

Our Need For Repentance 2

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Date: 28 September 1980

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[0 : 00] Why the people of God had been taken away into Babylon, into captivity, was because they had not kept the law. And so to save their country and to bring about a renewed life in their midst, they determined that they would keep the law.

So they got together with the scribes. And the scribes were the people who knew the law. They spent the whole of their days immersed in the study of the parchments.

The greatest joy and delight of a scribe was to be able to quietly study, undisturbed by anybody, so that they could delve deeply into the scriptures and know what they said.

And they did. And they came up with the fact that in the scriptures there are not ten commandments, but 613 commandments. And of these 613 commandments, there were 248 positive commandments, this do, and there were 365 negative commandments, don't do.

And then they added to that 31 customs of immemorial usage. That is, that had been customs among the people for so long that nobody remembered when they began.

[1 : 29] Not only did they produce these 613 laws, they were able to convince people that these 613 laws were given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

That's why it's important to have Bible study. Because sometimes if you have the Bible left just to the experts, they can misconstrue things in such a way that you lose the whole point of it.

Well, if you are encountering the scriptures for yourself, you have the right to challenge anything that you're taught in the light of what scripture teaches.

And because the scribes and the Pharisees so dominated the people, and the people accepted it because they themselves did not know any better.

Now, one of the things that particularly bothered the Pharisees was the law of tithing. And they demanded that every piece of food that came into the house would be tithed.

[2 : 33] One-tenth of it would be given to God, to the Lord. And the reason they wouldn't go out and eat in the home of a Gentile or a heathen was because they would be eating food which they believed belonged to God.

And they weren't going to defile themselves in this way. And they absolutely insisted on the tithe. Everything had to be given. One-tenth of everything.

And that was good and acceptable to them. And they said, this is the law and this must be observed. But the difficulty they ran into was, not only did they subscribe that ten percent should be given to the Lord, the Roman soldiers and Roman authorities came along and said, and we want some too.

And Herod and the priestly order came along and said, they wanted some too. And so they were burdened by tax collectors who had the right to force them to pay over and above the tithe that they gave.

And this caused great dissension. So when this chapter opens, you have Jesus with the tax collectors. You can see what a terrible offense this would be to them.

[3 : 59] Not only was he with them, but if you look at it, you'll find that he received sinners and ate with them so that he broke the law at that point which they were most anxious it should be preserved.

And so they were very critical of Jesus consorting with tax collectors and sinners as they're described.

So Jesus tried to explain to them what was happening. And he used this parable to explain it to them. And it was a parable which should have made the Pharisees leap up and sing and rejoice and dance and really be very happy.

It was a very happy parable. And they wanted very much to have the Pharisees see the joy that was intended. But it's doubtful if they did see it.

Jesus said there was a shepherd and he had a hundred sheep and one of them was lost. And he left the ninety and nine and went out and looked for the one that was lost.

[5 : 10] He was fearful lest it had fallen and been injured. He was fearful lest it had been attacked by a wild animal and consumed or wounded or maimed. He was fearful lest it had wandered so far away that he would never find it.

And so with those fears and anxieties, the shepherd goes out to look for it. And as the night wears on, he finally hears the bleat of the little sheep and goes and finds it and throws it on his shoulders and all his fears and anxieties are ended and his heart is flooded with joy and thanksgiving and he comes home.

And naturally enough, he goes to his friends and neighbors and says, come and rejoice with me for that which was lost is found. Well, he hoped that they would come and rejoice with him.

But Jesus found his neighbors and friends at this particular time quite unwilling to rejoice with him at the lost being found. They didn't think it was fun at all.

They didn't think it was a reason for rejoicing and giving thanks that he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Rather, they found it very upsetting and very disturbing.

[6 : 28] Well, Jesus then went on to try and explain to them the meaning of the parable so that they wouldn't miss the point.

He said to them, don't you see that what happens in heaven is that there is joy over one sinner that repents more than over ninety and nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

But the joy comes from the one who repents. Now, I recognized when I read this verse that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons, that you would be so familiar with that verse and find its language so religious and so out of touch that I tried to do a paraphrase of it to try and tell you what I think it means.

And this is my paraphrase, which you may condemn because it will only appear today and be gone tomorrow. But this is how it reads. There is more joy at the bottom line over one uptight person who is able to make the big change than over ninety and nine persons who obviously have it made.

And that's the fundamental principle that lies at the basis of the life of the church. That's where the joy comes from. That's where joy comes from in heaven.

[8 : 03] I've been reading Chuck Colson's book on life sentence, And he talks about the opposite of that in words which I find very stark and a wonderful contrast.

This talks about the joy in heaven. Chuck Colson quotes this when he says, The desire to tear down people who represent high moral character and an advancement of spiritual values is evident and insidious sickness, historically peculiar to times of moral decay.

We wait in ambush, British journalist Henry Fairley writes, for the novel that fails, for the poet who commits suicide, for the financier who is a crook, for the politician who slips, for the priest who is discovered to be an adulterer.

We live in ambush for them all, so that we may gloat at their misfortunes. We feel cheated by our newspapers and magazines if no one is leveled in the dust by them.

Well, you see, that's exactly the opposite to the joy in heaven over one sinner that repented. It's precisely the opposite. And you can recognize in our kind of world that kind of attitude.

