

What do you think of when you hear the word “Repent”?

Two images come to my mind right away. The first is a street preacher with a huge black family Bible, screaming at people to repent to escape the coming judgment. The second is a guy in a robe and sandals. He’s holding a placard that says, “Repent!! The end is near!!”

For most people repentance carries a negative connotation, mainly because of images like I’ve just described. Yet repentance is the first word of the Gospel. It’s the core of John the Baptist’s message. Repent and believe are Jesus’ first words in Mark’s gospel and His last words to His disciples were to command them to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

But Repentance is a rare message in the Church today because it requires confrontation with an uncomfortable subject – sin. Sin just does not “sell” well in our feel-good culture. When sin gets personal, people get skittish. But only the conviction of personal sin, however, brings us to Christ.

So how do you feel when someone confronts you? How do you react when someone tells you that you are wrong? That your behavior is violating Scripture? What if someone told you that you needed to repent?

Most of us hate being confronted. We get angry, resist the message or excuse our behavior. We pull the old, “No one is going to tell me what to do.”

Did you know that God has called us to be confronters? The Church today has swung to an extreme. We’ve erred so much on the side of love and grace, that we neglect truth. The end result is sloppy agape. We have a responsibility to confront the lost around us with their precarious situation...that Hell is real and death is final. We are to risk ticking them off or having them cut off our friendship.

And we are even to confront sin within the Church. James 5:19-20 says, *“My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”* Galatians 6:1 *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.”* We are commanded to *“speak the truth in love”* (Eph. 4:15).

I had one of those *“speak the truth in love”* moments this past week. One of our sons did something that ticked me off and I went off and really overreacted. And my wonderful wife took a risk and shared with me that she felt that I had gone way over the top...so I apologized to my son. I needed that confrontation. I was wrong. If we care about people, we will care enough to confront.

Too many of us have bought into the lie that confrontation is unloving. The fact is that it’s unloving not to confront. If you have a friend whose behavior is violating Scripture, even if it’s your spouse, you are Biblically obligated to lovingly confront them. If a friend is considering a divorce without Biblical grounds, you are responsible to tell them that they are wrong and it harms the name of Christ. If a Christian friend is a gossip or a complainer or sowing dissension, you have a responsibility to confront them. Men, if you’re on the ball field and another brother gets all hot and bothered, you have a Biblical responsibility to graciously confront them. Ladies, if you’re together and a sister starts gossiping, then you have a Biblical obligation to lovingly confront them. If a brother or

sister drops out of church, or is living in some sin, you have are Biblically responsible to talk to them. The key is that we are to “*speak the truth in love.*”

Jonah is a Class A confronter. But he confronts without compassion. He speaks the “truth” but there is absolutely no love. He is all contact with no tact! And we have a huge surprise. There’s a huge revival. An entire culture repents and turns to God. Jonah is a surprise book but hands down, the biggest surprise is in chapter 3:1-10 (p. 655).

What takes place is a national revival. We’ve never seen anything like that in America. Perhaps the closest we’ve ever come was immediately after 9/11 when members of Congress stood on the steps of the Capitol and sang “God bless America.” But after the attacks of 9/11, after 2000 of our soldiers have died in the Middle East, after Katrina and Wilma – there is very little thought that maybe, just maybe, God is ringing our phone. Have you been listening to the debate this last week regarding Supreme Court nominee, Samuel Alito? According to the talking heads, he may be okay because he will be a reasoned, dispassionate judge who will be guided by precedent, not ideology. In other words, though he believes that abortion is wrong, he won’t overturn it because we now have a national precedent. Based on that fuzzy immoral thinking, didn’t Hitler have a precedent on murdering Jews? Shouldn’t we have just left him alone? Wasn’t there a precedent of racism in this country, even slavery? Why would we do the right thing when there is a precedent? 1 million babies are murdered every year for our precedent. America needs to repent because judgment is coming. Someone has suggested that if God does not judge America soon, He needs to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. Nineveh is the scene of the greatest revival of all time. What’s so shocking is that Nineveh was the last place that anyone thought that there would ever be a revival. And the one responsible for starting the revival didn’t want one. Jonah wanted God to judge them. His message was, “Have you heard the good news? God’s fixing to nuke you!!” But instead there is **Real Repentance!**

This morning we want to work through surprises in this latter part of Jonah 3 and then make some contemporary applications. If you’re taking notes...

