



Can true repentance exist without faith? By no means. But although they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished (John Calvin)...Discuss

February 18th First Sunday of Lent Mark 1:12-15

## For goodness sake, just repent!

The instruction ‘to repent’ has a burdensome connotation for many people. Defined as ‘regret’ or ‘being remorseful’, it sounds like a dark pursuit and at the same time does not seem to offer much hope.

Yet that verb is very much a rich and exhilarating biblical concept. The Hebrew word we translate as ‘repentance’ is *teshuva*, pronounced “teh-shoo-vah”). That word means a great deal than a feeling of guilt or regret. It is worth pondering how it derives from the verb ‘to return’! Return to what? To whom?

### The Biblical Way to Repent

Our English Bible often mentions repentance, which most interpret as being sorry. As such, it appears to be more of a feeling rather than taking action.

*Teshuva*, however, takes on a completely different focus. Instead of referring simply to a state of mind, it is a decision. It is deciding to turn away from where you are headed and moving **back** toward God.

The Old Testament theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, puts it this way: *A change in man’s conduct brings about a change in God’s judgement.*” When we *teshuva* — turn away from the darkness and turn toward the light — God pulls us toward Himself! “*Even now,*” declares Yahweh, “*return to me with all your heart ...*” (Joel 2:12)

### Hebrew Understanding of Repentance

It is not about adjusting the course of our lives, but *completely turning back around* – physically, emotionally and spiritually. *Teshuva* is more than just stopping a certain behaviour, being sorry or apologizing one time. This is a continuous decision to return closer to God striving for a new beginning.

In Jewish thought, the purpose of repentance is to go through a transformation. It is not just an apologetic confession. ***Regretting a misdeed is only one step in the process of teshuva***” There are more steps to follow.

### To Repent and to Return

As seen in the story of Joseph and his brothers, the biblical concept of repentance is more than saying sorry. To repent means to rearrange our entire way of thinking, feeling and being in order to forsake that which is wrong. We reimagine the world through the lens of Jesus. Judah and his brothers showed remorse, but more importantly, they showed a transformation.

*Teshuva* is returning to what is right and pure. It is returning to innocence. Aside from showing regret and remorse, it is *returning to the original plan of God. To live with Him, consult with Him, fellowship with Him, and obey Him.*

To repent means to turn around and face the One we have wronged. It is regretting our sin and showing remorse, yes. And it is also committing to a new path. Because this return path of correction and truth leads to true freedom.

### Teshuva and Temple Sacrifice

In Old Testament days, when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, an important part of *teshuva* was animal sacrifice. But it was never a complete and final forgiveness. Through His prophets, God made it clear. He desired something more:

*For I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)*

*For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would*

*bring it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalms 51:16-17)*

Since there is no Temple today, and clearly, the offerings were not enough to please God, what are we to do?

### **The Truth About Repentance**

There are some basic truths we need to understand about repentance, for it to make any sense: **Firstly**, it is always a good time to repent, and it is never too late. If the Bible teaches us anything about forgiveness, is that it is always 'on the table'. But it is up to us to reach for it.

**Secondly**, God is always ready to take us back, like the father of the prodigal son. All the son needed to do was return. *Teshuva*. The Father was prepared to pour out all His love, regardless of the state of the son, regardless of his sins.

And there is one more element that always accompanied Jesus' ministry. It applied to a crippled man, a Samaritan, the woman caught in adultery, a rich man and every other person that sought Jesus' help. They were met with forgiveness, but also an instruction: sin no more. *Teshuva*, turn around, return to Me!

### **Returning to the Father through Jesus**

Returning to God requires not just courage or conviction, but primarily... faith and hope. We get the order all wrong when we think the journey of repentance starts with fixing our mistakes *before* we can approach the Cross. The awareness that makes repentance possible is our understanding that we belong to God and it is in God alone that our hearts know peace. Returning there is a lifelong desire.

The process of repentance only makes sense if there is a place to which we can return. And that was made possible thanks to Jesus, our Messiah. It was Jesus who told us of the Father's love; Jesus who made known the Father's will; Jesus who showed us the Way to the Father and Jesus who opened the doors for us to return to the Father's side. *Teshuva* means 'returning', and

any genuine repentance will be a most beautiful experience for every believer.

### **How then do we repent?**

Before pondering repentance, it would be valuable if we could identify what sin is. What was the first sin? Surprise, surprise, the first recorded sin was the sin of Lucifer! Not Adam, though the latter's sin was exactly the same — pride. It was pride that brought him/them both undone. Both chose to rebel against God.

Sin is not defined by personal preferences; it is defined by the Word of God. It is not about our theories, opinions or current worldly trends. It is all there revealed to us in the scriptures.

Sin has little to do with lists of commandments. It is about our relationship with God in Jesus Christ, a relationship the laws try to enhance. We repent for the same reasons we seek to mend relationships with those we love dearly. We hurt. They hurt and that hurt eats away at us. If our relationship with God never brings us pain, it is probably because we have not yet entered the kind of relationship seeks of. We cannot sin if we do not know God intimately.

When I ponder the sins that pain me the most, I would come up with a list similar to this: I have failed to

- Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Not 95%, but 100%. (**Matthew 22:37**)
- Love your neighbour as you love yourself. Be as eager for things to go well for the other person as I am for things to go well for me. (**Matthew 22:39**)
- Do all things without grumbling, whinging, whining. No grumbling — inside or outside. (**Philippians 2:14**)
- Cast all your anxieties on him (**1 Peter 5:7**)
- Only say things that give grace, healing and wellbeing to others — especially those closest to me and, those I dislike, or who dislike me. (Ephesians 4:29)

No we can take up our renewed spiritual direction, come closer to God and grow in grace.