

True Repentance

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Date: 19 May 2019

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[0:00] everyone. Israel Falau is a famous rugby player who was on a \$4 million contract. He quoted a verse from the Bible on Twitter. I'll show it on the screen now. This is what Israel Falau actually said on Twitter, in addition to the meme and the Bible first. Those who are living in sin will end up in hell unless you repent. Jesus Christ loves you and is giving you a time to turn away from your sin and come to him. It's a warning message of impending danger and a call to repentance. This message angered a lot of people from the LGBTQI community, Rugby Australia, who is the governing body of rugby, and to the sponsors and Israel Falau's personal sponsors. Furthermore, it even angered some Christians. And just two days ago, we've heard that Rugby Australia has terminated his contract. So there are many questions that we would like to ask of this situation. Why is this post causing so much offence? What does it mean for me? Have a look at the list of sins up on the screen. I've struggled with at least one of them, even now. So what does God actually want from us? What does repentance really look like? What does it mean to be grieved by our sin and say sorry to God and to live for him? We also need to think about what does it mean to preach the message of repentance in this day and age, given there's so much opposition. Jonah 3 alludes to all these topics, and we need God's help to understand it. So let us pray so that we can do so. Dear God, as we come to the topic of repentance, and as we come to your word, help us to understand it so that we can repent, believe in your word, and know how to proclaim it for your sake. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So when we look at Nineveh's repentance, there are two parts to this reaction. The people's repentance, and how the king reacted to this repentance, and how he commanded the repentance to continue. So let us look at the first one, the repentance of Nineveh's people. For those who were not at church the last couple of weeks, I'll try to summarize what's been happening in the book of Jonah. In chapter one, God told Jonah to preach against Nineveh, and Jonah tried to run away as far as possible by boat, and God caused the storm to rise up.

Jonah realized that he was in the wrong, so he told the sailors to throw him in the ocean, where God graciously rescued him by using a big fish. In chapter three, God called him to proclaim to Nineveh, and we can see the message that Jonah preached from verse four. So looking at verse four, we can see that Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming 40 more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown. And we can see how each person in Nineveh responded to this message.

The Nineveh believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, are put on sackcloth. So what does it mean for someone to put on sackcloth and fast?

So sackcloth is something that's rough and plain. I can't find any sackcloth to illustrate this, so I'll use a modern, somewhat transcultural equivalent. And you know, 25 kilogram rice bag.

Imagine putting that on me right now. That's not something that you'll wear every day. It's not very flashy, and it's actually not a fashion statement. So what does it mean in the Old Testament to put on sackcloth? In the Old Testament, it means it's a sign of mourning, or someone trying to lower themselves and debase themselves, or the fact that they want to repent. So the idea of fasting is similar, that they want to carry the idea of mourning and repentance. So the word repentance means turning away from sin. And we can see how the Nineveh repented in verses six to nine. For having had a look at how each of the people at Nineveh repented, let's look at what it means to repent together. The word corporate means the whole body. So the word corporate repentance means how a whole group of people repented together, usually done by the direction of a leader. So when you read Jonah chapter three, verses six to nine, you can see how the king directed all the people at Nineveh to repent. So the claim then is issued by a royal proclamation to get everyone to repent. The king, in effect, is trying to get everyone to repent together or corporately. So we might not be that familiar with the idea of corporately repenting. But we can see that in the Old Testament.

We can see that most clearly in the book of Psalms.

[5 : 20] Psalms. But there's a whole category of Psalms called corporate laments, where the whole community of Israel is led by the leader to, you know, some lament. Although the king isn't a believer, we can see that in his speech where he tried to get the people to repent. He called the whole community to repent, to put on sackcloth and to fast. And in these verses, we can clearly see that these actions are meant to be an act of repentance and not just acts of mourning, but what the king says in chapter three, verse eight. In chapter three, verse eight, he says, let them give up their ways, their evil ways and violence. And that's a concrete expression of their repentance. And we can assume that everyone in Nineveh listened to the king because God relented from bringing his judgment to Nineveh. So that's a really amazing transformation.

To understand how significant it is, we need to know what the Assyrians are like. The Assyrians for the capital at Nineveh were known for their violence. In fact, they became very successful by being violent and conquered everyone around them. So for the king to tell everyone to give up their violence, it's for them to give up their identity and for them to give up the ways that made them successful. So there's one question we need to ask. Did the Assyrians really repent? So if you look at the evidence from the book of Jonah and also the rest of the Old Testament, the answer is yes and no. The Nineveh of the generation repented once, but in the generation that followed, we saw that it didn't produce long-lasting ultimate repentance.

