

What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, “Repent”?

A Study of Matthew 4:12-17

Characteristic of Completeness: Salvation by Grace

Big Idea: By all means repent, but not for eternal life.

Related Scriptures: Isaiah 9:1-7; Hosea 6:1-3; Acts 10:1-48; John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; Luke 15:11-32; 2 Corinthians 7:8-9; 2 Timothy 2:24-26

Introduction:

- A. I have a question: Does a person need to repent in order to go to heaven? That is to say, is repentance a requirement for receiving eternal life? In order to be saved from the penalty of our sins, do we have to repent?

In Christendom today, the vast majority would probably say, “Yes, you must repent to go to heaven.”

Are they correct? Or are they the ones who need to repent?

- B. I bring this up because, in the biblical text we’re studying today, Jesus preaches one of His first sermons, and in the sermon, He uses the words, “repent” and “heaven.” In ► Matthew 4:17, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:17 . . . “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Those in the majority, the ones who say repentance is required, often point to this verse as supportive of their view. For example, one very fine preacher and author ► says:

. . . when our Lord first began to preach, the opening word of His message was “repent.” ► It was also the first word of John the Baptist’s message, and the basis of the gospel the apostles preached. ► No one who neglects to call sinners to repentance is preaching the gospel according to Jesus. . . . ► The truth of the gospel according to Jesus is that the only ones who are eligible for salvation are those who realize they are sinners and are willing to repent.¹

Is that right? Is Jesus saying we must repent to get to heaven?

- C. In ► my sermon today, I want to accomplish two things.
1. First, I want to explain the message of Jesus in Matthew 4:17. In the process, I want to determine whether or not Jesus is saying we must repent to get to heaven.

¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 66.

2. Second, I want to look more broadly at what the Bible has to say about the role of repentance in our lives today.

I. First, let's focus on the message of Jesus in Matthew 4:17.

A. It is always a good idea to consider the context of any message, so I'm going to back up and begin in Verse 12 to set the stage for Jesus' sermon in Verse 17.

1. In ► Verse 12, it says:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee

► “John” is John the Baptist—the forerunner of Jesus who preached the exact same sermon back in Matthew 3:2:

^{NAU} Matthew 3:2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Later, in Matthew 14,² we get an explanation why and how John was taken into custody. John had offended a Roman governor named Herod. So Herod had John arrested and thrown in jail.

In the wake of John's arrest, Jesus withdrew to the region of Galilee. It was perhaps a strategic withdrawal in the face of danger.³

2. Verse ► 13 continues:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:13 and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Let me retrace Jesus' steps using ► a map. On the ► bottom part of the map, there is the northern tip of the Dead Sea. Closer to the ► top of the map, there is the Sea of Galilee. The ► Jordan River joins the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Remember, the Jordan River is where John was baptizing, probably to the south, closer to the Dead Sea.

According to ► Verse 12, Jesus withdrew from there to the region of Galilee. And, according to ► Verse 13, He then traveled from town of Nazareth to Capernaum.

² Matthew 14:1-12.

³ David L. Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Streams, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 70.

Matthew positions the town of Capernaum in the minds of his Jewish audience by saying it's in the vicinity of Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the territories allotted to them bore their names.

3. The itinerary of Jesus may seem like an incidental detail. But the significance is explained in ► Verses 14-16. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:14 *This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 15 “THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES-- 16 THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED.”*

As indicated by the capitalized words, Matthew is quoting Isaiah 9:1-2. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Isaiah had written these words as a foreshadowing of the Messiah's itinerary. He would go ► to Galilee. The light of the Messiah would dawn on Galilee.

This is interesting because, in the first century, most Jews considered Galilee to be a bad neighborhood.⁴ It was considered shady, in part, because there were a lot of ► Gentiles there mixed in with the Jews. More on the significance of this a bit later.

4. Finally, ► Verse 17 says:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

- B. That's the immediately preceding context of Jesus' sermon. Now, let's consider the sermon itself.

1. Before we get to the substance of the sermon, we need to consider the audience. This is very important, because the significance of any message can depend on the audience.

Let me give you a silly example. Let's say I issue ► this command: Close your trunks! What do I mean by what I say? It depends on the audience. “Close your trunks” can mean one thing if I'm addressing passengers with baggage at the airport. It can mean quite another if I'm addressing a careless boy at the beach, or a herd of elephants in a dust storm.

⁴ Turner, 70.

Turning ► back to our text, who is Jesus calling to repent in Matthew 4:17? Who was His audience at that time? Jesus was addressing Jews. We know this because just a few verse later, in ► Matthew 4:23, it says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:23 Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom . . .

