

“Repenting Well”

Prayer: Holy Spirit of the one true God, we need you so badly. Please be our pastor this morning.
Amen

Hear the word of the LORD through his prophet Joel:

- ¹² Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD, your God?
- ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.
- ¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’ ”

This is the word of the LORD.

The prophet's message is clear: Repentance is important, and repentance can be done badly. Sin really is that diabolical.

Repentance is so important that God is careful to say that *everybody* needs to repent. It's worth the inconvenience. If you are old, come; if you are nursing a baby, come; if you just left on your honeymoon, you'd better turn around and get back here. Your relationship with God must be *your* relationship with God—not your ancestor's, not your youth pastor's. No one can do this *for* you. If you are a student, you need to repent; if you are an administrator, you need to repent. If you are a member of the faculty, you *really* need to repent.

So what *is* repentance? Well, it must not be outward theatrical observances. "Rend your hearts *and not your clothing*... Return to me with all your heart." Why observe some ritual when inwardly you yearn to be free of God?

So ... is repentance "trying not to do the bad things I enjoy," making *another* resolution that this time I will really, *really* try to act better? No. Willpower is doomed to fail. Sin is much more clever than that. If repentance were a matter of your willpower, sin would have you in its death spiral: "I repented and was saved. Then I sinned again; so I must not have really repented; so I must not really be saved!"

If repentance is not willpower, is it self-criticism? "Knowing our misery," feeling really *really* terrible about ourselves? No. That can be a place to begin. But if we stop there we are still completely self-absorbed—and *that* is what we need to repent *of*.

But the Holy Spirit does not leave us in despair: "*Rend your hearts and not your clothing*... *Return to me with all your heart*." Repentance is not trying to *do* a few things differently; it is a matter of the heart. *Repentance is learning to love differently*. The *great* commandment is *love*, right? Repentance is learning to love—with the love that is stronger than death, more urgent than distractions, faithful in the face of all competitors.

Now this exercise may be difficult, but it is the beginning of repentance: Think for a moment about something you've done that you are not proud of. Now ask yourself: What does this tell me about what I truly love?

This is the beginning of repentance: facing up to our loves, and learning to love differently. Our actions follow our loves. Repentance is not about trying to do different things; it's about

learning to be a different person. If we struggle with persistent sins, it is because we love the wrong things, in the wrong way, to the wrong extent, with the wrong kind of love.

So... how *do* we repent—how do we learn to love differently?

Repentance is learning to love with the sort of love that only God possesses. So repentance cannot really be something we *do*; only God possesses this love, so only He can give it. Repentance is something we *receive*—the gift of a new set of loves.

As God says later in this same prophecy:

²⁸ I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

God promises to give His Spirit to His people. And with that Spirit He promises to give a new set of loves.

God has ordained some special places for receiving this gift. You might call them “repentance parties,” because everybody there gets to open a present. Joel mentioned several of them that we’re “attending” today. First, we gathered for worship as God’s people, just as Joel gathered God’s people. Then we bowed before God’s word. We asked the Holy Spirit who inspired the author to also be *our* teacher.

These are God’s primary repentance parties for giving new loves—gathering as His worshipping people, and bowing before His word.

And we are invited to other parties. In a moment you will have the opportunity to come forward. We are confessing publicly—to each other—that we are broken. I need forgiveness and conversion. I do not want to remain broken. Only God can forgive and change me, and I depend entirely on Him to do so. No matter who you were when you walked in, you can leave as a person on a different path.

Then you will receive a blessing from God’s people, people committed to learning with you how to love differently.

This rhythm--confessing and receiving, confessing and receiving—is how we learn to love differently. It is dying and rising, which is the gift of God.

Prayer: The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

Benediction: Peace be to the whole community, with love and faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 6:23)