

MYTHBUSTERS: REPENTANCE

Mother's Day – Not implying that all mothers need to repent any more than others

Intro

What is repentance? Jesus began his ministry with this command: “*Repent* and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15-16). Peter began his first sermon after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension with the same command: “Repent” (Acts 2:38). Repentance is not a New Testament thing – the Old Testament uses the word “return,” carrying the idea of turning from sin back to God.

The Bible talks of repentance as both the way we come to Christ and the way we stay near him, both the door and the path of the Christian life. Indeed, the whole of Scripture seems to put repentance at the center, the very heart, of the life of a disciple of Jesus.

But for something so central, there seem to be a lot of misconceptions. For some of us repentance is a foreign word – we can’t remember the last time we repented of something. Others of us are always trying to repent of things but it never seems to work.

Because of all this confusion, I thought it would be a good idea to model this sermon after the show Mythbusters, where the hosts debunk commonly held myths. But how are we going to bust myths about repentance and get to the truth? We need a reliable source.

Hosea’s our guy. His entire book of prophecy is about repentance. In fact, he uses the OT word for repentance – “return” – 15 times. Why did Israel need to “return” to God? Israel had run away from him after idols, so he compares them to an unfaithful wife (named Gomer) who has run away from her husband (Hosea) after other lovers. By the time Hosea prophesied, the consequence of their unfaithfulness – exile – was looming, so God wanted to show them the way back to him, and that way is repentance.

As we walk through our passage, let’s bust some myths about repentance.

Myth #1: Repentance is Relatively Painless

- A. Tendency – treat repentance like tearing off a bandaid – it hurts for a second but it’s over quickly and not too painful.
- B. Hosea thinks otherwise [**READ first line**] – “Therefore” links our passage to rest of chapter 2. Gomer has run away from Hosea to her other lovers, and God says that he will “hedge up her way with thorns” so she can’t keep going down that path, and take away all she has (food, comforts, clothes, feasting) because she has forgotten him.

Having everything taken away was painful. And this pain led her to return to her true husband. Have you had something taken away because of your sin? It’s painful.

And look at where he’s alluring them – “into the wilderness.” This is a bittersweet place for them. Sweet because the wilderness was where God and Israel’s relationship first began. It’s where God made covenant vows¹ to them – “til’ eternity do us part.” It’s where they learned to follow his lead in childlike dependence because he was all they had. Though not perfect, these were sweet beginnings.

But the wilderness was also bitter. They had none of the security or comforts of Egypt. Everything they knew was changed. They had nothing but God, and what he gave them.

Hosea busts the myth that repentance should be painless. The truth is that **repentance always involves pain.**

[Do you think it hurt David to feel the weight of his sin when Nathan confronted him?]

Repentance is painful because in repentance, God kills whatever is killing us.² This process hurts. But it leads us, like Israel, back to our first love.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Love to the Loveless: The Message of Hosea*, p. 32.

² Pastor Harry Reeder, Briarwood Presbyterian Church

MYTH #2: I Initiate My Own Repentance

- A. We think, “I’m the one who messed up; I need to be the one to make it right.” We tell ourselves it’s up to us to confess, to start the process, and God responds with forgiveness.
- B. God says, “Behold, I will allure her” – notice the “I” – God acts first.

The word “allure” means to “persuade, entice, seduce” – can be used negatively or positively, but here, it’s a good thing. What we might call “divine enticement” or “holy seduction” – unlike fleshly seduction, God has no selfish motives, no deception is involved. This is courtship language.³

Derek Kidner put it this way: “True love need be no less ravishing than false [love]; only less disappointing.”⁴

What if we are not the ones who initiate our own repentance? What if God lovingly allures us away from the death-eating of sin and back to the true feast of his presence? What if it really is God’s kindness that **leads** us to repentance (Romans 2:4)? What if it’s true that God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro 5:8)? What if God is the Chief Pursuer and we respond to his pursuit?

[In the next chapter, God tells Hosea, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel though they turn to other gods” (Ho. 3:1). Notice he didn’t say “Go, love a woman who has cleaned herself up and already come home to you.”]

God initiates repentance, and we respond to his gracious enticement.
[One application for confession – **look up before looking in**. Look up to behold God’s mercy and goodness before looking in to confess.]

If God initiates repentance, what is he after?

³ Andrew Dearman, *Hosea*, p. 121.

⁴ Kidner, p. 32.

