

Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

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[0 : 0 0] So, I want to take on a couple of topics this morning that are classic foundational tools for the spiritual life. Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

And I want to talk about these topics because they're critical to our spiritual health, because I think they're not talked about enough, and because I think, like all congregations, we need these tools.

Like all congregations, we've been hurt by things that have been said or done by others, and sometimes by clergy. These topics are topics that I regularly cover in healing prayer times with people, and I have for years.

And I want to say to anyone who's here, anyone who's listening to this now or later, if we've talked about these topics in a prayer time, this sermon is not a subtle message to you.

It's not kind of a backdoor, indirect, you know, public messaging to you. It's not because any clergy said, go talk about this, Rob, because so-and-so needs it.

[1 : 0 8] I think this is something that all of us need to master. And truthfully, this sermon comes from a lot of good teaching, I think good teaching that I've received over the years, but mainly through a lot of hard-fought prayer, some of which I did with others who came alongside of me to pray with me, but a lot of which was done alone before the Lord.

So, with this kind of intro, let me get into things. And I want to give you an unusual starting place for these topics, the heart of God. And I want you to hear these words from Isaiah 61.

These were words that Jesus quoted during a service at a synagogue at the beginning of his ministry to announce his purpose for coming and what his father was going to do through him.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. I've referenced this part from Isaiah a few times in past sermons, or at least Jesus is quoting of it from Luke, because I always like to go back to what Jesus saw as his mandate as a kind of way of framing and anchoring some of the things that I feel I want to talk about in sermons.

[2 : 5 4] And so there's no difference here. This heart of God is our starting place for understanding repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

What we should hear in these verses that I read is that God the Father, through God the Son, by God the Holy Spirit, is bringing healing of hearts, freedom to those in bondage, comfort and gladness for those who mourn.

It's just who God is and what God does. You should hear in these verses that the Lord's intention for you is to reverse the death and decay that you might feel inside, to create praise, strength, and righteousness in you instead.

The words a garland instead of ashes speaks to me in particular from this part of Isaiah, because ashes have to do with irretrievable loss, with a place of death from which there's no return.

What the Lord wants to do in you this morning and always is take away all that is dead in you and make you a planting of the Lord full of his glory. So reflective of the Lord's heart for us, to achieve his intentions for us, the Lord has given us these powerful and frankly beautiful gifts of repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation.

[4 : 15] So let's take a look at each in turn. They're related to each other, and they can work together in sequence sometimes, but they are also distinct from each other. So repentance.

In the Gospels alone, repentance or a variant of it occurs 91 times, just in the Gospels alone. You can always argue when you hear these word counts about how a word is said, who's saying it in what way, but when it comes to the Gospels, I can assure you the word repentance is always used in a good way.

It's a good thing. And clearly, the Gospel writers and Jesus talk about it a lot. It's a big deal to God. In Biblical Greek, repentance, the word for repentance is metanoia.

It literally means to change one's mind. And I've always found this really helpful to understand what happens in repentance. It's not a feeling of being sorry for something.

It's not even a nice apology, well-delivered in person, or maybe on a nice little note card. These are all helpful, but these are actually not repentance. Repentance, by Biblical definition, means that you come into agreement with God that what you said or did, or maybe left undone, was wrong, that it was sin.

[5 : 34] And that's basically it. So it's important to understand this when we are battling, especially with stubborn or persistent sin, whatever that sin is. Because the deeper the struggle with persistent sin, the more often we may not feel sorry about it.

And we may not even feel like saying sorry. So a spiritual key for us in this is as persistent as your sin is, as often as you fail and give in to sin, persist as much in repentance.

As a practice, I would urge you, don't wait until the end of the day or for Sundays when we say the general confession. Keep a short account with God in real time.

Repent in the moment as soon as you can do so. As I said, it really is simply a choice to say, God, I agree with you. What I did was wrong. However you feel about it, whatever the circumstances.

And I would offer to you the following language for when you repent. I would say simply, Lord, I repent of, and just name it, plainly and simply, without excuse, without justification.

[6 : 48] There's no rationalization based on what the other person may have done. Repentance is simply agreeing with God that what you said or did was wrong.

Repentance, therefore, is also something that happens primarily between you and God, which is why you can and should always keep short accounts. Repentance towards others always comes after.

It follows from the first. First, we clear things up with God, and we clear things up with others. In my life, every time we're talking about repentance, and I say, in my life, people lean forward, this is gonna be good, won't be that good.

But once upon a time, I was in undergrad, I think it was in my first year, and I made a list with God of all the ways that I had wronged people. It was a pretty long list at the time.

I spent time with it over a couple weeks, writing down names of people and things that I'd said, things that I'd done, ways that I knew I'd hurt them. And then I called, or this was the early days of email, so I mostly called, but I emailed people to confess to them what I'd said or what I did, and just to tell them I was wrong.

