

The Crisis of Repentance
By Jason Huff
Ezekiel 18:26-32, Revelation 3:14-22, Luke 12:49-13:9

Our third Scripture reading today comes from Luke 12:49-13:9. Listen now to God's Word. "[Then Jesus said,] 'I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'" He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled to him on the way, or he may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny." Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Who's your favorite Jesus? We all have one. Some of us like the meek and mild Jesus, a shepherd tending to his sheep. Maybe we like the social revolutionary who brought justice to the sick, the poor, and the oppressed, or maybe we like the wonder-working healer. Sometimes we like the wise rabbi teaching the crowds. But the truth is, Jesus is more complex than any one side of Him we happen to like. It's hard to see Him in roles we don't like, and that's what today's passage gives us, Jesus warning of judgment and calling for repentance. Maybe that's not so troubling. But why did the Prince of Peace say He came to bring not peace but division? Why all this morbid talk about judgment? What's the story about settling accounts mean? This passage is tough to understand, but it all ties into one common theme: the crisis of repentance.

Jesus starts today's lesson saying that He has come to bring fire on the earth, a fire that will come following a baptism He must undergo. Now there are two things that fire stands for in the New Testament. The first is judgment. Judgment is like the fire that removes all the impurities from gold and leaves just the precious metal behind. Anything that isn't pure will be burned up. Judgment is one fire Jesus brings...those works we do outside of God's will burn up before God on the day of judgment. Only that which God the Father approves will remain.

But fire also stands for something else in the New Testament...the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came to live in the believers several days after Jesus ascended into heaven after being raised from the dead. In Acts 2, tongues of fire rest on each believer's forehead...and that symbolized the gift of the Holy Spirit. The banner that hangs behind me has a picture of a dove and tongues of fire. Both refer to the Holy Spirit. It is through belief in Jesus Christ that we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, that we escape God's wrath and are judged righteous by God. Jesus came to bring both judgment and the Spirit, and the symbolic baptism He experienced in His death on the cross and His resurrection to life made it possible.

Jesus and the fire He brings is death to some and life to others. What separates the two is forgiveness. The Spirit is given to those who are forgiven, and the way that the gift of forgiveness is accepted is through repentance. We often hear that the way to latch hold of God's forgiveness and receive salvation is to believe and "have faith" in Jesus. That's true, and repentance is the main action we take that shows that our faith is real. Repentance is the core of faith. Repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means "a change of perception." It's the idea that once you've turned to God, your outlook is completely different. In Hebrew, repentance comes from the repetition of one word – *shuv*, which means turn. Repentance is a two-part turning: a turning away from sin and a turning toward righteousness, with the result of a changed heart and mind that now faces God.

But repentance creates a crisis both for us and for everybody around us. That's because repentance requires change, and change upsets the status quo. Things aren't predictable any more. We prefer the sins we know to the holiness we don't understand. Repentance is a threat. When Jesus said that He came not to bring peace but division, He's not talking about everlasting peace. He's not talking about how He can give us eternal peace with God the Father. He's saying that the whole world has rejected God, and when we realize our need for God and turn away from sin, it changes everything. It upsets social orders and family systems, nations and governments and the way things have always been done. That's dangerous. Most people like the false peace the world offers that's really no peace at all, and they will fight Christians and condemn them rather than doing the difficult thing and following the One who *is* peace.

When we hear this passage, sometimes it doesn't ring true to us. Some of us became believers as children. We were born into Christian households where we were embraced when we came to believe in Jesus. Only a few of us have really suffered for our faith. We live in one of the few countries where Christianity is accepted, but many face the division Jesus talks about. In my time over in Russia, I met a young man named Fachrudin. He grew up in one of the former Soviet republics as a Muslim, but he began to study the faith, and one day he became a Christian. He went home and told his family. His father told him, "In the morning, if you haven't renounced your faith, your brothers and relatives and I will kill you." He left that night with the clothes on his back, his Bible, and little else. He fled the country and traveled several hundred miles to escape. Fachrudin wanted to become a minister to other Muslims...I don't know if that ever happened. But his choice to follow Christ, to turn his back on his past, cost him everything. It's real. It happens every day, all over the world. I read reports every day from the group called Voice of the Martyrs that tells how Christians are persecuted by their own families and villages for their decision to follow Jesus. Jesus wants us to have real, lasting peace, and He knew that we would face hardship here on earth to reach it.

