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Acts: What is Repentance?
Acts 2:36-38; Luke 15:11-24

This morning we will resume our journey through the book of Acts, and as promised, we are going to return to the day of Pentecost and examine Peter’s answer to the crowds when in vs. 37 they ask, “What shall we do?” So let’s stand and read our text for this morning which is Acts 2:36-38, and then we’ll read Luke 15:11-24

Acts 2:36-38

36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. ” 37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 And Peter said 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.

Luke 15:11-24

The Parable of the Prodigal Son
11 And he said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

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As we return to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, remember that Peter has preached a Holy Spirit powered proclamation of the Gospel. In his message Peter has pointed to the prophet Joel, making it clear that the prophecies of the last days has come to pass as evidenced by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Day of the Lord is approaching, and those who have contested the way of God will be judged. However, in God’s supreme mercy, the prophet Joel reveals that God will provide a way to escape the Day of Judgment: “All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Peter then builds his case that Jesus is the “name of the Lord”, and his sermon is summed up in vs. 36, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

In other words,” the Messiah of God, sent to make salvation possible for those under God’s judgment, is the very Jesus you citizens of Jerusalem just crucified on a Roman cross.”

The message hits home for thousands who are gathered there in Jerusalem. Luke reports that “They were cut to the heart.” So they ask Peter and the other apostles, “What shall we do?” In response, Peter gives two mandates and makes two promises: Mandate one is REPENT. Mandate two is BE BAPTIZED. Promise one is YOUR SINS WILL BE FORGIVEN. And promise two is: YOU WILL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. What Peter says here in vs. 38 is so absolutely essential to the Christian faith that I will take the next couple of weeks to address the mandates and the promises that Peter provides, so that all of us who might be asking the question, “What shall I do?” will have a biblical understanding of what our response to the gospel should generally look like.

To get started, let’s place ourselves in the sandals of the first century Jewish audience there in Jerusalem to understand how they would have heard Peter’s mandate to “repent.”

Repentance is one of the words that triggers a visceral response from many in our postmodern culture. Most postmoderns think of repentance as an admission of guilt and shame based upon antiquated morality that is not only outdated but completely irrelevant in our age of relativism and technology. If I asked an average postmodern person to tell me what most needs to be repented of in our culture, they would surely say, “Our tendency to judge other people.” Judging other people’s behavior as “sinful” or “wrong” is the only SIN that remains in the western world. So I have no doubt that any discussion of repentance will cause many people under the age of 60 to roll their eyes and shut down. But listen, let’s not go there quite yet. Let’s take a moment and consider what repentance meant in the ancient world, and then we’ll see if and how that applies in our western, postmodern culture.
Repentance in the ancient Jewish world was a very common subject. The primary word for repentance in the Hebrew Bible is “shub,” and it is found close to 1300 times in the Old Testament. Shub literally means to “turn back” or “return.” Isaiah 55:7 is a classic example of the OT call to repentance,

“7let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return (shub) to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

We find the word shub used three times in one sentence in Ezekiel 14:6: “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Repent(šub) and turn (šub) away from your idols, and turn (šub) away your faces from all your abominations.

Notice that repentance is commanded by God through the prophets so that God’s compassion can be applied to sinners. Those who turn back to Him will be pardoned. Repentance, therefore, is not an act of shaming other people or judging other people. Repentance is simply turning back to God after having turned away, so that the relationship can be restored.

There is another word sometimes translated as repentance in the OT, and that is the word nacham. Nacham is found 130 times in the OT, and it literally means “relent.” In the context of repentance, nacham typically means “change your mind.” Now…some of you are aware of certain OT scriptures where God is said to have “repented” of a certain decision to render punishment. Anytime you see the word “repentance” applied to God in the OT, it’s an English translation of this Hebrew word nacham, and it literally means that God changed His mind…He chose not to punish sinners as He said He would because, in these cases, either the people repented (like the Ninevites in the book of Jonah) or there were intercessors who pleaded on behalf of those who were being judged by God (as in Exodus 32 when Moses pleads with God on behalf of the sinful Israelites and God “repents” or changes His mind about their punishment).

