

## The Message for Sunday, March 7, 2010

**Title:** “Are You Just Sorry?”

**Scripture:** Luke 13:1-9

**I. A visitor...** When I was an associate pastor at Calvary United Methodist Church in Nashville, we once had an unusual visitor. He asked to be introduced to the senior pastor. At that time, the senior pastor was Durward McCord. When he was ushered into Durward’s office, the visitor told him that nineteen years previous, he had stolen the sound equipment from the sanctuary at the church. When he was finished with his confession, he simply left. I do not remember him even asking to be forgiven. And, he certainly did not offer to repay the church or replace any equipment. He just confessed and left.

I wonder what he hoped to achieve by his confession? Do you think it was his way of repenting?

**II. What Jesus had to say...** Jesus had a lot to say about repenting. We are grateful to Luke for researching and reporting two situations Jesus used to emphasize repentance. The first situation is not known among the ancient historians who recorded many of Pilate’s grisly acts. However, it is consistent with what the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, had to say about Herod.

Galileans were known throughout Palestine as being hotheaded and revolutionary at heart. They were always causing Pilate some kind of grief. And, Pilate was always attempting some kind of retaliation that should have been a deterrent. Obviously, in response to something the Galileans had tried, Pilate had his soldiers launch a raid.

The Romans were efficient in many areas; but there was no greater efficiency than in their military conquests. The result of the raid was that many Galileans were killed. That their blood was mingled with sacrifices may be a metaphor; or it may be something the Romans did, literally. The result was the same. Galileans died.

The second situation Luke recorded was of a tower that was probably part of the aqueduct Pilate wanted to build. It was to bring water to Jerusalem. Since Pilate did not have enough money to build the aqueduct, he seized money from the Temple. Scholars speculate that the Siloam Tower was a part of the aqueduct. Apparently, it collapsed and killed eighteen people. While we know nothing else of the event, it was a well-known catastrophe in Jesus’ day.

Apparently, Jesus used public reaction to both of these incidents as an opportunity to talk about repentance. The current religious thinking of Jesus day was to think of the consequences of sin as being directly related to the size of the offense. Operative in Jesus day was the “*lex talionis*.” We know it as the “law of retribution.” Most commonly, it echoes Deuteronomy 19:21, where the Law states that when sin results in the loss of a life, the punishment is the loss of a life—or execution. If sin results in the loss of an eye, then the punishment is the taking of an eye: (i.e.,) “an eye for an eye.”

Clearly, there was a graded scale of punishment that was supposed to fit the crime. But, what Jesus tells us in this passage in Luke is that God thinks differently about sin.

Jesus asked them: “Do you think that the worse the sin, the worse the punishment?” And then he clearly indicated that the issue is not punishment—or the fear of punishment. Rather, the truly important thing about sin is repentance. Jesus told us that what is more important to God is not the size of the sin but that we repent. Now, about repentance, I want to make three affirmations.

**III. Confrontation...** The first affirmation is this. *I believe that repentance follows confrontation.* Goethe once wrote, “People do not mind their faults being spread out before them, but they become impatient if called on to give them up.” (Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe [1749-1832], German poet, novelist and dramatist. <http://en.proverbia.net/citastema.asp?tematica=1012>)

Repentance has not changed. The ethical demands of the Gospel are the same as they always have been. However, we live in a different cultural environment than did our parents. Today, the ethical atmosphere is charged with an attitude that appeals to “consenting adults.” That is to say, whatever people jointly agree to do makes whatever they do all right.

Just this past week, I read a report from *The News Tribune* in Tacoma, Washington, where police responded to a 911 call. It involved a woman, tied to a tree. She had nothing on. After investigation, they discovered that it was a “consensual rendezvous” with a man.” (<http://www.comcast.net/articles/news-odd/20100303/US.ODD.Consensual.Rendezvous/> Information from: The News Tribune, <http://www.thenewstribune.com/> (retrieved on Wednesday, 3 March, 2010)

Today, when the message of the Gospel is proclaimed, many just shrug it off, complaining that the church is antiquated and out of touch with reality. I receive a weekly publication named, *Time Out New York*. It is somewhat similar to a “TV Guide” for all of the goings on in New York City. I like it because of the reviews of restaurants, movies and Broadway productions. However, whether it is an official editorial policy or just a trend among writers, many articles and comments have something critical to say about the church and the Christian faith as being watchdogs. Even though conservative Judaism and Islam have stricter interpretations of morality, it is the church that often “takes it on the chin,” as it were.

