 4:17

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

As a preacher of the gospel, one of the many things I love about Jesus is: he was a *preacher*. Our text begins today telling us "From that time Jesus began to preach." The preparations for his ministry were now complete. He'd been anointed and commissioned in his baptism, tempted in the wilderness by Satan, He had established his ministry headquarters in Galilee. And now what's the first thing Jesus did? It says He began to preach.

That word "preach" has taken a bit of a hit in our world today. The question has even been asked, "Do we need it anymore in the church?" Some churches refer to it as teaching and not preaching, as if preaching has something negative about it. Or we hear people say to someone, "Don't preach to me" or "Don't preach at me," when a friend or a relative is trying to make a point with them. It's an attempt to shut them up by insinuating that they are doing something negative: preaching. And it oftentimes works because we ourselves sometimes think, "I don't want to sound like I'm preaching to them." And yet here is Jesus, *preaching*. So obviously, preaching is an important part of God's redemptive plan, or Jesus would not have done it. It's a positive thing.

What does it mean to preach? To preach means to proclaim as a herald, telling news. And that's what we see Jesus doing and his preaching today: proclaiming something. And we're going to look at the heart of that proclamation, the main thrust of his message, and here it is: repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. I was browsing

around in a gift store recently and I came across a little book entitled *The Little Book of Lost Words: Collywobblers, Snollygosters, and 86 Other Surprisingly Useful Terms Worth Resurrecting*. Curiosity got me, so I picked it up and started looking through it and came across words like “dewdropper.” Ever heard that? It means a young, unemployed adult who sleeps through the day. And “snollygoster,” which is a noun meaning a dishonest, corrupt, and unprincipled person. I found the whole thing to be rather fascinating.

I thought of the book as I looked at the opening word of Jesus preaching: repent. You don't hear it used much these days, not even in church. In the minds of many people, I suppose it's an old-fashioned word associated with fire and brimstone sermons or with loud, obnoxious street evangelists holding signs saying “repent or burn.” So, the word has been put away as something rather old and negative. And yet here it is coming from the lips of Jesus. In my mind, that would make it a good word, worth resurrecting in our lives, because it's God's Word, first of all. God used that word through his prophets in the Old Testament as they spoke for him on his behalf. God had John the Baptism Baptist using it as well as the main theme of his preaching ministry.

And we see it in today's passage. Jesus, a son of God saying, “Repent.” It was also an important word used by the Apostles in the Book of Acts. We find, for instance, Peter used it in his preaching on the Day of Pentecost. “Repent,” he said to the crowd of listeners in Jerusalem. So, if this word was important to Jesus and his disciples, then it must be important for us to understand and to act upon, for it is something we are called to do. Now, to repent means to change direction, to reconsider the direction your life is taken and turn around and move in a new direction. It's a turning from something and turning towards something else. And about face; a U-turn like we sometimes do when we're driving a car. It's more than just being sorry, like we sometimes think and it's more than just expressing remorse or regret for wrongdoing, though this very well can be a part of repentance. But it's about turning mostly. Christian writer Gordon MacDonald, talking about repentance, I like what he said, he says

Repentance is not basically a religious word. It comes from a culture where people were essentially nomadic and lived in a world with no maps or street signs. It's easy to get lost walking through the desert. You become aware that the countryside is beginning to look strange, and you finally say to yourself, I'm going in the wrong direction. That's the first act of repentance. The second act of repentance is to then go in an alternate direction, an opposite direction.

That turning involves letting go of some old, preconceived notions that we have within ourselves and letting go of some old thoughts and habits, ways of doing life, and letting God be God in your life. It's letting go of the idols, those things that crowd and control our lives instead of God, and letting him take over and give you what you truly need to live a full, satisfying life. It's leaving some things behind in order to receive what God is offering. I was going one way. I go another way to receive.

Which brings us to the second half of Jesus's message – the reason Jesus gave for calling people to repent. Our text tells us “For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”. Kingdom of Heaven. He's not talking about going to Heaven here. It's the same word as the same phrase “The Kingdom of God” as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John use. Matthew's more sensitive to his Jewish audience, so because of they're concerned about the potential of using the Lord's name in vain as they talked about the Kingdom of God, he chose to use instead with them “Kingdom of Heaven.” So what is this Kingdom of Heaven about that Jesus is heralding? Well, first of all, the Kingdom of Heaven is the place where God rules. It's not defined by geography, but by human hearts given over to God's rule and authority over them. It's a spiritual kingdom. Jesus said to a questioning Pontius Pilate at his trial, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Second, God's kingdom coming into our world – the kingdom is good news for everyone. It means a new and better life with God has arrived, has become available. Jesus, later on in the Gospel, actually described God's kingdom as a treasure and a pearl of great worth to be possessed and a wedding feast to enjoy. It's not something you want to miss out on or ignore. A few verses after today's passage, in fact, we're told that Jesus went throughout Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom and gospel means good news. So, the kingdom is good news.

Finally, when Jesus is announcing God's kingdom, he's saying that it is at hand, meaning it's come near. And he's pointing to himself as he proclaims these words. The kingdom has come near and Christ, in the person of Jesus through his birth, his ministry, his crucifixion at the cross for humanity's sins and his resurrection from the dead. And it is now established in our world.

What kinds of blessings, then, are given to those who are citizens of that kingdom, is what we probably need to ask next? First scripture tells us that a person who steps into that kingdom receives righteousness in God's sight. We were unrighteous before, but

stepping into the kingdom we're made righteous. We're forgiven of our sins and cleansed of all our unrighteousness because of Christ's atoning death on the cross to pay for sin. So, we receive a new standing before God, a new status. Children of God.

