

# Rend Your Hearts

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]      rend your hearts and not your garments I wonder what went through the father's mind all those months and years his prodigal son was away from home in that far-off country I wonder whether that father placed his favorite chair beside a window in his house strategically positioned so that he could see his son approaching from a distance and I wonder whether every day he prayed that this would be the day his prodigal son would come home by contrast I wonder what went through the prodigal son's mind all those months and years he was away from home in that far-off country I wonder what a amongst all the noise of those parties he he threw for his false friends whether he ever thought of home and his father or whether it was only when he began feeding pigs that he ever thought about going back when Jesus told the story of the prodigal son and his forgiving father I wonder whether he had the prophet Joel in mind perhaps even these verses from Joel 2 verses 12 through 13 for here we have a prodigal people running away from God but now brought to their senses by both an infestation of locusts and an invasion of foreigners they're called to return to go home to their loving father who when they return will run toward them and passionately embrace them in compassion and forgiveness and so he calls to them even now return to me return to me as tonight we work our way through these two short verses Joel 2 12 and 13 examine yourself challenge yourself to listen to the voice of God's Holy Spirit through God's Holy Word return to me subtly and secretly have you wandered away from Jesus have you strayed like a lost sheep have you slidden back in your faith your loving heavenly father is speaking to you this evening and he's inviting you to return to him let me suggest the three aspects of that return from these wonderful verses first return to God it's not too late second return to God it's all in the heart and then third return to God he'll never turn you away first of all then return to God it's not too late it's not too late all of us have our favorite verses in the Bible my former minister Colin Jones who if you remember that a communion for us a number of years ago here had one of his at what had one of his favorite verses Jonah chapter 3 and verse 1 then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time now we all know the story of Jonah Jewish prophet who when called to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh ran in the opposite direction

Jonah disobeyed Jonah failed Jonah turned away from God and yet in Jonah chapter 3 verse 1 we read these amazing words then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time I clearly remember Colin Jones's smiling expression as from the pulpit he would say in his lovely Welsh accent we serve a God of second chances perhaps Colin himself had learned by bitter experience of turning away from God that it's not too late to return to God and to start obeying him the first few words of Joel 12 Joel 2 verse 12 are of the same variety as as Jonah 3 verse 1 yet even now yet even now the day is late the day is dark for the people of Judah they had turned away from their God they had been like the prodigal son who had run away from his loving father but now they've been devastated by those swarms of locusts and invaded by foreign enemies the day is late and the day is dark there where the prodigal son found himself in a far off country eating the swill of pigs but a loving father calls out to them over the miles and says to them yet even now return to me one of the commentators on this on this passage writes

Joel in effect reminded his people that Yahweh was the God of second chances Yahweh is the God of second chances it is not too late for them the French reformer and gospel expositor John Calvin wrote of these words see how indulgently God bears with men since he left a hope of pardon to people so obstinate and almost past recovery don't you don't you just love that phrase that Calvin uses see how indulgently God bears with men well these people that turned their backs on God that rebelled against their father see how indulgently God bears with them he gave them a second chance and after the second chance he gave them a third chance and then a fourth all of us at one stage or another in our Christian lives have had cause to thank and praise God for his indulgence in bearing with us in fact I'd reckon that for most if not all of us his indulgence is not a one-off experience it is a daily grace in Matthew chapter 18 verse 21 the apostle Peter asks Jesus

Lord how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him Jesus replied I say I do not say to you seven times I say to you 77 times if the principle of repeated forgiveness holds good for the servants of Jesus then how much more does it hold good for Jesus himself in that he forgives us not seven times he forgives us 77 times and so we join once again with John Calvin as he says see how indulgently God bears with men do you hear the voice of God speaking to you this evening calling you to return to him yet even now he lovingly whispers yet even now though you may have wandered so far away from me though you may have run so far away from me though you may have made a fool of yourself yet even now return to me see the sufficiency of Christ's grace in his gospel

Saul of Tarsus had been a vicious killer but his yet even now happened on the road to Damascus where the sovereign glory and grace of Christ stopped him in his tracks and brought him to himself but then you say to me you don't know how far from God I've gone I no longer read my Bible I no longer pray and the things I've done are so immoral to which I answer yes and God knows but he says to you this evening yet even now return to me but but then you say I become so apathetic about God I'm happy with my life and I don't care enough about him to return to which I answer you fool you have allowed the worthless trinkets of this world to obscure the pearl of great price though you may have stopped caring about God he still cares for you and even now he says yet even now return to me but then you say to me my spiritual life is like a yo-yo

