

Making A U Turn From Sin

Series on "Four Fundamentals For Lifelong Followers"

The opening chapters of three of the gospels describe the ministry of John the Baptist. Out in the desert by the Jordan river, John is preaching and baptizing the crowds of people who were flocking out to see him. Simple people and religious leaders alike were coming to check him out. John had one just message for all these Jewish people. The kingdom of God is coming. Repent. Turn away from your sins and get baptized to demonstrate your repentance.

When Jesus began to preach, Matthew tells us he called on people to repent. **"From that time on Jesus began to preach "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17NIV)**. Luke's gospel quotes Jesus saying **"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32 NIV)**. What is the message of Jesus? The same as John the Baptist. Repent.

In the book of Acts, Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost. He tells people in no uncertain terms that they are responsible for crucifying Jesus the Messiah. What is his message to them? **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38 NIV)**

When the Apostle Paul was preaching in Athens, he said to the Greeks **"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent". (Acts 17:30 NIV)** The message of John the Baptist, and Jesus, and Peter and Paul, and of the Christian church all through the ages is this: One day we are all going to have to answer to God for the sins that we have committed. There is a judgment day coming, and God isn't going to turn a blind eye to your sin, no matter who you are. But he is giving you the opportunity to repent. You had better take it while you have the chance.

If this message of repentance was so important to John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and Paul, we had better make sure we understand what they were calling people to do. Before I get into specifics, let me tell you what Biblical repentance isn't.

1. It isn't feeling sorry for the consequences we have brought on ourselves. Don't confuse repentance with self pity. There are a lot of us who have done dumb things in our lives and are now reaping the consequences and we feel sorry about what we have done. It's good that we feel sorry about our past, and hopefully we have learned from those mistakes. But that's not the same as repentance.

2. It isn't feeling sorry for the hurt that we have caused others. Many of us have been filled with remorse about the way our sinful behavior has damaged the lives of other people. There are a whole bunch of things we have done and said that have been deeply hurtful to other people and we look back on those incidents and wish we hadn't said or done what we did. We feel very sorry about what we have done to others. We should feel sorrow for those things, but that isn't repentance.

Godly sorrow that leads to repentance.

Biblical repentance begins when we understand what our sin has done to God. When Paul writes to the Corinthians he talks about a Godly sorrow that leads to repentance. He goes on to say **"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10 NIV)**. Sin is like a corrosive acid in our lives. It eats us up from the inside and destroys who we were meant to be. It's like a cancer that slowly eats away everything healthy that God created us to be. Every sin we commit contributes to the wrecking of the image of God within us. Every sin causes damage. It's a healthy thing to sorrow for our sin and the consequences it has had on our lives. But our sin doesn't just hurt us. It damages all the people around us. It's like radioactivity.

We don't see the immediate effects, but it contaminates and ultimately destroys everyone that touches it. It pollutes our life and the lives of people all around us. Our sin has a three way effect. We sin against ourselves. We sin against others. And we sin against God, which is the most serious of all. Every one of us has defied Gods authority. We have broken his laws. We have polluted his beautiful creation. We have spoiled his pleasure. We have provoked his anger and because of this, we deserve his judgment.

Biblical repentance.

Biblical repentance has three dimensions. Thought, word and deed. All three of these are necessary if repentance is to be real. Here's an example to illustrate the point. I arrive at Geneva airport late at night. It's dark. I've never been here before. I'm tired and jet lagged and I need to get to Nyon. I have no idea where Nyon is, so I give the taxi driver the address. Because he sees I'm a stranger, the taxi driver takes me from the airport around Geneva, into France, around the lake to Evian, to Montreux, to Lausanne and finally to Nyon. A trip that should have been 25 kilometers and 25 minutes is extended to 160 kilometers and three hours. By the time the driver gets to Lausanne his conscience is getting the better of him for exploiting a stranger's ignorance. He delivers me to my address in Nyon. I pay him the exorbitant amount that is showing on the meter. But then he confesses that he has taken me the long way round, and returns the whole fare to me. What's happened? He has changed. He has changed in his thinking. He's telling himself the truth. He has changed in his speaking. He's now telling me the truth. And he's changed in his deeds. He's refunding me the whole fare. That's biblical repentance. Biblical repentance is a change in thinking, a change in speaking, and a change in action. Let's look at these in more detail.

