

“Repentance”
Matthew 3:1-17
October 29, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day on which we remember Martin Luther’s nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Today is a special Reformation Sunday because it marks the 500th anniversary of that defining act. It was on October 31, 1517 that Luther posted his theses. So it is fitting this day that our passage should be on the topic of repentance, because Luther’s purpose with his 95 theses was to write a commentary on true repentance and to contrast that with false repentance. In his first thesis he announces his theme: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he wanted the whole life of believers to be a life of repentance.”

Repentance was the theme of the preaching of both John the Baptist and of Jesus (Matt. 4:17). It is just as widely misunderstood in our day as in Luther’s. One of the most common of these misunderstandings is to regard repentance as something like a spiritual root canal: sometimes necessary, but in itself miserable. The best thing, then, is to do all you can to avoid it. While it is true that there is often an element of sorrow associated with repentance, the dominant emotion associated with it in the Bible is joy. The repentance of the prodigal son led to a joyful feast. Paul said that godly grief produces a repentance that **“leads to salvation without regret”** (2 Cor. 7:10). The reason repentance leads to joy is that it leads us to Jesus. Frederick Bruner makes an interesting statement in his commentary on this passage in Matthew 3.

Where do we find God today? Perhaps the Magi were led by a star to a baby two thousand years ago and there found God. But there seem to be few such stars today. Where, then, do we meet God today? The third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel serves as an answer to this question. We meet God in repentance and baptism, in the confluence of law and gospel. P. 84

As we consider this topic of repentance, I want to point out its three components.

I. An Awakening

The simplest definition of repentance is to turn around. A person floating down a river on a raft might be headed for a dangerous waterfall without being aware of the danger. Someone who knows the danger sees them and warns them to turn around lest they be swept over the falls. That’s what repentance is like, and it was a central component of the preaching of John the Baptist. His

preaching is summarized in verse 2: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** There is an urgency to the need to repent, and the urgency stems from the fact that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In Jesus, God is coming to put all things right in his world, and this extends even to rebellious sinners. Sinners are put right with God through repentance, and all who do not turn to him will suffer the fire of judgment.

We can see in John’s preaching that the first step in one’s repentance is an awakening to one’s danger. John’s preaching is a fulfillment of a prophecy from the prophet Isaiah. John is the one *crying* in the wilderness. That is a word used of a person crying out for help. It means to shout. John was raising his voice. When do you speak loudly? It is when people are far away, hard of hearing or angry. The human race is all three, and John’s preaching is designed to awaken them.

We also see John’s efforts at awakening people in the strong manner of his address. The Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, come to him in the wilderness, probably to check things out rather than to submit to his baptism, he speaks to them strongly and directly. **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”** (v. 7). John wasn’t engaging in name-calling to belittle or to vent his anger, but to awaken their hearts to their need. What are snakes like? They are deceptive, lying low and somewhat camouflaged. But above all, the poisonous ones are dangerous. John calls them not “snakes” but “vipers,” and all vipers are poisonous.

The most dominant element of this passage is John’s attempt to awaken their hearts to the danger of judgment. John is portrayed here like an Old Testament prophet. The great prophet Elijah also dressed in a hair garment and leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). John is really the last Old Testament prophet, and all these prophets proclaimed a message of judgment. So he warns them of **“the wrath to come”** (v. 7). He speaks of judgment as fire, a word that occurs three times in this passage. The first one is in verse 10. **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** The axman has his axe raised and is ready to strike. If the tree doesn’t bear fruit immediately, it will be felled and burned.

Then John speaks of Jesus and says that he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (v. 11). He is speaking of a division that Jesus will make. Some will be given the Holy Spirit, resulting in the fruit-producing that will keep the axman from felling the tree and throwing it into the fire. But others will be thrown into the fire by the very same one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Instead of being bathed with the fruit-producing Holy Spirit, they will be bathed with the pain of fire. And then the third mention of fire draws upon the metaphor of the threshing floor, where the wheat grain is separated from the rest of the plant, the chaff. The precious wheat, which speaks of those who do

repent, is gathered safely in the barn. What is left, the chaff, Jesus **“will burn with unquenchable fire”** (v. 12).

