

March 15, 2020

“The Path of Repentance”
Matthew 26:69-27:10

FCF: Dangers of never turning back

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus knows our wayward hearts.
(magnet) And He calls us to a path of repentance.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

C. S. Lewis taught Renaissance and Medieval Literature at Oxford and Cambridge. But it is for his other works that he is remembered as one of the greatest thinkers and storytellers of the 20th century. Perhaps you’ve heard of *The Screwtape Letters* or the Narnia stories. Another was *Mere Christianity*, which began as series on the BBC during the 1940’s ([READ quote](#)):

Now what was the sort of “hole” man had got himself into? He had tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor — that is the only way out of a “hole.” This process of surrender — this movement full speed astern — is what Christians call repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death...

Sometimes turning around, going full speed astern, is the only way to really move forward.

Such things are worth hearing. There is danger in thinking this could never apply to us.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 26:69-27:10](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Wisdom can be found in many places. In a 2018 commencement speech ([READ quote](#)):

USA Soccer player Abby Wambach encouraged the graduating class at Barnard College to look at each other as part of a pack, and to create one collective heartbeat with rules for your team to live by. One of those is to turn failure into fuel. “Here’s something the best athletes understand, but it seems like a hard concept for non-athletes to grasp. Non-athletes don’t know what to do with the gift of failure. So they hide it, pretend it never happened, reject it outright—and they end up wasting it,” she said. “**Failure is not something to be ashamed of, it’s something to be powered by.**”

That’s good insight - especially with goal setting, skill improvements, and individual resolutions.

But it’s limited when it comes to what I’ll call “deep failure.” That is, when you have to face not just your finite capabilities and personal disappointments but character deficiencies and relational pain. In those cases, failure cannot fuel or propel. It’s just too deep. So what then?

The Christian gospel is good news for many reasons. One of which is how well Jesus knows us and loves us. He knows our frailties and weaknesses. He knows how easily we can fall into deep failure. And yet He has not left us to figure things out on our own or to muddle our way through as best we can. Jesus knows our wayward hearts. And He calls us to a path of repentance. Jesus knows our wayward hearts and He calls us to a path of repentance. But what does such a path look like? Our text shows us with the story of two apostles - Judas and Peter.

And there we see three things regarding repentance. First, why repentance is needed. Second, what repentance looks like. And, third, where repentance leads. Let’s look at these.

I. WHY IT’S NEEDED

First, what makes repentance necessary? Let’s explore our two case studies.

A) Judas’ Betrayal

First, let’s look at the record and think about Judas’ betrayal ([READ Matthew 26:14-15](#)).

1. The record

After the Palm Sunday entrance, the temple cleansing, and Jesus' teaching, the religious officials had had enough. And Judas was giving them just what they wanted just when they wanted it.

2. An analysis

Why did he do this? We're not sure. Greed was part of it. We know he embezzled the funds of the group. There may also have been a disillusionment with Jesus' ideas on the kingdom of God and an attempt to force His hand towards a political movement. In any case, he sold Jesus out.

B) Peter's Denial

So we have Judas' betrayal. And then we have Peter's tragic threefold denial.

1. The record

Peter starts off well, making good on his pledge of loyalty. He had gotten as close as he could and was putting himself at risk. But he caved. He'd hoped to blend in but trouble began when a servant girl recognized him. So he pulled back, away from the others, but was recognized yet again. The others speak up. So Peter moves from a denial, to an oath, to a curse upon himself.

2. An analysis

Why? The fear of man. We need to press into this. Where did that fear take him? Peter denied Jesus repeatedly, solemnly, vehemently and from a place of leadership - despite Jesus' warnings and despite Peter's own stated resolve. It's a precarious thing to be overly self-confident.

All of which points to why repentance is necessary for us.

Illustration:

The London Times once sent out an inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, "What's wrong with the world today?" G. K. Chesterton sent his reply ([READ quote](#)): "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G. K. Chesterton." And that pretty well sums it up for every one of us.

Application:

What's wrong with the world today? We are. These two case studies are representative of the human race. What makes repentance necessary? We do. We are sinners and that's why we sin. That's why we rebel against God's rule. It's in our spiritual DNA. We are fallen. We have crashed from the greatest heights to the lowest depths. The operating system is infected with a virus. The mirror is fractured all the way through - body, mind, will, spirit. All the way.

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II. WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

So that's why repentance is needed. But what does it look like? What are its dynamics?