1. Repentance is surprising. *“On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth”* (vss. 4-5). D. M. Panton wrote, *“It is a foolish blunder to suppose that any age can be too evil for revival.”*

We’re tempted to believe that some cultures or people groups are too debauched for repentance or revival. Yet those very conditions are often the cause of revival, not the prevention of it. Every great revival is preceded by times of deep spiritual darkness and depravity. But if any place should not have had a revival, it was Nineveh. And Jonah was the most unlikely prophet to bring in a revival. His message certainly left a lot to be desired...just four words. Not exactly eloquence or pulpiteering.

We must continually remind ourselves that *God’s work is God’s work*. It was His power alone that was demonstrated at Nineveh.

Too often the person we consider most unlikely to be reached is the very one that God reaches. In America we would not be overly surprised if revival broke out in the Bible-belt but would be shocked if it began in San Francisco or Hollywood. The Nineveh Revival is a reminder that our task is to faithfully share the message and leave the

results with God. The one we think unreachable may be the very person God is going to reach.

Then, it is always the message, not the messenger that has the power. Most of us have heard of Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon that started a revival in New England, *Sinners in the hands of an angry God*. 500 people came to Christ the day that he preached it. But on another occasion Jonathan Edwards preached the same sermon with no results. *God's work is God's work*. Our work is to be faithful in sharing the message.

a) *The masses repented.* Doubtless hundreds of people followed Jonah up and down the streets, watching him and listening to his message as he repeated it hundreds of times. Can you just picture men and women running in every direction to tell their loved ones and neighbors of the message of doom? At the same time, there must have been thousands of people all over the city crying aloud to God in humble repentance. A miraculous, heart-crushing manifestation of the power of God had fallen on a city long known as a stronghold of idolatry and wickedness.

The text says that *"the Ninevites believed God."* A literal rendering would be *"the people of Nineveh believed in God."* One may *believe*, in the sense of merely accepting the fact of His existence; but to *believe in* God demands faith and trust in all that God says, as well as a complete commitment to His eternal care. Many so-called religious people believe there is a God, that He is the Creator, and some even go so far as to acknowledge that He has provided salvation. They believe all this, but they have never committed themselves to God's eternal care by sincerely acknowledging His Son as their Savior and Lord. When one truly believes on Christ, he believes in God, and the Lord becomes a reality in his life.

Fasting is a means of seeking God's mercy, while sackcloth is a symbol of repentance. It was used for making sacks for grain. But when worn as a garment, it was a sign of mourning, humiliation and penitence.

b) *The sovereign repented.* *"When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust"* (v.6). We're not overly surprised when "normal" people or when the masses seek God. But when a government leader surrenders to God, it gets our attention. This king was a dictator. He was used to being obeyed without question. He was unaccountable. In a sense he was god – little "g." But this little "g" god surrendered before the big "G" God. Rulers usually resist God. They become stubborn. And we would have expected him to laugh it off. It would not have surprised us if he had said, "Well, if it's going to happen. Let's eat and drink for tomorrow we die." Or in common terms, "we're going to die anyway, so let's party." But this pagan king surrendered. It's noteworthy that he followed his people's lead. Most leaders do the same. Why do you think they do polls? If believers today would truly stand for Biblical values and let our leaders know, many of our leaders, like this king of Nineveh, would follow our lead. It's noteworthy too that Jonah did not go looking for the king but the word got back to him. God found the king, even when the king wasn't looking for Him.

c) *Repentance is decreed.* *"Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. 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” (vss. 7-9). In spite of the conventional wisdom of the day, you can legislate morality. This king did it. By the time word reached the king, the city’s repentance was already well under way. But because the king also believed Jonah’s warning, he made every effort to assure total compliance to the city-wide repentance. While he begins by personally repenting, he then made a proclamation which required all of Nineveh to fast and to abstain from drinking water. Both men and animals were to be covered with sackcloth, and all the people were to call upon God and to abstain from their wicked ways and their violence. Billy Graham has never seen a revival this extensive.

