

The inaugural ceremony is a defining moment in a president’s career — and no one knew this better than John F. Kennedy as he prepared for his own inauguration on January 20, 1961. He wanted his address to be short, clear, and devoid of partisan rhetoric. The climax of the speech contains its most memorable phrase – “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” It’s one of the most well-known lines in American history, still resonating some sixty-three years later.

When Jesus steps on the scene at the beginning of Mark’s gospel, He’s stepping into something like an inauguration. At the very least, Mark records Jesus’ first words as He enters His office as Messiah, and the impact of these words is even greater than an inaugural address. Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” More than two thousand years later, these words still resonate. Indeed, “repent and believe in the Gospel” is the substance of the message proclaimed in Jesus’ Name by His Church to all people. It always has been, and always will be, until He returns. There’s just one problem. It’s a message that is almost always resisted and resented by the human heart.

Years ago, the TV show Happy Days featured a character, "The Fonz." The Fonz was Mr. Cool; he had the ability to do anything... anything other than say he was wrong. The best he could do was say, "I was wrrrr. I was wrrr." Now when Henry Winkler, the actor who played the Fonz, got stuck on his admission of guilt, it was funny, not so much because it sounded funny, but more because we recognize the difficulty The Fonz was having.

The problem of Jesus’ inaugural message is simple. A person who needs to repent is a person who has done something to repent of. The world likes to soften these “repentable” acts by renaming them, by calling them errors, mistakes, lapses in judgment. The Bible refuses to play that game and labels these acts for what they are: sin. Sin which drives a wedge between the Creator and His disobedient children; sin which, when left untreated, calls for condemnation and final separation. Sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? Of course it does... especially if your ear has become used to the idea that Jesus loves us and accepts us just the way we are... especially if we have convinced ourselves that the Lord up above would never, could never send anyone to hell... especially if you believe that nobody, and by that I mean not even God, has the right to judge us and tell us to repent.

Indeed, so strong is the average person's aversion to repenting, some Christian pulpits have now decided it's in their best interest to avoid talking about sin, repentance, condemnation. Pastors have found the people like them better, fill their arenas and give more if they preach a message which refrains from any kind of accusation. It's successful. But is it right?

The story is told of a church that had a new pastor who believed in calling for repentance and the forgiveness which comes only through faith in Jesus. He did a great job, but even so, there were some who were upset with his directness. One day a delegation made an appointment to see him. They entered his office, shut the door, and they began: "Pastor, you are a great guy, but could you

find a way to tone down your message? With all this talk about sin and hell, repentance and remorse, you're scaring people. This isn't how you attract new people."

The pastor listened carefully to the people and then asked if they would excuse him for just a minute. He came back with a gallon bottle of bleach. Setting the jug down on his desk, the pastor replied, "I will be glad to do what you suggest if you will do me a favor. I'd like you to go home and soak off the labels and the warnings from your bottle of bleach. Soak them off and then take a marker and write, "Apple Juice." Do we have a deal?"

The visitors were shocked. "Pastor, how can you ask us to do such a thing? Our children might just read the words and take a drink. It could kill them!"

"I agree," replied the pastor. "But that's what you are asking me to do. In good conscience, I can't relabel sin, when I know that it's deadly."

When the Church and her servants are being faithful, the message remains the same. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Did you hear it? Jesus calls for people to repent. He calls upon them to leave their old ways, their old sins, their old disobedience behind and be turned to faith; faith in the truth that Jesus' perfect life, His innocent, sin-bearing death, and glorious resurrection from the dead secures forgiveness of sins and new life. Today it is common for people to say, "Jesus loves everybody and He would never send anyone to hell." And you know, those words are true. They are true IF they are properly understood. Jesus doesn't have to send any one to hell. Every sinner in the world, which means every person in the world, is headed there already.

That's not my opinion. It's a fundamental fact of Scripture. The Bible says: "...the wages of sin is death." In another location it maintains, "the soul that sins will die", and in yet another spot it reads: "death spread to all men because all sinned." Jesus isn't going to send anyone to hell; their sins are. So that we might be freed from that inevitable conclusion, Jesus was born into this world. If sin is no big deal, He could have saved Himself the trip. But sin and its consequences are so big, so overwhelming, so tragic, that the Triune God decided that Jesus would die so all who believe on Him as Savior might be rescued and have their destination changed.

Jesus loves us the way we are, but He never leaves us the way we are. He took our sins to the cross of Calvary where they can never condemn us again. St. Paul said it better than I ever could, when he wrote: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God..."

And that's the key: All this is from God. The message: "Repent and believe the Gospel," is from God. The Savior, who did everything needed to make reconciliation possible, is from God. Your life situation, setting the stage for you to hear this message is from God. And the ability to repent of sin is from God *and* the ability to believe the good news is from God. All this is from God. Let Him do it. Let Him give what is from Him. Let His first words be the Last Word on your soul: "Repent and believe the Gospel," and in so doing, hear this, your every sin is fully forgiven.