Some say that “God does not frighten us into heaven.” That might to some be a fine-sounding statement, but it is not biblical. Jesus said more about the judgment of hell than anyone else in the Bible. If you do not tremble at the thought of the judgment of God, it is because your heart is hard. It should frighten us, like a child might be frightened when a strange dog comes running toward it with a menacing bark. What does the child do? He flees for refuge to the arms of his parents. Similarly, we flee for refuge to the arms of Jesus, and that’s what repentance is. That’s what makes it good news.

II. A Turning Away

Repentance means to turn around, which requires turning away before we can turn toward. There are at least two things this passage tells us we must turn away from as we repent: defensiveness and smug self-righteousness. We read in verse 6 that those who came to John **“were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”** Both of those activities, submitting to baptism and confessing their sins, speak of turning away from defensiveness.

The rite of water baptism does not appear in the Old Testament. It began to be practiced by the Jews and was administered to Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. So in the view of most Jews, it was the unclean outsiders, the Gentiles, who needed washing. So we can see something of the spiritual revival taking place in Israel at this time in the fact that John is baptizing Jews here, not Gentiles. Instead of defending themselves and pretending that they are not unclean like the Gentiles, they are saying, in effect, “I too am dirty and need cleansing.” Submitting to baptism required of them a turning away from defensiveness.

We can see that even more clearly in the fact that they confessed their sins. When you confess your sins, instead of defending yourself, you accuse yourself. Repentance requires a reversal of our natural tendency, which is to defend ourselves and accuse and blame others. But the path to God and the joys he has for us lie in exactly the opposite direction. The application is to invite the Spirit to show you your sin, and then to receive it, grieve it and confess it. Even to do that much requires a miracle from God. To quote two of our “solas” from the Reformation, it is by grace alone and through Christ alone that we can do this. But, God loves us enough to give us this miracle when we ask him.

The second thing we turn from is smug self-righteousness. That’s what John speaks to the religious leaders about. **“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham”** (v. 9). John was

seeking to undermine their sense of racial superiority, feeling themselves better than others merely because they were children of Abraham. We might call this kind of self-righteousness “group superiority.” It is feeling oneself superior to others merely because of belonging to the right group. Notice how John seeks to undermine this. First, he reminds them that any benefit they may enjoy comes from God and not from them. God can take stones and make children of Abraham out of them. When you are tempted to this group superiority form of self-righteousness, it helps to tell yourself the same thing. If you’re tempted to think yourself superior because you are Presbyterian and have the right theology, remember, God can make good Presbyterians out of rocks.

The second way he undermines this self-righteousness is by telling them that they must bear fruit or be judged. All fruit-bearing is a miracle from God, requiring a change of our nature that only God can accomplish. This is where it becomes necessary to turn toward God, which is our next point.

III. A Turning Toward

In order to repent, we must first be awakened to our danger, and then turn away from our defensiveness and self-righteousness. But we haven’t yet repented until we turn toward the Lord. The messages of prophets like John never end in warnings about judgment, but always in the hope of God’s promises. That is because repentance requires this turn to God, being drawn to him because of his love and kindness toward us. That’s why John ends not with talk of judgment, but with talk of the greatness of Jesus.

John says that Jesus is great because he baptizes with the Holy Spirit. John can only baptize with water, but Jesus with the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to change and the power to bear fruit, such things as love, joy and peace. This baptism of the Holy Spirit, by the way, is not a second blessing available only to some Christians, but God’s gift to all who come to him in faith.

Jesus is also great because he alone is able to fulfill all righteousness. Verses 13-14 record a dispute between Jesus and John the Baptist. As John was baptizing, he looked up and saw Jesus standing in line with the other sinners coming for his baptism. John insisted that Jesus didn’t belong in that line, on the grounds that he was not a sinner and had no need for repentance. It would have been more appropriate, John said, for them to switch places and have Jesus baptize John. Jesus made his case for being baptized by telling John, **“It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”** What did he mean? How would being baptized by John fulfill all righteousness? I believe the answer is that he was identifying with sinners here, just as he would on the cross. In that action of identifying with sinners, he works in us that we might be given the gift of righteousness and then actually learn to act righteously.