We can find out from the Old Testament and even the book of Jonah. Firstly, we can see that it's just by the way that the king addressed God. In verse 9, the kings of Assyria said, God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.

So you might wonder why I highlighted the word God. The word God used here is the word Elohim, the generic term for God. So where is the sailors in chapter 1 when they cried out to God? They said, they actually cried out to the Lord Yahweh, the personal name of God. And the king here just know God as a generic God that is powerful and not a God that he personally served and worshipped.

Secondly, we will look at the motive that the king gave for repentance. Looking at the same verse, we can see that the king wanted to avoid disaster. The first line says, God may yet relent with compassion and turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. He wanted the people to believe in God because he wanted to avoid disaster for his city. And it's not because he wanted to believe in a God that he wanted to serve and relate to. Thirdly, ultimately, we can see the Assyrians went back to their violent ways. So the book of Jonah was written between 786 and 746 BC.

[8 : 53] So the mere 30 to 70 years later, the Assyrians returned to the violent ways. And we can see that because they completely destroyed Israel. So it's conceivable that some of the people in the city would have seen how the Assyrians acted towards Israel. So the very fact that you can see the violence enacted by the Assyrians, you can see that the Ninevites didn't have a long-lasting repentance.

So it leads to an important question. The Ninevites mourned, they fasted, and they gave up on the evil ways. If that's not real repentance, what is? And the important question for us is, how do we know that we have truly repented? So let's look at our repentance. Our working definition of what repentance is, is the turning away from sin. To understand the true nature of repentance, let's look at the book of Thessalonians from chapter 1, verses 8 to 10. We'll start from verse 8. They tell you how you have turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. So from here we can see the act of repentance.

It has the implicit meaning of turning away from sin towards something. So the people here, they've turned away from sin towards God. So let's look at what that means for us. When we sin, do we try to repent by trying to stop the act of sinning out of fear of going to hell? We can see that from the example of Nineveh, that that might not produce a long-lasting repentance. In contrast, the people of Thessalonica showed that the evidence of true repentance. We can see that they didn't only believe in the God of judgment, but the Lord who saved them and that they want to serve. I'll read verses 9 to 10 again and highlight a different bit. In verse 10, it says, they tell how you have turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son, whom he has raised from the dead, Jesus who rescued us from the coming wrath. Can you see how that's a completely different attitude to repentance? So I'll try to illustrate this point by using an example that younger people will get. And I sort of understood as well, since I'm not too old yet.

I joined the Facebook group called Subtle Christian Traits. Yep, everyone laughs. It's good. This is where young people discuss various issues and share jokes that Christians will find funny. And since they didn't set an age barrier, they let me join, which is good. There's a recent set of posts that's asked, is it a sin to... So that's one random post. Is it a sin to read the Bible in Klingon? [12:11] And some of these are pretty trivial or funny, but some of these are serious questions that people ask. Someone asked, is it a sin to have a tattoo? All of these are good and valid questions, but in light of repentance, it misses a point. Repentance isn't just about giving up sins.

Repentance is about changing your entire life's direction. So to answer all these random posts, someone on that Subtle Christian Trait group posted something very helpful. They wanted us to ask the question instead, is it glorifying to God to do something?

This is real repentance, not just the act of giving up on our sins, but to live for God. In other words, repentance and faith aren't two separate things, but they're two sides of the same coin.

So let's apply this to ourselves. If there's a sin that we all need to corporately repent of together, it's probably greed. And greed might not mean the accumulation of wealth, for some of us, it might mean putting yourself first in pursuing material things and consumerism.

It might take another form. So my struggle with greed is not in the form of being tempted to put my trust in the security that wealth brings. I'll tell you why I struggle with this.

[13:48] So my parents gave up promising careers in Hong Kong to migrate to Australia. And with my dad in particular, he gave up a job as an engineer to work as a handyman.

But five years after migrating in 1993, my mom was diagnosed with stomach cancer and was given a 4% chance to survive. And by God's praise, she's still alive, so you guys don't have to worry about me or her.

She's still growing strong today, so praise God for that. But what that meant for us as a family is, we've been on a single income since 1993, from that point onwards.

As a result, I've always lived with sort of a siege mentality. I hated to be wasteful. And if you need an evidence of it, you can see it in the car that I drive.

It's older than some of you. It's from the year 2000. So I find it hard to waste, and I wanted to be secure in my wealth. I had to work really hard to be generous and to give up my trust on material security.

[14:52] And God has changed me slowly, and he's still growing me in this area. And each of us would have a different struggle with greed. And each of us would work through it differently.

