



DISCIPLESHIP IN AN INSTANT SOCIETY SERMON SERIES: Repentance

Romans 8:1-5; Psalm 120:1-7

Elder Fred Mollon

May 28, 2017

Skyline Presbyterian Church

This morning our psalm speaks to the word “repentance.” What comes to mind when you think of repentance? For most of us I’m sure it’s a picture of someone, maybe even ourselves, who has committed some horrible act or deed, and has realized it, and so, falling on their knees, in tears, crying to God for forgiveness and promising never to do that again.

As I have said in previous sermons, the word repentance involves a turning; a change of direction. I wonder how many wives here can relate to this story. My wife and I would be going somewhere and I knew for certain how to get there. Before long she’d comment, “Didn’t we have to turn there? Are you sure this is the right way?” Of course, I had to keep up appearances and would firmly state that I knew exactly how to get there. After a while she’d say, “Why don’t we stop and ask someone?” Never one to admit defeat I would emphatically state that I knew this was the right way, just trust me. After another while she’d say, emphatically, “Stop and ask for directions. This is not the right way.” So, after another good while, still not reaching our destination, I would ever so reluctantly pull into a gas station; get out of the car to ask for directions, and find that I needed to turn around and … yes, go back to where she first said “Don’t we need to turn here” and take that road to reach our destination.

This is exactly what repentance is all about – changing direction. When I looked through the Old Testament I found that each time the word “repentance” or some variation was used, it was always the same Hebrew word – “nakham.” This word always involves turning to a positive course of action. It means to exert effort to accomplish this. It is not passive and the emphasis is always upon that to which you have turned as well as on the visible action that is taken. Repentance also has two elements:

- 1) It’s not a feeling; it’s not an emotion; rather it is a deliberate decision to change course; to do a 180 and go the other way; and always this is turning around to take a direction that leads to God, and walks in the pathway that He has for us.
- 2) The element of repentance is not a focus on what we have left behind, but it focuses on where we are going. If you have ever listened to or read a testimony of someone who has done this you’ll find that while they may talk about where they were and/or what they left behind, the main object of their story is where they are going now. God has become the focus and orientation of their life. God has changed them. Their life has a new meaning because of this new pathway which they are following and they can’t help but talk about how wonderful it is, and the exciting things that God is doing in their life. What they left behind is no longer important. This is exactly what Paul says in Philippians, “Whatever was gain to me I count as loss for the sake of knowing Him and the power of His resurrection.” Ever since that day on the Damascus road Paul’s focus was on Jesus and all that used to be important didn’t matter any longer.

I think that we also have a misconception when it comes to repentance, in that if we sin, if we “miss the mark” we think that God has left us and therefore when we come to our senses we have to come “in sackcloth and ashes,” showing our deep sorrow and remorse in the hope that God, once again,

will draw near to us. What I have found is just the opposite. I have learned that when we sin, when we miss the mark, it's not God who has left us, it is we who have moved away from God and His presence in our lives. Because we have sinned we are the ones who can no longer feel comfortable in His presence so we move away.

In this light, let's think about the story of the prodigal son. It was the son who took his inheritance and left. The father never changed his position. The father remained at home. It was the son who left and it was the son, who, upon realizing his horrible state of affairs, got up and returned to his home. Just so, when we mildly or even grossly miss that mark, when we come to our senses it is we who simply have to turn back and come home to our Father. He's never left. He's never changed His position, and just like the father of the prodigal, He is always there to welcome us with open arms, with a kiss, and the joy of His presence once again.

I just want to touch on this point briefly, and that is, how it is that God can welcome us back into His presence after we have so grievously turned from Him. It hinges on the two scriptures that say, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us;" and again, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." God does not "forget" our sins. It is a deliberate act of His will that He CHOOSES to not remember them, to not think about them and to not bring them up again. Just so, we are not called to "forgive and forget," rather we are called to forgive as He does. It is an act of our will that deliberately chooses to not think about or dwell on the offenses done to us by another.

I remember back when my wife and I came to a point in our marriage and divorced. My wife was hurt; she was angry. I had caused hurt not only to her but to our family as well. My two children were also hurt and angry with me. Today she and her husband and my daughter and son and their families and I enjoy great fellowship and love and eagerly look forward to those times when we can get together. This happened because, as she, and even my children, told me, she came to a place where she realized that if she kept dwelling upon the anger and hurt eventually it would only destroy her, not me. She said that she realized that because of the children we would always be family on some level and because of that it wasn't worth it to remain angry so she chose to forgive and move on and not dwell on it any longer; and as I stated, today, she and her husband and I are great friends and look forward to times to be together and have fun together. But this is an act of our will: to choose to let go of past hurt or pain; to choose to not dwell on it; to let fellowship be restored for our own good and for the good of the body of Christ.

