



NEWSLETTER

*Behold me here, in grief draw near, pleading at thy throne oh King.
To Thee each tear, each troubling fear, Jesus Son of Man I bring.
Let me find thee, Lord of mercy, King of grace.*
Joachim Neander



TURNING TO JESUS

By Davis Morgan, RUF Campus Minister at Southern Miss

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" Luke 13:6-9 (ESV)

Once upon a time, when our son Sam was about 6 months old and my daughter Katherine was four, our family went out to eat at our favorite Mexican restaurant. My family pulls up in our car, and the baby had just fallen asleep. And it's raining, and so to try to let Sam sleep a few more minutes, I dropped the girls off at the front door of the restaurant and I drove around the block for a while, then eventually parked. And, when you have a newborn, you carry a lot of stuff around with you. So, there's a diaper bag, there's a special cloth for baby, there's teething toys...all kinds of stuff.

I try to park the car and really quietly get everything out without waking him up. So, he's snoozing, and I'm grabbing stuff, and I just ever so quietly close the door, and I walk into the restaurant pretty confident that I've got everything: I've got my bag, my towel, the toy (maybe I was bringing Ashleigh her purse too). I walk in, and I'm looking around, with all my stuff in my arms, to find Ashleigh and Katherine, and when I find them, their eyes are huge, and they look at me

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SUNDAYS

Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.
Morning Worship, 10:45 a.m.

and just simultaneously ask one thing – WHERE'S THE BABY???

What happened? I remembered all the other stuff. I had all the baby accessories. But I didn't have the one thing—I didn't have the baby. [Quick note: I went back and immediately got him; he was still asleep. He was alone less than two minutes and was never in any danger].

In Luke 13 Jesus is showing us the heart of his message. And it's possible, especially for a lot of us Christians, to have all these things that we think we need. To have our arms full of biblical knowledge, with spiritual activities, spiritual disciplines, godly living, robust theology, even things like witnessing to our neighbors, defending the faith to our friends—but be missing the one thing that's essential to Jesus' message. Put another way, *it's possible to be with Jesus and yet completely misunderstand him.*

The heart of Jesus' message is repentance. Jesus' ministry revolves around two things. In seminary they teach you that sermons effectively boil down to two things: *what's true* and *what to do*. Jesus' sermons pretty much boil down to his first public statement in Mark's gospel: "The kingdom of God is at hand—repent and believe the good news." (1:15). *Because the kingdom of God has come upon you in my incarnation—what you must do is repent and believe the good news.* That's Jesus' message. Those were the marching orders for the early church in the book of Acts—the message was the same everywhere—repent and be forgiven of your sins.

The heart of Jesus' message is that repentance leads to life. So, we're going to talk about the centrality of repentance: 1) why it matters; 2) who needs it; and 3) how it works.

Why It Matters

Why does repentance matter? Or why does it matter to Jesus specifically? It matters because Jesus seems to be saying that our biggest problem is not what we think it is. At the beginning of Luke chapter 13, Jesus is in the middle of teaching and some people interrupt him to tell him about this horrible thing that happened—because they want him to weigh in on it. In other words, they want Jesus on their side on this issue in current events.

It's exactly what we see today—political groups have always tried to appropriate Jesus to their cause. But they don't actually want *his* kingdom. Contrary to contemporary thinking, Jesus says our most urgent problem is not political unrest, oppressive regimes, or power imbalances. And it's not natural disasters, the chaos of modern life, or even our very real experiences of suffering. According to Jesus, our most urgent problem is the problem of sin and unrepentance.

Who Needs It

Next, who is repentance for? Who is Jesus telling this to? Who needs to hear that they need to repent? And the answer is YOU.

Our tendency is to do exactly what these people do, when we're told to repent. To try to deflect it away from us. We defend ourselves—*no actually, I was right and here's why....* Or we rationalize—*you don't understand what I've been through that made me do that.* Or we deflect—*it's not my fault; it's my family, or my trauma, or society's expectations.* All of those things may be true, but we use them as a shield to deflect any guilt away from ourselves. And most often we do what the people in Jesus' time did—we try to point the spotlight on the sins of others.

In contrast, in the final verses of Luke 12 Jesus has been talking about being reconciled to someone who's accusing you before you get to the judge. So, he's already highlighting this, and in verse 1 of chapter 13, these people are trying to deflect. Why is it so tempting to do this? Because we tend to be better at seeing the sin of others. It's easier for me to stand in judgment of what I don't like about you than it is for me to take a long look in the mirror. This is backwards, because my knowledge of myself is far greater than my knowledge of you. I only know your externals. I don't know what goes on inside your heart. But I know my own heart. I know how self-justifying and self-centered I am. I know that even when I do kind things it's with selfish motives. I know that even when I'm doing the right thing, I secretly want praise and glory for it. So, if anything I should be far better at recognizing my own sin, but it never seems to work that way.

Ironically, unless I see my own sin as dangerous and destructive as the sin of anyone else I'm judging, then I'm doomed to live in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Only when I see that *I* am the problem and must be delivered from *my own sin* will I be free to enjoy the self-forgetfulness of being accepted, not based on my performance but on Jesus' love for me.

There's a famous story that in the early 20th century, the *Times of London* published a question to its readers: *What is wrong with the world today?* The great G. K. Chesterton is reported to have submitted a simple response: "Dear Sirs, I Am. Yours, G. K. Chesterton." That's it.

