

Repentance is Progress

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[0:00] Now, it's been a while since I've done this, but early in my married life, I was a frequent purchaser of IKEA furniture. Mainly bookcases and shelves, which you all know come flat packed, right?

And so requires DIY. And so many a weekend was spent with a screwdriver in one hand and a hammer in the other. Not quite the weapons of righteousness that we saw two weeks ago, but sort of close.

Now, initially, I would try and sort of get it done quick, which meant ignoring the instruction booklet. After all, I've seen the product in the showroom, right?

And, you know, you see the pieces. Yeah, sort of works. You know how it's all going to fit. Except that, of course, and some of you will know this through hard experience, there is a specific order to how you put it together, right?

In particular, the thing that I keep getting stuck with is that there are different screws for different holes. They all seem to look the same, but actually, there's ten of that length and then eight of that length.

[1:12] And you need to put the ten in the right holes, otherwise you get it wrong. And, of course, I would only realise this sort of like halfway or maybe even three quarters into the assembly.

And so, to my dismay, I would find out that the only way to fix this was to dismantle everything and start all over. There was no other way.

I could only go forward if I first went backwards. Now, a similar thing, I think, applies today with our topic on repentance.

Nobody likes to repent. It's humbling, humiliating even, and awkward. And it often reveals uncomfortable truths about us. And yet, for the Christian, repentance is actually progress.

For God, in fact, with God, actually, repentance is the only way to progress. Hence, the title of our sermon today, which I have to confess, I stole from Jeff Hall.

[2:19] All right, so this is my first act of repentance for the day. It's the name that he's given to one of the modules that we do in the leadership training program. And, you know, some of you have even done it, so you're aware exactly what it means.

But in our passage today, we're going to find out that repentance is progress. Why is that so? I think it's spelled out in the key verse of the passage, chapter 7 and verse 10, which I've got at the bottom of the outline.

In fact, verses around it, verses 8 to 12, form the main focus of the passage tonight. It's the wagyu beef, if you like, in the burger.

The premium meat in the sandwich. All right? And around it, both before and after, Paul sandwiches it with the fluffy bun of pastoral care. All right?

He wants the main instruction to be received well. And so he envelopes it and cushions it with care and pastoral sensitivity, both at the beginning and the start.

[3 : 23] And as we've seen in the past few weeks, repentance is hard, isn't it? Paul actually then wishes for the Corinthians to know not just the message, but to realize that it is really for their own good.

And that actually when he gives it to them, it is out of love for them. So, Paul leads in in verse 2 with these words. Make room for us in your hearts.

We have wronged no one. We have corrupted no one. We have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you. I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.

I have spoken to you with great frankness. I take pride in you. I am greatly encouraged. In all our troubles, my joy knows no bound. Knows no bound. Paul is therefore saying that my conscience is clear in what I am doing to you and my motives are pure.

And if you read the entire letter, that would be a constant theme that you find him saying throughout. And so he urges them to receive his words as someone who deeply cares for them and takes great joy in seeing them obey God.

[4 : 32] But now in verse 5, Paul returns, I think, to where he left off all the way back in chapter 2 and verse 13.

Now we have been trying to do this over two years, so you may have been a while since we went back there. But in those five chapters that we have been looking at, Paul has actually diverted his letter to defending his ministry.

This was because of the so-called ministers that I have talked about a few weeks ago who had come to lure the Corinthians away from the gospel. So he's had to digress to defend his ministry, the ministry of reconciliation.

But having made his defense, Paul now returns to his relationship with the Corinthians and how he would like to restore it. He resumes where he left off, telling them of his journey to Macedonia.

And so he goes on, For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn. Conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.

[5 : 41] And not only by his coming, but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

So if you recall, Paul had left Troas back in chapter 2 because he was unsettled. He was searching for Titus, who arrives in Macedonia with news.

That the Corinthians had taken on board his message. What joy for Paul when he hears this. For you see, he was concerned that they might find his severe letter, the one which Titus took to them, too painful to receive.

So in verse 8, he continues, So Paul is sorry, but not totally.

It's kind of sorry, not sorry kind of thing. But it's not because he's heartless or disingenuous. But rather, as he says, your sorrow led to repentance.

