

Written Copy For: How Do I Repent? Joel 2:12-14

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, February 26th, 2020

Text: Joel 2:12-14

¹² "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. ¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

Exegetical Statement

In the previous chapter Joel is warning God's people of the great and awesome "Day of the Lord". This day God had been warning them about that they needed to turn away from idol worship and half-hearted keeping of the Laws and turn back to Him or He would allow this day to come and so remove them from the land. But even now, after all their previous ignoring and hardheartedness if they return to Him with all their hearts, not just with outward acts of repentance but allow the tearing and destruction of their sinful hearts the LORD would relent from what He had told them would come. He does not desire to inflict punishment but desires to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and keep all of His covenant promises of mercy and grace. They needed to allow His words of warning to reach in and show them their sin, that they have separated themselves from Him and His grace. Realizing and confessing this they needed to repent inwardly as well as outwardly. The LORD promises not to ignore a broken heart but will react with love and compassion and restore that heart through the Gospel and so call them back into fellowship as His beloved people.

Focus Statement:

The ashes of death on my forehead are in the sign of the cross. It is through the gift of Christ crucified and resurrected that true repentance can happen in my life. Without faith that I am forgiven I would never admit the depth of my guilt. But Jesus came as my defender and removed all the evidence of my sin. That evidence stood against Him and sent Him to the cross. He not only takes my punishment but gives to me what His perfect life has earned, the presence of the Spirit now and eternal life to come. The Spirit working through the Sacraments creates in me a new repentant heart and keeps me in fellowship with the LORD

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

My sinful prideful heart stands against any true confession and repentance of sin by focusing on excuses instead of allowing myself to see clearly the depth of my sin and guilt. I cannot choose to repent. I cannot change my own heart. For that I deserve eternal death

What the hearer should do as a result:

Avail myself of the Word so that the Spirit can continue to convict my prideful heart and remake it as the new heart from God. I can then live according to this new heart.

Subject Sentence: Repentance is Holy Spirit's work in me

“You’re Late!” That was what I hated to hear from the General Manager at Hillers when I would arrive at work after a snowy commute like we have today. On a good day with no snow, during rush hour, it took me @ 50 minutes to get to work. But when snow came just before or during rush hour my commute would extend anywhere from one hour ten minutes to one- and one-half hours. One day it took me over 2 hours to get there. So it wasn’t just a matter of leaving 10-15 minutes early. Snow meant rearranging my whole morning schedule. Now thankfully there was a two Head Cashiers who were scheduled to start an hour before me. One of them lived within walking distance. So there was someone there to open the doors for other employees arriving for the opening shift. And the Head Cashiers were trained to open the store on their own since that was how things went on Sundays. But from the top down they wanted a manager on duty in the store to unlock the doors every other day.

When I would arrive late, I could count on one of two things: a message from the General Manager to call him as soon as I got in, or if I was really lucky, he would be there in the office waiting for me. And what really used to grind my gears was that no excuse was satisfactory enough to still his wrath or diffuse his sarcasm. If it snowed, he would tell me that I should’ve left earlier. If it was a surprise storm, then I should’ve planned for that. Just because it takes 50 minutes doesn’t mean I have to leave just 50 minutes prior to starting time even on a good day. When I responded that meant on the snowy days, I would have to leave an hour and a half early he responded “Well, if that’s what it takes. Is your job important enough for you to leave earlier than normal he said, “Can’t you find something to pass the time when you get here early, like checking your email, reading that Bible you always carry around, or how about starting work early? Maybe then you’d actually get

something done!” When I mentioned how working a closing shift the night before and then having to get up that early for the opening shift the next day severely cuts short my night’s sleep, he said “You could take a nap here if you got here early enough.” Basically any other excuse I came up with his answer was “If it’s that difficult a thing to drive that distance and get here on time than either you should move closer or find a job closer to home.” Keep in mind there were often some choice colorful metaphors mixed in.