MYTH #3 – The Goal of Repentance is Behavior Change

- A. We often approach repentance primarily as a way to stop sinning – to change our behavior. Then we get discouraged because we rarely change, and when we do, it doesn't last. Why not?
- B. Naturally behavior change should flow from repentance, but is this the main reason we repent?
- C. Let's investigate this myth. God says that he will allure his people and bring them into the wilderness, where all they have is him, and there he will *"speak tenderly to her."*

"Speak tenderly" - this is a beautiful phrase. It literally means to "woo" or to "speak kindly." It is used in Genesis 34 of a man wooing a woman, and in Ruth 2 of Boaz speaking kind words toward Ruth when she was gleaning in his field.⁵

The word "tenderly" comes from the Hebrew word for "heart," the center of one's being (will, thinking, and emotions). We could translate this phrase: "speak to her heart."⁶

If God was after behavior change alone, he might speak solely to our will ("Stop sinning!"), but instead he speaks to our entire being.

God speaks to the heart because he is after the heart. God has always been after the heart. Not just outward behavior modification but inner heart transformation.

That's why he says later in Hosea: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice" (6:6).

God speaks to the heart because he knows that "the heart of our problem is the problem with the heart." All the sacrifices were to point to the seriousness of the problem in the heart.

God knows that as our heart changes, so will our behavior.

But if God is after our hearts, why does repentance feel like punishment?

⁵ Genesis 34:3, Ruth 2:13; also Isaiah 40:2

⁶ BDB, *Hebrew-English Lexicon*, p. 525.

MYTH #4: Repentance is Punishing

- A. The myth goes like this: for repentance to really take effect, I need to beat myself up, punish myself, make myself feel unworthy. Didn't we say that repentance is painful?
- B. God says (v. 15), "There I will give her her vineyards."

Vineyards in the Bible picture prosperity.⁷ Remember what the 12 spies who scouted out the Promised Land brought back to show the abundance of the land? A single cluster of grapes so big and delicious they had to carry it on a pole between two men.

The Promised Land with its fruitful vineyards is exactly what Israel would lose because of their sin when they went into exile.

God is saying, "What you lose in exile, I will restore."

This is a picture not of punishment, but of restoration. So we see that repentance is not punishing, it's restorative.

And this restoration happens in the last place we would expect: the wilderness, where God brings us back to childlike dependence on him.

[It may not be the kind of restoration we envision – think of David. After his adultery with Bathsheba, God told him his firstborn with Bathsheba would die, and this came to pass. Did God restore David? Yes. He blotted out his sin, restored to him the joy of his salvation, and enabled him to finish well. But his son still died.]

Restoration in repentance does not cancel the consequences of sin, but enables us to trust in the Lord in the midst of them.

[Peter is a striking picture of restoration. The man who weeks before denied knowing Jesus is gently restored on a beach and given the privilege of feeding the sheep of the one he denied (John 21).]

⁷ McComiskey, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, p. 42.

MYTH #5: Repentance Puts My Shameful Past Behind Me

- A. We think, “Once I’ve repented, my shameful failure is in the past, like water under a bridge.” But water that’s gone under a bridge is still flowing downstream, and can come back to haunt you at the next crossing. Putting our sin and shame behind us is akin to sweeping it under the rug.
- B. God does something much better than put our shame behind us – he transforms it.**

He says, “ I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.”

The Valley of Achor was a shameful part of Israel’s past. They were entering the Promised Land under Joshua and had just witnessed God’s miraculous victory at Jericho. Next was Ai, but instead of another victory, Israel suffered a startling defeat. Had God not promised to go before them? Had he left them? No, Israel was to blame – a warrior from the tribe of Judah named Achan had taken forbidden spoil from Jericho and hidden it in his tent. God commanded that Achan be executed for his sin, and they called the place of his death the “Valley of Achor,” meaning “trouble” for the trouble his sin had brought.

The Valley of Achor was a place of failure, loss, shame, and disobedience in Israel’s past. And God says he will make this shameful place a “door of hope.”

A door – something you walk through to get somewhere – of hope – expectation of a radiant future.

The truth behind the myth is that repentance doesn’t put my shameful past behind me; it transforms it from something that brings death to something that leads to life.

The place where sin led to death becomes the place where repentance leads to life.

[APP – Don’t cover our sin/shame, get defensive, hide. This short-circuits repentance and keeps us in the shadows. Instead, bring it into the light.]

[When the woman at the well hid her past, her shame only increased, but when she discovered Jesus knew her shame and still pursued her, her shame was transformed into the door to life and hope.]

How could such transformation be true? How could this miraculous process work – that even through pain, God allures us into the wilderness where all we have is him, and there restores our covenant intimacy.

Where else has a place of shame become a door to hope?

Achor was not the final defeat in Israel's history. There was another warrior from the tribe of Judah. This one, although he had done nothing wrong, took on the shame and failure of others and was executed for it. But this story does not end with defeat, because through this death, life comes to all who follow this transforming path of repentance. Now the place of death is the place of life. The cross of trouble becomes the eternal door of hope.

And the ones once haunted by shame now sing of grace. As v. 15 says, "they answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt." Back to the beginning, when grace was sweet.

God brings his wayward bride back home, and soon, he will feast with her at the wedding supper of the Lamb, where there will be no more trouble, only hope.