So, the OT understanding of repentance was both turning back or returning to God, and also relenting of one’s course of action…a change of one’s mind or one’s decisions.

There is another element that is consistent with repentance in the OT, and it’s the idea that repentance leads to sincere sorrow over the broken relationship between those who have sinned and their God. The grief typically associated with heart-felt repentance might lead people to tear their clothes, dump ashes on their heads, or even clothe themselves in sack cloth. In other words, repentance was thought to be a holistic shift of one’s mind, emotions, and actions.

So, given that context, how did the first century Jews in Jerusalem understand Peter’s mandate to “repent” after they had been cut to the heart by his sermon on this day of Pentecost in Acts 2?

First, those hearing Peter’s sermon were certainly made aware that they were on the wrong side of the field. God was with Jesus, as evidenced by his life, his resurrection, and his ascension. And, God is with the Jesus followers as evidenced by the power of the Holy Spirit now enabling them to speak of the mighty works of God in every language under the sun. So, if the listeners wanted to be on the winning team…if they wanted to be where God was, they would need to turn back, turn around, and join the team wearing the Jesus jersey! So the invitation to repent was
certainly to switch sides from those who killed Jesus to those who will now join Jesus and His people.

To make that change of allegiance required the listeners to change their minds about what they had assumed was true. The first century Jews surely assumed that a Messiah would never suffer the humiliation of a criminal’s cross. In fact, the cross was a source of shame…and in the honor culture of middle-eastern antiquity, shame was to be avoided at all costs. But after Peter’s sermon, those who are cut to the heart realize that the shame is not on Jesus, but on them…they killed the Messiah, and in so doing they dishonored God. Yet God “exalted Jesus” by raising Him from the dead and placing Him at His right hand where all of His enemies would soon become his “footstool” according to Psalm 110. So repentance meant rethinking the shame of the cross. It meant acknowledging the guilt and shame of their behavior towards Jesus, and it meant taking action to regain honor by aligning themselves with the true and rightful King and becoming citizens of His Kingdom.

Make no mistake, there was also an element of fear that gripped the Jewish audience at this moment. God’s judgment was coming, the Day of the Lord was approaching, and they had blood on their hands. That’s why Peter says, “Save yourselves from this wicked generation.” God’s wrath will fall on those who rejected and crucified His Messiah, and only those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. There is a very real-time, historical, geographical urgency to their repentance—they want to be out of harm’s way when God sends His judgment upon those who killed the Messiah, and they are likely assuming that judgment may come at any moment.

Historically, they were right on target. Remember that by 70 AD, just 30 some years after this day of Pentecost, Jerusalem is completely annihilated by the Romans. According to the first century Jewish historian named Josephus, 1.1 million people were killed during the siege, of which a majority were Jewish, and 97,000 were captured and enslaved. But you know who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem? The Christians. You want to know why? Because they were so fiercely persecuted by the Jews in those first 20 years or so that they had to flee Jerusalem, thus most of the Christians were scattered abroad when the Romans came to annihilate the “wicked generation” that was Jerusalem in 70 AD.

OK…so now we have a basic understanding of what repentance meant for the first century Jewish listeners on the streets of Jerusalem.

Now…was repentance a key theme for Jesus and the New Testament? Very much so. Before Jesus began His ministry, we saw in Luke 3 that John the Baptist called people to repent and to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. He also baptized people with a baptism of repentance. We’ll talk more about that next week.

When Jesus began to preach and teach, He regularly called people to repent as well. Matthew summed up the message of Jesus in Mat. 4:17 as simply this, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” In Mat. 9:13 Jesus says, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” In Luke 13:3-5 Jesus states twice that “unless you repent, you will perish.” To some degree, repentance would appear to be a primary goal of Jesus who says in Luke 15:10

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“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

So what does repentance mean in the New Testament?

