

Week 20

Salvation + Repentance

Key Verses

Luke 5:31-32 And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance."

Luke 15:10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke 15:18 I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight."

+ Introduction

Perhaps the clearest and best-loved parable in the Bible is the one most often referred to as "The Prodigal Son." In this parable, we are given an amazing picture of repentance: what it is, the joy in Heaven when a sinner repents, and a sobering reminder that no one is free from the need for repentance.

Charles Dickens called the parable of the Prodigal Son the greatest short story ever written. It is represented in classic works of art, such as Rembrandt's famous painting of the Father extending his arms to embrace the Prodigal upon his return. Our English vocabulary has even expanded to include references to the parable. When we talk about a lavish dinner, we may say, "They killed the fatted calf." We designate a son or daughter who strays or leaves home as a "prodigal," and we pray that this individual will "come to his senses." How thankful we are for Luke, whose gospel places such a clear emphasis on repentance and on the repeated claim of Jesus that He did not come "to call righteous men but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

+ Repentance: What It Is/Is Not

Repentance is a vital doctrine, and a call to repentance is an essential factor in the presentation of the gospel. As we will see in the next section, genuine repentance is necessary for life change. Wayne Grudem states that “preaching the need for faith without repentance is preaching only half of the gospel.”¹

And Dr. Harry A. Ironside, as long ago as 1937, lamented the failure of churches to include a call to repentance in their preaching.

“The doctrine of repentance is the missing note in many otherwise orthodox and fundamentally sound circles today.”²

What Repentance Is

In *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem defines repentance as “a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ.” It is clearly more than just a feeling or emotion. It includes an understanding that sin is wrong, an acceptance of the teachings of Scripture regarding sin, and a personal decision to turn from it. It is, therefore, something that occurs at a specific point in time, as initial saving faith and initial repentance occur only once in our lives.

The word translated “repentance” (especially in the NIV and NASB) is the Greek word “metanoia.” This word comes from two root words, meta” which means “after” or “beyond,” and “noeo” which means “to think.” Literally then, repentance means to “change one’s mind.” It, therefore, describes our willing response to the gospel call, in which we “repent” of sin when we change our minds about Jesus and about ourselves, place our trust in Christ, and accept Him as Savior and Lord. True repentance is a turning of the heart as well as of life. It is not a word of weakness but of power and action. The act of repentance is what Billy Graham has said: “breaks the chains of captive sinners and sets Heaven to singing.”

What Repentance Is Not

True repentance is accompanied by a sincere decision to forsake sin and recognize that sin is being committed against God. We see this in the Prodigal’s rehearsed confession that he has “sinned against Heaven and in your sight.” Anything less is not genuine repentance. Therefore, it is not penance, i.e. acts undertaken as a self-imposed payment or punishment for sin. It is not simply remorse; even Judas was remorseful for his betrayal of Jesus. And it is not self-condemnation, which only leads to despair or guilt. We should hate our sins, not ourselves. 2 Corinthians 7:10 states: “For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death.” The repentant heart is the one that God can use.

✦ The Doctrine of Repentance

An About Face!

Another use of the word “metanoia” was as a military term that basically meant “about face.” And that is what repentance involves. The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers the question, “What is repentance unto life?” with the response that it is a saving grace that does two things: turn from sin and forsake it and turn to God. The gospel call of Christ includes both aspects of repentance as He called people to turn from sin. John MacArthur states

“From His first message to His last, the Savior’s theme was calling sinners to turn from their sin, to embrace God, and to pursue righteousness.”³

So, in the sense that Jesus used it, repentance incorporated both a repudiation of the old life and a turning to God for salvation. This is further illustrated in I Thessalonians 1:9, “...*how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.*” Here again, is the “about face” of turning from evil and turning to God. This “turning from” and “turning to” are both essential.