[6 : 57] Now of course here, Paul is distinguishing, as he goes on now, between good and bad sorrow, from godly and worldly sorrow. And he says that only good and godly sorrow leads to repentance.

And of course, as you read this, you'll realize that sorrow and repentance then are two related, but actually different things. Sorrow and repentance, not the same thing.

Sorrow or being sorry is merely the realization that something has gone wrong. That things aren't what they should be. And it may cause you to feel sad or bad, but that's not the same as repentance.

Instead, repentance goes a step further. It requires us to take responsibility for what's gone wrong, to admit the part we played in it, and then to make amends and stop doing it going forward.

And so while sorrow necessarily precedes repentance, there can be sorrow without repentance. So Paul continues, For you became sorrowful as God intended, and so were not harmed in any way by us.

[8 : 10] Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation, and leaves no regret. But worldly sorrow brings death. Now, why does worldly sorrow bring death?

Because, for example, you may be sorry about something, and your response might be, for example, to try and cover it up, or to downplay its seriousness.

Instead of repentance, what it does is produce, let's say, fear, or embarrassment, or blame shifting, or excuses as to why it happened.

And sadly, you know, we've seen that happen quite a bit. Look at some of the big corporates, or even churches. They do that, don't they? Instead of owning up and putting things right, and stopping things from recurring, if possible, as much as possible, what they do is try and protect their reputation.

They may even say sorry. They may even get up and have a press conference where they say sorry. But then you see what happens after that, is nothing changes.

[9 : 17] They go back to the same things. They might even have an inquiry, have some findings, have some recommendations, say they'll change, but nothing changes. Things stay the same. That's not repentance, is it?

Now all these things, particularly when they relate to the church and to us as individuals, lead to death. Because there's no reckoning with the underlying issue, that of sinning against God, for which we need to seek forgiveness, and then turn away from doing.

The opposite is true repentance. And true repentance is different, because what it does is it opens our heart to the gospel. When we know that we've done wrong, and that the only thing that can fix it is Jesus and his death on the cross for us, that's the only thing that makes us right before God, that is true repentance.

And repentance that way gives us or brings us salvation, leads us to salvation because of God's forgiveness. Now in our psalm reading today, King David got to the heart of the matter of repentance when he sinned and committed adultery with Bathsheba.

And so he says in verse 10, which I've got on the screen, Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

[10 : 42] Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Can you see that true repentance always turns us toward God, not away from him?

We realize that we don't have the resources within ourselves to make right what's wrong, and so we turn to God for salvation. Firstly, for forgiveness, but then also to receive his spirit to do what's right.

Worldly sorrow, on the other hand, turns away from God. It may come with pity and regret as to what's happened, but because there's no true reckoning with sin, it separates us from God.

We run away from God rather than run toward God, and that ultimately leads to death. But God's great assurance is that hard as repentance is, because it's humbling, we will always find him ready and waiting to forgive, waiting to welcome us back into his open arms.

And so David can say in verse 17, on the next slide, It's hard, it seems like you're moving backwards, but actually, it's progress, because you're moving toward God.

[12 : 09] And so if you're here today and you find yourself in that position, you know you're not right before God and you're feeling, ah, this is bad, this doesn't feel good, well, let me encourage you to turn toward God rather than turn away from him.

It takes courage, but you're actually making progress because you're walking into God's open arms. Now of course, true repentance also then leads to obedience, which now Paul says, on my outline, is a desire for justice to be done.

So he continues, See what this godly sorrow has produced in you. What earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourself, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.

At every point, you have proved yourself to be innocent in this matter. Now let me just try and explain some of the events that are going on behind the scenes so that we understand what he's saying.

If you cast your minds back to chapter 2, remember that what prompted all of this was the initial sin of an offender, one person. Most likely he's in the church, but the church had initially failed to respond correctly to that sin.

[13 : 22] It may not have been everyone in the church, maybe just the leaders or whatever, but no decisive action was taken to deal seriously with him. So Paul has to write this so-called severe letter to warn them to take action.

Now, Titus then brings that letter and then he brings news that Paul's letter has jolted them into action. Hence, Paul's joy at the news.