It’s interesting that there was apparently no need for the people to be told what their wicked ways were. Of course, Jonah could have filled in the details for the people, but it seems as though no one needed a clarification. The issue, then, was not one of having inadequate knowledge of what God considered sin, but lacking the desire to abstain from it. It wasn’t a problem of information but of motivation. It’s doubtful that if America received word of God’s impending judgment, we’d have difficulty determining what it is we are doing which is offensive to God, which is, in short, sin.

The Ninevites realize that they are sinners in what they are, do, think and in what they possess. Everything is to be covered with sackcloth because everything is tainted by sin. Unlike many believers who segregate their Sunday from their Monday, these Ninevites realized that repentance demanded their whole being; work, finances, homes, everything.

The orchestra of their prayers was joined by the bleating of sheep and the groaning of livestock to God. Not feeding the animals demonstrated their sincerity in that it also jeopardized the city’s economy. The animals join in *“crying out”* because of their hunger. After just one day without food the protests of twenty head of cattle can be heard half a mile away. The bleating and bellowing would be one huge blaring noise of moaning. During the Civil War President Lincoln tried to lead our country in this kind of repentance. Would to God that we had leaders who would do the same today!

d) God relents. It struck me recently that periodically I will meet those who doubt the existence of Hell, particularly among liberal churches and ministers. But knowing what we know about man, his cruelty and sinfulness...knowing what we know is in each of our hearts...if we doubt anything we ought to doubt the existence of heaven. Hell I can accept and know that I deserve, but forgiveness, grace, mercy and heaven is unbelievable.

The king said, *“Who knows? God may yet **relent** and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish.”* Vs. 10 tells us that *“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.”* The NASV is more accurate, *“When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God **relented** concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.”*

Most of us, even in the Church, know so little of repentance. When confronted with sin, we typically deny that we have a problem. Or, we compare ourselves with those that we consider big sinners, attempting to shrink our guilt in comparison. Then, there is remorse. We are sorry for our sin. Even regret our sin but do not change. It’s “I’m sorry but I’m not sorry enough to change.” Probably the most common response to sin in

American culture is the blame game. We're a nation of victims and thus, anything is excusable. "I have a bad temper, drinking problem, drug abuse, porn problem, etc., because of _____. It's not my fault. I'm a victim." The last one that harms us spiritually is half-repentance. Over and over again we find in Israel's history that they would have a revival but they wouldn't destroy the high places. They took care of most of it but had a few pet sins that they weren't willing to repent of. It's like the man who sent a check to the government for back taxes with a note attached that said, "I felt so guilty for cheating on my taxes I had to send you this check. If I don't feel any better, I'll send you the rest."

But God **relented** in His judgment of Nineveh because the Ninevites had complete, uncompromised repentance. One Bible scholar points out that God could relent in His judgment because the Nineveh that He was going to destroy no longer existed. The wicked people there had repented and now were righteous because they had turned to Him. It was a new Nineveh.

God had spared Jonah. He now spares Nineveh. God would have been just if He had still destroyed them but God is a God of mercy. His mercies are always unmerited. His grace is never earned. Repentance is never a work to be rewarded but that does not mean that God does not act in response to such repentance. God loves to forgive and show mercy. He's always in a hurry to forgive! Nineveh is a powerful illustration that God does not want to judge and gives every opportunity to repent. Man is judged because of his own willfulness and hardening of his heart.

At Nineveh God kept what He had promised to the prophet Jeremiah, *"If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned"* (Jer. 18:7-8).

