

You Turn

3/4 series on *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*

Jonah 3

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Introduction

A woman hired a teenage boy to paint her home during summer vacation. The teenager hit upon an ingenious plan to half the cost and double the profit. He bought only half of the latex paint required for the job. Then he mixed it with equal parts water. The thinned paint went on quickly, and the young man completed the job in only a few hours.

Just as he finished, however, a sudden thunderstorm appeared out of nowhere. The hard rain washed all of the diluted paint off the house. Then a voice thundered from the clouds, *“REPAINT, YOU THINNER!”*

Groan! Okay, I’ll admit, this is an OLD preacher’s story. But it does a nice job of introducing today’s theme from the third chapter of Jonah: **repentance**.

I. Jonah in the City of Nineveh

When we last left our hero, **Jonah** had spent three days and nights in the belly of the **big fish** BEFORE he decided to pray. His prayer concluded with the affirmation of faith: *“Salvation belongs to the Lord!”* Not even the dark depths could prevent God from hearing his servant’s cry. *“The Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the land.”* No doubt both the fish and the prophet were relieved.

“THEN the word of the Lord came to the prophet a SECOND TIME, saying, ‘Arise, go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim the message that I tell you.’” Jonah might have been stubborn, but he wasn’t stupid. This time he WENT!

Jonah still drug his feet on the journey to Nineveh. The **Assyrians** were Israel’s archenemies and non-Jews to boot. The reluctant prophet would have formed a one man cheerleading squad if God had destroyed the city.

Nineveh was a great city of the ancient world. The Bible says: *“Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.”* Jonah entered the city’s gates and walked into the city of town. His skin had been bleached white by the fish’s stomach acid. Salt stained his clothes. Seaweed clung to his beard. A wild gleam filled his eyes. And even the least observant person could see that God’s hand rested upon his shoulder.

Then Jonah began to preach. Only one sentence of the **sermon** has been preserved—perhaps that’s all there was. It was a straightforward warning from the Lord God Almighty: *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.”* Then Jonah went to the hills outside of town to find a ringside seat for the coming devastation.

The strange prophet’s words frightened Nineveh’s **king** into repentance. He exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and sat in a pile of dust. Then he sent a decree to the entire city: *“Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”*

II. Repentance

This call to **repentance** runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. When Jesus began his public ministry, he summarized the gospel in 3 sentences: “*The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. REPENT and believe in the good news!*” (Mark 1:15)

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* which describes a complete transformation. Like a caterpillar emerging from a cocoon as a butterfly, the Holy Spirit changes us from sinners into saints. In 1 Corinthians 5: 17, Paul writes: “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*”

Repentance means that we turn our backs to sin and turn towards holiness. We make a 180 degree U-turn in life. Repentance is a lifestyle for the Christian believer. It involves both particular events and a lifelong process of transformation. As one hymn puts it, we are “*changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place.*”

There are four phases or movements of repentance that happen to begin with “R.” Isn’t God GOOD! The four “Rs” are: **responsibility, remorse, repair, and repetition.**

Responsibility

The first “R” of repentance is **responsibility**. Although Christians are new creatures in Christ, the old ways of life tend to remain like a man’s wardrobe after he gets married. It normally takes his wife a while to throw away his old t-shirts, holey socks, and bell bottom jeans! Paul uses the imagery of discarding old, worn out clothing in exchange for new, holy garments. Hebrews 12: 1 challenges us to “*throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*” This takes a lifetime to accomplish.

In order to repent of our sinful nature, we must first claim responsibility the unrighteousness in our lives. One role of the Holy Spirit is the ministry of **conviction**. Christ’s spirit convicts us of sin in our lives. We become sensitive to the words, deeds, and attitudes that are not pleasing to God.

Conviction leads to **confession**. In many ways, our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic faith have a much clearer understanding of the importance of this step. Confession is an integral part of repentance. I had a Catholic friend once who had me convinced his church provided a drive-up window for confession. I only realized my leg was being pulled when he said the name of the drive through was “*Toot and Tell!*”

Confession IS good for the soul. In confession, we are NOT telling God anything the Lord doesn’t know! Instead, we are AGREEING with God about the sin in our life. The Holy Spirit has already convicted us of our sin, and we then confess, “You know, Lord, it turns out you were right. That IS sinful. And it is hurting me and others.”

As fallen human beings, we are not good at claiming responsibility for our sinfulness. Bill Keene created the familiar cartoon strip entitled *Family Circle*. A reoccurring character is a small gremlin whose name is “*Not Me!*” When a parent asks about a mishap, the children always say that the culprit was “*Not Me.*”

When our daughter was a toddler, she had an imaginary friend named “**Lucy.**” Lucy participated in many of our family activities. However, she didn’t always behave well. Occasionally we would find crayon drawings on the wall or a mess in the playroom. When we asked Katie about this, she would confide in a whisper, “Lucy did it!”

What began in Eden's garden continues today—we attempt to avoid any blame. Even when we confess our sin, we create all sorts of rationalizations and excuses. Many prayers begin with the phrase, “*Lord, I can explain!*” A popular Christian book some years ago had the title Yes, Lord, I have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses.