Now this angered me. And the only thing that prevented me from lashing out either verbally or physically was all the bills I needed my paycheck to cover and the insurance that this job provided. But I always saw myself as in the right and the General Manager to be an unfair, hardnosed, uncompassionate, pain in the rear. Looking back now I can see things in a different light. I was late for work more times than I really wanted to admit. Sometimes only 5 or 10 minutes but I was still late, nonetheless. And when I took the position I agreed to the starting time and to be on time to open the store, and to set an example for the other employees. But these facts usually escaped my notice as I groused to myself and others about his unfairness. Maybe the worst part of this was my hypocritical way of ignoring my tardiness when disciplining other employees for theirs. I recall one time when the General Manager dismissed a tardiness write-up that I had given to an employee who mentioned how I seem to be tardy too. That should’ve changed my perspective, but all it did was anger me all the more. I saw myself as the faithful employee who was being unfairly picked on.

Excuses didn’t fly with my General Manager. Excuses don’t fly when it comes to what the LORD demands of us as His chosen people, His children. His law is pretty clear cut and dry.

So much so that we often respond with excuses and our own personal clarifications to soften its hard blow.

Take for example the commandment “You shall not murder”. I haven’t ever murdered anybody, so I feel pretty good about that. But then Jesus comes along and explains in **Matthew 5:21-22** ²¹ **"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'** ²² **But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.** So anger is the same as murder? Really Jesus? Well, Ok maybe sometimes. But what about when the idiot who passes me on the freeway during a snow storm and then cuts back over in front of me, causing me to lay on the brakes and begin to slip and slid in my lane, and then almost clip the guy to my right, who lays on the horn and shows me how long his middle finger is. I respond with some graphic words that are a lot stronger than “fool”. Does this mean I am guilty of breaking this commandment? C’mon! After all it was that idiot cutting in front of me that started it all. And why is the guy on me right trying to pass me on the right? And why didn’t the snowplow drivers get the freeway cleared off? And why did the doctor have to make my appointment so early? It’s not really my fault that I got angry and reacted. Anybody in my place would. I can’t help it. The anger just rises up and comes out. How can I stop it? Jesus: how can you accuse me of breaking the commandment when others are so much more at fault then me? When that anger just rises up how do you expect me to control it? How can you hold me responsible for that?

OK, so what I've done is something that I need to confess before my Savior in repentance. And let's say I do, "Dear Lord, I'm sorry that I lost my temper when those losers almost made me crash." Now is my repentance the real thing? **Joel 2:13a** says "**rend your hearts and not your garments.**" In the days of the OT prophets people demonstrated their sorrow over sin and their repentance through physical means such as ripping your outer garment in half, wearing sackcloth and ashes, and fasting. People began to see these outward signs as being repentance in and of itself. They began to see these displays as making them right before God when they sinned. But the problem is the ripping and rending stopped far short of how deep it needed to go. The ripping and rending needed to go all the way to the heart. It needs to destroy the sinful pride that lives in my heart. Can I say that was true of me?

That sinful pride is the gift from Adam and Eve that has been passed down through the generations and is part of what we call the Sinful Nature. Because of that pride I refuse to see and will avoid any real responsibility for my sinful thoughts, words, and actions. I will admit that I did say something that I shouldn't. I will admit that on the highway I used a colorful metaphor. I may even admit that I showed the other driver the length of my middle finger was wrong. But really, it's not my fault. I've got the excuses to prove it. The problem is in Scripture where Jesus is expounding upon the sin of anger, I don't see any wiggle room for excuses.

What God sees when I sin is what I should see in myself if I wasn't blinded to it by my sinful heart. Any repentance that comes with the word "but" or comes with excuses is not really repentance at all. Excuses and "but's are not me confessing sin and owning my

disobedience, they are deflecting my responsibility and hiding behind those excuses to protect what really needs to be addressed: my sinful prideful heart. That's what needs to be addressed in each one of you as well. We can say to someone we've offended "I'm sorry that I did that". But does that mean we've repented? Why am I really sorry? Because it was wrong? Or because I got caught? Because others got to see the way I responded which I'd rather they didn't know I was capable of? And after all, I may have done it; but its not really my fault. But that is not repentance.

