

Prepare! | Repentance and the Advent of Joy

False Repentance and the Delay of Joy

Psalm 51; 2 Corinthians 7,9-Micah 6.6-8

11.28.21

(Psalm 51) For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.

⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. ⁶ Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. ⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which 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 steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from Your presence And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation And sustain me with a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted to You.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. ¹⁶ For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

¹⁸ By Your favor do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

(2nd Cor 7.9-12) I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. ¹⁰ For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹ For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. ¹² So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one

offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.

(Micah 6.6-8) With what shall I come to the LORD and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? ⁷ Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?

This is the second Sunday in the Advent Season – a time of spiritual reflection leading up to Christmas. THIS year we’re preparing as John the Baptist called people to prepare for Jesus Christ’s ministry: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand – the King is here!” Many Christian traditions use Advent in just this way.

Today, we begin a three-week dive into the practice of repentance, looking first at the idea of False Repentance. In this year’s Life of David Series we saw the notorious pseudo-repentance of King Saul... and that stands as a warning that not all apologies or expressions of regret or confessions or pleas for forgiveness are actually what we’ll see is a gift from God – i.e. true repentance.

The Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau seems to be always apologizing and always having his words analyzed and scrutinized because someone wonders whether he’s really sorry...Lots of apologies by public figures are SUSPECT today...people wondering whether the offender is indeed SORRY enough! But I’m not interested to teach us how to apologize but to hold out in our own experience for the real thing. Because IF we settle for a cheap imitation of repentance we miss out on the results – the “comfort and joy” we sing about at this time of the year and we miss the real meaning of Christmas.

Let’s look in these texts at:

- 1) The Multiple Counterfeits**
- 2) The Miserable Conclusion**
- 3) The Missing Component (in False Repentance)**

David’s Psalm (51) is a model of the “logic and the lyrics” of repentance BUT it stands in contrast to a number of famous fakes found throughout the Bible AND in our own lives. We could look at Judas, King Saul (as we mentioned) or the Pharisee in the Temple (Luke 18.10) but we’ll look at these two.

In the first, there was a case of brazen immorality in the First Century Church at Corinth... It was a sexy town to begin with but THIS case was unacceptable even by the decadent standards of this erotic, pagan city. Paul wrote, “there’s immorality among you Christians, of such a kind as does not exist even among the pagans” (1Cor 5)

And apparently, the Christians were blaming this sin on God and His grace, like, “we overlook this horrible situation because no one’s perfect and Jesus Christ has us covered us and our leniency simply shows how loving we are.” And when Paul shows them, “No! This relationship is toxic; its offensive to God and it will lead to untold destruction – confront it!”

And when St. Paul’s directives were read to the Church, the members were saddened. And Paul writes, “Well, it’s NOT like I wanted to make you sad but that your sorrow morphed into something more – it was the kind of sorrow God wants His people to have” (7.9 NLT) In other words, “there’s a kind of sorrow that’s basically the same as regret or remorse but it’s NOT the same as repentance as God sees it.”

And from that we learn that there are all kinds of regret and remorse and shame and fear and a sense of guilt that human beings can work up on their own and mimic repentance but are NOT what God wants.

In the last passage, the situation was very different. This time the people in the Prophet Micah’s day (700BC) were basically asking a question about what God wanted from them. And their follow-up questions betray their own understanding of God (we’ll talk more about that in a moment) but basically they’re sure that God wants them to DO something. He wants something from them.

“What does He want now?” Look at the buildup: “burnt offerings...yearling calves...thousands of rams ...ten-thousand rivers of oil... our firstborn children... the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

One writer said, they “had transformed the covenant into a contract” and disregarding how God had always dealt with them, they now wanted to make a transaction so they could meet the demands of the deity. It sounds spiritual, “We’ll do whatever it takes to do what God wants – just name it and we’ll pay up!” But what they really mean is, “Tell us what to do and we’ll do it ...anything but to REPENT!”

The Prophet comes back in v.8 to say, “Only repent – that’s what God wants – NOT all your sacrifices as if He were in need – God wants your heart! To walk humbly with Him on whom your very life depends.”

But the people are basically saying, “Uh...could you just sort of quantify that because we’d gladly give whatever it takes...even our own children...if only God would get off our back...we mean ...uh...um... it ...was a ...I mean, if it would please Him.”

In the first instance, the Corinthians first avoided repentance by indifference (“Yeah...we live by grace around here – you know: ‘live and let live’ the way God deals with us!”) And when Paul said, “Wait! God didn’t deal with us that way – He got involved!”