These subsequent actions are what Paul is pointing to as them being innocent of this matter or in this matter. It's not to say that they did not sin initially in how they responded, but it's saying that with their godly sorrow and true repentance leading to their zeal for justice, all of this at every point, he says, is what they've proved themselves to be innocent in this matter.

And I guess perhaps even if you read all the way back in chapter 2, they may have even been so zealous in disciplining the offender that Paul encourages them to actually, no, no, great that you've pulled him up, but you need to forgive him as well.

So now Paul then finally comes back to the verse 12. He says, he gives them a reason for why he's done all this. And so he says, so even though I wrote to you, it was neither an account of the one who did the wrong nor an account on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.

[14 : 54] So what we see here is that Paul's primary motivation for writing in the first place wasn't just to correct the wrongdoer, it wasn't even to provide justice for the victim or injured party, which it could be Paul himself who is the injured party that he's referring to or it could be the one that the offender has sinned against.

But either way, Paul's saying, yep, those are valid reasons, but the most important reason why I've written to you is for you yourself, you as God's people, so that you can see for yourselves before God how devoted to us you are.

So it's not to say that the individuals in the incident don't matter, but rather it's to prioritize the importance of God's people. In other words, it matters greatly how God's people respond when there's wrongdoing in their midst.

Yes, the individual is answerable to God, but so are we as God's people in how we treat that sin in our midst.

And the church, especially leaders, shouldn't just turn a blind eye when there is sin. And I guess it ties in with last week's message or vision, isn't it?

[16 : 10] Because we are God's people, together, his treasured possession, we display God's glory together. That's why if there is sin, it impacts the purity, doesn't it, of God's people as a whole.

It impacts our holiness. But thankfully, Paul says, the Corinthians have responded rightly. And although Paul says their actions show their devotion for Paul, that's his words, I think the fact that it's before God to whom they are accountable, shows that they are actually also doing it for God.

After all, Paul's message itself would have pointed them toward God. And so, by showing devotion to Paul, they are actually showing obedience to God as well. And now, to complete the fluffy bun, the bottom part, I guess, Paul now also then finishes off by affirming their actions again and to talk about the effect their actions have had on him and Titus.

He says that it's engendered encouragement and affirmation for both Paul and Titus. Paul is so encouraged that he wants to affirm them in their actions. And so, in verse 13, he says, by all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. I have boasted to him about you and you have not embarrassed me.

[17 : 36] But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling.

I am glad I have complete confidence in you. Paul and Titus have obviously invested much in their lives. And although this is not always the case, it seems that in this case, the trust that Paul has in them has paid off.

And it brings great encouragement to Paul and to the others. And so, Paul wishes them to know this to give them another reason to see that their hard work of repentance hasn't gone to waste.

Not only is it good for them because it brings salvation for them, it also brings joy for Paul and Titus. They are not the only ones that benefit. Everyone wins from their repentance.

And so, therefore, repentance, even though it seems to be a backward step initially, is progress. The Corinthians have done the right thing and they shouldn't have any doubt or shame over what they've done.

[18 : 47] In fact, Paul says that if there is any remaining awkwardness in their relationship, that they should cast that aside and open their hearts to him. So, this is really just a quick run-through of the passage and hopefully you get a fair sense of the background to understand what Paul's really trying to say to the Corinthians.

It's not always easy with a letter like this because we don't have Paul's severe letter. So, we don't know what Paul actually wrote nor does he explicitly set out what went down in Corinth.

But, I think, notwithstanding that there's some perhaps uncertainty on those minor details, the key point in verse 10 is clear, isn't it? And if I then had to summarize what comes out of this by way of application, I would have these three which I've got on the slide.

So, first, as the title suggests, let's remember that repentance is progress. And although Paul's focus in this letter is on the church's response to sin, it applies to all sin, whether it's us individually or corporately as a church.

The only right response to sin is repentance because that's progress. So, I want to just emphasize to all of us, let us not ever be fooled to think that worldly sorrow is enough.