A) Not Just a Change of Feelings

1. Metamelomai

It's more than a change of feelings. That's what you see with Judas ([READ Matthew 27:3](#)). The word translated "changed his mind" is *metamelomai*. It means "to regret, to be full of remorse."

2. Judas' remorse

Judas' feelings changed about what he'd done, his act of betrayal. His feelings changed. But his heart did not. Where did he go with this? Not to Jesus but to Jesus' enemies, trying to offload his guilt. He wasn't really broken at all. The same heart dynamics were still at work within him.

B) But a Change of Heart

1. Metanoeo

Repentance is more than just a change of feelings. It's *metanoeo*, a change of heart, the deepest part of us. Repentance is a turning from sin to Christ in true sorrow and humility. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, evidence of His work in our lives, enabling us to love God more than our sin.

2. Peter's repentance

That's what we see with Peter ([READ Matthew 26:74-75](#)). Peter leaves the courtyard, moves through the dark streets, breaks down and weeps. Everything he thought he knew about himself had been shattered. He was a failure, a liar, and a traitor. He was as broken as he could be.

That's what repentance looks like. It's real, true, and deep, bearing fruit.

Illustration:

We read Psalm 51. This was David's prayer of repentance after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband to cover his tracks. Why is it in the Psalter? Not just as an historical artifact but as a gracious gift. The Lord intends for it to be our prayer as well.

Application:

But how is such a prayer, such a change of heart, possible? This is what set Peter apart from Judas. Peter trusted Jesus. Peter knew the safety and security of Jesus' love and he had embraced it. Peter knew that with Jesus there is no need for posturing, pretending, or defending. The way is wide and clear for us to be honest, open, confident, transparent, and repentant. Ultimately, self-righteousness is self-defeating. The gospel is beautifully clear and distinct here.

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III. WHERE IT LEADS

Where does all this lead? The point is obvious here and we can see it from the two paths.

A) Ruin

Without repentance, we are on the sure path of ruin. And we see that pictured with Judas.

1. Judas' response

What was Judas' response? Where did his stopping with remorse take him? ([READ Matthew 27:3-5](#)) This is the end of the line for one of the twelve. This is so sobering, absolutely chilling.

2. Judas' reasons

Why? How did this happen? Again, we don't know the reasons for his actual betrayal. But here things are a bit more clear. Judas had nowhere to go with his guilt. These religious officials refuse to deal with him. They aren't interested in justice or truth. They've gotten what they

wanted and have absolutely no desire to go back. So where can Judas go? He looks within, finds nothing, and that takes him to a place of utter despair and ruin, dis-integration and death.

B) Restoration

We see the opposite with Peter - not death but life, not dis-integration but re-integration.

1. Peter's posture

What was Peter's posture? Looking at his story, we see that he sinned not from malice but from weakness. And, in the end, he turned not to himself but Jesus. That's where Peter took his guilt.

2. Jesus' pursuit

That was Peter's posture. Which was part of Jesus' pursuit of his heart. Let's go back a few hours before ([READ Matthew 26:30-32](#)). Now this was easily missed at the time. They could not hear it. But Jesus meant it. And that's exactly what He did, graciously restoring the disciples back to fellowship with Himself after their terrible failure. And Peter especially, in particular.

Stopping with remorse leads to ruin. But repentance leads to life.

Application:

Which raises a question. Who needs to repent? We all do at some point. How often? All the time. The first of Martin Luther's *95 Theses* that he nailed to the Wittenberg door read ([READ quote](#)), "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." We need to repent constantly, continually, all the time in all kinds of ways. Why?

As another of the Reformers, John Calvin, said "Our hearts are idol factories." We are constantly seeking meaning, significance, and satisfaction in something other than God, settling for cheap substitutes. Which takes us into sin and brings us to a need to repent. All the time.

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CONCLUSION:

As I said earlier, sometimes the only way forward is to turn around and go, as Lewis said, "full speed astern." I don't get lost often. But there was a time on Swans Island, off the coast of Maine, that stands out. It was the spring of 1992. Sarah and I were staying in a cottage owned by extended family. We went to explore and headed down a road. We could see the ocean off through the trees and decided to park and hike towards that sea of blue. Eventually, we decided to head back. The problem was we couldn't find the road. "How do you lose a road?" This was 1992 so there was no GPS or smartphones. The only way was to retrace our steps, go back, and start over. It's like that with repentance. It's the only way we make progress in the Christian life.

Now, there is a problem with my story of getting lost on Swans Island. We found our way back on our own. There was no one out there marking the trail, giving us a map, inviting us down the right path, and guiding us to where we needed to go. But that's what Jesus does for us.

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