

Making A U Turn From Sin

When Jesus was on earth there were lots of people who followed him. He drew crowds that at times numbered in their thousands. Some of those who followed him were people who wanted to see another miracle, for the word went around quickly that Jesus was healing the sick, making the blind to see and the lame to walk. People brought their family and friends to Jesus hoping for a miracle. Others followed Jesus because they loved his teaching. People hadn't heard teaching like that before. They especially loved it when Jesus gave a bit of stick to those who were exploiting the poor. Then there were those who followed Jesus because they wanted to neutralize him. Mostly these were religious leaders who felt threatened by his popularity and were alarmed at the way he was undermining their religious power.

Out of the thousands who followed Jesus, there were a few who followed him because they believed he was God on earth in the form of a man. Almost all of these followers were so convinced that Jesus was the Son of God, that they gave up their businesses, their jobs, and their way of life, to do what Jesus asked of them. Jesus made it very clear that following him was going to be costly. But it was this group who counted the cost and became lifelong followers. Some of them died, because they followed Jesus.

If you read through the New Testament, you will find that there are four things that mark a true follower of Jesus from those who just followed until things got too hard. Each Sunday in October, I'm going to take one of these characteristics and talk about them in depth. Today I want to talk about making a U turn from the sinful stuff in our lives, and turning to a life that pleases God. There is a technical term for this in the Bible. Its called repentance.

The story of Jesus in the New Testament opens with a character named John the Baptist. He was out in the desert by the Jordan river, preaching and baptizing the crowds of people who were flocking out to see him. Simple people and religious leaders alike were coming to check him out. John had one just message for all these Jewish people. The kingdom of God is coming. Repent. Turn away from your sins and get baptized to demonstrate your repentance.

When Jesus began to preach, Matthew tells us he called on people to repent. ***"From that time on Jesus began to preach "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17NIV). Luke's gospel quotes Jesus saying "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32 NIV)*** What is the message of Jesus? The same as John the Baptist. Repent. Turn from your wicked ways and live Gods way.

In the book of Acts, Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost. He tells people in no uncertain terms that they are responsible for crucifying Jesus the Messiah. What is his message to them? ***"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38 NIV)***

When the Apostle Paul was preaching in Athens, he said to the Greeks ***"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent". (Acts 17:30 NIV)*** The message of John the Baptist, and Jesus, and Peter and Paul, and of the Christian church all through the ages is this: One day we are all going to have to answer to God for the sins that we have committed. There is a judgment day coming, and God isn't going to turn a blind eye to your sin, no matter who you are. But he is giving you the opportunity to repent. You had better take it while you have the chance.

If this message of repentance was so important to John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and Paul, we had better make sure we understand what they were calling people to do. Before I get into specifics, let me tell you what Biblical repentance isn't.

1. It isn't feeling sorry for the consequences we have brought on ourselves.

Don't confuse repentance with self pity. There are a lot of us who have done dumb things in our lives and are now reaping the consequences and we feel sorry about what we have done. It's good that we feel sorry about our past, and hopefully we have learned from those mistakes. But that's not the same as repentance.

2. It isn't feeling sorry for the hurt that we have caused others.

Many of us have been filled with remorse about the way our sinful behavior has damaged the lives of other people. There are a whole bunch of things we have done and said that have been deeply hurtful to

other people and we look back on those incidents and wish we hadn't said or done what we did. We feel very sorry about what we have done to others. We should feel sorrow for those things, but that isn't repentance.

What sin does to us

When we rebel against God's design for our lives, we are working against the way God made us. The Bible tells us we are made in the image of God. But when we sin, we destroy the image of God in us. As a teenager I remember once replacing a battery in a tractor. The cover for the battery was off, and as I was lifting it, I spilled some of the acid on my clothes. I didn't think it would matter, and didn't think my mother would notice. There was nothing to show that damage had been done. But the acid was there, doing its corrosive work. And it wasn't long before those clothes had holes in them and were ruined. Sin has this corrosive effect on our lives. The results don't show up immediately, but eventually, sin is so corrosive, it destroys the image of God in us. It eats away at our soul, destroying all that is good.

What sin does to God.

The prophet Habakkuk says this; ***"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."*** (Habakkuk 1:13) God is holy. The word "Holy" means to be distinct or separate. Because God is holy, sin is completely incompatible with his nature. He has a severe reaction whenever he is near evil. He is completely distinct from anything and everything that is evil and sinful. He has a huge aversion to sin. He hates it. He can't even look at it. He doesn't want to have anything to do with it. God has a zero tolerance for sin. He is antagonistic towards evil.

The Bible writers use human terms to describe God's reactions to sin and evil. God reacts to sin so violently that it makes him vomit. When your body takes in something that is dangerous to it, there is almost an immediate reaction. First you feel nauseous. Then the body just reacts involuntarily and vomits out what it cannot cope with. Vomiting is probably the body's most violent of all reactions. That's how God finds sin. It's nauseating. It disgusts him. It makes him reach and vomit. When Jesus encountered the Laodicean church, the sin of that church literally made him want to vomit. God cannot tolerate or sin or hypocrisy. They are so repulsive to him that he must rid himself of them.

Let me try and describe it in another way. When we were in the UK we first came across stinging nettle. We didn't know what it was at the time, and those of us that had touched this plant came up in large itching welts. It was terrible, and the itching went on for days. The next time we went out in the English countryside, we kept a sharp lookout for the stuff, and stayed as far away as we could. When it comes to stinging nettle, I'm "holy." I'm separate from it. I don't want anything to do with it. Some of you have allergic reactions that are far stronger than that. Some of you have children who react to a bee sting in such a way that they swell up and can't breathe. If you don't get them immediate medical attention, they will die. So in order to protect your child you make sure they are never in a place where they could be stung.

