

Introduction

I'd like to begin by making an observation and then asking a question. The observation is that Jesus began and ended His earthly ministry with the same theme. The question is, what is that theme? Can someone tell me? That theme is "repent" and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to Matthew 4:17 and Luke 24:44-53.

Jesus met with His disciples on several occasions between the time that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Verses 50-53 make clear that this occasion, in verses 44-49, was the last of those. Jesus gave them final instructions during it, the chief one of which was this. Proclaim repentance to the nations. In this passage, Jesus ended His earthly ministry. In Matthew 4:17, He began it. That verse tells us what His central message was when He did, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*** My point is that Jesus began, continued, and ended His earthly ministry with the same central theme – repent!

With that in mind, notice something in verses 46 and 47. Jesus linked what He did, died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead, with repentance. His death and resurrection, in other words, demand a response. That response is, repent!

Now, all off that together implies what repentance is. As revivalist J. Edwin Orr declared, it's "the first word of the gospel." It's the first thing we should do. It's also the first thing we should tell others to do.

We can do either of course only if we know what repentance is. So let's examine just that today, what it is. It's a four-step process.

Admit Our Sin

First, we admit our sin. That's what David did in Psalm 51:3. He wrote, ***"For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me."*** To admit our sins means to identify and then acknowledge them to our selves. What we're doing here is reversing the process of denial.

Denial is a defense mechanism. We use it to shield our selves

from painful truths we'd rather not face. In this case, those truths are about us. Most of us are afraid of seeing our selves as we really are. So, we live in hiding from our selves. The level of energy, deftness, and skill we display in avoiding the truth about us is remarkable.

Rebecca Pippert tells about a friend who was having an affair after twenty-five years of faithful marriage. He regretted it, he said, but justified it to her this way: ***"It just happened. We didn't plan it or pursue it; it simply happened."*** To which Rebecca replied: ***"I know just what you mean. You were talking to her one day and suddenly all your clothes fell off. A bed then suddenly appeared in the room and the next thing you knew, you were somehow in it with her."*** The man saw her point. ***"OK, you got me,"*** he said, ***"I guess I had to have been making choices, whether I consciously realized it or not."*** Of course he had. That it just happened is absurd but that's what he believed. We have an almost unlimited capacity for denying our sins.

To repent though means to reverse that. We admit not deny. We examine ourselves thoroughly and objectively and identify our sins. We then acknowledge to ourselves that we've committed them.

It's essential in doing so that we be precise about the sin or sins we've committed. Our admission must be specific not general, exact not vague, for our repentance to be real. Thus, a man recognized and acknowledged to himself that he looked and lusted during the Victoria's Secrets commercial. Or a woman recognized and acknowledged that she said something bad about so and so to so and so for no good reason - that she gossiped. We need to be specific and exact about our sins.

So that's the first step in the process of repentance. We reverse our denial and admit to our selves with exactness what are sins are.

Express Sorrow for Our Sin

The second step is that we express genuine sorrow for our sin. 2 Corinthians 7:10 states it this way, ***"For godly sorrow leads to repentance."*** Notice that the sorrow must be godly to be genuine.

Much of what we call sorrow isn't sorrow. It's only embarrassment that we've been caught. What causes our shame isn't the wrong we did. It's the consequences of the wrong we did to us. It's the harm it caused us. That's ungodly sorrow and doesn't lead to repentance.

Godly sorrow that leads to repentance is distress over our sin itself. The harm it did to God and others breaks our hearts. What causes our shame isn't the consequences of the wrong we did to us. It's the consequences of it to God and others. We're grieved about that.

But what do we do if we feel no sorrow for the wrong we've done? Martin Luther told us: ***"And if you are so hardened that you do not tremble, then you of all people have reason to tremble. Pray to God that He will soften your heart."*** That's sound advice. If we don't feel sorry for our sins, we can start by feeling sorry that we don't feel sorry. Do two things. #1 – analyze the wrong we've done in terms of its effects on God and others, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten us as we do. #2 – ask the Holy Spirit to soften our hearts, believing He will.

That then is the second step in the process of repentance. We express genuine sorrow for our sin.

Confess Our Sin

The third step is that we confess our sin. To confess it means to communicate it to someone else. We admit we've sinned to him or her. John Stott teaches the basic principle in that regard: ***"The confession must be made to the person against whom we have sinned and from whom we need and desire to receive forgiveness."***

That person is first and always God. I say "always" because Stott's principle is a hard and fast rule with regard to Him. In Psalm 51:4, David made a startling statement after committing the sins of adultery and murder, ***"Against You (God), You only have I sinned."*** That verse and many others in the Bible reveal a fundamental truth. All sin is first and foremost against God. We've violated His nature and disgusted and grieved Him in doing so. We must confess it to Him, therefore, either

through thoughts or words. We must declare to Him, with the exactness I explained, that we've sinned and are sorry.

