

Storytellers: What Does It Mean To Repent?
By Jason Huff
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Ezekiel 18:26-32; Acts 26:1,9-23; Luke 5:27-32

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Luke 5:27-32. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.””

Stories matter. The last couple of weeks, we've been learning to become storytellers for Jesus and discovered the key elements of what the Bible is all about – the story of what God has been doing through history. Stories change how we perceive life. Last weekend, right before church I made a presentation to our presbytery about CrossWay. It's easy to be discouraged about our setbacks. But when I put together the story of what God has been doing, I became more and more encouraged.

When I noted how many people have been fed, how many lives changed, how many relationships strengthened, how many baptisms, how much God has accomplished through us, my outlook changed. When I heard the stories of the other church plants in our presbytery, The Antioch Movement in Ypsilanti and New City Church in South Bend, I wanted to connect with them, pray for them, and encourage them too. God works through the preaching of the gospel, the telling of the story, and we all have people we can reach with that story.

Just to help us review, we've found the chief dilemma in God's story and its solution. The problem is that we are lost, wandering far from God, and in our sin, we will remain lost forever unless we're found in this lifetime. The solution, though, comes through Jesus Christ. Because of His life, death, and resurrection, we can be found. We're saved by Him from sin, death, and wrath, and we're saved for life, love, and righteousness. Our personal stories all start with the same problem, but they won't all end the same way.

What makes the difference? Why may one person's story end with sin and death and wrath and another person's end with life and love and righteousness? The keys to salvation are repentance and belief. This was the message Jesus preached – repent and believe the good news. That same message was echoed by Paul and all the apostles. And when we look back in history, back in our passage from Ezekiel, back even before Jesus' life on earth, repentance and belief have always been the actions we are called to undertake to receive salvation. God gives us the ability to repent and believe, but we must actually do them. And because repentance always comes first in the command, we're going to look at it first. In the modern church, we often skip this step, but it's a must for us to be right with God.

What does it mean to repent? The Bible outlines it in a few different places – Psalm 51, which King David wrote after he was confronted about his affair with Bathsheba; 2 Corinthians 7, where Paul outlines how some believers wanted to be cleared of sin; the parable of the prodigal son. Peter and Paul’s lives show repentance at work – Peter turning from a brash-talking, cowardly deserter to a bold preacher who led the church in Jerusalem, and Paul converting from a murderous persecutor of Christians to the church’s missionary to the Gentiles outside of Israel. Ultimately, it’s a change – a change of heart and mind that leads to a change in personality.

But we ought to start off with what saving repentance isn’t. It isn’t feeling bad when you are actually guilty of sin. Pharaoh “repents” when the plagues hit Egypt as he refuses to let the Israelites leave. King Saul “repents” when he has an encounter with the true king-to-be, David, the man he’s been trying to kill. Even Judas “repents” after he turns in Jesus to the Pharisees.

All of these men felt guilty because they did something wicked. Yet none of them received forgiveness. They didn’t repent in the full, biblical, saving sense. Like children caught with a hand in the cookie jar, they feel badly that there is a price to pay; they are upset at themselves for what they did. But their ongoing actions show they had no regard for God’s law, like getting speeding tickets on the Interstate but continuing to drive 85 miles an hour. You might hate the fine, but not enough to take your foot off the gas.

Biblical repentance goes far deeper and further. Here’s what it looks like. *First comes the recognition of wrongdoing against God and the possibility of mercy.* If you don’t know you’ve done anything bad or you don’t know that you can be forgiven, you can’t repent. The first change of mind happens when we come to understand that we have offended our Creator who made us to love and serve and enjoy Him, not to rebel against Him. The modern heart has to first believe in God; then it has to accept our failure to follow Him as He intended. That failure is not something we can fix; we have gone over that bridge and then torched it behind us. We recognize our utter helplessness before God.

But our change of heart also brings us the realization that God is merciful and will forgive those who truly repent. That’s hard for us to believe too. It goes against our expectations. We have stories about our own creations gone wrong and rise up to destroy us, from *Frankenstein* to *The Terminator*. And what do we do? We destroy them first; we get them before they get us.