“It is from a life of sin that one must turn. This is what repentance means. It means to turn your back on that life and turn toward God for forgiveness and cleansing. So, the first step toward being born again is repentance, turning away from the old life, and turning now to God.”⁴

A Heartfelt Conviction

Repentance begins with the heartfelt conviction of sin. Until that is present, repentance is unlikely to take place. J. I. Packer has stated that true repentance only begins when you get past what the Bible sees as self-deception or that modern counselors call denial into what the Bible calls conviction of sin. We see this self-deception clearly represented in the elder brother in our parable and in the Pharisees he represents. Some find it difficult to repent because they simply do not understand the gospel message or the blessing of forgiveness that accompanies repentance. Others may feel that repentance is too hard because they fail to realize that when we repent, God does the converting, and He blots out our sins. In other words, when we become so contrite over our sins that we decide to change our way of living, God actually helps us to repent as the Holy Spirit acts upon us and within us. Because repentance involves a redirection of our will (turning to God), it is not something we do by ourselves; it is the work of God and a gift of God.

A Lifelong Process

The focus of this lesson is on the initial repentance that leads to salvation. However, it is important to understand that repentance is also a lifelong process. The promise of I John 1:9 is an important one, as it declares that “*when we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” This heart attitude of repentance is an important part of the victorious Christian life. Wayne Grudem explains,

“This same attitude should continue throughout the course of our Christian lives. Each day there should be heartfelt repentance for sins that we have committed, and faith in Christ to provide for our needs and to empower us to live the Christian life.”⁵

+ Repentance: A Classic Illustration

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) we see many of the aspects of repentance – and its rejection – exemplified in the persons of the younger and elder brothers. We also see the lavish grace of the father as he extends love and acceptance to both sons. To fully understand the parable in context, take a moment to look back at Luke 14:35, in which Jesus declares, *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”* It is no coincidence that Luke follows this verse with the opening verses of Luke 15 that describe the setting and audience for the three parables in this chapter.

LUKE 15:1-2 *“Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. ² And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”*

As the parable progresses, we begin to recognize that the younger son (the Prodigal) represents the tax collectors and sinners, while the elder brother represents the Pharisees and scribes. Throughout the gospels, one of the chief complaints the Pharisees have against Jesus is His association with sinners, and we grasp that Jesus is directing the parable to them.

Two short parables precede the account of the two sons. One is about a lost sheep and the other about a lost coin. In both, something is lost, then sought for and found, followed by joy and celebration. Both conclude with a declaration that Heaven and the angels rejoice over *“one sinner who repents,”* suggesting there are others who will reject repentance or fail to see their need for it.

The Younger Son

The Pharisees are most likely shocked by the disrespect the younger son pays to his father, and the disgrace he brings upon his heritage and his community. We know the story well. After exhausting his inheritance in *“the far country,”* the Prodigal is destitute and has *“no one”* to whom he can turn. This sets the stage for the prodigal to *“come to his senses.”* This wake-up call compels him to determine to return home. We see in this description a beautiful word picture of the steps required for true repentance:

- An honest assessment of himself
- An acceptance of responsibility for his situation
- A recognition that he needs help outside himself
- A readiness for a fundamental worldview change (an about face)

The Father

As the prodigal approaches his village and his home, the father enters the story. And the father’s actions would have created a *“seismic shock”* for the Pharisees. Instead of ostracizing the son, or even requiring (as Deuteronomy 21 and 28 prescribe) that he be stoned to death, the father literally sprints to meet his son and spares him the reproach of the villagers. In the father’s actions, we are reminded of the description of Jesus in Philippians 2, as the father becomes a reproach himself, empties himself, takes on the son’s disgrace, and sacrifices his dignity out of love for his son. The

sandals, robe, and ring the father requests for his son indicate that the father is granting his son the full privileges of sonship, denoting the father's forgiveness, acceptance, and restoration of the son. What an incredible picture of all that we receive when we repent and receive Christ as Savior and Lord: *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."* (John 1:12)