The New Testament understanding of repentance is essentially the same as what we saw in the OT. The most common two words associated with repentance in the Greek New Testament are *metanoia* and *epistrepho*. *Metanoia* essentially carries the emotional and convictional meaning that we find in the OT in regards to both turning and changing one’s mind. The word *epistrepho* carries the meaning of “returning” that is commonly associated with the OT understanding of repentance as well. Peter uses both terms in Acts 3:19 when he says, “Repent and return that your sins may be blotted out…” Again, the mandate to repent is not usually a threat, it’s an invitation to walk through the door that leads to forgiveness and restoration.

So based upon what we know from the OT and the NT and how the first century Jewish listeners understood repentance, how does that translate for us here and now in the 21st century?

For some reason, repentance continues to be a difficult subject for us, all of us. Proud people don’t want to admit their faults, liberal people don’t want to admit that there is any absolute moral code, people who battle shame don’t want to repent because it only makes them feel worse about themselves, and even long time Christians don’t like to talk about repentance because they feel like they should know better by now and yet they keep sinning, so maybe their repentance wasn’t very sincere or maybe “it doesn’t work for me.” Whatever our situation, the very word repentance is likely making you uncomfortable, and I get that…trust me. Nevertheless, heaven rejoices when we repent, so we need to understand what that actually means for us and our lives this morning.

I think the best way to understand repentance is to look at the picture Jesus provided in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Remember that the youngest son of the Father demands to have his share of the estate so that he can leave the father’s house and live on his own terms. Once the money is gone, the boy ends up starving. He is forced to eat pig food and work for heathen. But then something happens. Jesus says in Luke 15:17ff that “when he came to himself he said, ‘…I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

First note that repentance follows a harsh dose of reality. We cannot genuinely repent if we are self-delusional or in a state of denial about our condition. The boy must first “come to himself”…he must snap out of the intoxicating lie that has led him to the mess he is in. The consequences of his selfishness have led to a painful lesson, and only now can he see that he is alienated from his father. Only now can he can honestly recognize that he is not a good person. His comments reveal that he is covered up with guilt and shame. Remember, guilt is feeling bad about what we have done; shame is feeling bad about who we are. Guilt is the conviction that we have broken the law; shame is the conviction that we are lawbreakers. He acknowledges his guilt when he says “I have sinned against heaven…” And he acknowledges his shame when he says, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”
If we think of repentance as behavior modification, we’ll miss the power of its biblical meaning. Moral transgression has consequences, and surely repentance must address our transgression and its consequence. But biblical repentance goes much deeper than that. A biblical worldview always associates sin with an offense against God that damages our relationship with God, our relationships with others, and our relationship with ourselves. That’s why sin is so toxic and deadly. Our sin leads not only to moral consequences but relational consequences…both guilt and shame.

Now listen…before you get offended by me talking about sin, guilt, and shame, remember that in any worldview conversation, whatever we believe to be true must be consistent with our observable reality, and here’s what we all know: this world is messed up, and most of us wrestle with the notion that we’re messed up as well. We all know that we have done things that are wrong…that we are guilty. But even more devastating is this sneaking suspicion that we are unaccepteable…that we are damaged goods…that if the world could really see us as we are…if people really knew…if all of our secrets were exposed, people would discover what we already suspect is true: that we are not worthy of being loved or accepted by anyone. That’s shame, and it’s very powerful, very real, and very common...even for pastors. All people wrestle with some degree of guilt and shame, and the only reasonable way to account for that universal reality is that we are moral creatures made in the image of a moral God.

Our postmodern friends will be quick to say that people only feel guilt and shame when they feel squashed by antiquated morality found in the Bible. They will argue that if people were free to define their own values and their own morality, they wouldn’t suffer from guilt and shame. I disagree.