And with the infinite power of God, there’s nothing stopping Him from doing precisely that...except His incredible mercy. When we repent, we know it isn’t for nothing. God has promised mercy to the brokenhearted who seek Him. This isn’t a pipe dream. We aren’t seeking redemption without hope. God keeps His promises, so if we repent, He will respond.

That leads us to the second facet of repentance: *an earnest desire to be cleansed sought with true mourning over sin.* This is where guilty feelings and true repentance part ways. Getting rid of the filth of sin becomes extremely important to us. We are not satisfied with feeling bad; we want to be right with God. To want to be cleansed is to want to be free of sin. Not just forgiven until the next time, not given a pass, but a return to purity. To recognize you’ve waded in the mud and want to be clean, with all the grime rinsed off, permanently. To desire

freedom not only from the guilt of sin but the stain of sin and its habit of returning.

The difference between superficial sadness and godly mourning is humility, and even humiliation, in pursuit of God. It's marked by earnest prayer, not forced on us by someone else but crying out to God. Special words don't matter; even just "have mercy on me, a sinner" can be enough in honesty. Repentance is marked in the Old Testament by fasting – forgoing food for a time to feel the weight of sin and the desire for righteousness. Sackcloth was uncomfortable; it made the believer aware of their uncomfortable place before God physically. Ashes were a humiliation, a sign symbolizing that we were made out of nothing more than dust, and that without God, that is our worth.

For us, this is the hardest step. Even as I was writing this week, I realized that my own repentance is rarely as serious as the biblical picture. Because we know God loves us, we think we have great value, and we do; yet that value comes not from something inherent in us, but because God chooses to give us value. We think humility is simply not bragging about our accomplishments. But biblical humility is recognizing our real place before God.

If we revere David and Daniel and Job and Isaiah and Paul and Peter as fathers in the faith, we should follow their lead. In Matthew 11 and Luke 10, Jesus spoke approvingly of repentance in sackcloth and ashes. Jesus said that when He left, His followers would fast. Our humility before God isn't just a lack of boasting, but a deep and mournful denial of ourselves.

Now we don't have sackcloth and ashes lying around the house, and neither did people in Jesus' era. Jesus' brother James describes what this process looks like for the Israelite of his day in James 4: "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

If we are mourning over our sin, it's OK to be sad over it. It's OK to fast over it. It's OK to be uncomfortable. Depending on the situation, you may need to hide it so you aren't prideful. But you might need to tell fellow believers about it so they might lift you up in prayer. It is not a process that must go on forever; in Scripture, sometimes it's a day; sometimes three days or a week, depending on the situation and its seriousness. Sometimes, like in Acts 2, people who have already been humbled before the Lord come to believe without any additional time of repentance. But we should grieve before the Lord when we are burdened by our sin.

The end result of seeking this cleansing in sorrow is brokenness...not brokenness that can't be fixed, but brokenness that God can then put back together. In Psalm 51, David says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." When we are truly broken of sin, God removes it and puts His character in its place.

That leads us to the third aspect of biblical repentance: *a desire for the presence of God*. When Levi – also known as Matthew, the author of the first gospel – left his old life behind, He threw a party for Jesus. He wanted to be with Jesus more and more, enough to leave behind his cushy job and spend his money lavishly so others could be with Jesus too. When David wrote Psalm 51, he cries out, "Don't cast me away from Your presence or take Your holy Spirit from me." As James just told us, the person who repents wants to draw near to God.

The reason we repent is to come into the presence of God, not to avoid Him. Think with me about Luke 5. Simon Peter's been fishing all night and hasn't caught a thing. Jesus tells him to put out his nets. Simon Peter is leery, but he says, "Since you say so, I'll do it." When the nets come back so full of fish they start to break, Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man." He recognizes that he doesn't deserve to be in the presence of Jesus. It's then that Jesus reassures him: "Don't be afraid; from now on, you'll catch men." Because Peter is repentant and humbled by his sin, his heart is in the right place to follow after Jesus.