God is severely allergic to evil and sin. He just can't tolerate it. His holiness means that he has to always separate himself from it. He doesn't want anything to do with it.

Biblical repentance.

Biblical repentance has three dimensions. Thought, word and deed. All three of these are necessary if repentance is to be real. Here's an example to illustrate the point. I'm a first time visitor to NZ and I arrive on a late night flight at Auckland airport. I'm tired and jet lagged. It's dark. I tell the taxi driver I need to get to an address in Tauranga. I have no idea where Tauranga is. Because he sees I'm a stranger, the taxi driver takes me from the airport down to Hamilton, then to Rotorua, across to Whakatane and then finally to Tauranga. By the time the driver gets to Whakatane his conscience is getting the better of him for exploiting a stranger's ignorance. He delivers me to my address in Tauranga. I pay him the exorbitant amount that is showing on the meter. But then he confesses that he has taken me the long way round, and returns the whole fare to me. What's happened? He has changed. He has changed in his thinking. He's telling himself the truth. He has changed in his speaking. He's now telling me the truth. And he's changed in his deeds. He's refunding me the whole fare. That's biblical repentance. Biblical repentance is a change in thinking, a change in speaking, and a change in action. Let's look at these in more detail.

1. Thought – Conviction of past sins.

The word for repentance used in the original language of the New Testament literally means to change one's mind. It means to think again, particularly about our behavior in the past. It means looking at the things we have done from God's point of view and agreeing with his analysis and accepting his verdict. It's measuring our thoughts and our actions by the holiness of God and becoming convinced that we fall far short. When we begin to do this we discover two things. That God is better than we made him out to be, and that we are much worse than we have made ourselves out to be. God is absolutely holy, absolutely just, absolutely pure. We also discover that we are not good people who occasionally do bad things, but that we are basically bad people who occasionally do good things. And even then, the good things we do still don't measure up to the holiness of God. All the good stuff we give ourselves credit for still adds up to a pile of dung as far as God is concerned.

Now here's the problem. So many people never get to repent because they don't believe this. They don't believe God is all that good, and think they are all that bad. They don't understand the holiness of God, and how he feels about our sin. We tell ourselves our sin is OK and the devil gives us all the help we need to believe it. We tell ourselves God doesn't mind too much. Because we believe these lies, we never get honest with God about our sin. Jesus died on a Cross to save us from our sins, but a whole lot of people don't really believe they need saving because they don't believe they are too bad. Until we agree with God about our sin, we haven't even taken the first step toward repentance.

2. Word – Confession of past sins.

The next step after thinking differently about our past sins is to speak differently about them. The second step of repentance is to speak out specific sins before God. Naming them. "Lord, I have done this and this and this." That means swallowing our pride and asking God for his mercy. It means stopping blaming everyone and everything else for the way we are and accepting responsibility for our sins. It's only when we get real with ourselves and get real with God that we begin to appreciate what it means to be forgiven. Confession opens up the channel for God's grace to flow.

Here's the third and hardest step in the process of repentance.

3. Deed – Correction of past sins.

Repentance isn't just about thoughts and words. It's about deeds. John the Baptist said to those he was baptizing ***"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." (Luke 3:8, 10-14 NIV)***

Repentance isn't some spiritual mumbo jumbo stuff that you mouth off in church. Repentance is about dealing with specific changes in the way we think and act toward God and toward other people. Repentance is about sharing your food and clothing with the needy. It's about stopping cheating on your taxes. It's about stopping taking advantage of your authority and treating people fairly. Zacchaeus was a character who encountered Jesus. He was a crook who had defrauded people. Not only did he promise to go straight in the future, but he told Jesus he would repay the people he had defrauded in the past and that he would add on interest and a large bonus to the people he had cheated. Repentance means cutting ties with anything or anyone that has caused us to sin. It's putting an end to wrong relationships. It's getting rid of objects that have taken the place of God. It's breaking away from things that have tempted us to do wrong. This is the hardest part, but the most rewarding part of repentance. It means making a U turn from your former way of life. It means turning from things that led you away from God and turning toward those things that bring you closer to God.

Becoming a lifelong follower of Jesus Christ seems like an attractive idea, but if you haven't come to terms with repentance, you haven't even started. Repentance is one of ***the essentials*** of the Christian faith. Agreeing with God about our sin. Confessing to God specific past sins and accepting his forgiveness. Then producing the fruit of repentance by dealing with the things in our life that we know, and God knows, need to change, so that the way we live is entirely different from the way we have lived before.

Before this Sunday, I have been praying, and others have been praying that God would speak to specific individuals about specific sins they need to repent of. I've been praying that some of you that have never ever committed your lives to Jesus Christ would take this first step. Today I want to give you an opportunity to respond to whatever it is God has been saying to you.

We are going to play a song, and the words will be up on the screen. The song is about turning away from sin and turning to Christ. While that song is playing I want to invite you to come to the front. Those of you that need to pray and do business with God, there are some seats up the front that are reserved for you. You may want to kneel at the foot of the cross. You may want to have a Christian friend pray for you. It may be that there are things you need to confess to someone here. But whatever it is that God is prompting you to do, do it.

Prayer – then play Parachute Band Track 3 – “Salvation Song” (Words On Screen).