

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

The Nature Of True Repentance

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Acts 26:12-23

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 26:12; that’s on page 935 in your pew Bibles. Last week we were looking at Paul’s defence before King Agrippa. Paul makes a lengthy speech, but thankfully, he himself tells us what the heart of the matter is. In verses 6-8 he says:

And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:6-8 ESV)

The central issue here has to do with THE HOPE OF THE JEWS. I believe that hope, Paul says. And I believe that all of those promises and prophecies have landed now on the person and work of Christ.

That’s why I’m on trial.

I believe everything written in Moses and the Prophets. I believe there is HOPE and a FUTURE – not just for the Jews, but also for the nations – for anyone and everyone who turns from their sins and puts their faith in Jesus Christ. That’s my gospel and that’s my testimony before you, O King Agrippa.

Having looked at that wonderful speech in terms of its overall message, this week I want to return and drill down on something that Paul says in his personal testimony. In relating his call and commission to the ministry Paul talks about how he was told to go and open eyes with the Gospel so that people could TURN from darkness to light. And then from there he immediately goes on and talks about how he began to execute that commission. He began to preach, calling both Jews and Gentiles TO REPENT and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with repentance.

What does that mean?

That's the question we're going to try and answer today as we revisit this portion of Paul's speech before King Agrippa.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 12:

“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ 15 And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

19 “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:12-23 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

It is clear from our reading of this portion of Paul's testimony before Agrippa that he understood his mission and calling fundamentally as a ministry of repentance. And not just "heart deep" repentance – Paul was after WHOLE LIFE REPENTANCE. He told people to repent, turn to God and to perform DEEDS in keeping with repentance – so this was a deep work. A penetrating work. A saving work.

So what does that look like?

I think FALSE repentance is the scariest concept in the Bible. False repentance is when you THINK you have turned from sin and toward God but you haven't. You've had some kind of sorrow, but it isn't really sorrow over sin it is sorrow over consequence. And you have some kind of love for God, but it is not the love of gratitude, the love of obedience, the love of fealty – it is merely the love of enthusiasm.

Those people are not real believers – don't take my word for it, Jesus said:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 7:21 ESV)

Not everyone who THINKS they've repented really has. Not everyone who SAYS they've repented really has. Old Testament and New we are warned about this reality. In Hosea 6:4 God says:

“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.” (Hosea 6:4 ESV)

Your repentance is thin. Your sorrow is skin deep. Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.

There is no reality to it!

The Bible talks about this problem again and again and again. There is a worldly grief that leads to death and a godly grief that leads to repentance unto life – and so for the sake of our own souls, we need to know the difference.

So WHAT IS REAL REPENTANCE?

What Is Real Repentance?

Our Puritan grandparents thought about this a great deal. Thomas Watson wrote an influential book called *The Doctrine of Repentance*¹, in which he talked about 6 characteristics of real repentance. Now, the Puritans tended to focus mostly on what it looks like to TRULY move away from sin – whereas Paul talks about BOTH the move AWAY from sin AND the move TOWARD God. He talks about people turning:

“from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18 ESV)

So there really are two parts to this movement; a FROM and a TO, so I’m borrowing and adapting these 6 characteristics from Thomas Watson for our purposes this morning.

The first thing, then, we need to say is this: REAL REPENTANCE involves a:

1. Recognition of sin AND an affirmation of God

That’s where it all begins, doesn’t it? There needs to be a moment when you realize who you’ve become and who you have betrayed. That’s the turning point in the Prodigal Son story. In Luke 15 Jesus tells a story about what it looks like for people to wander away into sin and then to come back and he talks about then moment when the Prodigal Son comes to his senses. Luke 15:17 says:

“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!’” (Luke 15:17 ESV)

¹ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (1168; reprint, Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2012).

Do you see that? That's the moment when HIS EYES WERE OPENED and he saw two things with perfect clarity: THE MAN HE HAD BECOME and the MAN HE HAD BETRAYED. Somehow, in the grace of God and through the movements of Providence, he understood in that moment that he had become little more than an animal, whereas his father, he now realized was actually a very good man.

That was the turning point for the young man in the story, and it is a perfect illustration of what has to happen to us at some point if we are ever going to truly repent. The beginning of all true repentance is that moment when you see the truth about yourself and you acknowledge the truth about God. Repentance begins with you saying in your heart:

I was wrong and God was right.

