

Sermon Notes, April 24, 2016

Coming to Your Senses, Luke 15, 11-20

We're looking at the younger son in this parable of the prodigal sons—this one who returned home to his father in repentance and experienced rebirth—as Jesus described it, from death to life, from being lost to being found. Now, even though the word is not in this text, what we have when the younger son decides to go back to his father is a powerful example of repentance. Let's look at *the importance of repentance*.

Again, Kenneth Bailey brings insight to this meeting of father and son. He says, "Faced with this incredible event he is flooded with the awareness that his real sin is not the lost money but rather the wounded heart. The reality and enormity of his sin and the resulting intensity of his father's suffering overwhelm him... He changes his mind and accepts being found. In this manner he fulfills the definition of repentance that Jesus sets forth in the parable of the lost sheep. Like the lost sheep the prodigal now accepts to be found." He is overwhelmed; he can only put himself completely at the mercy of his father and say, "*I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*"

At the beginning of the story he insisted on unhampered control over his own life. Now he leaves his destiny entirely in his father's hands. He is overwhelmed by this unexpected outpouring of costly love. He is undone. His surrender to his father's will is complete. Words originally composed to manipulate are transformed into a speech of genuine repentance.

Think now. In this story, what is the key factor that begins to heal the younger son's insides? What brings him to his senses? What is the key factor that begins to bring restoration to not only the son, but to the family? The father, all along, has been loving his son. Right? But what is the fuse that detonates this genuine change in this son? What triggers his love, what detonates his love into radical action, is the response of the father which leads to this powerful repentance of the younger son. If the father here represents God, which he does in the story, then we're being told no less than if you want the love of God and the power of God to explode into your life, the fuse that both detonates the change in your heart and the love of God to explode into your life is repentance. But it always begins with God.

Paul in Romans 2, when speaking of God's judgment, reminds us of something remarkable. He says, "*Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*" So it is with the father here in this parable.

Do you ever notice how often Jesus says, "*Repent and believe the gospel; repent and enter the kingdom; repent for the kingdom of God is at hand*"? Repentance is the key to everything.

When Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation, he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenberg Cathedral door. The first of the 95 theses was, "*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he meant the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.*" The first of Martin Luther's theses in which he was laying out his understanding of biblical gospel Christianity was, "*All of life is repentance.*" Luther teaches that repentance is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength. You humble yourself. Do you realize how strong you have to be to be like that?

Luther also says repentance is an experience of liberation. A repentant person, a person who is continually repentant, is someone who is free, finally, from pretense and evasion, free from the need to defend him or herself, etc. A repentant person is someone who is vulnerable and happy to do it and says, "*Yes, I was wrong. I was absolutely wrong. I should never have done that. Let's make it right.*"

Therefore, since it's not a sign of weakness, but of strength, it's not an experience of restraint, but it's an experience of liberation, shouldn't it happen all the time? All of your life should be repentance if you understand gospel Christianity.

This younger son recognizes what he has done to his father and to the community in which he lived. He says, "*Father, I don't deserve anything. Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*" Genuine repentance. In 2 Timothy, I'm not sure, but I suppose when Paul wrote this he could have easily had this story in mind. In 2 Timothy, Paul writes, "*Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance...and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap...*" Repentance. It begins with coming to your senses. That's what we're talking about. If you want experience with God, at the very heart of it is repentance.

Look at the two views we've considered that we human beings have for our understanding of our relationship with God. The moralistic and the progressive. You will not see repentance in the moralistic or in the progressive understanding of life and their relationship with God. But for Jesus repentance was absolutely at the center.

For the moralist, repentance is abnormal. For the progressive, repentance is unnecessary. They have good feelings. The moralists are the Pharisees. These are the people who say, "*I'm okay. You're not okay. You're immoral. I'm moral. The reason I know God likes me is because I'm a good person.*" There's no explosion. There's no kiss from the Father. There's no transformation, because repentance is hardly ever considered. It's simply uncharacteristic.

If you go over to the progressive paradigm, repentance is unnecessary. Why? Because if you talk about the love of God to a person who's a progressive, they'll tell you this: "*God embraces everybody just as we are. It's only the condemners He is unhappy with. He loves us all just as we are.*" So when you talk to a person who's a progressive about the love of God, it's just a sentiment. It's just an idea. It's a kind of good feeling. There's no transformation. There's no kiss from the Father. That doesn't change you. The difference between Jesus Christ and the other two is the centrality of repentance.

Repentance is like looking at the whole world differently. The language of repentance is, "*How could I have been so blind? How could I have been so ungrateful? How could I have missed the obvious? I am in desperate need of forgiveness.*" Eugene

Peterson in *The Message* translates repentance in Romans 2:4, which I read at the beginning of my message, as a radical life change! That's repentance, always.

And it's here you begin to see why the elder brother in the end is more alienated from God than the younger brother. Why? Because the elder brother couldn't possibly understand what I just spoke about concerning repentance!