Then they went the other way: they got morose and gloomy and overwhelmed with regret...but Paul says, “true repentance is without regret... You can’t get sad enough to deserve forgiveness – you can’t feel bad enough to merit God’s favor or get serious enough to sort of atone for your failings and make God take notice!” – “Could my zeal no respite know/Could my tears forever flow/All for sin could not atone/Thou must save, and Thou alone.”

The bottom-line in these two cases of false repentance is that while we use Multiple Counterfeits – the main goal is to avoid really repenting... We’ll do anything but repent. As we saw last week, it has the feel of death AND as we’ll see in two weeks, it does in fact entail a kind of death and resurrection.

We avoid repentance in any number of ways – we run, hide, cover and blame (as they did in the Garden). People try to atone for their own sin by making promises to God or making themselves especially unhappy. We’ll try self-justification, drama, shallow indifference (like the Corinthians or David during the nine-months before Nathan called). We’ll lie to others, lie to God and to ourselves. We’ll fake it (like Saul and Judas). We’ll PAY even the greatest price. We will even “obey” so that we don’t have to repent. (Flannery O’Connor’s quote from the book, *Wise Blood*, “There was already a deep, black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.”) The Miserable Conclusion to our brief survey IS: we hate to repent.

We hate to say what David said, “My, my, my, my, my...” – did you see the repetition of that word in the first three verse – MY transgression, MY iniquity, MY sin...

And the fact is, we really CAN’T repent. I know that’s a mystery and seems to almost negate this whole sermon and the whole series but repentance IS as our catechism says, “Repentance...is a saving grace...” (WSC 87; Acts 11.18; 2 Timothy 2.25; Ezek. 36.26–27) Like believing (Eph 2.8), it’s a command that only God can empower us to keep. We might work up regret, remorse, tears, apologies, confessions (look at Judas) but repentance is grace...it’s a gift...and you might say, “Uh...I’m ok... That’s a gift I don’t really WANT!” Except you DO! And we plan to talk about the benefits in two weeks.

But for now... let’s point out how, even when our defenses are up and we’re fortified against this practice... fortified against God (or so we think!) God is able to overwhelm our defenses and supply The Missing Component ... and He does this in surprising ways.

This time of the year, we think of His coming to us in disguise... As He came to David in that man, whose name means Grace (“Nathan”) who was armed with that silly little story... that irresistible little parable ... and David welcomes it into his heart and the story turns out to be a razor-sharp scalpel that cuts through all David’s strategies to keep God out... and the Word made flesh in Nathan... the kindness of God leads to repentance (Rom 2.4).

And we're moving toward the celebration of the Word made flesh, not in Nathan, but in Jesus Christ and the kindness of God revealed to stubborn, obstinate, arrogant people who hate repentance and can't repent and yet need it so badly... God comes to us in the incarnation of Kindness, by a Baby.

He's saying to us, "See, I'm coming to you humble to show you that you can trust Me... I'm coming to serve you, to court you, to allure you, to pursue you as a Shepherd pursuing His lost sheep."

"My Son will be born like you were born... He will live the life of perfect love and flawless obedience IN YOUR PLACE... and YOU who believe will be rewarded for what I have done in the Man, Jesus, whose very Name (Yeshuah) means salvation." We don't give God OUR firstborn for our rebellious acts – He gives US His only Begotten for OUR rebellious acts!

And then, when He has done all the will of the Father, Jesus Christ, will take the full penalty for the sins of all who believe – all their sins, past, present and future will be charged to Jesus Christ...the Infant, the Child, the Servant, the Lamb who was slain will show Himself to be the Lion of Judah and will rise from the dead, incorruptible and mighty to save.

Don't fear repentance...if it feels like death...it's only that IN repentance the OLD YOU is dying and you are putting "on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." (Eph 4.24) It IS indeed a death AND a resurrection granted us by the One who lived and died for us and who is the Firstborn from the dead...

False repentance we can generate ...but true repentance is both a command and a gift and yet, God shows us that He loves to give good gifts to His children (Mat 7.11; Luk 11.13). We can simply ask for the Spirit of God to grant us this gift. "Holy Spirit, looking at the lowly birth of Jesus, His life of obedience and service, His willingness to obey in my place, to die in my place... and seeing His power over death itself...I will not fear the death to my old self that comes by repentance... I've seen that on the other side of this repentance there is Resurrection and New Life."

"So, Lord, grant me that Gospel-confidence that enables me to face the things I hate to see about myself...to accept the gift of death by repentance because I have seen Your disposition toward me..."

"Jesus came in weakness so I would not want to run and hide... And the death of Jesus Christ is NOT the end... His resurrection proves that I need not fear the death of repentance or even the death of my body...because for Him who loved us and for all who trust Him, death gives way to New Life.