That's the first and essential characteristic of real repentance and the second, of course, builds on that. Real repentance involves:

2. Sorrow for sin AND gratitude for mercy

Jesus tells a couple of stories about REAL REPENTANCE and he will sometimes provide a contrast in the story with FALSE REPENTANCE. In Luke 18 for example, he tells the story of two men. He says:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ (Luke 18:10-13 ESV)

One man was focused on his saintliness, the other man was devastated by his sinfulness. Jesus says:

“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.” (Luke 18:14 ESV)

Real repentance involves DEEP, heart-felt sorrow over sin, and also deep, overflowing gratitude for forgiveness! Do you remember the story about the woman who was PROFUSE in her expressions of gratitude toward Jesus in Luke 7? Luke politely describes her as “a sinful woman”, which Leon Morris says: “probably means a prostitute”². She couldn’t STOP expressing her appreciation for the mercy she had received and Jesus points to her as an example of true repentance. He says to one of the Pharisees who was offended:

“Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” 48 And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Luke 7:44-48 ESV)

REAL repentance is characterized by this strange co-mingling of sorrow and grateful joy. We are deeply sorry for the things we have done but we are also deliriously thankful for the mercy we have received.

Thirdly, true repentance is characterized by both:

3. Confession of sin AND profession of faith

The Bible says that real repentance involves speaking the truth about SIN – yes - but it also says that real repentance involves speaking the truth about God. We see that on display, for example, in Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is sometimes called “The Sinners Guide To Repentance”. It was written after David’s sin with Bathsheba, which was perhaps, the worst sin ever attributed to a believer in the Bible.

And yet, by the grace of God, David repents. Of course, there are still consequences – there was a civil war because of David’s sin. Three of his sons died because of David’s sin – but thanks be to

²Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 166.

God – David did truly repent and David did receive mercy from the Lord and he wrote Psalm 51 as a sort of prayer guide for those seeking true repentance and in it we see him speaking the truth about his sin. He says:

“I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is **evil** in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” (Psalm 51:3-4 ESV)

There is no sugar coating here - David speaks the truth about his sin – he agrees with God, he calls it EVIL, he refers to himself as a LINE CROSSER and a LAW BREAKER – so David wants to tell the truth about his sin, but he also wants to tell the truth about God. In verses 13-14 he says:

“Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.” (Psalm 51:13-14 ESV)

That’s part of the process too. As Matthew Henry said, commenting on this passage:

“Penitents should be preachers.”³

Real repentance involves speaking the truth about your sin and speaking the truth about your God. If your heart has really been changed, those are the things that start flowing out of your mouth.

And then fourthly, real repentance involves:

4. Shame for sin AND desire for deliverance

Not all shame is bad in the bible, in fact some shame is a gift from God. Peter Krol in his article “Three Kinds Of Shame” talks about the good kind, saying:

³Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged), Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 14991.

“In moments of clarity we're horrified by our ability to be horrible.”⁴

Have you ever had a moment like that? Every journey of real repentance has at least one moment like that; when you see who you are and what you are capable of and you are pierced through the heart with an immediate sense of shame.

That's a good thing!

Every journey out of sexual addiction starts with a moment like that. When you see what you are looking at. When you see what you are doing, as you're looking at that, and you are absolutely horrified by the animal you've become.

Or maybe it's when you hear how you talk to your spouse or to your kids – whatever it is – there has to be a moment when God opens your eyes to see your sin the way he sees it.

That's a gift, brothers and sisters.

That's grace.

That is a wakeup call, that is an alarm bell, that is a bucket of cold water in your face. That is God waking you up to the deadly seriousness of the situation that you are in.

We all need that.

There is a stage in the journey of TRUE REPENTANCE that is FUELED by a God-given sense of shame – a desire to be something better than you are. A desire to be lifted up out of the depths to which you have sunk.

You catch a sense of that godly desire in the writings of the Apostle Paul, he says:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25 ESV)

⁴ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2014/04/14/three-kinds-of-shame/>

Fifthly, real repentance involves a HATRED for sin and a delight in holiness.

5. Hatred for sin AND delight in holiness

At some point in the repentance process SHAME hardens into HATRED and rightly so. We learn to hate that which we once loved. We hate the harm that sin does to other people. We hate the deceitfulness with which it seduces the weak and the vulnerable. We hate how it diminishes us and dishonours God.

Make no mistake my friends, hatred is something you need to grow in as a Christian. The Apostle Paul says that in Romans 12. He tells his people to:

“Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” (Romans 12:9 ESV)

Abhor means to hate.

If I can speak for a moment as a pastor and a parent, this is one that really concerns me because Hollywood is really good at interrupting this part of the process. Hollywood is really good at normalizing that which is unnatural and even hateful to God and interferes with the proper functioning of our consciences. Your conscience is like an early warning system. It is supposed to give you a little SHOCK whenever you get near to something dangerous, but your conscience isn't perfect and neither is it static – it can be dulled and it can sharpened, depending on what it is exposed to – and that's the issue isn't it? Because I'm sure we've all noticed that in the last 10-15 years there has been a concerted effort to MAINSTREAM portrayals of sexual behaviours that are supposed to trigger your consciences.

It's hard to find a show or a movie you can watch as a family nowadays isn't it? Producers are under pressure to ensure sexual diversity on all their programs, so if you are watching something made in the last decade you are pretty much guaranteed to encounter some kind of DEVIANT SEXUAL EXPRESSION – and every time that happens its like scrapping a rock over the point of your conscience.