[9 : 35] So, my ambition for us as a church is that we won't be a we-they kind of church. And the reason we don't need to be a we-they kind of church is that we have something in common that belongs to all of us.

St. John's has a reputation for wealth and social prestige, but we don't all have that. And if you don't happen to be in that category, so what?

There is one thing that we all have in common. And the thing that we all have in common is that we are sinners. That we can all rejoice in.

You can look at anybody in the church and know confidently and categorically that you are face-to-face with another sinner and that you have that profound reality in your life and it's a profound reality in their life.

Stephen Neal has described what a sinner is. A sinner is a person whose harmony and relationship to the earth, our physical environment, is broken.

[10:50] Our relationship to our fellow man has fallen. Our relationship to ourselves is chaotic and confused. And our relationship to God doesn't exist in the way that it should.

That's what a sinner is. It's someone who is suffering acutely from broken relationships. relationships to the physical world, to his fellow man, to himself, and to the world.

And you find in our society that there are various groups that are very anxious for you to restore the relationship to the physical universe. People like Greenpeace and more power to them.

Or to restore your relationship to yourself by taking better care of your physical existence. You find some people are out to achieve, by dint of moral effort, a better relationship to their fellow man without being able to deal with the kind of hate and distrust that exists so often between us and our fellow men.

You find all sorts of people who are in the business now of helping us to relate to ourselves. And that it's a whole lot of people are writing about it.

[12:14] And the concept is that if you can relate rightly to yourself, then you don't have any other problems. Most popular movements do not help very much in restoring your relationship to God.

And yet Christ teaches that the restoration of your relationship to God, which is the sinner that repents, is the basis for a new relationship to yourself, to your fellow man, and to the world in which you live.

And that that's the thing that people, that heaven rejoices over. So, I think what we need to do as a church is emphasize the one thing that we have really in common.

And that is that we are sinners who need to repent. Do remember that the lost sheep repented by being found, allowing himself to be found.

It wasn't a great thing, but it was a wonderful thing for him. So that the thing that we have to do is to repent. And when you come to morning prayer, you're asked to say, all we like sheep have gone astray.

[13:37] We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. You are asked to strongly identify yourself with wandering sheep. In the course of the communion service, you are invited, if you do truly repent and unfeignedly believe Christ's holy gospel.

If that's your condition, that's your qualification to partake of the holy communion. When you're sick and on the point of death, it doesn't say, will you please add up the sum total of your good deeds so that you may have the record ready for when you arrive at the pearly gates?

No, do you know what the prayer book does? And you can see it in the ministry to the sick. It encourages you, even when you come to the end of your earthly life, to repent and to put your whole trust in Christ's love and mercy towards you.

We have penitential services for Lent. Repentance is the operative word. It's the basis of the big change by which we who acknowledge that we are sinners come into the place of a right relationship to God, which then will lead to a right relationship to ourselves, to our fellow men, to our world.

The second thing that I want you to recognize and I want us to recognize as a church is that we need very much to see that the initiative belongs to Jesus Christ.

[15:22] The existentialists believe Christianity insofar as it describes man as lost. They part company with Christianity when we go on to talk about a Savior who seeks and saves the lost.

That God's concern is not to leave us in our lostness, but to find us and to bring us in faith to himself. And we have to recognize the initiative that the Good Shepherd takes in coming out to find and restore us and to acknowledge that initiative.

The third thing that I want us to have as a church is that we won't regard ourselves as the company of the ninety and nine who need no repentance.

Repentance is the active word at the basis of the whole life of the church. It's the basis of coming into the faith of Christ.

It's the basis of going on in the faith of Christ. It's the basis of renewing our relationships to one another. It's the basis of building up our confidence in the mercy of God.

[16:37] All this happens at the point of repentance. And some people, I know, regard the church as being the safe stronghold of the ninety and nine that need no repentance, which is categorically denied over and over again in the New Testament.

That's not what the church is about. The fourth thing that I desire we should have as a church is to share and join in the joy of heaven.

That is, not to be as those people described in Chuck Colson's book that are waiting in ambush for the next personal tragedy to overtake the next public figure, but that we are those who are waiting to see the big change that comes when someone whom we know and love, someone whom we relate to, has come to the place of the big change and making a faith in Christ the center of a healing relationship to God, to himself, to his fellow man, and to the world in which we live. And that we will, as a congregation, share in that joy, which is the joy in heaven over one sinner that repents.

And that we will, by that, come into that new kind of relationship. Can I ask you to pray? Lord Jesus, when we come to the place where we have nothing to commend ourselves, and where we see ourselves in a broken world as a broken person, that that is your gracious invitation for us to turn in repentance and faith to you, that you might demonstrate to us in the circumstances of our individual lives your mercy and your love and your grace and your power to heal and to restore and to renew.

[18 : 56] Grant that we may not be frightened to come to that place. Grant that we may not use our church as a place to emphasize that we need no repentance.

But grant that it may be a place where we can change in response to your gracious invitation and to your seeking after us.

We ask this, Lord Jesus, in your holy name. Amen. Now can I ask you to stand with me and confess our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, which is on page 9 in your small green book.

We believe in one God. We believe in one God. Father, who is the one I, and greater than ever. All that see the Nicene.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father.

[20 : 14] Amen. For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit.

He was born of the Virgin Mary and became man. For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, died, and was buried.

On the third day, he rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son, he has worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the cross. We believe in one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

[21 : 17] we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the dead.