

Prepare! | Repentance and the Advent of Joy

True Repentance

Psalm 51; Luke 15.17-20

12.12.21

Psalm 51 (For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba) Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your **lovingkindness**; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.

⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. ⁶ Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. ⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which You have broken rejoice. ⁹ Hide Your face from my sins And blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from Your presence And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation And sustain me with a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted to You.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise. ¹⁶ For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

By Your favor do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, In burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

Luke 15.17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸ 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 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.

This is Advent Season, so we're thinking about the advent/arrival, of a couple in Bethlehem, Mary, very pregnant, Joseph scrambling to find lodging.

We remember the ominous words: "there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2.7) AND of course, the hymn writers counsel US, "Let every heart, prepare Him room." In other words, "Let

modern people NOT make the same tragic error as ancient people and close the doors failing to welcome the Child into our lives – let US recognize WHO He IS and WHAT He’s come to DO.”

And the WAY to extend Him that welcome is simply to respond to the significance of His Name: Yeshuah means to save or release. “You shall call His name Yeshuah/Jesus for He will SAVE His people from their sins.”

Whoever wants rescue from sin and looks to Him for the solution is preparing Him room – welcoming Him to take up lodging in our hearts and motives and our lives. And today we see that to welcome the Rescuer, to offer room in our hearts to Jesus Christ, that act goes by two very closely related scriptural words: faith and repentance. You really can’t have ONE without the OTHER.

We could think of those words as two sides of the same coin and safely conclude that welcoming Jesus Christ into our modern lives is by “repentant faith”. To quote yet another Christmas Carol: “Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

Last week we saw False Repentance – next week we hope to look at the difference repentance makes and THIS week we look at True Repentance:

- 1) **Properties**
- 2) **Process**
- 3) **Pathologies**

The properties or qualities or characteristics of true repentance begin in a VERY unlikely place... You will NOT expect me to say what I’m about to say... We’re advising a good practice on the congregation but in order to DO THIS THING you have to sin.

There will be no repentance in the world to come because there will be no sin. Repentance and Faith are THIS-WORLD-ONLY spiritual disciplines – so get in on it quickly because soon you’ll be dead! If there’s no sin there can be no repentance (I’ll tell you where you can GET some sin that won’t harm you spiritually in a moment!)

David committed atrocious sins – adultery, betrayal, multiple murders, arrogant misuse of authority, blatant hypocrisy/cover-up (9 months!) The young man in the parable had told his dad: “May I have my inheritance now? I can’t wait for you to die.” So there’s no shortage of sin in these stories!

Not only do you need sin to repent but also you have to have sinfulness... David mourns his sin and uses like every Hebrew word for sin but he also sees that HE HIMSELF IS SINFUL – “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” (v 5)

Not only do you need sin and sinfulness but you have to see/face these things in yourself and the discovery of them often comes by a crisis. With the “prodigal son” he finds himself in a famine, broke, a servant doing the most disgusting work he can imagine and he “comes to his senses” – a crisis that opens his eyes. With David, he’s successfully managed the crisis-pregnancy but the overwhelming crisis comes in the form of a prophet with a story!

In short, they both come to see their sin and sinfulness through a sudden onset of discomfort – as in Psalm 119: “Before I was afflicted, I went astray...”

David lost touch with his true self. He’d arrogantly ignored that he was a shepherd and that GOD and NOT DAVID was the True King of Israel. You’ll remember: David was “sending” people and messengers and armies here there like pawns on a chessboard.

And all the while David was sending and controlling ...while his life looked ok outwardly, yet under the surface arrogance was eroding a sinkhole under David and when his life caved in, it revealed that without God, David had an almost unlimited potential for evil.

David was in control – the Sender...until we read, “Then the LORD sent Nathan to David...” (2Sa 12.1) and that was the crisis of discovery for David – he could no longer run, hide, cover or blame. (“My” 5x in vv. 1-3)

Next, after sin, sinfulness and the discovery of those things (often by a crisis) is the fact that both these famous “repenters” relate their sin to God. It’s NOT simply that people were hurt but a sense that SIN is offensive/insulting to God. The theologian who said, “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith” was actually wrong; we can see some of the badness of sin in the way it hurts other people but the ULTIMATE badness of sin is not empirically evident – sin is against God.

That’s what David means by the words (v.4), “Against YOU alone have I sinned” Sin ultimately offends God.

One of the old writers said, “Sin would kill God” (Thomas Watson) When we have to be in control (all we control freaks) it’s because we don’t like the way God governs. We want to push God off His throne and take His place. It’s like when God asked the righteous Job, “Would you condemn Me in order to justify yourself?” (40.8) And Job realized that he wasn't so righteous after all.

And part of seeing sin in relation to God (and NOT just a violation of someone’s rights or consent) is to see that God is both repulsed/offended by sin AND is also drawn to it... like an exterminator drawn to roaches.

God alone is willing and able to wash away sin and guilt. That's what David sees. "According to Your "hesed" or lovingkindness" i.e. because YOU are determined to have/hold Your people; because YOU are forgiving, the Just and the Justifier" (notice the triplet in vv. 2-3 starting with the very first word in the Hebrew, "mercy" ("be gracious") and then, "according to Your lovingkindness" (hesed) and third "the greatness of compassion" – in three words, David reminds himself who God IS.