[8 : 07] This had followed my repentance before the Lord. I had taken this list and I'd prayed it through with the Lord, repenting before him and then turning to others to confess to them.

My confession and apologies to others was to clear things up with them after having cleared things up with God. Forgiveness on the part of these other people was not required.

What counted what the Lord wanted of me was simply that I would agree with him and with others that I had done wrong, and to express that agreement in confession to others.

I can only be responsible, and all of us can only be responsible for the things we've done and for the actions that we can take when we're repenting or forgiving. And this kind of brings us to forgiveness.

So like repentance, it's a big deal in the Bible. I did another word count. The word forgive, or it's a variant, is mentioned 129 times, so it beats repentance.

[9 : 09] But I actually find, as much as we read about it and the Gospels are saturated with it, there's a lot of misunderstanding about forgiveness. So I want to lay out a little bit of how I understand it.

So the first is, for me, forgiveness is mainly a transaction. It's a transaction with God. It's a choice you make with God. It has nothing to do with your feelings of hurt and anger.

Forgiveness is also, I want to tell you what I think forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not saying, it's okay that somebody did something wrong to you. It's not saying that what they said or did doesn't matter, or that they can do it again.

By definition, the work of forgiveness has at its core an assumption that something wrong has happened. It shouldn't have happened. It was not okay. Forgiveness ultimately says, as a prayer to God, God, I let this person go to you for you to deal with.

Forgiveness lets go of all claims and demands to make that person pay us back for what they did. Without reservation, caveat, or any sort of backdoor.

[10 : 25] Like repentance, God asks us to forgive without conditions attached. And like repentance, forgiveness is something that happens first between you and the Lord.

It's something that you transact with the Lord. Whether you ever bring up this wrong with the person who hurt you. Let me talk about some of the inner workings of unforgiveness. When someone wrongs us, our natural God-given reaction to injustice is provoked.

And frankly, rightly so. We feel hurt, angry, shocked, grieved, betrayed, and more. And in that place of hurt, our natural reaction to injustice, what the scriptures call righteous indignation, when it's mixed with pride, can take us off track and lead us to a sense of being justified or entitled to not forgive, to demand redress or an apology or repentance on the part of the wrongdoer.

It can lead us to think that we deserve to have payback or revenge because we didn't deserve what the other person said or did. And the only way to have justice is to make that other person pay.

It can feel like something's unbalanced when somebody doesn't pay us back. And without making that person pay, it feels like they get away with something and that can feel unfair.

[11 : 49] Payback can take a rich and amazing array of options, active and passive. I am frankly completely versed in all of them, I'm sorry to say.

The active path can be anger, yelling, talking badly about people, bringing complaints against the person. It could include violence. That's not mine, thank the Lord.

But it's all out there and we've all seen it. The passive path can be stony silence and refusing to speak to someone, ignoring the other person when they're in the room, harboring critical or negative thoughts about the wrongdoer and lots more.

Now there is a place for complaint or sanction and even lawsuit and justice in a biblical sense is making things right. But if Jesus' teachings matter, we need to search our hearts first and test our motives before the Lord first.

Do the hard work of forgiveness so that we have the clarity of heart and thought, the clarity of discernment to know whether and what form of complaint and redress might be right.

[12 : 57] unforgiveness takes our hurt and anger and leads us to live out of pride and offense, the ugly cousins of self-worth and righteous indignation.

Spiritually, unforgiveness is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die. What really happens when we withhold forgiveness is that we die inside.

When we hold grudges and unforgiveness, we harden our heart. We close ourselves off from the life of God. Unforgiveness blocks prayer and healing. It shrinks our capacity for love and compassion, keeps us from seeing others for who they are.

Jesus' words at one point in the Gospels are about when he talks about abiding in him or that if we don't, we're like a dried up branch suitable only for the fire.

This is a plea from Jesus not to cut ourselves off from the life of God. And what can be said about unforgiveness can be said about refusing to repent. Unrepentance also cuts us off from the life of God.

[14 : 04] Jesus' words in the Gospel reading today about unforgiveness are not Jesus trying to be mean or harsh. They're him trying to warn us of a spiritual truth out of kindness.

And I'll say this also from my time, my years of praying with people who have long protracted unforgiveness. When we cultivate unforgiveness, it can turn to bitterness and hate.

And when we do that, we don't just cut off ourselves from the life of God, but we make space in ourselves and our lives for the demonic. We don't talk about the demonic very much here, but it's out there and it's real.

And I don't say this to spook people or for any other reason, but just to underscore how serious unrepentance and unforgiveness is. So what do we do with the hurt and anger that can drive unforgiveness?

Because that's real and it matters and it needs to be handled with the Lord. So I want you to think of it this way. Picture your heart as a bathtub full of slimy, gunky water.