I have wondered many times why modern critics of Christian morals still complain about us. Could it be—whether they realize it or not—that they still take us seriously? And, could it be that somewhere down deep inside, the world senses that our message is more about Grace than the size of the sin?

Grace has a way of confronting sin much more effectively than does the threat of punishment. That is the message of Jesus: To confront our sin with a message of hope for a better future instead of sheer condemnation. Repentance always begins with confrontation. Jesus always confronted with grace and the hope of repentance.

**IV. More than acknowledgement...** The second affirmation I want to make is this. In the New Testament, the word for “repentance,” is a word that literally means, “to change our minds.” That makes it seem that repentance is an intellectual endeavor. *But, repentance is more than just acknowledging sin.* That is all the fellow did when he came to see Durward and told him that he had stolen the P/A equipment out of Calvary Church.

Let me tell you another story. If you have been around the church this week, you might have noticed many school buses parked in our parking lot. If you have been inside, it looks as though we have been invaded by teenagers. That is because we have been hosting middle and high school vocal competitions. They like to come here for competitions because our facility is such a great place. And, we have quite a number of our own students involved in the choirs from various schools.

About two years ago, a young man came to the church office and asked to see the pastor. Patsy led him into my office. I met a 16-year-old who appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable. I asked him to sit down, and he immediately began to tell me that he had been in one of the visiting choirs a few months previously. While on his way back to his bus, he had stolen one of the little angels that had been placed out among the landscaping by the east entrance. He said that it had gotten to bothering him—to the point that it was becoming a huge emotional burden.

At the end of our discussion, he said that he would like to bring the little, metal figurine back. He had it out in his car. And then, he went back to the car and brought it in to me.

The difference between this teenager and the man who had stolen sound equipment from Calvary is that the teenager not only wanted to acknowledge his sin. He also wanted to repent. He had not just changed his mind. In fact, he could have simply changed his mind and returned the small statue without telling anyone. It was necessary for him to repent; and he could only do that by honestly and sincerely confessing his sin.

*Never in the New Testament does anyone ever repent without it affecting the whole person.* Repentance is not simply acknowledging sin.

**V. Sorry...** The third affirmation I want to make is this. In my research this past week, I ran across a quote by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Fuller (1608-1661). He had this to say about repentance: “Great is the difference betwixt a man’s being frightened at, and humbled for his sins.” (<http://en.proverbia.net/citastema.asp?tematica=1012>)

I thought it was a nice quote; but it did not take on much meaning until I read about Thomas Fuller. He was a clergyman in England during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. That was the period of Civil War: the execution of Charles I, the rule of Oliver Cromwell, and the restoration of Charles II.

During all of that time, Dr. Fuller stayed loyal to the crown. It was a dangerous time to be associated with the king or any royalty. It was during the period of Civil War that Dr. Fuller was frightened at what his “political sins” might bring upon his neck. But, he was not humbled by his political leanings. And, that made me think: “**Repentance is not just saying ‘Sorry’.**” To be sure, there were times during the Civil War in England that Dr. Fuller had to say that he was sorry. It was the only way he kept his head. But, he was not humbled.

Now, his involvement in English politics was not really a religious affair. But, his quote and his attitude sum up, quite nicely, how some people think they can deal with their transgressions. Sometimes, words are cheap. Sometimes, it is relatively easy to say, “I’m sorry,” but not really mean anything by it.

The fellow who came to Durward and told him that he had stolen the P/A equipment had said, in essence, “Sure, I stole it. But, I’m not going to do anything about it.”

Repentance is not only saying, “I’m sorry.” Repentance is saying, “I am humbled by my sin and intend to lead a better life.” When that is said before God, it must always include, “I intend to lead a better life, with Your help.” Repentance must be more than saying, “I’m sorry.” It must involve living as though we *are* sorry.

**VI. Repent...** Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was a strong Calvinist who had a crisis of faith in Victorian England. Because of a chronic stomach ailment, he lived most of his adult life as a crotchety, cranky, and argumentative individual. However, he once wrote something that resonated with me. He said, “Of all acts of man, repentance is the most divine. The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none.” (<http://en.proverbia.net/citastema.asp?tematica=1012>)

Jesus said that we must repent. Repentance is being confronted by the moral imperative proclaimed by Jesus and captured for us in the Gospel. Repentance is more than simply acknowledging sin. And, repentance is not just saying “I’m sorry.”

Repentance is realizing that we have messed up and then allowing Jesus to make us into the new Creature He wants us to be. Jesus said to repent. Amen.

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