

What I would like to do tonight is look at Christian best practices, especially as it pertains to repentance. I have been a Christian now for 15 years and counseling and teaching for almost 10 years. I am convinced that most of us go through life almost utterly clueless. We get through the end of each day full of all of the things that we have to do and we are just lost in space when it comes to spiritual things. Most of the spiritual thoughts we have had have been abstract and disconnected.

I know this because I have been at too many bible studies when the leader asks, So, what has Jesus been teaching you lately? And truly me and everyone else has this frozen far off look.

I am also convinced that the main reason for this lack of spiritual clarity is because of a lack of Gospel repentance as a way of life.

CONFESSION

Let me confess something to you. Sunday night I was just in a dark mood. I just could feel my whole mood getting mean. Michelle needed to go pick something up from a store and all of a sudden my heart grabbed onto the idea of having a beer. I wanted something special with dinner. She said she wasn't going to the grocery store. I could feel my insides start to get into knots. I knew it was wrong but it was just happening. I decided something was really wrong so I cancelled my appointments for Monday and I took the day just to read and pray. I asked God to search me and to reveal my sin. He did. It turned out I was really anxious about many relationships. It turned out that I was approaching my relationships in a very self-centered way. I would serve people but really only as a means of getting something from them...acceptance, gratitude, whatever. I was not living to the glory of God but I was living for myself. I repented and was able to grab onto the Gospel and see Christ and pray with power.

Turn to Luke 18. I want to show you the structure leading up the Zacchaeus story in Luke 19. Look at Luke 18:9-14. There we have the familiar passage concerning the pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee lives his life thanking God and being proud of his righteousness. The tax collector simply begs God for mercy.

Then in Luke 18:15-17 the disciples are trying to block the little children from coming to Jesus. Jesus explains that we need to receive the kingdom like little children. Not that all children get into the kingdom!! It is the manner or way of little children- Totally needy and totally trusting, helpless and dependent...

Story of trust- When we were younger my brother and I were about 5 and 7 years old we were fishing in the park with my mom. There was this nice older man there who was very friendly. My mom wanted to go get something...I don't remember if she was actually going to go shopping or she just wanted to get something from the car...and she told us just to stay there and she would be back. Well, right when my mom was out of sight the old man told us that we would not catch anything with the bait we had but he had some bacon back at his place. Catfish love bacon. He told us to come with him back to his house and get it. So, my brother and I happily started to follow him. That is when we heard the ear piercing scream of my mother. "STOP! Where are you going!" We trusted the old man...we were dependent and trusting...

Side Note: Why we don't tell our kids Santa is real...

This is amazing. Don't miss this. Far from these needy people being a waste of time to Jesus, he has come for them and they are the only ones who get into the kingdom.

Then we have the contrasting story of the rich young ruler- Luke 18:18-27. He wanted something from Jesus. He wanted eternal life...he wanted spiritual riches. But notice the question: "What must I do...to get it?" This man already had what he needed in this life. But he wanted to secure the next life

as well and he really thought he had already earned that. He comes to Jesus wanting something that he thought he could earn...he was not needy...not lost.

In Luke 18:28 Peter basically says, "Look at what we have done. We have given up everything. Now, when are you going to show us the money...when are we going to get the reward for what we have done?" He is really no different than the rich young ruler. He is trying to manipulate Jesus.

Then Jesus reveals how he will die and rise again. V.31-34

Then in verse 35 we have the story of blind Bartimaeus:

35 As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. **36** And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. **37** They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." **38** And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" **39** And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" **40** And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, **41** "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." **42** And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." **43** And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

Look at how helpless and yet bold Bartimaeus was. He was a social disgrace, but he didn't care. He was like a hungry little child...He won't be put off. He was truly needy and He went to Jesus with the confidence of a child coming to a parent for food.

Now, turn to Luke 19 and we'll see there an example of repentance...

