

Repentance--Practically

The following is a follow-up to the sermon on Psalm 32, "Repentance." This is one man's practical, real-life experience of what repentance before God looks like--including the challenges, fears, and ultimate forgiveness that comes through Christ. What follows are excerpts from a question and answer between Pastor Jeff and a close friend, who has walked the gritty, raw path of repentance over the last couple of years. In the same vein as King David, hear the real challenges and victories that accompany sin and repentance.

1. In the midst of your sin, what did God use to draw you towards repentance?

This might sound cliché but it was without a doubt the Holy Spirit. In the midst of my sin I wrestled with salvation but after a week or so I came to the conclusion that I was His and remembered that rebellion doesn't always mean not saved. God still hates sin but that doesn't change the status of "sealed with the Holy Spirit". I believe that it is BECAUSE of my salvation that I even wrestled with returning. His grace and love exists within our rebellion and plays a significant role in bringing us back. I often considered that I was the prodigal son or Jonah. MY GOD wanted me back but I did not want to return. I wanted Him but I wanted my sin as well. God kept reminding me that I couldn't have both and that there was a countdown clock going. Not on his love but on the consequences. If I turned now, some things could be restored but if I kept running, forgiveness could happen someday but restoration for some relationships might not be available. That was hard to deal with.

I was so aware of my rebellion that many times I would wonder if today was the day God was going to take my life. I would walk in a parking lot looking out for cars fearfully thinking one would kill me. I would also wake up many mornings wondering if sickness had come over me. All of this is what God used to cause me to call a biblical counselor so I could reconcile some things in my head and heart in regards to what I had done and what could happen if I kept going down this road. Eventually, this counselor helped me to take steps toward repentance.

2. Similarly—what things did the enemy use to keep you from repentance (pride, hardness of heart, the allure and pleasure of remaining in sin...)

I heard so many lies from the enemy and chose to believe them. My feelings were given more credit than the truth of scripture. I hate that I allowed them to rule over me. While in my sin the lies that I heard frequently were these:

- 1) Things are so broken and damaged that you might as well keep going forward.
- 2) God will forgive you down the road but no one else will ever care for you, respect you, love you, or see you as a brother or friend again.
- 3) This life you've built is now over so you need to rebuild a new one with where you're at and just start over. Count everything and everyone a loss from your past.

3. How did God finally break through? What did that moment (or hours or days), where you finally broke down in repentance...look like?

At one point, I knew I had to repent and wanted to but then another part of me didn't want to. And for various reasons I felt I could not even if I wanted or tried to. It was a battle that lasted a few weeks. I prayed that God would give me a window of opportunity to pull the trigger and that He would need to help me pull that trigger because I wasn't sure I could do it. One day that opportunity came and I did. Rebelling caused major emotional, spiritual, and mental damage. As my counselor said would happen, so did returning. Obviously not spiritual damage but emotionally and mentally I was now a wreck. I tore apart relationships with my wife, kids,

family, friends to pursue a new relationship. Now, once again, I was tearing apart a relationship to try and re-engage with previously torn relationships. Apart from the Lord, there won't be any kind of health for years. But we serve a God of miracles and miracle after miracle is what He did!

4. How did you feel once you repented? Did you immediately feel restored? Did you doubt?

As I mentioned earlier, I was a wreck. At first, I felt nothing but pain and sadness. I was numb to everyone and everything else. I was returning to my family but not allowed to live in the house for a few months. In the beginning, I lived in a rough hotel out of boxes and bags. Not the beautiful story of the son returning and the Father running to him on the road (but that is exactly what was happening even though I couldn't see it!). I was so numb in every way and literally could not process anything I had just gone through over the last 3-6 months. I did not want to see anyone I knew. I was keenly aware that I had committed terrible sin, greatly hurt my family including all extended family. It was so overwhelming to think about and usually I couldn't handle the thought of it all without having a breakdown. So, many times I had to shut that off and not allow myself to think about it too much. I still have tears when I think about this and still working through it. I was so broken. Nothing but sadness, anger, hurt, and shame were all that I could feel for months. I related so much to King David in the Psalms for the first time.