Repentance begins with claiming responsibility for the sinfulness in my life. No excuses, no reasons. Agree with God about the sin in our soul.

Remorse

The second “R” of repentance is **remorse**. This word comes from the Latin. “Re” means to do again, and “morse” means to bite. Remorse is a gnawing guilt over some wrong we have committed by thought, word, or deed against God, others, and self.

Some modern therapeutic models dismiss **guilt** as a corrosive, destructive emotion that should be eradicated in life. Parents are warned against making their children feel guilty. We place a high importance on a positive self-image.

I clearly understand that guilt can be used as a manipulative tool in ways that hurt others. But brothers and sisters, there ARE some things that we need to feel guilty about! Our sinful actions have harmful consequences. Read the Psalms for a model of repentance. The Psalmist understood the concept of remorse. In Psalm 51: 4, he wrote: “*Against you and you only have I sinned and done that which is evil in your sight.*”

When Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh, the king clothed himself in sackcloth and squatted in the dirt. He called city's citizens to join him in repentance.

Repair

The third “R” of repentance is **repair**. Sin is a toxic, corrosive substance that always causes damage. Simply saying “I'm sorry” is not enough. We are called to repair the damage we have done to ourselves and others. I think this is an element often missing in our modern understanding of repentance. We think an apology—sincere or otherwise—should suffice. How often have we heard and said the line, “Well, I SAID that I was sorry.” That's not enough. Actions have to reinforce our words.

In the comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin said to his stuffed tiger friend, Hobbes, “*I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry that I did it.*” Hobbes said, “*Maybe you should apologize to her.*” The little boy pondered this for a moment and replied, “*I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution.*”

Apologizing is the beginning and not the end of righting a wrong. John the Baptist told the people in the desert, he declared: “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!*” (Luke 3: 8) In the *Alcoholics Anonymous* “12 Step Program”, the ninth step is **making amends**. To the best of your ability, make the attempt to repair the damage that has been done. This step demonstrates that remorse is genuine and sincere.

2 Corinthians 5 says that God has given us the “*ministry of reconciliation.*” The Holy Spirit reconciles us to God; then we are called to be peace makers in our relationships with others. As we have been loved, we are called to love one another.

Let me add two other observations. Sometimes any attempt to repair a relationship might cause more harm than good. We need to be wise in how we handle this step. We might do something that makes us feel better but causes another person more pain. So we have to be discerning. The second observation is that closure is not always possible in this world. However, it is our responsibility to attempt to repair relationships whenever humanly possible.

Repetition

The fourth “R” of repentance is **repetition** in both a negative and positive sense. In a negative sense, repentance means not repeating the same sin over and over again. Repentance means to change how we live. It doesn’t involve a cheap grace that makes us feel better so that we can do out and do the same thing again.

In *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*, the loving father welcomes his wayward son back home with open arms. Then he slaughters the fatted calf and throws a feast to celebrate his son’s return. I saw a cartoon once depicting the feast. In the caption, the father confides to a neighbor, *“I hope that boy grows up soon, that’s the seventh fatted calf we’ve slaughtered!”*

In a positive sense, repentance must be repeated constantly in our lives. This occurs in two ways. For most of us, there is some particular sin or set of sins that trips us up time and again. Because we are unique individuals, this differs from one person to another. Overcoming this sin in our lives may be long term process that requires ongoing repentance in our lives.

An example is a person who decides to quit **smoking**. Mark Twain said that it is easy to quit smoking—he had done it hundreds of times! Most are not successful the first time. When a person backslides, he has one of two choices. Wallow in guilt or helplessness and give up. OR say, “I blew it this time, but I’m going to try again.”

The same principle applies for those who struggle with alcohol, drugs, illicit relationships, Internet porn, losing your temper, financial indiscretions, and fill in the blank. God’s people are always in process. We will stumble and fall. We are not a perfect people, but we are a forgiven people who are called to grow grace.

The second point is that repentance and change require more than human self-will. The Holy Spirit provides a power beyond our own. And oftentimes we need the help and support of others to succeed. This takes place within the larger context of a church family, but often time support groups with similar experiences can be extremely helpful.

III. Forgiveness

Repentance includes responsibility, remorse, repair and repetition; but we should never forget that repentance is a means to an end—it is a process that leads us into God’s **forgiveness**. In *Isaiah 1: 18*, the prophet writes: *“‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”* The Psalmist says that God takes our

sin and throws them as far as east is from west (Psalm 103: 12). My favorite image is that God casts our sins into a pool of forgetfulness where they are no longer recalled.

As a forgiven and forgiving people, we receive the opportunity to lead radically new lives in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we ARE new creations. The old is passing away and the new arrives every day.

Conclusion

In Wishful Thinking, **Frederick Buechner** wrote about God's **judgment**:

“We are all judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us in the mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.

Romantic love is blind to everything except what is lovable and lovely, but Christ's love sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence Love can pass is that we behold the suffering which Love has endured for our sake, and that is also our acquittal. The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one.” AMEN.