1. Thought – Conviction of past sins.

The Greek word for repentance used in the New Testament literally means to change one's mind. It means to think again, particularly about our behavior in the past. It means looking at the things we have done from God's point of view and agreeing with his analysis and accepting his verdict. It's measuring our thoughts and our actions by the holiness of God and becoming convinced that we fall far short. When we begin to do this we discover two things. That God is better than we made him out to be, and that we are much worse than we have made ourselves out to be. God is absolutely holy, absolutely just, absolutely pure. We also discover that we are not good people who occasionally do bad things, but that we are basically bad people who occasionally do good things. And even then, the good things we do still don't measure up to the holiness of God. All the good stuff we give ourselves credit for still adds up to a pile of dung as far as God is concerned.

Now here's the problem. So many people never get to repent because they don't believe this. They don't believe God is all that good, and think they are all that bad. They don't understand the holiness of God, and how he feels about our sin. We tell ourselves our sin is OK and the devil gives us all the help we need to believe it. We tell ourselves God doesn't mind too much. Because we believe these lies, we never get honest with God about our sin. Jesus died on a Cross to save us from our sins, but a whole lot of people don't really believe they need saving because they don't believe they are too bad. Until we agree with God about our sin, we haven't even taken the first step toward repentance.

2. Word – Confession of past sins.

The next step after thinking differently about our past sins is to speak differently about them. Here's what Matthew says about the people coming out into the desert to be baptized by John. ***"Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance". (Mat 3:6-8 NIV)*** Can you picture people openly confessing sins before a whole bunch of onlookers, then getting baptized?

In the 1662 Anglican book of common prayer, there is a prayer of confession that goes like this;

(Say it with me)

Almighty and most merciful Father;

We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

We have offended against thy holy laws.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;

And we have done those things which we ought not to have done;

And there is no health in us.

Do you know it's possible to pray that prayer without thinking of a single specific sin? The second step of repentance is to speak out specific sins before God. Naming them. "Lord, I have done this and this and this." That means swallowing our pride and asking God for his mercy. It means stopping blaming everyone and everything else for the way we are and accepting responsibility for our sins. It's only when we get real with ourselves and get real with God that we begin to appreciate what it means to be forgiven. Confession opens up the channel for God's grace to flow.

Here's the third and hardest step in the process of repentance.

3. Deed – Correction of past sins.

Repentance isn't just about thoughts and words. It's about deeds. John the Baptist said to those he was baptizing "***Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.***" ***What should we do then?***" ***the crowd asked.*** ***John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."*** ***Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." (Luke 3:8, 10-14 NIV)***

Repentance isn't some spiritual mumbo jumbo stuff that you mouth off in church. Repentance is about dealing with specific changes in the way we think and act toward God and toward other people. Repentance is about sharing your food and clothing with the needy. It's about stopping cheating on your taxes. It's about stopping taking advantage of your authority and agitating for higher wages. In the case of Zacchaeus it was not only a matter of promising to go straight in the future, but to repay the people he had defrauded in the past – and he added on the interest and a large bonus to the people he had cheated. It means cutting ties with anything or anyone that has caused us to sin. It's putting an end to wrong relationships. It's getting rid of objects that have taken the place of God. It's breaking away from things that have tempted us to do wrong. This is the hardest part, but the most rewarding part of repentance. It means making a U turn from your former way of life. It means turning from things that led you away from God and turning toward those things that bring you closer to God.

Becoming a lifelong follower of Jesus Christ seems like an attractive idea, but if you haven't come to terms with repentance, you haven't even started. Repentance is one of ***the essentials*** of the Christian faith. Agreeing with God about our sin. Confessing to God specific past sins and accepting his forgiveness. Then producing the fruit of repentance by dealing with the things in our life that we know, and God knows, need to change, so that the way we live is entirely different from the way we have lived before.

Before this Sunday, I have been praying, and others have been praying that the Holy Spirit would speak to specific individuals about specific sins they need to repent of. I've been praying that some of you that have never ever committed your lives to Jesus Christ would take this first step. Tonight I want to give you an opportunity to publically respond to whatever it is the Holy Spirit has been saying to you.

We are going to play a song, and the words will be up on the screen. The song is about turning away from sin and turning to Christ. While that song is playing I want to invite you to come to the front. Those of you that need to pray and do business with God, there are some seats up the front that are reserved for you. You may want to kneel at the foot of the cross. You may want to have one of the Elders or another Christian pray for you. It may be that there are things you need to confess to someone here. But whatever it is that the Holy Spirit is prompting you to do, do it.

Prayer

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