The Elder Brother

By this point, the Pharisees have most likely begun to understand that Jesus is pointing to them as he describes the actions of the elder brother. In this brother, we see pride, hypocrisy, superficial morality, self-obsession, and self-deception. One commentary observes that "sinful hearts have an amazing capacity for self-deception," and the elder brother fails to see that his begrudging obedience and legalism are as disrespectful to the father as his younger brother's open rebellion. Both sons have rejected their need of the father and refuse to be in his presence. The elder brother has no appreciation for grace because he thinks he doesn't need it. And, therefore, he embodies one of the parable's main lessons: the elder brother is just as lost and hopelessly enslaved to sin as the younger son. Even so, the father extends costly love to this elder son by coming out to him and pleading with him to join the celebration and by declaring that "all that I have is yours." While the elder son – and the Pharisees – reject the idea of needing repentance, the father/God makes it available to them as well.

✦ Conclusion: Hope for All

Alternate Endings

Kenneth Bailey, an expert in Middle Eastern studies, has studied the literary style of the parable and determined that it is a chiasm – a technique in which the statements are in a particular pattern, then the pattern is reversed. The account of the younger son is basically an ABCD – DCBA pattern, in which the opening statement declaring that the younger son leaves for the far country (and is therefore dead to his family and village) is ultimately reversed as he is declared by the father as *"dead but is alive again."* Interestingly, the account of the elder brother is also a chiasm, but the pattern is incomplete. It is basically ABCD – DCB, with the final "A" missing.

What this means is that the account of the elder brother is unresolved. Initially, he hears the music and returns home, and remains outside, standing aloof. But we do not know the conclusion. Does he accede to the father's request and go inside, or does he remain outside – bitter, alone, and unrepentant? We are left to write our own ending, speculating on how the elder brother responds to the kindness of the father. John MacArthur suggests a hypothetical ending in which the elder son repents and participates in the joy of the celebration.

"I repent for my bitter, loveless heart...Make me a true son, and take me inside to the feast. The father then embraced his firstborn son, smothered him with tearful, grateful kisses, took him inside...They all rejoiced together and the level of joy of that already amazing celebration suddenly doubled. No one there would ever forget that night." ⁶

There is no indication that the elder brother, like the Pharisees, has any intention of acknowledging his need for repentance. But, we know that even this angry and bitter individual is not beyond the love and grace of God.

Second Chances

The inclusion of the accounts of two brothers – an obviously rebellious son and his self-righteous brother – is another indication that there is hope for all. God’s love extends to publicans and sinners, and it also extends to those who consider themselves exempt from their need for it. Martyn Lloyd-Jones concludes that an important truth of the parable is the possibility of a new beginning, a new start. “No case,” he states, “can be worse than that of the prodigal son. Yet even he can start again.”⁷

Our “Prodigal” God

Tim Keller’s classic, *The Prodigal God*, gives us further assurance that no one is beyond the love of God. We think of the word “prodigal” as referring to someone who runs away from home and indulges in all kinds of trouble in the “far country.” But the word “prodigal” actually means “extravagant,” or “having spent everything.” And, according to Keller, this describes the actions of the father in this parable. He lavishes grace upon the prodigal, he initiates forgiveness and restoration to both of the sons, and in his willingness to experience the disgrace and shame of running to embrace the prodigal, he reminds us of the cost of the grace that God extends to us. As Keller observes:

“Jesus is showing us the God of Great Expenditure, who is nothing if not prodigal toward us, his children. God’s reckless grace is our great hope, and a life-changing experience.”⁸

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994.

² www.gty.org/library/print/sermons-library/90-22

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-doctrine-of-salvation-part-11

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

⁶ John MacArthur, *The Prodigal Son*, Thomas Nelson, 2008.

⁷ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Classic Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, Kregel Publications, 1997. ⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, Dutton, 2008.