If we feel like we must repent but don't want the presence of God, we haven't understood the story we are a part of and the story we're called to tell. Because at its root, God's story is a love story. We are lost, but the prince is sent to save us. He doesn't save us because He must but because He has chosen to love us. And as someone much wiser than me once said, the amazing thing about the biblical story is that Jesus didn't come to rescue the beautiful princess but the old hag and the evil queen, which is what we all are. When we repent before God, we experience His forgiveness and love and He makes us beautiful, strong, bold, courageous, into heroes and heroines after His own heart, and He brings us into His presence.

Catha and I are still big fans of romantic comedies. And one of the stereotypes behind romantic comedies is the big misunderstanding in the third act that has to be resolved. Usually, the guy makes some huge romantic gesture, a speech, a song, a proposal. He does that in order to win the girl's heart back, so they'll be together again and everything will be happy ever after.

That may seem clichéd or old-fashioned, and the truth is that we can't make God love us any more than that grand romantic gesture can make the girl fall back in love with the boy. But the last thing we would expect is for the leading man to do that so that he'd never have to spend time with her again. Relationship and communion with God should be at the heart of our desire to repent. As we said last week, we are saved not just from bad things, but saved for life and love and righteousness *-with- -God-*. If we want to repent just for God to leave us alone, we're missing the whole point – and so much God has in store for us.

The final step of repentance is changed actions. Actions don't save us; they don't set accounts right with God. What they do is prove that our repentance is real and that God is working within us. Scripture is very clear on this point. When Paul spoke about repentance before King Agrippa, he said he "preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." Ezekiel told us that "if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life."

When the Corinthians repented, Paul says, "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done." When Zacchaeus, a notorious tax collector, repents, he pays back four times what he stole from those under his greed. Even in the parable of the prodigal son, the son takes steps to make amends with his father.

This is the end goal of repentance – a changed heart, mind, and attitude that leads to a new way of life, a new persona, one free of enchantment with sin. There's really no point in starting the process of repentance if a dramatic change isn't what you want. But if you do, then the steps of repentance lead you there. Without taking the steps of repentance, moving back into actions that are right with God are impossible. We love our sin too much. But under the blessing of repentance, we can begin to move forward again, not just in thought but in deed.

Now for those who grew up in Catholicism, this isn't penance – this isn't earning forgiveness or making yourself worthy of forgiveness in any way. Nor is it about doing a religious duty, repeating a prayer or giving money to the church. It's acting in ways that please God...loving Him, loving your neighbor as yourself, showing kindness and compassion, goodness and self-control, serving others and righting wrongs, whether your own wrongs or the wrongs of others. These actions are the fruits of repentance. And while we may not have grave sins to deal with in the future, the fruits of repentance remain in the Christian's life as evidences of that all-encompassing change.

The four steps of repentance – recognition of wrongdoing against God, earnest desire to be cleansed with genuine sorrow, a desire to draw near to God, and actions consistent with changing one's ways – these are always available to us. Repentance marks our entry point into the Kingdom, alongside belief, which we'll discuss next week.

But it's not a once-for-always thing. We regularly repent. We start our service each week with a confession of sins and a request for forgiveness. And when we find ourselves caught in sin, when God convicts us of something in our lives that needs to change, this is the means God has for us to reestablish communications, to bring us back to the knowledge and assurance of our salvation.

It doesn't mean that we can possibly remember every sin we do or that God is waiting for us to name an event and feel bad about it before forgiving it. It does mean that when we feel far from God by our actions or thoughts, when we know our sins are displeasing to God and we want to feel His presence again, when we are burdened by the weight of guilt and despair, there is always hope. There is always grace available to us as we repent.

The greatest thing, to me, about repentance is that God responds to those who earnestly seek Him. He does not hide His face. He does not condemn forever. Even when our sins are dark and heavy and seemingly insurmountable, He is the answer. The story is not without its difficult moments of hurt and longing for relief, but there is a way forward. Truly repent and believe, and you will know the heartbeat of salvation in your life and soul from this day forth and forevermore. May it be so for all of us. Amen.