Who do you find in ► synagogues? Jews. The early ministry of Jesus was focused on Jews. Jesus and His twelve disciples—all Jews—preached first to Jews. Listen to the early instructions of Jesus to His twelve disciples, beginning in ► Matthew 10:5. He says:

^{NAU} Matthew 10:5 . . . “Do not go in *the* way of *the* Gentiles, and do not enter *any* city of the Samaritans; 6 but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

Jesus and His disciples first preached to ► “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The nation of Israel. The Jews. It’s not that Jesus was uninterested in others. Indeed, He loves everyone and is the Savior of the whole world. In fact, scholars believe that the Messiah going to Galilee was a foreshadowing of the ultimate expansion of His ministry to Gentiles.⁵

But first things first. The first preaching was to Jews and the main message ► was “Repent, for the kingdom heaven is at hand.”

2. Well, what exactly does it mean to repent?
 - a. It is helpful to consider the composition of the word. The Greek word for ► “repent” in our text is *meta-no-EH-o*. It’s a combination of two words. *Meta* means “after,” implying some kind of change.⁶ *No-EH-o* means to think or perceive.⁷ So, the primary meaning of “repent” is to change one’s mind.⁸

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 88; D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 117; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 88.

⁶ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. “repent, μετανοέω,” (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “μετανοέω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

- b. But it does raise the question: Change one's mind about what? The context in which "repent" is used determines the nature of the change in view. Most often, the Bible uses the term "repent" or "repentance" to signify a change of mind in a direction away from sin and toward God.⁹

So the biblical command to repent is normally a command to get right with God. To turn from sin toward God. To seek relational harmony with Him.

3. That's normally what repentance involves in the Bible. Now, what is ► the kingdom of heaven?

It is interesting that Matthew is the only biblical author to use the phrase, "kingdom of heaven."¹⁰ You won't find it anywhere else. Other writers use the phrase, "kingdom of God" instead.

The gospel of Matthew was written especially for a Jewish audience. With that in mind, it is likely that Matthew used "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God" in deference to devout Jews who were reluctant to even use the name "God" for fear that they might somehow take His name in vain.¹¹

It's a good reminder that we should probably be careful to consider this sermon of Jesus from a Jewish point of view. From a first-century, Jewish point of view, what is the significance of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God? To appreciate it, you're going to need a little history.

You see, God made some promises to the Jewish people. They're commonly ► called covenants. I mentioned some of them a couple of months ago when we began our study through Matthew.

- a. The first covenant God made was with Abraham, who was originally called Abram. It's called ► the Abrahamic Covenant. The promise to Abram was made around 1900 B.C.¹² It's recorded in Genesis 12:1-3.

God promised to give Abram a land. He promised that Abram's descendants would become a great nation. He promised that, through Abram, all people of the world would be blessed.

⁹ Some scholars argue that, in a few isolated cases, repentance may actually be synonymous with faith, on the thinking that the change of mind is from unbelief to belief. While that may be true, that is not the usual meaning of repentance in the Bible.

¹⁰ Blomberg, 73; Turner, 57.

¹¹ Blomberg, 73, Turner, 57, Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, (London and Louisville, KY: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 2004), 28.

¹² Bibleworks timeline.

- b. And that's not all. There was also another promise God made through Moses around 1400 BC.¹³ It's called ► the Mosaic Covenant. It's presented in Deuteronomy 28-30. In this deal, God essentially says to the nation of Israel: "I gave you My rules, including the Ten Commandments. Now, if you obey Me, I will bless you and we will enjoy fellowship. But if you disobey Me, I will discipline you and our fellowship will be broken. It's your choice, according to the Covenant."
- c. And there was yet another promise God made. It was given to another Jew named David around 1000 B.C.¹⁴ It is called the ► Davidic Covenant. David was then the king of Israel. The promise is recorded in 2 Samuel 7:16. Here, God promised that David's lineage and his throne would continue forever.¹⁵

Related to this promise of David's lineage and throne came a corresponding promise through the prophet Isaiah around 700 B.C.¹⁶ The promise is recorded in Isaiah 7:6-7. It was the promise of a Messiah who would come to occupy the throne of David and reign forever as a blessing to all peoples.

- d. Now, looking back, these are big promises. According to the Abrahamic Covenant, the Jewish people were to be a great nation and a great blessing. According to the Mosaic Covenant, God would bless them for obedience and discipline them for disobedience. According to the Davidic Covenant, the lineage and throne of David would last forever. And it would include a coming Messiah who would reign as king over all.