Now let's move back and take a look at our psalm. As I mentioned before we usually think of repentance as our own, more or less individual turning from some sin: a wrong attitude, an inappropriate action of some kind; perhaps an addiction. We repent and turn from these things that harm our body, our individual temple of God. We come and seek restoration of relationship with our Father, our Creator, and with David cry out, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me; cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me; restore to me the joy of Thy salvation and uphold me with Thy free Spirit."

In Psalm 120 our psalmist speaks of another kind of repentance; one that is more "social" in that it speaks to how we live and move and have our being in this world. The first thing that is mentioned is that the person of the psalm seeks salvation from "lying lips and deceitful tongues." This world, and by that I mean countries, culture, society, economic systems, this "world" is not our friend. The world system is one that is designed to protect itself from any onslaught and tells us that if we all band together, we can work out our problems and have a glorious day of peace and prosperity. Remember what God said at Babel... that when men are of one mind they can accomplish anything and so He confused the languages. At times prayer to God is invoked to achieve this end and because we are believers we get drawn in to believing that this could happen and in the process,

we let down our guard. We begin to believe that “with God’s help” we can make this a better place to live: a better government; a better society; a better environment in which to live; a better world where all enjoy freedom and prosperity. This is the age old argument with which mankind has been deluded from the beginning. What we forget is that no matter how good and noble the cause sounds, if it is not God oriented, and proceeding from God, it is the work of man and will not succeed. As believers we cannot use the things of this world to accomplish God’s purposes. As we learn from the book of Revelation, this world is at odds with God’s kingdom and will ultimately come to its end. We are always called to say “no” to the ways of the world; we are called to turn from, to repent of these things and constantly say “yes” to God and His ways; to His kingdom.

This psalm is about a person who is sick of these lies and the liars who propagate them. “Deliver me O God from such as these.” This is our starting point on the road of ascent, the road that follows Jesus; to realize that Jesus’ kingdom is not “in the sky;” to be experienced “in the sweet by and by.” When Jesus came and taught about the kingdom He said that now (!) is the kingdom of God come to you. His kingdom is in the here and now and we are called to live according to this holy kingdom’s rules. This is what puts us at cross currents with the world systems. We should no longer accept or abide by the rules of this world, this age. We are to live by the rules of the kingdom of God and this is our repentance; our turning that needs to take place.

Next the psalmist declares that the only thing available to these liars with lying tongues is God’s arrows and burning coals – God’s judgment; but these are not acts of judgment to destroy. God’s judgment is always meant for one thing, and one thing only and that is salvation. When God sent Jonah to Ninevah to speak words of judgment what happened? When Judah was in captivity and Daniel’s words of judgment came to Nebuchadnezar he was driven mad, and what happened? In both cases there was repentance and thus salvation, i.e. relationship was restored between God and His creation. This was why Jonah became angry. Ninevah was an enemy of Israel who had wreaked vengeance upon them and Jonah wanted nothing more than to see them punished and as Jonah argues with God he says to God, “I knew You would do this.” This is what we want when some horrible slaughter takes place in a school or a church and people are senselessly killed. We want vengeance upon that individual. We want the full weight of the law to come to bear and judge this person as they should be; even to be put to death; but God’s judgments are not to destroy; God always acts to bring salvation and restoration. Just as he did to Ninevah and Nebuchadnezar, God seeks to bring His creation back to Him in full salvation and relationship.

Finally our person of the psalm confesses that he is stuck living in this world. He lives “in the land of Meshach, and dwells in the tents of Kedar.” He tries to speak words of comfort and to bring about peace but it only drives them to war. Does this sound at all like our world today? Do you get frustrated with the way things are, with the direction in which history seems to be moving?

Meshach is a land that is many miles from Palestine. Kedar is a nation with a barbaric reputation that lives along its border wreaking havoc. These represent the strange and the hostile. The last few stanzas are the psalmist crying out that this world is a mix of strange creatures and wild savages “and I want out!” We too live in a world that for most of us is very different from that which we knew growing up and is full of violence and getting more and more violent. When words of peace are spoken, how often are they shot down and drowned out by those who continue to say, oh no, we need more weapons; more laws! We need to build walls to separate us from “them,” whoever “them” is; and so the believer is called to say a resounding “No” to this type of system. But in saying no we are saying a resounding “YES” to the kingdom to which God has called us and to which Jesus has opened the way.

In the book of the Revelation we have words which George Handel put to music in his work, “The Messiah” which are so true. These are not words for which we have to wait but are ours,

now. "The kingdoms of this world HAVE BECOME the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ." The moment that Jesus stepped onto the world stage was the moment when the Kingdom of God was established and made available to His people. Because of this kingdom, we can stand with the psalmist and say "No" to this world; we can repent or turn from its ways and follow the path that leads to God through Jesus. We are to live now by the rules of this kingdom and not be conformed to this world but be transformed. We can, with the children of Israel, make the ascent and climb to that City of God, Zion, and follow the path of this long obedience. Let's go up to Zion, the City of our God.

Amen.