How It Works

Lastly, how repentance works. Christians talk a lot about repentance but sometimes we don't define it well, and that leads to a lot of misuse and misunderstanding. So, I'll give you my short definition and a longer, more detailed definition. My simple

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definition is that **repentance is turning to Jesus**. To flesh that out a bit more, here's the Westminster Shorter Catechism explanation:

“Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.” (WSC #87)

I actually think that's an amazing definition—it's precise and it's clear. It's turning away from my sin because I see it for what it is, and I'm beginning to hate it. And I'm beginning to see that Jesus' free grace is enough to deliver me, and so I'm turning toward him, totally, with all of me, not once, not twice, but daily and moment by moment.

So, shorthand, repentance is turning to Jesus. “To Jesus” is the operative phrase. Because there's a way we can turn from sin but just be turning to obedience or law. Kind of a 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' approach to repentance, and that's actually the exact opposite of what repentance is. And that's not the goal: the goal is to actually look to Jesus himself. The goal is to give myself up, to entrust myself to Jesus.

Worldly grief feels remorse for the consequences of our sins but doesn't hate the sin (2 Corinthians 7:10). You can experience deep shame and self-loathing or bitterness and self-pity from worldly grief. It can make you anxious and insecure. But ultimately, it's a turning inward on yourself. In that sense it retains the nature of sin [St. Augustine coined the Latin phrase, picked up later by Martin Luther, that human nature is *incurvatus in se*, 'turned in on itself.']

True repentance is the opposite. It is to be turned outward toward God, to look outside of yourself. *It's like a hiker who's lost in the woods who shoots up a flare gun, to say 'I AM UTTERLY LOST AND IN DANGER, AND I CANNOT RESCUE MYSELF. COME SAVE ME OR I AM GOING TO DIE.'*

And when Jesus compares repentance to a fruit here (vv.6-9), he's saying 'this is what my people are supposed to be producing.' And if your life is not marked by a repentant spirit, by a quickness to say “I was wrong...I'm sorry...forgive me” both toward God and toward one another, then that's a big red flag. Check the fruit of your life. What is being produced in you?

Worldly remorse produces self-centeredness, comparison, brazen resentment, unforgiveness, cold-hearted lack of empathy, apathy toward the real depth of our sin, and a haunting lack of assurance. True

repentance replaces our self-centeredness with a joyous self-forgetfulness because of the sweetness of God's free grace poured out on us. It makes us quick to forgive. Quick to repent to others. It makes us patient when we suffer, because we're not questioning God's love or his goodness.

You see, unless God's love for me is based on something constant and unchanging, I can never be truly secure in his love. If it's based on my circumstances, I'll always be on a pendulum back and forth. If it's based on my performance, then it'll go up and down with my performance. But if it's based on his unchanging promise, his free grace, tied to his covenant keeping love in Christ, then my performance can't change it, my circumstances can't affect it. Nothing in all creation can separate me from the love of God.

The reason you can know that your salvation is secure is the voice of the one saying, “Don't cut the tree down.” Because Jesus said, “Don't cut them down. Cut me down instead.”

Conclusion

At the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones and his father have been on this long dangerous journey to find the Holy Grail (the cup from the Last Supper in the Bible, which in this version of the story has magical powers). And after they find the Holy Grail, the cave inside the canyon that they find it in begins to collapse, and there's a moment where Indiana Jones is about to fall into this chasm, and his father catches one of his hands. But on a ledge a little bit down from him there's the Holy Grail. This thing that is so valuable, that he's worked so hard for. That feels so wrong to abandon. And he's reaching for it, and his father's saying, “Give me your other hand,” and Indiana's almost able to grab the grail; but he's also about to fall into this bottomless pit. And then he hears his dad change tone of voice, and in a very loving but authoritative voice you hear, Indiana....Indiana....let it go...”. And Indiana lets it go, and they get out and ride off into the sunset.

What's happening in that story? He has to let go of this thing that he had valued so much. But if he doesn't let go of it, he's going to die. Unless he turns away from it and turns to the father who loves him and can save him, he's going to perish. Unless you repent you will perish. And what enables him to turn? The voice of his father.

It's the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. The question for you may be, “Have you heard the kind voice of your Father inviting you to turn to Him in repentance?”

STUDENT MINISTRY UPDATE

By William Devenish, Student Ministry Intern

The past fall has been a really exciting time for the youth ministry. Josh and I have enjoyed getting to know the group; spending so much time with them has been a blessing. We finished our Wednesday large group series a few weeks ago. We studied 2 Timothy all semester and learned how to “Stand Firm” in Christ regardless of what the world throws at us. In Sunday school, Wes Bonner and I have been doing a thematic study of Proverbs, where we looked at what the Bible teaches about living wisely in many different areas.



In addition to the teaching series, we have also enjoyed a number of special events throughout the semester. We started with a movie night but also did a pickleball tournament and a Christmas party. We enjoyed a couple of retreats, including a night at the Easterlings' and, most recently, a refreshing weekend at Timber Creek Camp.



It has been such a privilege to see the Lord at work with the youth this semester and to be able to serve them. I am excited and praying about what the Lord will do as we enter into the spring! In particular, we are looking forward to studying 1 Peter on Wednesday nights as we investigate how Christians are meant to live an “alien life.”

Hope everyone has a blessed New Year!

HARVEST CAMPAIGN UPDATE

Thank you to our members who have committed nearly \$450,000 to the **Harvest Fund** for facilities improvements (as of 12/30/24)!

If you wish to make an online gift to the church's **General Fund** or **Harvest Fund**, visit the church website at www.fpchattiesburg.org and click on the GIVING tab at the top of the page.

Online gifts should occur before midnight on December 31 to be considered as received in 2024.