So the kingdom of heaven refers to the rulership of God. And when Jesus says to the Jews, "the kingdom of heaven is ► *at hand*," they would understand it to mean that God Himself is about to take over. "At hand" means that a kind of revolution is approaching; it is near, but has not yet arrived.¹⁷ In accordance with the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, the Messiah is about to occupy the throne of David and reign forever as a blessing to all peoples.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 57.

¹⁶ Bibleworks timeline.

¹⁷ BDAG, "ἐγγίζω;" Carson, 117; Keener, 149.

4. So why should the notion that the kingdom of heaven is at hand motivate repentance among the Jews? Why didn't Jesus say, "Rejoice!" instead of "Repent!"?

Well, the nation of Israel had not been faithful to God. They were disobedient. Therefore, according to the Mosaic Covenant, they were out of fellowship with God. Prophet after prophet had come, urging Israel to return to covenant fellowship with the Lord.¹⁸

And now, finally, Jesus had come preaching to Israel the same message John the Baptist preached: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The command to repent was not new. It had echoed down through the prophets in the Old Testament. Jesus is calling the nation of Israel back to obedience to God and fellowship with Him in accordance with the Mosaic Covenant.

5. In light of all this, in Matthew 4:17, what does Jesus have to say to us about what we must do today in order to receive eternal life? What is He saying in our text about what it takes for us to get to heaven?

Nothing. Nothing at all. First of all, the sermon is not directed at us; it's directed at first-century Jews under the Mosaic Covenant. And, secondly, the sermon is not about how to receive eternal life. It's about a return to fellowship under the Mosaic Covenant. We are not a party to the Mosaic Covenant. It is not operative for us today. It was nailed to a cross 2,000 years ago. So repentance for us does not involve a return to Old Testament rules and regulations that have been done away.

II. Okay, ► so what must we do to receive eternal life? And what role does repentance play for us?

- A. There is only one book of the Bible that was written for the expressed purpose of telling people how to receive eternal life. It's the Gospel of John. To be sure, other books speak of eternal life, but the Gospel of John is dedicated to it. Toward the end of the book, it gives the purpose for which it was written. John ► 20:30-31 says:

^{NAU} John 20:30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Here's the purpose of the book: ► That you may have eternal life in His name. Here's the means of receiving eternal life: ► Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In the Gospel of John, over and over again, Jesus promises eternal life to all who will

¹⁸ In 2 Chronicles 7:13, the Lord explains to the people of Israel that, if they find themselves under His discipline, they need only repent, to turn away from their sin and back to Him, and there would be restoration.

simply believe in Him for it. Repentance is nowhere in view. In ► John 5:24, Jesus says,

^{NAU} John 5:24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

How many times is any form of the word “repent” used in this verse? Zero. It’s just believe.

In ► John 6:47, Jesus says,

^{NAU} John 6:47 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”

How many times is any form of the word “repent” used in this verse? Zero. It’s just believe.

Jesus can promise eternal life because He paid the price to back it up. He loves us so much that gave Himself as payment for our sin by dying on a cross and rising again. John ► 3:16 says,

^{NAU} John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

How many times is any form of the word “repent” used in this verse? Zero. It’s just believe.

In fact, how many times is any form of the word “repent” used any place at all in the entire Gospel of John? Zero. It’s just believe.

- B. Another ► book of the Bible, this one by the Apostle Paul, was written to defend the gospel of Jesus against those who were trying to distort it. It called Galatians. Right up front, in ► Galatians 1:8, Paul comes on strong, saying,

^{NAU} Galatians 1:8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!

How many times do you suppose any form of the word “repent” is used anywhere in Galatians? Zero. It’s just believe.

The sole requirement for getting to heaven is faith alone in Christ alone. Period. And so our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ is ► Salvation by Grace.

- C. You say, “Well what about repentance? Then what role does repentance play in our lives?”

The need for repentance is very great. I'm a big fan of repentance, mostly because God commands it. But it's just not required to receive eternal life. The big idea of my sermon is ► this: By all means repent, but not for eternal life. Let me explain.

God has moral standards. There are right ways and wrong ways of living. Right ways include things like love, and justice, and honesty. Wrong ways include the opposite: things like hatred, injustice, and falsehood.

Repentance can be viewed as turning from wrong ways to right ways, in harmony with God's design. As such, God calls everybody to repent. So by all means, repent. Get your act together. But recognize that it's not a condition for eternal salvation. If it is, we're all going to hell, because we can never get our acts together enough to earn or deserve heaven. It's a free gift offered by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To tell a person that he must get his act together to get to heaven is to hand concrete flippers to a drowning man.