If our sin also hurts a human being, we must confess second and sometimes to him or her. I say "sometimes" because Stott's principle is a guideline with regard to people. If the good that confessing our sin to a person achieves outweighs the harm, we confess. If the harm it achieves outweighs the good, we don't. That's often a difficult thing to determine and we should ask the Holy Spirit's help when it is.

Confessing to those whom we sin against is supportive of right behavior. A pastor I know directs husbands and wives who are at odds with each other to do something. Each time one sins against the other, the one must confess it with exactness to the other. The pastor says that husbands and wives who make and carry out the commitment to do that change. There's a reason. It's because nothing is more supportive of right behavior than open truth and that's what confession is – open truth.

So let's confess our sin with exactness always to God and sometimes to man. Doing so is the third step in the process of repentance.

Change Directions

The fourth step is that we change directions. That's exactly what the Greek word translated "repent" connotes, to change directions. Listen carefully. We don't uncover our sins just to have them forgiven. We also uncover them to forsake them. Repentance, in other words, is the ultimate "about face." It's a total turnaround in thought, word, and deed. We do whatever is necessary to turn **from** the wicked thing and **to** the righteous thing that is its opposite.

I've counseled many men, for instance, whose sin was pornography. If they've admitted it, were sorry for it, and confessed it, I then helped determine what they needed to do about it. Cancel their subscriptions to the pornographic magazines. Throw whatever tapes and magazines they have away. Turn away from sexually suggestive commercials and shows. Refuse to place their minds on sexual things. Stay away from people and

places that tempt them. Practice solitude, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines that address this sin. Study what the Bible says about sex and more. Those who do that have changed directions, have done an “about face.” They’ve turned **from** sexual impurity **to** sexual purity.

This fourth step, like many things, is a matter of intention. We actually intend to forsake the sin and pursue the righteousness. That intention works itself out in trying and training, which I’ve explained in detail before. We try to turn **from** the sin and **to** the righteousness that is its opposite. But if we can’t turn **from** and **to** by trying, we do it by training. Anyone who has the intention to do that has changed directions. Anyone who doesn’t have the intention to do that hasn’t.

Those are the four steps in the process of repentance. #1 – admit our sin. #2 – express genuine sorrow for our sin. #3 – confess our sin always to God and sometimes to people. And #4 – change directions.

The Consequences of Repenting

Now that we know what it means to repent, let’s do just that. Let’s repent. Two things will happen if we do.

The first is found in Luke 24:47. Notice that Jesus describes repentances as being *“for forgiveness of sins.”*

Most non-Christians and some Christians take their sins far more lightly than God does. Yes, it’s true. I did get mad and speak rudely to the customer service clerk today. But what does it really matter that I did? People do it all the time. It isn’t that big of a deal. Right? Wrong! It is that big of a deal. Recall what I said earlier. Jesus linked repentance in verse 47 with His death on the cross in verse 46. That little wrong I did cost Father God the life of His Son. It matters profoundly to Him, therefore, that I did it and He must punish me for it.

But He forgives me instead when I repent. He regards and treats me as if I hadn’t done it. Before I repented - I did it and am wrong. After I repented – I didn’t do it and am right. Forgiveness is the first consequence of repentance and what a powerful one it is.

The second consequence is found in Matthew 4:17. Jesus explains why we should repent. It's because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The kingdom of heaven refers to God and the realities of His invisible kingdom. "At hand" means that we can access those realities and Him here and now. We can interact with and receive them into our persons and lives. They empower us when we do so that we can live righteous abundant lives – lives of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy.

But accessing the kingdom is conditional. We can access it, in other words, but only **if** – only **if** we repent when we need to. Repentance opens up the channels of God's presence and power to us. Sin not repented of, on the other hand, hinders or even blocks them.

So, let's repent when we need to. God will forgive and empower us if we do.

Conclusion

I'd like to close this morning by tying up a loose end, one that you may be wondering about. To whom am I speaking?

I'm speaking first of all to those of you who haven't decided to follow Jesus. I don't mean to be blunt but you're lost in your sins. They've separated you from God and the abundant life He wants to give you – now and forever. So repent and decide to follow Jesus.

But I'm speaking second of all to those of you who have decided to follow Jesus, including me. Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation when he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenberg Church door. It was no accident, I suspect, that the first of those was this: ***"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'repent,' He willed that the entire life of believers be one of repentance."***

Luther was absolutely right. You and I, as devoted followers of Jesus, must live a life of repentance. That means that we must not tolerate sin of any kind or degree in our lives. We must deal with it vigorously the moment that we're aware of it. How do we do that? You certainly know the answer by now. **Repent!**