2. There are upward steps in real repentance. Repentance has become a word used primarily in religious conversations. Dinner time talks don't usually center around the concept of repentance. Yet repentance is a key to our eternal destiny and our every day walk with God. So what does it mean to repent? Let me suggest first though what repentance is not.

Repentance is not feeling guilty. When we do something wrong and the Holy Spirit or our conscience tells us it's wrong and we feel guilty, that isn't repentance.

Repentance is not confession. Confession is a part of repentance but it isn't the whole picture. Just admitting to a sin doesn't mean you have repented.

Repentance is not penance. This is big in the Catholic church, but evangelicals do it too. "God if you'll forgive me I'll go to church every day for the rest of my life and spend 4 hours a day in prayer." Or we do something to prove that we really should be forgiven like give lots of money. This too is not repentance.

Wayne Grudem defines repentance as ***"Repentance is a heartfelt sorry for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."***

A Sunday School teacher once asked a class what was meant by the word "repentance." A little boy put up his hand and said, "It is being sorry for your sins." A little girl also raised her hand and said, "And it's being sorry enough to quit." That's repentance. Repentance then has several components. Let me suggest some steps

of real repentance.

a) Repentance begins with the Word of God. If Jonah had not given out God's message, there would have been no repentance. Repentance does not begin with music or drama or any other method. It always begins with God's Word and usually via preaching. That's why Paul wrote, "*How, then, can they call on the One they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*" (Rom. 10:14). God has chosen preaching as the means of proclaiming His Word.

b) Believing God. The people of Nineveh believed God. Notice that Jonah does say the people believed his preaching; he says they believed God. The word "*believed*" here is the same word used in Genesis 15:6 "*[Abraham] believed in the Lord and He accounted it to him for righteousness*". It's not just believing what is said; it's trusting the God who has spoken. The people believed that Jonah's message was from God, and they took it seriously. Hebrews 11:6 says that "*without faith it is impossible to please God.*" They believed God and they responded!

c) Humbling of ourselves. A proud person will not repent. It's no accident that a proud look is enemy number one with God. Pride has kept more people out of heaven than any other sin. The Ninevites by putting on sackcloth humbled themselves. While God does not expect us to put on sackcloth today, there must be a putting on of sackcloth in the heart. It's acknowledging our total helplessness and unworthiness before God.

d) Complete Surrender. The placing of sackcloth on the livestock was symbolic of complete surrender. The New Testament tells us that we are to take up our cross or crucify ourselves. It's death to all that we have and to self. It's complete surrender. God wants 100%, not 99.9%.

e) Change in behavior. J. Edwin Orr, a professor of Church history has described the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Welsh Revival of the nineteenth century. As people sought to be filled with the Spirit, they did all they could to confess their wrong doing and to make restitution. But it unexpectedly created serious problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had stolen all kinds of things, from wheelbarrows to hammers. However, as people sought to be right with God they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge piles of returned tools that several of the yards put up signs that read, "If you have been led by God to return what you have stolen, Please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you have taken." Can you imagine if repentance really happened in America? What a number it would do on our economic system!!

Repentance means that we take a spiritual u-turn, both in our actions and in our attitudes. The Ninevites "*turned from their evil ways.*" There was a behavioral change.

f) Prayer. The King decreed, "*Let everyone call urgently on God.*" It was a crying out to God for undeserved mercy, forgiveness and grace. It was getting serious and doing real business with God.

g) Hope. Verse 9 "*Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish.*" As Robert Smith said, "*True repentance has a double aspect; it looks upon things past with a weeping eye, and upon the future with a watchful eye.*" There is hope in real repentance knowing that our merciful God will have

mercy on those who cry out to Him for mercy. It's not a hope-so. It's resting in the heart and grace of God.

Conclusion: A lost world does not think it strange when people wreck their bodies, destroy their homes, or ruin their lives by running from one sin to another! But let a drunkard become sober, or an immoral person pure, and the family thinks that he has lost his mind! That is often the result of repentance.

