

TAKEAWAY

Response

Part 4 – Repentance

May 2, 2010

Good Grief

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5:4 (NASB)

No one really enjoys being sad. Our culture says, “Don’t worry, be happy.” We tell each other to think positive, happier thoughts. We tend to shy away from people we feel are overly negative. Of course, we recognize there are appropriate times for sadness—the death of a loved one, for instance—but in time we encourage one another to “move on” past the grief.

In my early years, I attended a liturgical church where each week there was a specific part of the service set aside for spoken and silent confession. As a congregation, we read aloud that we had sinned against God in thought, word, and deed by what we had done and left undone. It was pretty comprehensive. At the time, I felt it seemed overly negative, dwelling on depressing topics such as my personal sin. It was uncomfortable to focus on my/our failures. Now, however, I see the benefit of setting aside a time and space for such self-reflection. It seems that the Bible agrees. Time and again, the nation of Israel was called to repent and confess their sins before God. And God even set aside sacrifices and days for both the nation and individuals to atone for their sins.

God has promised forgiveness to your repentance, but He has not promised tomorrow to your procrastination.
~ Augustine

God knows we need to have the bad news before we can really appreciate the good. That’s one of the reasons He gave the Law. We had to realize we couldn’t gain righteousness on our own. God wanted to use that awareness to lead us back to Him. How can we tell the difference between merely feeling guilty versus true sorrow or conviction for our sin? Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-10. If our sorrow is according to the will of God, what will it lead to? Guilt usually drives us farther away from God. It makes us ashamed, and we tend to try to hide from God. This is not the good type of sadness. The right sorrow will drive us to God, to repentance without regret.

Jeremiah was a prophet who was burdened by his sin and his nation’s sin, and yet he still had hope. In fact, he wrote one of the most loved passages on hope in the Bible. Read Lamentations 3:19-25. Does your soul remember your afflictions and wanderings, or—like me—would you often rather just forget about your sin? We have to accept the bad news before the Good News (the Gospel) can be effective. Repentance prepares our hearts for revival. Spend some time confessing your sins today. Reading Psalm 51 is a good place to start. Then allow God’s kindness to lead you through godly sorrow into true repentance.

So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he’ll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it’s the only way you’ll get on your feet. James 4:7-10 (The Message)

A Light Bulb Moment

I did it. I confessed it. I repented. I moved on...until a week or so later, that is. Then I did it again. And I confessed it again. And I repented...etc., etc.

This went on for some time. After more than a year of this, I began to be spiritually disoriented. I questioned whether or not I had truly repented, and if I hadn’t, then I feared for where I might be spiritually at that point. I hated the idea of falling into a “sin that so easily ensnares” (Hebrews 12:1) over and over again. Yet, in the moment, I seemed to be a different person. I was truly living what Paul discussed in Romans 7:14-25, but I didn’t want to live that way any longer. I wanted to be over it. I wanted it to be done.

The problem was, I thought it was too late. I felt like God had to be sick of me by now, because I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't stay away from it for any extended period of time. Even after a few months of "being good," I would do it again. Then the process would start over.

I began to measure my spirituality by how "good" I was being. The trap I fell into was thinking that, if I didn't fall into the thing with which I struggled, then God was okay with me. If I did, He wasn't. Then, I had to earn my way back into His good graces, and I wasn't sure how many times He would keep letting me do that.

Eventually, God had to show me that this process was just about one step removed from legalism. I trusted my ability or inability to manage my own behaviors to determine my relationship with God. It doesn't take a genius to realize that this was doomed to failure. This Easter, I began to realize that living a resurrection life meant living in His *forgiveness*, not in His angry wrath.

Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off your relish of spiritual things...that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself. ~ Susanna Wesley

Read Matthew 18:21-22 for Jesus' instructions on how many times we are to forgive someone who sins against us and repents. Is this a model for how we can believe He forgives us? The evil one wants us to believe that we are doomed to live in a constant struggle. But, look at what Romans 7:18 says is the desire we really have inside of us, even though we sin. Read Paul's emphatic statement in Romans 8:1-2 about our standing with Christ as His purchased children. Meditate on this. Let it really soak in. It may be the most liberating thing you've experienced for a while.

Do I still mess up? Sadly, yes...and in the same old way. Some days I win, some days I sin. Do I have a license to keep messing up? Absolutely not. I am obligated to take steps to counteract the areas in which I am weak. Look at what Colossians 3:1-3 tells Christ-followers to do and what Philippians 4:8 says we should focus on. Let us go and live in the light of 1 John 1:9 and let that forgiveness be the foundation for our daily worship.

The Change Will Do You Good

I used to think that repentance was only caused by fear of God's wrath; i.e., if we don't repent, God will send us to hell. That's a poor basis for repentance. It robs us of experiencing the amazing love God has for us and can lead us straight into "System 1" (legalistic) thinking. Don't get me wrong...repentance is a must for anyone who wants to come to Jesus. Just read Acts 2:38. Peter said those words to the crowd after telling them about Jesus, who He was, and what He had done for them. Verse 41 of that same chapter says that many responded to the message and were baptized. Repentance is vital to Christ-followers.

In my own experience, the times when God has shown me more of who He is have been the times when I got a clearer picture of who I am. This inevitably shines a light on what in my life is not honoring Him. Those are the times that lead to repentance. God, in His kindness, wants us to come to Him and repent of whatever sin is hindering our walk with Him. Acts 3:19 promises "times of refreshing" for those who repent. It is because of love that He requires repentance, and it is a more accurate view of God that will lead us to recognize our desperate need for His transforming power in our lives.

Repentance is obviously about more than me having a clearer idea about God or about myself. The word repentance is usually translated from the Greek word "metanoia," which means to change one's thinking. As the old adage says, *as one thinks, one does*. Therefore, if my thinking is truly changed, then my actions will follow. One parable that Jesus told illustrates what it means to experience that change. Look at the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32. Notice which one gave lip service and which actually went. Which one did the people realize had responded appropriately to the father? True repentance will always result in a change, not only in our thinking, but also in our doing. The Apostle Paul is a great example of someone who truly repented and was used by God to show others the power of the Gospel. As we repent and surrender, God gives us the power to live that "changed life" according to Philippians 2:13, *"for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."*

Another proof of the conquest of a soul for Christ will be found in a real change of life. If the man does not live differently from what he did before, both at home and abroad, his repentance needs to be repented of; and his conversion is a fiction.
~ Charles Spurgeon

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