Remember, that’s exactly the kind of thinking that led the boy to treat his father like he was dead and demand his inheritance in the first place. The boy was denying the eternal, immutable law of God that commanded him to honor his father in exchange for his own set of personal values that said, “I deserve to have what’s coming to me so that I can have fun.” But how did that work out? Not so good. Who is convicting the son of his guilt and shame? He is!

Let me ask you a question: who is your worst critic? You, right? So if you create your own standards, if you establish your worth based upon your assessment of you…how’s that going to work out? How will you ever know how you’re doing if you keep changing the rules? How will you ever find a place to rest in this world if the only person who sets the standards and judges your worth is you…the least likely person to forgive you that you’ve ever met?

Biblical repentance acknowledges our guilt and shame based upon a universal, eternal standard that applies to all people in all times. We’re not judged by our own standards, we’re judged by God’s standards. That may seem like bad news at first, but it’s ultimately the most liberating concept in the world. That means we don’t have to be gods, nor should we try to be gods. We don’t have to make up our own laws and our own morality or our own reality as though somehow we have the power to be self-determining…we don’t, and we aren’t. God’s law is our friend…it defines reality, and if ever we “come to ourselves,” we’ll see reality as it actually is, and that is ultimately a good thing, though potentially painful at first.
Let me give you an example in marriage. Several years ago Christy and I were in a tough spot in our marriage. Apparently I often behave in ways that are hurtful to Christy, but based on my own personal standards, I wasn’t seeing the error of my ways. Finally, after 15 years of marriage, the consequences of my behavior caught up with me. It took long, painful hours for me to finally recognize that my standards for behavior in a marriage were unacceptable to her and inevitably hurtful. That was the reality of our marriage, even if it was not my personal reality in terms of my own standards. When I finally realized what kind of pain my behavior had caused my wife, it was devastating to me, which led to genuine repentance and an effort to adjust my behavior for the sake of restoring our relationship. Reality is our friend, even when it’s painful, because only when we see ourselves as we actually are can we truly repent and seek to restore a relationship.

So when we are confronted with reality…when we come to ourselves…when we come to see just how bad the situation is…according to Acts 2 and the rest of the Bible, we will have to repent. Jesus will call us to turn around, to return home, to have genuine desire to sin no more. It’s not fun, it’s not safe, it’s not easy…and it’s also not optional. Jesus called people, cities, and the whole world to repent—to snap out of the lie and be truthful about what we’ve done and the damage that’s been done in our relationships with God, each other, and ourselves.

But listen, as we repent before God, as we call a spade a spade and deal with the reality of our situation, we are also invited to consider the nature of our Father. He is just, and He is merciful. How do we know? Because Jesus Christ took the penalty of our sin to atone for our guilt. Jesus became sin who knew no sin in order to remove our shame…so that we might be forgiven and included in His family as His children. Repentance is the doorway through which we might be cleansed of all that has been corrupted and defiled and receive a new heart, a new identity, a new status in God’s family through the sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ. When we turn back to God, we are not merely tolerated, nor are we demoted to “slave” status even when we think we should be. The Father welcomes the wayward son with open arms and completely, utterly, restores him to SON status with no strings attached. This very same son who treated his father like he was dead and wasted years of his life squandering all that had been given to him…this very same son is given position, power, authority and a party to end all parties as well. That’s the God of the Bible…that’s our God, that’s our Father, and He will run to meet even one who will simply turn around.

Jesus said there is more rejoicing in heaven…there is dancing in the presence of angels, when even one person repents.

Listen…if your sin and your shame is crushing you this morning…if you are under the conviction that you are far from your Father in Heaven…if you are willing to admit that you really aren’t that great of person and you are ready to be made new…repent. Turn around. Return to your true Home and your True Father, and be restored. Repentance leads to life…unwillingness to repent…leads to death. The choice is yours. Let’s pray.