And then in another triplet – "blot out, wash me, cleanse me" David reminds himself what God alone is ABLE to do. He alone can remove the indelible spot: Jeremiah 2.22: "'Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before Me,' says the Lord GOD." Only God can reverse the irreversible and put the smashed egg back in the shattered eggshell.

And when it comes to the PROCESS of true repentance in our modern lives, this quality has to be front and center. We have to see that God is holy and despises sin, that sin makes a cosmic imbalance and must be expunged by a payment AND that God, the gracious, the merciful, the God of HESED has indeed willingly paid that price that we cannot.

And nowhere is this truth more evident than in the Baby who's name is "Rescue" – "You will call His name Jesus (Joshua = rescue) because He will rescue His people from their sins." (Mat 1.23) He's the embodiment of God's intentions toward sinners who repent (hesed incarnate). He comes into the world to rescue us from guilt and sin and even, eventually, from sinfulness.

By the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God does for us what we can never do for ourselves: (Romans 8.3 NLT) "God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins."

If we keep Him before us and if we recognize His purpose of rescue for sinners – a real Savior for real sinners – THEN we're able to live in a state of humility and trust. We can adopt that paradoxical, truly Christian self-image that says, "Cheer Up! You're much worse off than you think but in the gospel you're more loved, significant and accepted than you could ever imagine!"

All you need is faith in Jesus Christ... and sin... because...if you have no sin you can't repent. In the famous Ninety-Five Theses that sparked the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther began with this very idea: (Thesis ONE) "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

So now, I'll tell you where you can get a hold of some sin so you can live the life to which Jesus Christ calls us: just ask your wife how you can be a better husband...ask her how your listening skills have been... ask your roommate or your co-workers or friends...

OR, for one week, listen very closely to the words you speak (or the words you DON'T). Set out to avoid all exaggeration, all people-pleasing, all gossip, sinful complaining about how bad other people are ...all self-justifying and excuse-making AND speak only grace and truth for one week (I'll check in next week!)

OR look into your prayer-life to see how really self-sufficient you are, living like you're a self-made-man and don't need God at all... How many activities we engage without prayer...? Just ask at any point in your day, "Am I putting God first?"

AND if none of these tactics help you in the process toward a life of repentance... you can always wait for the next crisis to come your way (because they seem to keep coming) and the crisis will expose what you don't want to see... BUT DO see it because if it leads you to repent... to open the Inn of your heart to Christ then beauty and transformation and freedom are on their way (more about that NEXT week - fruit!)

The point of this is to see that we already have all the sin we'll ever need for repentance to be a process and an entire life: NOT self-confident and arrogant but Christ-confident and humble.

I'll close now with a few of the pathologies that hinder this process or life of repentance that Luther and I think the whole Bible has in mind: FIVE

First, only repent when there's a big sexy sin in your life. If you really see God for who He is and if you really see how often you break the First Commandment and recognize how deadly serious sin really IS, you'll start "keeping close accounts with God." You'll start to "walk humbly with your God." You'll start seeing how you need not a theoretical savior but a real Savior and need Him every day.

The alternative is the sinkhole.

Second, only repent at the start of the Christian life. I know there's a real impulse in American Christianity that sees faith and repentance as a one-time thing but nothing could be further than the truth...if we continue to sin, we should continue to repent and believe...This is how the Spirit gains more territory in the Lost Continent of our souls.

We should actually get better at it with the passing of time...Repentance is like exhaling, faith like inhaling.

Repentance Disorder #3 – "No harm/no foul"; i.e. if no one gets hurt than I don't really need to repent. In our culture whatever's done between consenting adults is ok but remember, sin is ultimately against God and even when it's a private sin where "no one was hurt" (BTW: that's not really true) repentance is the way we get grace whether we can see the damage or not...

When others ARE hurt, that calls for “relational hygiene” – “I have sinned against heaven AND IN YOUR SIGHT.” (Take the blame!)

Pathology #4 – Get real sorry before you repent. To only repent when you're sad enough is a repentance disorder/pathology. The truth is, if you simply OWN IT then you're on your way. It's ok to ask the Holy Spirit to give you sorrow... He is a Mourning Dove when we sin and it's good to mourn with Him but don't wait to be sad enough...it won't happen. Our repentance is never perfect. Was the Prodigal Son's repentance perfect or did he just want to come home? It's a process. Forgiveness is a declaration and won for us at the Cross...but repentance is a process.

The fifth/final repentance disease is to think that it's complicated. At the end of the day it's so simple even a cave-man can do it – and yet as we saw last week – only God can grant it (2Tim 2.25 et al) – but it's turning from sin (the act, the guilt and the power of sin) turning from sin TO God because of Jesus Christ.

We leave our repentance in the hands of Jesus...and we ask Him to refine our prayers as they ascend to God's throne. They leave our mouths like smoke but somehow, He converts them to incense (Rev 5.8; 8.3-4).

God will help you... He's the Father ready to run to you when you show up with your awkward words (Hos 14.2) and your mixed motives... His great desire is to have His children home in the house of joy...He's prepared the fattened calf...MORE, He's given the Lamb so sinners might come home... So, repent and believe; let every heart prepare Him room!