1. Unbelievers can and do repent, and their repentance can be beneficial in a number of ways. For example, repentance can prepare a person for faith. But repentance is neither a requirement nor a guarantee of faith. Let me show you.

a. The first example is a guy named Cornelius. His story is recorded in Acts 10:1-48. He is described as a devout man who feared God. He led a repentant life. But repentance didn't save him. Repentance helped him be ready to receive by faith the good news of Jesus Christ.

I've seen this kind of thing happen in my Life Group. About a year ago, a woman repented. She turned from alcohol abuse and decided to come to our Life Group, seeking God. She was not a believer in Jesus. But her repentance prepared her to believe some months later.

b. Repentance can prepare a person for faith, but the repentant person may not believe. In another biblical example, some Jews who heard the preaching of John the Baptist had apparently repented. Jesus seems to say as much in ► John 5:33-35,¹⁹ where he says to them,

^{NLT} John 5:33 “. . . you sent investigators to listen to John the Baptist. . . . 35 John was like a burning and shining lamp, and you were excited for a while about his message.

¹⁹ David R. Anderson, “Repentance Is For All Men,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, spring 1998, vol. 11:20.

Sounds like maybe they repented, but as Jesus stood before them, they did not believe. Jesus says to them ► plainly:

^{NLT} John 5:38 “. . . you do not believe me . . .”

Life bears this out. Plenty of people decide to do better. They repent. But they may not believe.

- c. Repentance can prepare a person for faith, but repentance does not guarantee faith, nor is repentance required for faith. There ► are other biblical examples of people who believe, but repentance is not in view. There is no evidence of repentance for the thief on the cross who believed (Luke 23:39-43). There is no evidence of repentance for the Philippian jailer who asked a simple question—“what must I do to be saved?”—and he got a simple answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:30-31).

My son was four years old when he believed in Jesus for eternal life. It didn’t seem to involve a conscious turn from a life of debauchery. He just believed.

So, repentance can prepare a person for faith, but it is neither a requirement nor a guarantee of faith.²⁰

2. Repentance is also vital for believers. In fact, if there were a top-ten list of words that should characterize every Christian, surely repentance should be on it.

In fact, the Christian life can be viewed as continually turning from wrong ways to right ways, in harmony with God’s design. That’s repentance.

As believers, to apply the Bible to our lives, that’s repentance.

But believing in Jesus is no guarantee that you will always live a repentant life. According to John 1:12, we become children of God when we believe. But ask any parent, just because you’re a child doesn’t mean you behave.

The account of the prodigal son in Luke 15²¹ provides a clear example. A son says to his father: “I really don’t want to be a part of this family any more,

²⁰ Repentance can also be beneficial, even if the one who repents never believes. Forsaking wrong ways of living in favor of right ways is beneficial in this life. The one who repents of sexual immorality or substance abuse or cheating does himself and society a favor in this life, even if his unbelief does him no good in the next.

²¹ Luke 15:11-32.

and I really don't care to continue having a close relationship with you. So please just give me whatever money I've got coming when you die, so I can get out from under your thumb and live my own life."

The father grants the son his choice and allows him to experience the consequences of it. The son leaves to live a life of self-centered excess and immorality—a road that leads to a common destination: rock bottom. And so, at rock bottom, the son changes his mind. He repents. He decides turn from his self-absorbed, self-destructive way of life and return to a right relationship with his father. That's repentance.

But I ask you: When did the son become a son? When he repented? No! He became a son when he was born. Having been born into the family, his membership in the family is never in question. Repentance has nothing to do with his status as the child of his father. Repentance has everything to do with his closeness and fellowship with the father.

By faith, we are born into the forever family of God. By repentance, we follow the family rules and get along with the Father.

3. And so, what about you? Let me leave you with some suggestions.
 - a. If you think that you have to repent to get to heaven, I urge you to repent of that idea.

If you are an unbeliever, my message to you is simple: Believe in Jesus.

If you are already a believer, your message to your unsaved friends should be equally simple: Believe in Jesus.
 - b. On the other hand, if you think that repentance is no big deal, I urge you to repent of that idea as well. God commands us to repent. By all means, repent.

The father waits for the prodigal. He gazes at the horizon for the silhouette of his sinful son coming home. Do you need to come home?

In ► Luke 15:18 the prodigal says:

^{NAU} Luke 15:18 "I will get up and go to my father" . . . 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Let's go home.