As the passage continues, Jesus chastises the crowd for not seeing their need to repent. They all knew how to predict the weather; they knew how to interpret the signs that showed when the desert winds would sweep in and when they'd have storms. But Jesus showed them miracle after miracle and told them of God's mercy on sinners who repented and the judgment to come, and they didn't get it! They saw the signs, but they couldn't interpret that they needed to be ready for the fire Jesus was about to bring. He gives them another parable, this time of someone taking them to court over a debt that's owed. Jesus says, reconcile with the person you owe before the sentence is pronounced, or you'll rot in jail until the debt is paid in full! This has nothing to do with physical debts and everything to do with spiritual ones. We owe a debt to God because all of us have sinned against Him. We need to be reconciled to Him before judgment comes. And that reconciliation is possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus already paid the debt on the cross! The only thing left to be done is to accept the gift through faith in Christ shown through belief, repentance, and discipleship.

The people around Jesus still don't get it. They still think that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Somebody brings up some awful thing that Pontius Pilate did to some Galileans who came to make sacrifices in Jerusalem. We don't know anything about them, but the crowd thinks they must have been evil to have died so brutally. They think it was God's judgment. But Jesus brings up a tragic accident – a tower in the city of Siloam fell and killed 18 innocent people. Jesus says, "They weren't any more or less guilty than anybody else." The only key to getting out of this life alive, to live eternally with God even after death, is to repent!

Jesus has another parable for them... a fig tree has grown for three years. It's taking up space and soil, but there's not a single fig on it. That's its reason for existence! The master wants to get rid of it and plant something useful. But the keeper of the tree says, "Let me give it really good care for one more year. Then if nothing happens, hack it down." The parable is about us. We were made to bear good fruit for God – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness! But without being reconciled to God, it's impossible. The parable gives us hope that change is possible – the tree can still bear fruit. But the change has to happen.

Now that we've looked at the whole passage, we need to step back and take a real look at what repentance is and what it isn't. It's not an idea we hear about every day. So let's leave today understanding it and making sure we understand the crisis of repentance. Truth is, many people who call themselves Christians don't ever repent. Instead, we feel good about ourselves for avoiding things we wouldn't do anyway. Here's an example... if you've eaten a burger with me, you know I take off the pickles. Pickles to me are a waste of a perfectly good cucumber. Just my opinion; it's not a sin if you keep a jar of 'em at home in the fridge. But for me to pull the pickles off my sandwich is not me changing my mind. I've always hated pickles. I haven't repented of eating pickles. And most of us deal with sin the same way. Didn't commit murder today? Wow... check that one off the list! Didn't steal anything? Two for two! Not doing those things doesn't require a change of heart... we weren't tempted to do them in the first place. We've got to throw these out when we think of repentance. When we think that we've repented because we don't break the rules the vast majority of the time, it's like shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic. The ship's still going down and we're not doing anything to stop it. We've either got to find a way off the boat or some way to plug the hole.

There's something else that isn't repentance either, and that's merely stopping sinning. It's really a good thing and it is a part of the process, but unless there's a true turning, it's only going to last until the desire for that sin becomes overwhelming. I've mentioned before that I'm a fan of the show **House**. The title character is a brilliant doctor who's gotten addicted to pain pills he takes for terrible pain in his leg. Now there are times that House tries to get off his medication...lots of different reasons why. But every time, he finds ways around the roadblocks that have been set up to keep him from getting his Vicodin. He'd like to be off the meds, but he loves the drugs more than all the reasons it would be good to be off of them. Given enough time and enough pain, he goes back to where he started.

A lot of us are the same way with a lot of different sins. We might have a lock on the liquor cabinet or an Internet filter on our computer. We might just avoid the people that we like to gossip about or stop a subscription to a magazine that advertises all the latest things we'd like to buy. Setting up roadblocks can be good! When temptations come, roadblocks make it easier for us to defeat them. But if the roadblocks aren't accompanied by real repentance, sooner or later we'll find a way to return to our sin.