Let me close this morning with a real life example of repentance. Chuck Colson told this story in a speech at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. He said:

"I love the illustration about a man named Jack Eckerd. A few years ago I was on the Bill Buckley television program, talking about restitution (one of my favorite subjects) and criminal justice. Bill Buckley agreed with me. A few days later I got a call from Jack Eckerd, a businessman from Florida, the founder of the Eckerd Drug chain, the second largest drug chain in America. He saw me on television and asked me to come to Florida. He agreed Florida had a criminal justice crisis, would I come down and do something about it? And we did. We got the attorney general of the state, the president of the senate; we got on Jack Eckerd's Lear jet; we went around the State of Florida advocating criminal justice reforms, and everywhere we would go Jack Eckerd would introduce me to the crowds and say, "This is Chuck Colson, my friend; I met him on Bill Buckley's television program. He's born-again, I'm not. I wish I were." And then he'd sit down. We'd get on the airplane and I'd tell him about Jesus. We'd get off at the next stop, he'd repeat it, we'd do the same thing again, and I'd talk to him about Jesus. When we left I gave him some of R. C. Sproul's books and I gave him C. S. Lewis's 'Mere Christianity,' which had such an impact on me. I sent him my books. About a year went by and I kept pestering Jack Eckerd. And eventually one day he read some things including the story of Watergate and the Resurrection out of my book, 'Loving God,' and decided that Jesus was, in fact, resurrected from the dead. He called me up to tell me he believed that, and I asked him some other things. When he got through telling me what he believed I said, "You're born again!" He said, "No, I'm not, I haven't felt anything." I said, "Yes, you are! Pray with me right now." After we prayed he said, "I am? Marvelous!"

And the first thing he did was to walk into one of his drugstores and walked down through the book shelves and he saw Playboy and Penthouse. And he'd seen it there many times before, but it never bothered him before. Now he saw them with new eyes. He'd become a Christian.

He went back to his office. He called in his president. He said, "Take Playboy and Penthouse out of my stores. The president said, "You can't mean that, Mr. Eckerd. We make three million dollars a year on those books." He said, "Take 'em out of my stores." And in 1,700 stores across America, by one man's decision, those magazines and smut were removed from the shelves because a man had given his life to Christ. I called Jack Eckerd up. I said, "I want to use that story. Did you do that because of your commitment to Christ?" He said, "Why else would I give away three million dollars? The Lord wouldn't let me off the hook."

Isn't that marvelous? 'God wouldn't let me off the hook.' I don't know any theologian who's better defined the Lordship of Christ than that. And what happened after that is a

wonderful sequel and a wonderful demonstration of what happens in our culture today.

We are caught up with this idea that we've got to have big political institutions and big structures and big movements and big organizations in order to change things in our society. And that's an illusion and a fraud. Jack Eckerd wrote a letter to all the other drugstore operators, all the other chains, and he said, "I've taken it out of my store. Why don't you take it out of yours?" Not a one answered him. Of course not--he'd put them under conviction. So he wrote them some more letters. But then Eckerd's Drugs began to get floods of people coming in to buy things at Eckerd's because they'd taken Playboy and Penthouse out. And so People's removed the magazines from their shelves and then Dart Drug removed them from their shelves and then Revco removed them from their shelves. And over the period of twelve months while the pornography commission in Washington was debating over what to do about pornography, and while they're trying to come up with some recommendations for the president about what to do which will result in laws which if Congress ever passes them will be sued by the ACLU and will be tied up in the courts for 10 years—meanwhile, across America, one by one, stores are removing them. And the 7-11 chairman, who sits on Jack Eckerd's board, finally gave in two weeks ago and 5,000 7-11 stores removed it. And in a period of twelve months, 11,000 retail outlets in America removed Playboy and Penthouse, not because somebody passed a law, but because God wouldn't let one of His men off the hook. That's what brings change."

My friend, that's real repentance. And real repentance transforms not just the one who repented but it impacts everyone in its circle of influence. My friend, are you living in real repentance? Has there been radical transformation in your life?