The younger son tried to get control by leaving and disobeying, the elder brother tried to get control by staying and obeying, but they're both lost, they're both alienated from the father. They both say, *"I want your things, but I don't want you."* The Bible says, *"I don't care if you are the most religious, the most obedient and the most moral person in the world. I want to know why you are doing it."*

Look at the elder brother. He's miserable. He is condemning of other people. He is self-righteous towards other people. He's angry at the way his life is going. Why? Not because he's obeying his father's law or God's law. Everything is fine. You should obey God's law. Jesus, the faithful Son, tells us that it is truly God's law. And Dallas Willard reminds us that *"the Law is not the source of rightness, but it is forever the course of rightness."* So you should obey God's law. Why? It's all in the motive.

Here lies the fundamental mistake of the scribes and the Pharisees. They focus on the *actions* that the law requires and make elaborate specifications of exactly what those actions are and of the manner in which they are to be done. They also generate immense social pressure to force conformity of action to the law as they interpret it. They are intensely self-conscious about being thought to have done the right thing. But the inner dimensions of their personality, their heart and character, are left to remain contrary to what God has required.

This lays bare the radically profound analysis of what sin is. It says the elder brother is trying to get control, but it blows out the progressive, too. In fact, is there anybody here who says, *"I'm not an immoral person. I'm a pretty good person. But I don't pray. I don't spend time in God's word, really. You see, I just try to live a good life. I think God is probably pretty pleased."*? Listen. What you've done is you've taken the things of God and you're living without reference to Him. You come to your senses when you realize basically what David says in Psalm 51, *"Against you, you only, have I sinned ..."*

So we come back to what we said is the crux of the matter. This son comes to his senses when he sees sin is basically a relational thing. The prodigal finally gets it—he understands the nature of his sin. He realizes the issue is not the lost money. It is his father's broken heart. The problem is not with the broken law, but the problem is the broken relationship. It's your relationship with God. Coming to your senses means to *begin to see* that you're running from God trying to control your life.

Here's another part of repentance. It's amazing that this younger recognizes first, and this is significant, his accountability to God. He doesn't say, *"Well, I really messed up my life and that's the end of it."* No. He recognizes his accountability before God. He says, *"I have sinned against heaven."* Repentance is vertical.

Look at this. He says, *"I have sinned against heaven."* Now wait a minute. He hurt the father. He hurt the elder brother. He hurt the family. What? *"Primarily, first of all, I have sinned against God."* Go back to Psalm 51 again, the most famous and greatest confession of sin in the Bible, where David is confessing his sin for having stolen a man's wife and then having arranged to have him killed in battle. He starts his confession like this: *"Against you, O God, O Lord, against you only have I sinned."*

Wait a minute. What about the guy who is dead? Why is he saying to God *"Against you only have I sinned"*? Why would you say God first? But that's right, because biblical, life-changing repentance, liberating repentance starts understanding whatever sin you've done, primarily and first of all, you have sinned against the goodness and greatness of God.

Now why is that important? Here's why. What is it that wakes you up to what's wrong with you? Pain. There's a very profound quote from C. S. Lewis in his book *Till We Have Faces*. He says, *"In this life we must die before we die."* This son had to die. Fortunately for him it was not a final death. What we see in the son's life causes us to have to acknowledge that God will and does use broken dreams and shattered lives and pain. God will use those things! In fact, in another insightful quote C. S. Lewis reminds us that *"pain is God's megaphone to a deaf and dying world."*

Stephen Charnock, the great Puritan, in his explanation of the big difference between a selfish, self-pity kind of repentance and a true repentance says this about genuine repentance. He says, *"Look at this good and loving God. Look at all the things He wants for me. Look at all the things He has done for me. How could I treat him like this? How could I break His heart?"* Listen. When you repent, not just about the fact that you broke the rules and it's messing up your life, but because you've broken His heart, you'll find, when you say, *"My sin is against the goodness of this God,"* it helps you to hate the sin. You actually change!

In conclusion, there is a decision this younger son had to make and follow. Verse 20 begins this way: *"So he got up and went to his father."* It is this moment here that authenticates and gives credence to what ultimately becomes the genuine repentance and confession of this young man. This young man knew what he needed to do. But he didn't only talk about what was necessary, he did it...one step at a time. And that must have been a painful journey for him. As we said, he literally is throwing himself on the mercy of the father, and of God. He is assuming a posture of being completely dependent on the father's love and mercy. And in that moment there is the heart of the Gospel!

Repentance is getting back in touch with the fact that I'm a sinner saved by grace, and to the degree I get back in touch with the wonder of what He did, how He was willing to come and, in rags, be stripped and have the door of the universe shut in his face, and the Father not answer Him when He called...So when I call, the Father always answers ...

When you call, the Father always answers when you come through Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus Christ and the gospel says all of life is repentance, and you want to do it all the time!