The only real way to repent is to take both steps: to turn away from our sin and to start sprinting in the opposite direction. It's not just stopping the car but doing a U-turn and flooring the gas. I'll give you a metaphor for what it's like. Some of you know I've been working to lose weight. For me, it's a spiritual thing...it's good for a lot of reasons, but ultimately it's giving up control of what I eat to God and giving up my greed for food. Now that's a big thing to tell you 'cause now I have an entire congregation of people keeping me accountable! But recently, I've been skipping the fries that come with virtually everything you order these days and been substituting veggies. Doesn't seem like a big deal, but to a guy like me who's got a lot of weight to lose, it's huge. I'm changing my eating habits not just by dropping something bad but eating something that's good for me. And that's the way true repentance works. We aren't just dropping our sins at the feet of Jesus, but we're looking to the Holy Spirit to replace those sins with righteousness, to sanctify us, to make us into the holy people God wants us to be.

And let's not for one minute doubt that this kind of repentance causes a crisis. I mean, seriously, who wants to substitute fries for veggies? I don't! It's sick and wrong! But that's the problem, isn't it? I'm like, fries, burgers, pie, ice cream, pizza, bring it on! But a life driven by food is an unhealthy life, both physically and spiritually. Veggies might be boring, but you know what? I've lost 25 pounds in less than 3 months. I have a lot further to go, a lot! But it's real change. And it took crisis to get there. It took realizing that my life was more important than whether or not I love every meal I eat. It's painful physically at times, but I am getting healthier.

And repentance of other sins takes the same kind of crisis because it is painful. Even if it's a quiet kind of repentance, other people will know. Eventually, those who aren't Christians will find it a turn-off at best. Old drinking buddies aren't going to like the guy who always stays sober. Gossips don't like it when the stream of rumors dries up. True repentance eventually gets into every part of you and won't let go, and it will make enemies of some people. You can count on it. Some of those people might see the change and decide that they need to believe and repent too, which is great, but not everybody. That causes a crisis.

But the other thing that causes a crisis is that repentance isn't a one-time deal. You can't just repent and be done with it. A fig tree that's coming back to life doesn't have fruit overnight. Repentance is something that requires patience and time. Last week Catha and I heard some lectures by Andrew Purves from Pittsburg Theological Seminary. He's often asked when he was saved. Dr. Purves' answer isn't the one that most people expect. He says that Jesus saved Him in his past. Jesus is saving Him right now. And Jesus will continue to save Him in the future. Salvation isn't just a one-time deal; the work of being totally saved into eternity is going on in the hearts and minds of believers right now. You might have come to faith in Christ on October 25, 1980, but God is still working within you, saving you this very minute, and He'll keep doing it until you are resurrected into eternal life. And repentance is the same. We repent of all the sins that have come before, we repent of sins we have now, and we repent of anything that might rear its ugly head in the future. In salvation, God calls us righteous long before we become righteous. But God's intent is for us to become what He has already said we are. His Holy Spirit is working to make us righteous even now as we continue each day to turn to Him rather than to the sins that our old hearts loved.

The book I'm using with the teens in our confirmation class has a great description of repentance. It says this: "To repent is to muscle aside familiar habits. You have to beat down old attitudes. You have to try to kill somebody—the old self with all its warts and ways. This is hard work. Old selves die hard. You might put out a contract on your old self but find that it takes a long time to get up the nerve to go through with the act itself. It is humiliating to be your own hit man. But it can be done. Over time repentance works. God is at work in this painful, holy suicide...like the freight-train rumble of a killer tornado, like the roar of a lynch mob, the old self slowly dies away. It can still be heard from time to time. But each time its voice begins to sound more and more like the voice of a stranger." Repentance is no less than dying to ourselves. But when we die to ourselves, we suddenly find something wonderful...that we are risen with Christ. We have a new life, new purpose, new attitudes, a new heart that the Holy Spirit transplants in us. We have new hope. We have real salvation. And we start living the life God always intended for us.

This week, I can't give you any easy answers. I can't give you a step by step guide to repentance. Each of us has our own sins that trip us up and lead us away from God. In small groups, in personal discussions, in Bible studies, we can get a greater understanding of all the how-tos. I'm just going to leave you today with the same call that Christ gave...repent. It may cost you friends and family. It may cost you more than you ever expected. It will mean dying to sins you hold dear. But do it, do it, do it. Repentance is our faith in Christ made alive in action. It grabs hold of the salvation Jesus has purchased with His own blood and says to Him, "Thank you." And even the power to repent comes not from within ourselves but the Holy Spirit working inside of us. If you're ready for that to happen, pray for that power today. Let's not ignore the signs that have been shown to us...may we believe, repent, and be born again into everlasting life, where we will be forever in the presence of the wonderful God who loves us beyond all measure.