[10:20] I have fallen away from God more times than I care to remember and I've let him down again to which I answer look to the forgiving grace of Christ who forgives and restores not seven times but seventy times seven and hear the loving voice of your heavenly father saying to you yet even now return to me young man young woman remember this and sear it into your hearts because you will have multiple failures in your life and you need to cling to this the two most important features of the parable of the prodigal son is one his father never stopped loving him even when he'd run away into that far off country his father never stopped loving him and second even though he had made such a fool of himself it wasn't too late for the prodigal son to return to his father it wasn't too late for the thief on the cross who with his dying breath repented turned to Christ older man older woman remember this even now it is not too late for you even now return to the God who loved you since before you were born by beginning verse 12 of the words yet even now

Joel reminded the commentator says Joel reminded his people that Yahweh is the God of second chances that it's not too late for them how thankful we are that what John Calvin said of God is absolutely true true to experience see how indulgently God bears with men since he left a hope of pardon to people so obstinate and almost past recovery yet even now it's a word to us all is it not it's God's word to you this evening return to God it's not too late return to God second it's all in the heart it's all in the heart these verses make some of the most challenging reading in the Bible especially if you should be the kind of person who likes to keep up appearances you want everyone around you to think that you're all sorted you're organized you're in control of yourself and of your circumstances you never lose your nerve you never admit that you're wrong or that you're vulnerable or that you failed far be it that you should ever let someone see you weak and crying to all intents and purposes you're the model Christian you've got much to thank God for and in your view little of which to repent what then does it mean to return to God and what does that look like well Joel writes return to me with all your heart with fasting and weeping with mourning and rend your hearts and not your garments

God's invitation to return to him here might seem almost more at home in Jesus serving the mount than in an obscure prophet from the Old Testament that according to God himself here the heart of our religion consists in the religion of our heart that returning to him consists not in our appearance but in turning to God in the heart it's all very well to tear your clothes which was an Old Testament culturally defined demonstration of repentance but it's what's on the inside that counts it's your heart it's more important that you return in your heart than it is to observe all the religious ceremonies you possibly can there's two features of this return repentance I want to draw your attention to first of all it's to be wholehearted

Joel writes return to me with all your heart or with your whole heart you can generally tell when someone's engaged in a task half-heartedly it's not to be the way it is when someone is returning to God after a season of backsliding just like the prodigal son he left everything behind him in that far off country and he wholeheartedly returned home to his father so we must wholeheartedly desire to return to God and yes I know as a firm proponent of the sovereignty of God even the desire to return to God comes from God himself yet it is to be there and if it is not then we must pray for it Lord make me wholehearted in my return to you wholehearted but the second feature of this return and repentance is to be that it is to be brokenhearted brokenhearted not just wholehearted but brokenhearted it consists in the realization of the sinfulness of what we have done in turning away from God

I don't say the full realization but realization enough that it leads to godly repentance to the weeping to the mourning to the fasting of our hearts you can leave your garments intact but your heart's broken under the weight of your sin you see Jesus dying on the cross and you realize that by all your back sliding you've hurt him even more and you're sorry you're so very sorry I'm going back to John Calvin again because he's so perceptive in his exposition of this verse and he says let anyone search himself and he'll find that he labors under this evil he would rather rent his garment than rent his heart he would rather rent his garment than rent his heart how true to the Christian experience this is it is so much easier to change our appearance than it is to change our hearts how careful we must be not to think that our performance of religious duties and our attendance at religious ceremonies is a substitute for a repentant heart what does

[ 17 : 41 ] God rather you return to church or return to him you changing your externals or changing your internals don't allow one to be a substitute for the other that of rending your garments a substitute for rending your heart in a similar vein Calvin goes on to say all those ceremonies by which men imagine they discharge their duties are mere mockeries when they are not preceded by a pure and sincere heart they're all mockeries unless they're preceded by a pure and sincere heart as I look back over the years how many hundreds of times have I stood up here to preach and engaged in the mockery of God because my heart was not pure or sincere how many times have you done the same thing how important it is that in the secret parts where

God desires truth as King David puts it we're engaging in daily repentance and faith anything less you know is far easier we would all rather rend our garments than rend our hearts but anything less is mere mockery rather than take our guilt away will only add to it you know for all that life has become easier for us it's also become far busier perhaps too busy and these verses are calling us I believe to call a time out on our busyness and to spend time examining ourselves that for all that I look as if I've got it all together where is my heart really the Lord's day the Christian Sabbath where we're called to rest from the normal activities of the week is our