[20 : 11] We can cry all the tears we want. We can feel regret and sorrow as much as we want, but unless it leads to genuine repentance where we approach the throne of grace in humility and change our ways, then it's really much ado about nothing in God's eyes.

grace. And I guess we've seen it before with little children, you know, they can cry crocodile tears, can't they? You scold them and they say, never do it again, never raid the lolly jar in the pantry, but what's the proof that they really repented when they don't go back to the lolly jar, right?

Without real repentance, sorrow merely leads to death. And that's why, you know, for example, we have a regular prayer of confession at church.

Most of the prayers we use come straight out of the Anglican prayer book, you know, which has sort of gone out of fashion these days, but it's really good, isn't it? Why? Because it reminds us that as Christians, our normal posture is a repentant life.

It doesn't matter how many years we've been a Christian, the normal posture for us as Christians is to be repentant. And in fact, if you read some of the prayers of confession, probably not tonight because we're using Psalm 51, but some of the other weeks, you will notice that those prayers don't just contain words of sorrow.

[21 : 39] If you read it carefully, they contain words of repentance as well. Phrases like turning away from sin, or asking God to change us, to have the Spirit help us to live like Jesus.

All these are actually prayers for change. It's actually repentance that we're praying for, or results of repentance, things that come out when we're truly repentant.

The things that Paul commends the Corinthians for. But lest we think, let me just press it one more point, lest we think that repentance is simply confessing in prayer, let me say that that's merely the first and necessary step.

We can pray, every week we'll be like, but unless we turn to God and then we step out in faith, in answer to those things that we've prayed for, and ask God to change our lives and then do those things, it's merely just tantamount to just worldly sorrow, isn't it?

That is, we just say the words, but true repentance requires that we follow through to do as we've prayed. Now, second, just as Paul called the Corinthian church to deal with the sin of the offender, let's remember that repentance is corporate, that is, not to say everything is corporate, but that it involves a corporate aspect as well.

[23 : 04] Therefore, as Christ's body, we have a responsibility to hold one another to account. We have to do it in a loving and caring way, and as someone prayed this morning, remember their own logs in our eyes, even as we sort of see the speck in others, but yet, if we see a brother or sister falling into sin, then let's not turn a blind eye to it.

Let's not just say, oh, you know, it's just them, it's nothing to do with me, I don't want to cause any trouble, I don't want to have any conflict. Rather, let's think about restoring them to God through repentance, talking to them and pointing it out to them in an appropriate way.

If repentance is progress and the posture of a Christian is to have a repentant life, then the culture in our church should be one of repentance as well. That is, we shouldn't be ashamed when we have to say we've done the wrong thing.

We shouldn't have to have a fear that will be rejected if we repent, should we? And that, I guess, leads me to the third application, and that is, we ought to show pastoral care and love to one another so that our practice of repentance is within a caring context.

Knowing that repentance can be hard and humbling, let's affirm true repentance when it occurs. Let's not, you know, ostracize a sinner because we know, well, now they're such a sinner, aren't they?

[24 : 38] Let's avoid them. No, let's embrace and affirm them instead and say, look, you've done the right thing. Yes, the sin is not good, but it's good that you've repented. Let's encourage each other now to continue to walk in Christ.

And to love them and forgive them and restore them. Because we don't want to allow them to fester in guilt and shame, which the devil can then use to cause them to doubt.

We need to encourage them to stop doing what they're doing, to live rightly, but then to embrace them as forgiven brothers and sisters in Christ. The gospel tells us clearly and loudly that when we truly repent, our reconciliation with God through Christ is complete.

That is, God doesn't stand there and say, oh, yep, I forgive you, but you know, I'm not that pleased with you, please don't come so close to me. No. When we ask God for forgiveness, we're welcome, aren't we, into his open arms.

And so if that's what happens with God, then we need to do the same as well. So yes, repentance is only needed when we do bad things. But repentance itself is a good thing.

[25 : 47] we don't like it, but actually it's a good thing because it's progress. It means that it's bringing us to God and leading us to life and salvation.

And so we need to embrace it, even though it might feel like we're moving backwards when we do it. Let's pray. Father, forgive us for the times when we have done wrong and yet refuse to repent and turn away from it out of pride.

Teach us to lament in godly sorrow and give us your spirit to change. Help us to encourage this in others and to treat this seriously as a church.

We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.