[15 : 14] That filthy water is all, that bathtub is your heart and all the filthy water is the hurt and anger because of an offense. The worse the offense and hurt, the more full the bathtub is.

Forgiveness is like pulling that rubber stopper out of the drain. It's a choice, maybe a hard one, but it's an act of the will. And when that stopper has been pulled out, the bathtub starts to slowly drain of all the filthy water that sat in that tub for probably way too long.

This can take time. It may be necessary to keep practicing forgiveness again and again to keep that stopper out, to keep the drain clear and keep the stopper out.

And other things might come along to plug the drain. Maybe you learn something new about an earlier offense. It comes to light and you feel hurt again. Or the person who hurt you keeps hurting you in new ways.

While forgiveness is a transaction where once it's done, spiritually it's done, our feelings take time to change. We may need to get with someone for prayer to let Jesus heal our hearts and scoop out all the hurt and anger.

[16 : 27] We may need to get with a therapist to process the wrong that happened in our reactions. As a practice, I've found that my ability to forgive depends on my depth of hurt.

For deeper hurts, I have to stay in a posture of forgiveness longer, forgiving someone sometimes over and over again to keep the drain clear so the Lord can heal my heart. And sometimes the hurt is so bad that you have to take small steps in your heart to move towards forgiveness, letting the Lord bring you to a place of full forgiveness.

forgiveness. Some ways of starting to practice forgiveness could sound, when you're deeply wounded, can sound like this. Lord, I want to want to be able to forgive. I want to even want to forgive.

And then maybe as the Lord works in your heart, you can say, Lord, I want to forgive. And then maybe as the Lord keeps working in your heart, you can say, Lord, I am now willing to forgive.

And then maybe you can say, Lord, I forgive. Sometimes a bit of alternate language can help. Some of the language that I've liked to use instead of saying, I forgive, if that feels too hard, is, Lord, I let this person go to you.

[17 : 49] Because that's really what it is. I relinquish this person and what they did to you for you to handle, Lord. It was never okay. But I do this as an act of faith. So in my life, I do find I need to forgive for specific things said or done.

I may have a hurtful interaction with someone and forgiving that person in a time of prayer with the Lord might mean going over, say, five, I'm making this up, five things that someone said or did in that interaction and all the ways they impacted me, all the ways that I felt about it.

I find driving in D.C. gives me so much opportunity to practice forgiveness. If you feel you need to cultivate this practice and you want to start with something other than trauma, drive, take a drive through D.C., all the construction, all the drivers, the Lord will meet you behind the wheel.

Yeah, amen. So, I remember one time, frankly, not even one time. I remember driving somewhere and I, I'll just say how, I'm gonna, I literally wrote down what I prayed when I was driving.

You'll deduce the situation as you hear me pray this. I was driving, something happened, my prayer was thus, Lord, Lord. I'm gonna just start with Lord.

[19 : 17] I am not gonna use other words at this moment, Lord. Lord, I forgive that driver for the way they did not move over when my lane was ending, for the way they honked at me, gave me the finger.

Am I allowed to say that in church? I'm sorry if I am. Don't tell Tommy. The way they acted like I was the one who was in the wrong. I forgive that driver for having no regard for my safety or the well-being of other drivers around us for their selfishness.

Now, is this self-pitying? Is this full of me? Maybe. But take the point. There's always lots of sides to something. In a moment, I take hurt and anger at face value.

If I'm with someone and praying, or it's myself, my brain might say, you know what, this is not a big deal. This might be an overreaction. That you might be taking yourself a little too seriously.

But there's another part of me down here that says, no, I'm hurt and angry. And that's the part that has to come before the Lord. The brain is right. Yes, yes, you're right. It's probably an overreaction and you'll calm down in a bit.

[20 : 29] But to keep my heart clear, which is what I care about, I take those things to the Lord, whether they are rational or make sense or self-indulgent or not, and I take them before the Lord and I pray this.

And it's actually good practice because when the real hurts come, I've got some muscle memory that I can call on because there are other hurts that are not too much of an overreaction.

They're actually quite serious. Let me talk about reconciliation. So, I don't have any biblical stats about reconciliation, but I do know it's important.

Jeff talked about reconciliation between God and people last week, but I'm focusing on reconciliation between people. Reconciliation is a repaired, broken relationship, simply put.

And like forgiveness can follow repentance, reconciliation can follow forgiveness, but we don't live in such a tidy and linear world. So, I mentioned that we can repent and ask someone for forgiveness, but repentance doesn't require the other person to forgive you.

[21 : 40] And similarly, forgiveness does not require the other person to repent to you first. It's possible most of these things happen just between us and the Lord, but this is different.

In the same way that someone may repent and offer an apology, maybe we forgive, it doesn't mean that there has to be reconciliation. That may sound painful and unbiblical, but let me explain a bit more.