19:1 He entered Jericho and was passing through. **2** And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. **3** And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small of stature. **4** So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. **5** And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." **6** So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. **7** And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." **8** And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." **9** And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Tax Collector Explanation:

Most of us are not really impacted by this story because we don't get what scum tax collectors really were. We think of tax collectors as people sent out to collect money, say 100 dollars in taxes and they collected 150 and pocketed the extra 50. That is wrong and evil, but that is not why people hated tax collectors. Let's go back in history just for a moment. Zacchaeus was a Jew and he was a tax collector for Rome. Rome ruled the world and their empire was spread far and wide. Now in order to rule the world far and wide you need a huge army and that army needs to be quite scary. That means that the Roman army had to be brutal and had to be paid. There is much historical evidence that they were brutal. In 71 BC the Roman army put down a slave revolt and crucified all 6000 slaves, men, women and children, along a 200 kilometer stretch of road that led into Rome. Rome killed, tortured and enslaved so many people that comparisons should be made with Rome and Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia or Pol Pot Cambodia. It was a wicked brutal nation. These scary soldiers had to be paid. Rome had hundreds of thousands of soldiers that were citizens and they also hired out mercenaries from other countries. To keep the entire army in food, clothing and weapons was very expensive. How did they get the money to fund their brutality? They hired out traitors like Zacchaeus who

collected money from his own oppressed people to fund the Roman war machine. Zacchaeus was an evil little man who deserved a slow painful death on his best day.

That is what makes this story so amazing. Out of the whole crowd Jesus looks at this little Nazi Zacchaeus and hangs out with him and loves him. Why? Because Jesus loves those who are lost and Zacchaeus was lost, as lost as Bartimaeus and he knew it. It is this love that breaks Zacchaeus.

Now that we have looked at this whole section of Scripture with the wide angle lens we can ask:

What is repentance?

Repentance is not about what man has done but rather about him coming undone. It is about putting down all pretense that one is worthy or deserving of anything (laying down our deadly doing) and just begging for mercy. It is about admitting that you are lost, powerless, guilty and just sticking out your hands to Christ and pleading for mercy.

THE PROBLEM

Let's talk about the big problem that is in the way of real repentance for us.

Religious repentance¹

1. Sorrow over the consequences of sin. It has a desire to see those consequences go away. So, religious repentance wants to keep God happy so that he will continue to treat you well.
2. It is an attempt to atone for sin. If you are sorry enough for long enough we can convince God and ourselves that we deserve to be forgiven. But you never really know if you have been repentant enough. Therefore there is no real comfort in this.
3. It is traumatic and bitter. A definition for religion is "I obey therefore I am accepted." This means that admitting that you have sinned is traumatic because it threatens your acceptance with God and with other people. Therefore, religious people seldom repent and when they do it always leaves them exhausted and depressed. They screen out their character flaws. They cannot hear criticism without being wrecked by it.

Gospel Repentance

1. Recognition of sinfulness/wretchedness of who you are, not just what you've done. It is sorrow over hurting or grieving God. Gospel repentance believes that God loves you and is for you even when he is grieved by you.
2. It looks to the one atonement for sin done by Jesus. It knows that even this repentance needs to be atoned for because a sinner can never repent enough. Jesus is the only one who did enough. We know that he did this when he said "It is finished."
3. It is full of Joy. Rejoicing and repentance must be married concepts in the Christian life. Only rejoicing in the gospels gives us the sand...the fortitude...the security to admit our wretchedness. On the other hand, only the heart understanding of our wretchedness shows us at a heart level how wonderful and free his grace is. "Repentance without rejoicing will lead to despair. Rejoicing without repentance is shallow and will only provide passing inspiration instead of deep change"²

¹ I stole this material here from Tim Keller's article "All of Life is Repentance" and his class notes on "Preaching in a Postmodern world."

² Keller "Preaching in a Postmodern World"

“Conviction of sin and grace are cyclically related--one leads to other to other. The greater our sense of weakness and sin the greater our realization of how extensive God's love and grace really is. But just as true, that deeper assurance of love/grace makes it possible to finally admit the greater depth of your sin. The more sure you are of not being rejected--the more honest you can afford to be with yourself!”³

Conclusion

What I am proposing is that you live in a state of gospel repentance. But I want to be specific about this. I don't think that it will do you or me any good simply to abstractly live with a repentant attitude. I want to propose that whenever you go to read Scripture; whenever you stop to pray; whenever you meet with other believers, you take time to confess your sins and to repent deeply. Do this privately and do this publicly.

Ask God to search you and reveal sin to you.

Ask God to give you repentance.

Remind yourself that you are utterly helpless. You can't do this. Gospel repentance is a gift. Humble yourself under God's hand and he will lift you up in due time.

Isaiah 57:15, 66:1-2

James 4:6-10

³ Ibid.