Frederick Bruner says that he considers this incident to be Jesus' first miracle, the miracle of his humility. "The first thing Jesus does for the human race is *go down with it* into the deep waters of repentance and baptism... It is well known that Jesus ends his ministry on a cross between thieves; it deserves to be as well known that he begins his ministry in a river among sinners."

The greatness of Jesus is seen at the end of the chapter in the Father's voice from heaven. As Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and the Father spoke words from heaven. It is unusual in the Bible for God to speak audibly from heaven. I can think of only one other time when it happened, and that was at the transfiguration. So this must be something that the Father wants us to know. What is it? **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"** (v. 17). Above all else, the Father wants us to know that Jesus is precious, and he is the goal of our repentance. The reason repentance at the end is joyful is that the end of repentance is Jesus. We turn from our sin and we turn to Jesus. I like what our Confession of Faith says about repentance. "As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent" (WCF 15:4).

CONCLUSION:

I read an article recently in which the author asked the question, "When did the prodigal son repent?" The traditional way that passage is preached is to locate his repentance in his coming to his senses when he was in the pigsty and decided to return home. This author made a good case, I thought, that this is not when he repented. He was fed up there with the consequences of his sin, but that is not the same thing as repentance. That is the worldly sorrow that leads to death, to use Paul's words. He simply concocted a plan there to escape his misery. His repentance came, this author said, when his father saw him from a distance, came running to him, showered him with kisses and enthusiastically welcomed him back as his son and not as a servant.

The biggest reason we don't repent is that we think repentance is simply coming to the end of yourself and admitting your sin. That is one half of repentance, but it is a half that will only lead to despair and misery if not joined with the rest of repentance. It is a turning to Jesus. It is experiencing the Father's lavish, enthusiastic welcome back. So repent, for the kingdom is near. Unimaginable joys are here for the claiming for all who will surrender their defensiveness and self-righteousness and who then turn to receive the staggering gifts brought by the one who is precious to the Father, our Lord Jesus.

Small Group Discussion Questions

Matthew 3:1-17

1. Repentance can be defined as “a relational turning from our idols and moralism, from our self-sufficiency and self-pre-occupation, to being dependent on Jesus alone.” So it is both a turning away from the deepest aspects of sin in our lives and turning toward God for his help. In light of that definition, what have been some of the most common misunderstandings of repentance in your experience or observation?

2. Interact some with the following statement from Frederick Bruner:

Where do we find God today? Perhaps the Magi were led by a star to a baby two thousand years ago and there found God. But there seem to be few such stars today. Where, then, do we meet God today? The third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel serves as an answer to this question. We meet God in repentance and baptism, in the confluence of law and gospel. P. 84

Do you agree or disagree? Is there any aspect of this that you might agree with in your mind but not in your experience and heart?

3. It is common for people to resist repentance. There is a need to be awakened, which John does by raising his voice (“the voice crying [shouting] in the wilderness), speaking directly to people as a “brood of vipers” and warning people of coming judgment. Can you think of things God has used in your life to awaken you to your need to repent? Hint: it is often in relationships with others.
4. Repentance requires confessing our sins (v. 6). Instead of defending ourselves, we must accuse ourselves. Do you struggle with defensiveness? Where do you see that struggle most clearly?
5. John’s preaching also addressed the area of self-righteousness as something we must turn from in our repentance. He did so in verse 9 where he told the religious leaders not to take pride in being the children of Abraham. Their self-righteousness showed itself in a type of group superiority. How do you see self-righteousness working in your life? Are there people you tend to look down on, feeling yourself to be superior because you’re not like them?
6. What happens if we leave Jesus out of repentance? That is, if we see repentance as only turning from something and not turning toward God, what is the result? Have you done that?
7. The chapter concludes with a very forceful and attractive description of Jesus as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (gives us the Spirit and all his benefits), fulfills all righteousness (enables us to be righteous), and the one the Father treasures. What does it look like in your life to turn to such as One as this?