

“Words You Should Know: Repentance”

1 Kings 8:46-53 • Luke 15:1-10

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • August 21, 2022

A man decided he wanted to get a pet bird so he went to the pet store to pick one out. As he looked at the birds they had, there was one bird that was talking to every person in the store. The man said, “I’ll take this one.” The store owner said, “you don’t want this bird, he’s says terrible things.” The man insisted and so the store owner sold him the bird. But when he got home he found out what the owner meant. The bird would insult the man. He would use language that would make sailors blush. In short, he was just foul mouthed and rude all the time. The man tried everything he could think of to get the bird to change its behavior but no luck. One day the bird was just cursing up a storm and the man became so frustrated that he couldn’t get the bird to stop that grabbed the bird and put him in the freezer. For a minute or so he could hear that bird squawking and cursing. Then suddenly it stopped. There was silence. He thought there was something wrong so he opened the freezer door and the bird calmly walked out, looked at him and said, “I want to apologize for my actions. I believe I must have offended you and I am sorry.” The man was speechless and was about to ask the bird what changed his attitude when the bird said, “if you don’t mind me asking, what did the chicken do?”

The theological word we are looking at today is “repentance.” In the Gospel of Mark, the first things Mark records Jesus saying is, “The time has come and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.” What does it really mean to repent? I think repentance is a word that is often misunderstood. Worse than that, a false concept of repentance is sometimes used to abuse people spiritually, to try to gain some kind of control over them. That’s why, like the other theological words we have studied, it’s important for us to understand what the word really means.

Our New Testament reading this morning is a couple of Jesus’ parables – the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. These parables are not difficult to understand. They are about the joy that comes from finding something that was lost. But it’s kind of odd that Jesus ends each of them by talking about the rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repents. Can sheep repent? What about a coin? What does repentance have to do with it?

I chose this passage because it teaches us some important truths about biblical repentance. The key is in verse 2. The Pharisees and Scribes are grumbling because Jesus receives and eats with sinners. They think he should spend all his time with respectable religious people. But the Bible is clear in many places that from God’s perspective there really aren’t any respectable religious people. In Solomon’s prayer from 1 Kings we heard earlier he says “there is no one who does not sin.” Paul says the same thing in Romans when he writes, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In each of these two parables, the thing that is lost is unable to correct the problem. The woman must light a lamp and get down on the floor, sweeping away the straw that covers the dirt floor in near darkness. The shepherd has to leave his flock unattended to go find the lost sheep. In both cases they rejoice at finding what was lost.

Jesus says there is great joy in heaven when a sinner repents. He says the angels celebrate! That’s point of these parables. When we who were lost are finally back where we belong there is joy in heaven. When you and I repent, God forgives and restores the relationship.

Jesus tells these two parables to set up a third parable that comes next – the prodigal son. You probably know the story. A young man asks his father to give him his share of the

inheritance. He was basically saying, “I wish you were dead already.” Surprisingly the father gives it to him. The kid then takes the money and hits the road to go far away from his father.

The truth is that this story describes every one of us. Remember the illustration last week of the road. We are all on a road. One direction leads toward God and godliness. The other direction leads away from Him. Every thing you do or say or think moves you in one direction or the other. Sin takes us along the road away from God. Like the prodigal son we tell God, “I’d like the benefits of being your son but not the relationship.”

As you know from the story of the prodigal son, eventually he hits rock bottom and remembers the life he had with his father. He realizes he’s not worthy to be called a son but he decides to return home and seek mercy. He goes to apologize. That’s repentance.

In the Old Testament, the word “repent” translates the Hebrew word *shuv*, which literally means to turn or return. To repent, in the Hebrew sense, means to turn around. On that road that leads toward or away from God, if you find yourself traveling away from Jesus you need to turn around. In the New Testament the Greek word translated most often as repentance is *metanoia*, which means to change your mind. Last week when we talked about sanctification we learned that a changed life begins with changed thinking. Thinking leads to doing. But the New Testament writers didn’t limit repentance to just your thinking. They used the word with the same understanding as *shuv* in the Old Testament.

So how *do* we repent? Do we just say we’re sorry and forget about it? Do we need to do particular actions to make it happen? And who decides? Theologians distinguish between two kinds of repentance. The first is what they call *attrition*. This is remorse or repentance that’s caused by fear – maybe fear of punishment or the loss of some kind of blessing. If you’ve ever

spent much time around children you know that sometimes they have to be made to apologize when they hurt someone. But frequently the apology is not all that convincing. As adults many of us have learned to be more convincing but not necessarily any more remorseful.

For example, there was once a man who worked for a lumber yard and over the years he would help himself to lumber. He began to feel guilty about it and went and confessed to his pastor. The pastor asked him, “how much wood did you steal?” The man said, “enough to build my house. And my daughter’s house. And a cabin at the lake.” Then he said, “I feel really bad about it. That’s why I wanted to confess. I don’t want to go to hell. Do you think God will forgive me?” The pastor replied, “I’m sure God will forgive you but you really need to spend more time with him. Have you considered a retreat?” The man answered, “I’ve never considered that but if you can get the plans I can get the lumber.” The man wasn’t really sorry after all.

The other kind of repentance is what is called *contrition*. This is godly repentance. With contrition you see your sin for what it is. You are truly sorry – not because you fear punishment but because you realize that you have offended God. There’s no attempt to justify your actions and you offer no excuses. You begin to hate your own sin and genuinely want to change. This was the attitude of King David in Psalm 51 after his affair with Bathsheba. He says, “I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.” He then throws himself on the mercy of God, trusting God to forgive. When you are contrite you are honest with God and honest with yourself. As 1 John 1 puts it, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Repenting means turning away from your sin. It means confessing your sin to God and

doing whatever it takes to get rid of that sin from your life. But just as important as turning away from your sin, repenting means turning toward or returning to God. In Zechariah 1:3, God says, “return to me and I will return to you.” In his Temple dedication prayer in 1 Kings 8, King Solomon depends on this promise from God. Solomon lays out a number of situations where God’s people have wandered away from Him. But he asks that when they repent, when they turn back to God, that God would forgive them and restore them, the very thing God promises to do for them and for you.

And this is the point of Jesus’ parables here. No matter how far you have travelled down that road away from God, He is right there ready to forgive when you turn to him. It’s not a one-time thing. We need to repent often, daily or even hourly. Jesus never forces himself on anyone but like the father of the prodigal son, his is ready to receive you back and he celebrates when you return.

So repenting is a turning back to Christ and it begins with your thinking. It begins with you realizing how bad your sin is. That’s why when people join our church, the first membership question everyone must answer is, “Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy?” You have to be bad to get in but unlike prison you must also confess it publicly. That’s why a time of confession is so important in our worship.

Finally, there’s one more aspect of repentance and the Westminster Confession says it best: “repentance unto life is an evangelical grace.” Ultimately, repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit. It’s the result of God working in you. His grace always comes first. Which way are you traveling on the road? If you realize you are going the wrong way, praise God and turn around.

Amen.