Repentance is seeing my sin for what it is and owning what I've done. It's seeing and confessing that breaking the commandment not to murder involves my angry thoughts, words, and actions, even if I don't see it that way. Jesus does see it that way. Excuses protect my prideful heart from being broken. When true repentance enters in, it makes me own my sin and confess that I am totally at fault. That crushes my sinful prideful heart. True repentance means seeing my sin from Jesus' eyes and admitting my guilt without the excuses. When excuses remain it makes my repentance nothing more than a superficial act like the shredding of clothes, the wearing of sackcloth and ashes, and the fasting. The change is strictly outward while my heart remains unchanged.

The thing about true repentance is you and I cannot do it ourselves. We cannot sit down and say, "I'm going to repent of what I've said and done." You can't do that on your own because your prideful heart will not let you. It will rise up and say "No you're not. You can admit some things but here are the excuses that go with it." But unless we can fully confess our sinfulness than we can't fully entrust our salvation to Jesus. We only need Him for the

really bad stuff. The other stuff is not really our fault. But keep following that line of reasoning and eventually you may find that you really don't need a Savior.

You and I cannot decide to repent on our own. Repentance is the work that the Holy Spirit must do inside of you. He comes to you with the Law and shows you just how deep the sin goes. He shows you that your sin involves thoughts words and actions. He makes us see the excuses for what they really are. He makes us see that there is no amount of explaining or spin doctoring that will ever let us off the hook.

Bottom line is we stand condemned before the judge of the universe, God the Father. On the table before us are exhibits A through infinity. All that we have done and thought and said. All the excuses and explaining cannot, in the all-seeing eyes of the Heavenly Father, change them into anything resembling evidence for the defense. They stand against us. And because of these we stand guilty as charged. We stand condemned to eternal punishment.

But then our defender appears. His name is Jesus. He takes all the evidence before us on the table and removes our name from it all. On them He writes His own name. No longer are these sins and sinful prideful excuses evidence against us. No longer do we have any evidence standing against us at all. We stand before the judge of the universe declared innocent of all charges, even though we actually did commit what we were originally charged with. We go free. And our defender now stands in our place before the judge. All the evidence on the table now stands against Him. He is declared guilty of our sin and receives what should've been our sentence: He suffers and dies on the cross.

What does repentance do? By the power faith given to us in the Gospel it writes Jesus name on all of our sin. **2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** We are declared not guilty, righteous before God because He has taken away all that would cause us to stand before Him and receive the guilty verdict. Jesus writes His name on all the exhibits of my sinfulness through the power of faith.

Now if this was as far as it went, we'd be standing there with a blank slate. Nothing against us, but also nothing for us. No reason that we should receive anything else from Eternal Judge. But by faith all Jesus' obedient work in His life, death, and resurrection has been assigned to us. He earned for us all that we receive as gifts in Baptism. We know that because He rose again so will we.

What does repentance do for you and I who have been exonerated of all charges? It keeps us in a faith relationship with our Savior. It keeps us looking to Christ's work as our answer for our continued sin. It keeps that relationship with the Heavenly Father honest. Yes, we do continue to sin. Yes, the demands of the Law are above and beyond what I can ever do. But yes, I will not receive what I deserve which is eternal death. Instead I will receive what Christ won for me; salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. Because He is still my Lord and Savior and by faith, I trust Him with my life now and my eternity too.

As God reminds us in **Joel 2:12-13** ¹² **"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;** ¹³ **and rend your hearts and not your garments."** **Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over**

disaster.” Yet even now, although you and I struggle with sin, even though our prideful hearts balk at true repentance, when the Holy Spirit brings His power to bear on our hearts through the work only He can do in the Law and the Gospel, He creates in us true repentance. He crushes that sinful prideful heart daily. He throws all the excuses out the window. And our God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for you and I will continue to draw us close. Through true Spirit wrought repentance He keeps in faith alive in me from now unto life everlasting. Amen