All of Psalm 51 became very real to me and especially these verses:

"Let me hear joy and gladness;

let the bones that 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 right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from your presence,

and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,

and uphold me with a willing spirit."

Like King David, my bones felt broken, my heart was shattered, and I would tell people that the word "joy" felt so foreign when I would read or hear it. This was a long process of "feeling" restored.

I waited a couple of weeks to attend church. I felt everyone was going to be angry at me, which they were, BUT.. when I arrived, awkwardly, I was hugged, cared for, prayed over, and loved. The lies I heard were wrong. I did sense of feeling in the beginning that I was forgiven by the Lord IMMEDIATELY. I also knew I was fully restored to Him but like with my earthly relationships, on my end, I needed to rebuild the relationship. I needed to get back to my Bible and rediscover who God is, who I am in Christ, and what my value and purpose are in the Kingdom. My identity was lost.. I literally could not figure out who I was. I needed to learn, maybe for the first time, who I was, just as a follower of Christ. And I needed to learn how to love my wife and kids again and what a simple life looks like in Christ, with no big purpose or plan. This, too, has been a journey but as I have been finding purpose and identity in the Lord alone, it has been so life giving!

5. Was repentance a moment...or a process...or both?

It's now been a 1 year and 3 days since I returned to the Lord and my family. It has been a long hard journey. Forgiveness was in a moment. Repentance has been a process and so has restoration to people. Like I said earlier, it was like I was in ICU at the beginning. ICU was about 3-4 months. Then I was moved to a hospital

bed which was another 3-4 months. Felt like I was able to leave the hospital on crutches with intense physical therapy for another 3-4 months. Lately, there has been a lot of health but the journey is not over. The pain and sadness took almost 6 months to turn into joy. There are still days and moments that the pain floods in but joy is a choice not a feeling. We must choose joy in all circumstances and when we do, we honor the Lord. It's part of the life of worship the apostle Paul talks about. This process is intentional. Healing comes through the Lord and it comes through pursuing Him.

6. Any other thoughts, bullet points you can share on the PRACTICAL aspects of repentance?

Sure.

1) Pursue repentance and submit to the daily process of being restored.

Sin absolutely destroys everything around you. God will not be mocked so trust the scriptures and know that confessing your sin and turning from it to pursue the Lord is your only way of having life to its fullest. As you see in Psalm 32 and 51, King David was a real man who actually experienced both sides of sin and repentance. He, too, experienced the power of repentance and the restoring of His life and joy.

2) Seek biblical counseling.

I believe that this could have all been avoided if I had sought counseling early on. There was a time period before all this happened that I considered doing this but thought I was "fine" and didn't need it. That is a HUGE regret of mine. There is no shame in seeking counseling even if things are good. We take our vehicles in for maintenance to a professional even when things aren't broken so that they don't break down. Why not our souls, minds, and marriages?

3) Pursue reconciliation with others where possible.

When we sin, we sin against the Lord but we also sin against others causing much pain. We can experience forgiveness and restoration to the Lord immediately and we can experience this with the Church, too, which is so good. But I think many people stop at this place because it's too painful or uncomfortable to go further to reconcile with others. This is in one way, as one of my dear friends says, "taking shots on the chin". To go to people that were in the wake of your devastation and say "I'm sorry", is going to be so hard but so rewarding with some as not only forgiveness takes place but possibly restoration and reconciliation of that relationship. As in war, the damage left behind after the war is ugly though the war is over. But, when cities choose to take care of the damage and rebuild, it's so beautiful!

I've had some really hard convos ALL. YEAR. LONG. and there are still more to come. It's hard and it's painful but God has allowed there to be some restored relationships and friendships that would not have come about if I had not reached out and pursued them. A few of them aren't fully like they were because sadly, that's the effect of sin. At least there is something valuable rebuilt there and I'll take what I can get. Restoration of broken relationships isn't required but it is encouraged. It won't be possible with all but for some it can happen by God's grace.