But in this mission month, as we've alluded to, let's use the pledge cards that we were given today and pray about it and bring our pledges back next week, not just as an act of generosity.

It's actually an act of serving God. Ask us, is it glorifying for us to use our money this way? Okay. So let's think about how we can actively use our money to serve our true and living God.

So I'm only testing on the tip of the iceberg here. After this mission month, our church is going to go through a series called Wealth on Purpose. It will reinforce the idea of how we can proactively turn from serving ourselves towards serving God in our resources, our time, our talents, and our treasures.

So having looked at what repentance looks like, let's look at the third point. How do we preach repentance? One of the most memorable quotes I've seen on Facebook about the Israel Folau saga goes something like this.

[16:10] People are now offended by a message that they think is not true, about a God that they think is not there, condemning you for a sin that you think you haven't committed, sending you to hell, a place you don't think is real.

So if you think about it, the Israel Folau tweet is basically a similar message that Jonah preached, a warning about impending disaster.

Given our current context of increasing opposition to the gospel, how do we share this gospel of repentance? Let's look at how the repentance of the Thessalonians helped them share the good news of Jesus.

We will pick it up from verse 8. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell you how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

[17 : 25] So we can see here that repentance has been known everywhere because of how they lived. So when a whole group of people repent and change the way they live from serving themselves or their idols and to serve the living and true God, it creates the context for gospel conversation.

So this has two implications for us in the way that we do evangelism right now. So firstly, we need to have people know us personally and not just on social media.

If we display true repentance in a personal context, it makes for effective sharing of the gospel.

That's why in the Mission Month booklet, please pick one up on the way out, or even now you want to, but on the way out is better, because otherwise it would be quite chaotic.

But pick one up now, well, not later, sorry, I mean, but pick one up later. I've listed six ways how we can engage in frontline mission, both in the way that we live and the way that we speak.

It's by intent that through community groups that we'll work through these six areas as we pray together and encourage each other to keep doing this.

[18 : 43] So these are the six areas that we are trying to work through and show how this helps out the way that we share the gospel. The first two points, modelling godly character and making good work, shows the importance of those around us seeing the evidence of true repentance and an active life of following Jesus.

The next three points, ministering grace and love, moulding culture, and being a mouthpiece for truth and justice, shows the importance of living for Jesus and its outward impact.

It is through deliberate actions in this area that people see the repentance of following Jesus, how that shows our practical love and concern for other people.

So it's in this context that we can be a good messenger of the gospel and an effective messenger of the gospel. So secondly, to create these contexts, we actually need to get people to know us.

So I'd encourage you to get in the habit of hosting meals, social, sporting events, where a whole group of Christians can meet with a whole group of non-Christians so they can see Christians in a social occasion.

[20 : 03] So that's what's been recommended from Sam Chan's book that I've been recommending since last year. In chapter two, he outlines some of the principles on how we can do that. And I want to show you how we've borrowed these principles and put it into action.

On Friday morning, in our English class ESL, we've invested time so that the students can get to know us. In the intermediate class, Andrew and I have been asking the students to prepare messages on how they can introduce themselves and how they feel about living in Australia. Through morning tea and through our lessons, we also illustrate things from our own life in our context so they get to know us and other teachers. For some of them, some of them for a term, some of them for more than a year, they slowly warm up to the Bible and they get more curious to learn more from it.

So last week, I started the Investigating Christianity course and about two-thirds of the class stayed behind to study the Bible. That's just two days ago, we studied a passage from Romans 1 and some of you might have seen it on my Facebook post.

It's a message on sin and judgment. So it has great potential to offend people. But although the passage was so sober, the students were willing to engage with the Bible and were really willing to understand.

[21 : 35] And one of the reasons is because they knew that this message was delivered in the context of a relationship. And I believe that all of us can do something similar in our own frontline context.

As people get to know you and witness your repentance and see how you live out your life with concern for other people, you can invite people to church.

So one of the things that I've made up and produced is this invite. It's got all the frontline, all the local mission activities that our church hosts as well as the Sunday service.

So if you can, grab these. There are stacks of them on the Connect desk. Get in the habit of using them in your personal context. Hand them out. If you don't have any more, grab a whole heap more and keep doing it.

And the thing is, people are actually quite willing to go to church. So a lot of people that haven't been to church, they assume that church is a club for Christians so you have to be a Christian to be here.

[22 : 42] But you know, we welcome everyone. So get in the habit of inviting people and use these in relational context so that people can get to know Jesus.

So as we looked at repentance and how to preach repentance, Nick will lead us in a time of repentance together as we turn away from our idols to serve the living and true God, our Lord.