God given opportunity to take time out for this very purpose then I fill it with other things take a guilt free half hour with your open Bible before you and prayerfully ask God to do business with your heart to rend your heart and not your garment before him so I'm asking honest question when was the last time you took advantage of God's gracious gift of a restful Sabbath to do this very thing believe me when I say to you that time spent returning to the Lord and rending your heart in the secret place is time you'll never regret spending it will perhaps prove to be the most productive half hour you'll ever spend return to God it's all in the heart and then third and finally return to God he'll never turn you away he'll never turn you away there's really no other word to describe verse 13 they are beautifully gospel words he is gracious and merciful slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love you know this is who God has always revealed himself to be yes even from the days of

Moses when on top of Mount Sinai where God gave Moses his servant the law he revealed himself to be all these things and more how beautifully loving how wonderfully gracious this is the father who longs for us to return to him he might shower us with his blessings and embrace us in his love that like that father in the parable of the prodigal son he may run out toward us and graciously embrace us in his love I've tried to be a good father to my children but they'll tell you there have been many many times when I've failed to model God's forgiving heart to them perhaps I've been so harsh with them that they're afraid to come to me with something they've done wrong rather than model God's fatherly slowness to become angry

I've become I've been so quick to become angry with them we've got to be so careful to let our children know when they come to us with their sins and with their failures and disappointments we're quick to show mercy and grace not anger and temper but if only we knew God this way as the perfect father who will lovingly receive us back to himself who is more willing for us to return than we are to return how quickly and willingly we'd return to him from our darkness our apathy and our backsliding and going back once again to John Calvin I make no apologies he says we can never be brought to fear God truly we can never be brought to fear God truly unless we trust in him as our father we can never be brought to fear God truly unless we trust him as our father can you not see this pattern here in

[ 24 : 04 ] Joel 2 13 we return to God knowing that he will gladly receive us back to himself and he will never turn us away the father of the prodigal son he longed for his son to return from that far off country he longed to see him in the distance returning he longed to lovingly embrace his prodigal son and restore him to the fullness of sonship in his family your loving father's calling you to return to him this evening he's inviting you to return to him this evening if you should return to him he will never ever turn you away never never no never for if he should he would no longer be the God who we see in the face of a Jesus who for us was abandoned and forsaken on the cross we can never be brought to fear

God truly unless we trust him as our father this is ultimately how we are to view the kind of repentance enjoined by Joel in these verses not that of a criminal crawling back to the judge saying sorry but that of a son returning to the embrace of his father if you're a Christian this evening though you may be far away from God right now you've never stopped being his child and he's never stopped being your father you might have tried to wrestle yourself out of his grip but in his love he'll never let go of you and when you ask yourself what kind of father do I have in him you have to answer he is gracious and he is merciful he is slow to anger and he abounds in steadfast love what then is keeping you away from returning to God even at this late stage yet even now return to be God says it is not the father in the story of the prodigal son who keeps his son from returning home it is the prodigal son who keeps himself from going back home what is it that is stopping you from returning to God perhaps there is a sin in your life a pleasurable addictive sin and you enjoy it and you know you need to get rid of it but you just don't want to you know you're not able to so you indulge the sin and stay away from God you've got it all the way wrong way around return to

Christ let him deal with that sin you find so wonderful let him show you that there are far greater pleasures to be found in him than in any tawdry transgression let nothing stand in the way of your returning to God not your friends not your pleasures not even your fears or your anxieties this is your greatest need this evening can you not see your father's waiting for you what then is keeping you from returning to him what is it at the end of his lecture that John Calvin delivered to the students on these verses Joel 2 12 and 13 he closed in prayer and he modelled his prayer on the teaching of these verses and as we close we're listening and joining in to

Calvin in prayer from nearly 500 years ago in Geneva and we're joining with him and his students as together they return to their loving heavenly father he prayed these exact words grant almighty God that as you see us so foolish in nourishing our vices and also so ensnared by the gratifications of the flesh that without being constrained we will not return to you oh grant that we may feel the weight of your wrath and be so touched with the dread of it as to return gladly to you laying aside every hypocrisy and devote ourselves so entirely to your service that it may appear that we from the heart have repented and that we have not trifled with you by an empty pretense but have offered to you our hearts as a sacrifice so that we and all our works might be sacred offerings to you through our whole life and that your name may be glorified in us through

Christ our Lord Amen