It gets duller and duller and duller over time.

So as parents, we have work to counteract this process. This means being a little more vigilant in terms of what the kids are watching and it means providing some positive teaching about human sexuality so as to RE-SHARPEN the consciences of our children they are supposed to react with REVULSION when they see something that is hateful to God.

That reflex is part of their God-given defense system and if you lose it entirely, it becomes much harder to truly repent of your sin, because that involves HATING that which is hateful to God and loving that which is pleasing to God.

That's where we want our kids and ourselves to get to! We want to get to the place where we're doing the right things not because we have to but because we want to. A mark of maturity is when our discipline has become our delight.

That's a wonderful place, when the heart cry is a little less: "O God! Help me do what I should!!" and a little more:

"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!" (Psalm 34:8 ESV)

You will pass through that place in your journey of real repentance.

And then lastly, again, being guided by Watson's list, real repentance involves:

6. Abandoning sin AND pursuing God

The Bible doesn't say that we will ever achieve perfect sinlessness while we live on this earth; in fact the Bible says:

"If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:10 ESV)

We're always going to be aware of the pull and presence of sin, but the expectation is that as we grow in Christ, we will increasingly leave sin behind and move forward into greater and greater works of righteousness.

Now, of course, there have always been Christian teachers and leaders who have denied this. There have always been preachers of "cheap grace" who basically say: "do whatever you want, then pray a little prayer and all will be forgiven." That's a very popular version of Christianity, but it is not the real thing. The Apostle Paul pushed back on that pretty hard; he said:

"But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."
(Ephesians 4:20-24 ESV)

That is the movement that is characteristic of ALL truly converted people. To BE A CHRISTIAN is to have your eyes open to the UGLINESS OF SIN and the GOODNESS OF GOD. It is TO BE MOVING out of darkness, into his marvellous light. If you're not SEEING that and you're not DOING that then you are, by definition, not a Christian.

This is what it means to be saved! To be saved is to HEALED BY GOD so that you can SEE and it is to be HELPED BY GOD so that you can GROW.

Now, that's the end of our list from Thomas Watson, but I want to add one more. You won't see it on your hand out and it won't appear on the screen behind me. I wanted to follow Watson because that list has been fairly well known in the church for a long time, but I feel like it is missing something, so I'm going to add a 7th characteristic of REAL REPENTANCE and it is this:

7. Embracing consequences AND resting in God

We were talking about David's sin with Bathsheba a moment ago. As I mentioned, there were serious consequences – a civil war being one of them, and as David was fleeing the city in

advance of his son's approaching army, there was a man named Shimei who walked alongside of David's caravan and threw rocks at the King and who cursed him continually.

One of David's soldiers, Abishai asked for permission to KILL Shimei, but David wouldn't let him, saying:

“If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’” 11 And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, “Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to.” (2 Samuel 16:10-11 ESV)

Do you see that? David knew this had been caused by his sin and therefore he embraced absolutely every consequence the Lord had ordained.

That's true repentance.

Real repentance involves embracing consequences AS PART OF HOW GOD WILL HEAL YOUR SOUL. David wanted to take his medicine because he trusted that God was the Good Physician. So it is with all TRULY repentant people.

Which leads us to a final and very necessary question which we must deal with before we close:

What If I Am Guilty Of False Repentance?

As I mentioned, false repentance is the scariest concept in the Bible because there is no person more at risk than the person who does not know they are in danger. False repentance tricks us – and others – into thinking that we are doing fine, thank you. There is no need for us to be in anguish over our souls, we are Christians of course! We said The Prayer! We shed the tears! We walked the Sawdust Trail! We're ok – you worry about yourself!

Every pastor and every parent needs to be mindful of the peril that the people who say such things are in. Paul certainly was. He would say to his people:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

So as your pastor I would plead with you to use this description of real repentance to examine yourself. Are you a truly repentant person? Have you seen the light? Have you walked the path? Are you producing fruit in keeping with true repentance?

Or are you guilty of worldly grief? Paul said:

“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10 ESV)

If you have “failed the test” today in terms of this description of godly grief and real repentance then I would plead with you to get down on your knees before this service is over and to pray for a godly grief that produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.

In our Statement of Faith we declare that we believe that repentance is:

“**an evangelical grace**, whereby a person, being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of their sin, does, by faith in Christ, humble themselves for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrancancy, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose and endeavor, by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God so as to please Him in all things.”

It’s those three words at the beginning of that citation that I want you to think about. Repentance is AN EVANGELICAL GRACE – meaning it is a grace associated with our salvation. It is something you have to RECEIVE in order to build upon.

Have you received it? Because if you have not, then all your labours will be in vain.

So let me end by leading in a prayer for the grace of true repentance. Let’s pray together.