There is also peace in the kingdom, which all of us long for in our lives, don't we? First, we're reconciled with God through Christ Jesus. And so, we have peace with Him. We're no longer His enemies, but sons and daughters of God. As we live in a reconciled relationship with them, we receive then the peace of God which dwells in us through the working of His Holy Spirit. We know that in every circumstance God is with us and God is in charge and casting all our anxieties on Him in prayer and supplication with Thanksgiving, scripture tells us, we will receive his deep, abiding peace within.

And finally, there's joy in the kingdom. God's joy. Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote that joy is a serious business of Heaven. He even wrote a book about this. And as he describes his conversion to Christianity, and he entitled it *Surprised by Joy*. We receive, first of all, the joy of God's salvation in our lives and in our delight in gladness, rejoicing in his deep love for us and his promises that I am his and he is mine forever. It's a deep-seated certainty that I am now safe in his hands no matter what. There's nothing that can snatch me from that loving hand. I can rejoice in him even during the worst of times. That's joy.

And living under God in his kingdom, finally, Jesus says, we will receive rest, rest for our souls as we learn from Him about the ways of kingdom living. Listen to his words that are so precious to us. "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn for me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Wow.

Forgiveness, peace, joy, rest. It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? I mean, who wouldn't want that? And God wants to give you that. That's why he sent Jesus Christ to usher you into his kingdom. That's why he had him suffer on a cross and then raised him again back to life so that the kingdom would be open to you. That kingdom, you see, is still available to us today. And we can enter in right now. We have only to repent. That's our response. And come to Jesus the King. That means turn to him. That's the response he's looking for. Turn away from those things that possess us and the false human made beliefs and values and gods that we have foolishly built our lives upon in

the hope of finding a satisfying and fulfilling life, and turn to him instead for real satisfying life. Our souls long for forgiveness, righteousness, peace, joy, rest, eternal life, abundant life. That is what awaits every individual who surrenders to him, and puts himself or herself in Christ's strong, loving hands. Repenting, you see, is a good move, a positive move, which leads a person to a new forever life with God. Jesus described it once as turning around and coming back home where we belong. He told the parable of a rebellious son who went to a far country to live life his way, and he found out life wasn't so good without his father. So, he turned around, he repented, and he came home and lo and behold, he was met with a joyous welcome by his father. Repentance leads us to grace – a fresh new start, living under God's loving jurisdiction in his kingdom. It's coming home. Christian apologist C.S. Lewis once said, "If you want to get warm, you must stand near the fire. If you want to be wet, you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace and eternal life, you must get close to or even into the thing that has them. They are not a sort of prize which God could, if he chose, just hand out to everyone. A better life is come. Repent."

Now, let me ask you, have you made that move in your life or have you continued to insist on running it yourself, your own little kingdom? My friend, that's a dead end street. Turn around. Turn towards Jesus and ask him to receive you and rule over you. And you will be received. Or maybe you're someone who, straight away from him, walked away from that relationship with God in your life is kind of messed up and not adding up. I've been there. Let me assure you, it's not too late to come home, to receive what he has to give you to give yourself over to his authority and care over your life. Why not do that now? He will not turn you away. This is the good news. You don't have to be stuck in your old life anymore without God at the center. A life that's leading you to a dead end. God has acted for you. A new life has become available to you through His son. Jesus Christ, your Savior. So repent. Turn.

Now, a while back, I read a testimonial article by a professional soccer player named Gavin Peacock, which was entitled *Professional Soccer Was My God*, and I'm going to finish with his story. He writes,

I was never going to be tall, so my dad, who was a soccer player, would take me into our backyard in southeast London and teach me how to quickly switch direction with the soccer ball at my feet. "The big guys won't be able to catch you," he said. For hours, I would practice turning to the left and right, dribbling in and out of cones, spinning this way and that. And my dad was right. The art

of turning served me well. Many of the goals I scored in the years to come were a result of his lesson. At age 16, I left school and signed a professional contract with the English Premier League Queens Park Rangers. I had achieved my goals and yet I wasn't really happy. I was playing the England Youth national team and it was not long before I broke into the starting 11 of the Queens Park Rangers. But I was an insecure person in the cutthroat world of professional sport. Soccer was my God. If I played well, I was high. If I played poorly, I was low. My sense of well-being and worth depended entirely on my performance. And I realized soon that achieving my goal wasn't all that was cracked up to be. And then finally, when I was 18, God intervened in my life. I was struggling to find purpose, you know, I decided to attend a local church and I don't remember what the preacher preached on, but afterward he invited me to his house where his he and his wife hosted a youth weekly youth Bible study I rolled up in my fancy sports car. Whoo! And yet, when they spoke about Jesus, as I listened, they displayed a life and joy that I knew I did not have. They talked about sin as if it had consequences and about God as if they knew him. I decided to return to that study the following week and the next. And I began to hear the Gospel. For the first time in my life, I realized that my biggest problem was not whether I met the disapproval of 20,000 strong crowds on Saturday. My biggest problem was my sin in the disapproval of Almighty God. I needed to turn. I realized that the biggest obstacle to happiness was that soccer was my king instead of Jesus, who provided a perfect righteousness for me. Over time, my eyes were opened through that Sunday meeting and I turned and repented and believed the Gospel. My heart still burned for soccer, of course, but it burned for Christ more. At the age of 35, he retired from professional soccer. Gavin currently serves as a pastor in Canada, and as he concludes his testimony, he says,

All those years ago, my earthly father taught me the art of turning. But it was my Heavenly Father who turned me first to Christ and now is helping me turn others to Christ by the preaching of His gospel. Amen.

Let's pray. Almighty God and Father, thank you for reaching out to us through Jesus to bring us into your kingdom, to live under your care and leadership. Amen.