The scriptures call and command us to repent and forgive, but we are exhorted to reconcile where possible. Reconciliation is not possible when someone is not repentant, when there's unforgiveness.

but also when it's not safe to be in a restored relationship with someone. I would never, never ask someone to be reconciled with someone who abused them, no matter how much repentance, forgiveness, or healing has happened.

And in some cases, the person that we would like to reconcile with might not be someone we're in touch with anymore. Maybe they moved away, maybe they've passed away.

[22 : 49] And in those instances, you'll never be able to apologize to them or hear their apology, hear their repentance, express forgiveness to them, and you certainly can't be reconciled to them.

Reconciliation can also just be partial, meaning partial restoration of a relationship, but with boundaries. This is not unforgiveness. This is not harboring hurt and bitterness.

This is just putting yourself at the right, healthy distance or proximity to someone while you continue to work out your repentance and forgiveness as needed and while the other person does the same.

It also puts you in the right proximity or distance to someone to give the Lord time and space to work out His salvation in both of you. So maybe one day it is safe and healthy to be in a more restored relationship, but there's no guarantee and there's no rush on this and no imperative.

Reconciliation is desirable but not always possible. It may ever only just be partial. So let me see if I can tie some of these together. I want to remind you that repentance and forgiveness are powerful gifts from the Lord.

[24 : 05] They're not things that God tries to burden us with. These are tools for freedom. They express His heart and intention for us. And I want to urge you as a pastor, as a shepherd who's entrusted with your spiritual care, who cares very deeply that you have a close and strong connection to the Lord, become skilled practitioners of repentance and forgiveness.

The more you practice these things, the more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's conviction you will become, the more your capacity will grow for turning to the Lord with your hurts and your wounds to practice forgiveness.

These are great acts of faith. They are primarily acts that trust the Lord to work in you and others and your situation according to His love.

I want to lead you through some of these steps of prayer of forgiveness. I want to ask you to be very honest with yourself and the Lord. Only take as many steps as you feel you can take right now.

[25 : 22] Give space to talk about things with the Lord and let Him lead you as far as you're willing to go. Some hurts are deep. You can't rush past hurts sometimes. I'm going to pray for us and then I'm going to invite you to follow me in a guided time of prayer.

I will pray a first prayer where I express that kind of wanting to want to forgive. I will start by asking the Lord to bring someone to mind that you may need to forgive.

And then as you sit with the Lord, with this person in mind, I'm going to invite you to take this first step of prayer. And if you feel comfortable, do it and kind of sit with the Lord and see where the Lord takes you.

And as you feel your heart responding to the Lord, if you feel ready, I will take us on a next step closer. And if you feel ready, take that next step. And then I'll draw our time to a close.

So let me just pray for us. Lord Jesus, thank you for these gifts of prayer, of repentance and forgiveness, these tools.

[26 : 31] So I ask that you pour your spirit out on us. Come, bring to mind someone who we need to forgive. I pray you be with us.

Help us bear any of the sense of hurt and pain that comes along with remembering this person and the wrong they did. Pray that you would be with us to help us walk with you and take as many steps into forgiveness as we are able at this time.

So I would ask that you, with this person in mind, and the Lord knows what the person said or did, and the Lord fully agrees with you that this was wrong.

If you feel comfortable, I want you to tell the Lord, Lord, I want to want to forgive. and just kind of seeing how your heart is and whether you felt like you could take that step with the Lord.

If you can take a next step, I want to invite you to say, Lord, help me want to forgive. and then from this place, I want to ask you if you feel willing to take another step with the Lord.

[28 : 20] I want you to tell the Lord, Lord, I am willing to forgive. And at this point, be specific. about the person and what they said or did to hurt you.

Lord, I am willing to forgive so and so, this person, for the way they said or did this. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And then as kind of a last step, I would invite you if you feel willing and able to tell the Lord, Lord, I let this person and what they did go to you.

I forgive them for and be specific again and for how it made me feel, for how it affected me. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Now, maybe that you need to spend some time in that place of prayer.

I'll come back to that in a sec. Amen.

[30 : 03] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. of the hurt and anger and any other feelings you're carrying.

Heal me of the hurt and anger I have carried in my heart. Lord, thank you for that.

Amen. This is not an easy topic but it's an important topic and for all of you who took brave steps towards the Lord and forgiveness I want to commend you for what you did just now for the hard inner work you did to take a few steps forward to be closer to forgiveness with the Lord.

For whoever it is that hurt you. And if you want to talk more about whatever the Lord brought to mind if you want to pray more pray through more forgiveness I'd be glad to listen to you.

[31 : 33] I'd be glad to pray with you at some point if you like. Please just let me know. So let me just close our time in prayer.

Lord Jesus continue this work to set us free continue to soften our hearts to move us to repentance and forgiveness by your Spirit.

We thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.