

Mark 1.14  
St Stephens

Sept 6, 2009  
Combined Worship Sunday

## Hard Sayings of Jesus: Repent!

We are looking these weeks at some of the hard sayings of Jesus, and there are a lot of them! Like:

*"You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Matthew 5:48

Or...

*"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."*

Mark 10:25

A couple weeks ago, I noted that people respond to these things by **downgrading him** - *'Uhh, you know he really didn't mean what he said! It was a deliberate overstatement designed to provoke thought. I'll tell you what he really meant to say...'* And then you hear soft words, an easy explanation for every hard thing, and his words no longer provoke you, no longer disturb you, no longer get under your skin! Well, **he meant to get under your skin!**

In this series we want to give him a **fresh hearing**, this Jesus who sometimes says offensive things, impossible things – the one who is not quite tame, not quite safe! So fasten your seat belts, and bring your crash helmets – here we go with another impossible word!

It is a simple one today, a single word: **'Repent'**. It was the word he used **to start** his ministry:

*"The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!"*

Mark 1:15

Speaking to the churches in the Revelation to John, he said:

*"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent."*

Revelation 3:19

The word is found in the NT over **50 times!** But you almost **never hear it** today!! 30 years ago I had a **friend in Akron** who worried that people never heard that word, so he named **his dog 'Repent!'**... He'd go out every night and call his dog!!

Why is it so hard to hear this word today?

- **We think we are nice people.** Why should nice people have to repent? Well, I've noticed that I am nice when things are going my way, but if you squeeze me a bit – or a lot – you might get something else out of me! Maybe we are not as nice as we seem.

Here is another reason we have lost this word...

- **We cannot see our sin.** We have this uncanny ability to see sin in other people, but are strangely blind to it in ourselves. Our sin is like an **iceberg**. There's a lot more under the water than what you can see on top of the water. And it's what's under the water that can kill you!

And maybe one more reason we've lost the word...

- **We don't understand what repentance means.** We think of repentance as an overwhelming **emotional crisis** with tears and grief and sorrow. Tears will come in due time – in my own life I had been a Christian for almost 30 full years before the day arrived when I wept and wept and wept before the Lord over my own sins. Repentance, though, is something **even more important than tears**, something quite profound, and quite surprising.

**3 Surprises about Repentance:**

## Repentance is a Change of Mind Leading to Change of Life

**In the OT** (*shub'* Hebrew): **to change your direction**, especially to turn away from sin and to God. That's no surprise, you think. And you would be right.

**The surprise comes in the NT** word for repentance (*metanoia'* Greek): **to change your mind!** Repentance means to think life over, deeply and profoundly, and come to different conclusions. The focus is on your **thoughts**, because your thoughts will control your **behavior**. The inside always directs the outside, as we like to say. **Eugene Peterson** (Galli, p.38) puts it this way.

*Repentance 'is deciding that you have been told a pack of lies about yourself and your neighbor and your world. And it is deciding that God in Jesus is telling you the truth.'*

So repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of life.

### A snapshot of Paul His conversion at 26 years old

*"But when he who called me by his grace, I did not immediately consult with anyone; but I went away into Arabia..."*

Galatians 1:15-17

**Scholars have long thought Paul went into the desert**, perhaps for as long as 3 years. Why? Well, **to repent**. To think it all over. Because he had it all wrong. I am sure he asked some profound questions in those months and years. *"Lord, show me who you really are. And who I really am. How shall I live? What shall I do with my days and years? What of my family, my job, my friends. What of my talents and opportunities? How can I make my life count for you?"* Those are **repentance questions**.

You will also find that there will be times that **God will take you out into the desert to think it through again**. It may come in an

illness, during a season of unemployment, during a loss or time of hardship. It may come during a sabbatical or a vacation – or in the middle of a troubled night. He meets you and says to you, *repent of your sins and believe the Good News!* And you know you have to **think it through again, to change your mind and change your life.**

Second surprise:

## **Repentance Is For Your Whole Life**

Most of us think that repentance is a **one-time affair**. When you come to Christ you repent of your former life, you are forgiven, and then you launch out in this new life.

But we find something else in the words of Jesus. This call to repent comes **to saints and sinners** alike. He speaks the word to people who have **not yet believed** in him and to people who have **long believed** in him. Repentance is a life long affair, it seems. It is not just a **doorway**, but a **pathway**. A way of life! My sin is like that iceberg! He intends to get to all of that iceberg. **So repentance goes to the bottom of my heart and the end of my days – as long as there is sin left in me, as long as there is mercy left in Jesus!**

This plays out in **Paul's** life in a startling way. We catch another snapshot of him when he is **in Ephesus, 46 years old**, and he has completed 2 missionary journeys. He is writing the Corinthians and talking about himself.

*I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am,*

1 Corinthians 15:9-10

Remember that phrase, '*least of the apostles*'

We catch another snapshot of him about **9 years later**. He is now **55 years old**, and he is **in prison**. **Time to think things through again**. He is writing to the Ephesians:

*Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...*

Ephesians 3:7-8

From the 'least of the Apostles' to 'less than the least of all God's people...'

**And once more we catch a snapshot of Paul, now near the finish line. He is 57 years old**; released from prison, but within a year or two of his martyrdom...

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that... Christ Jesus might display in me his unlimited patience...*

1 Timothy 1:14-17

As Paul's days and years go on, he is more and more deeply **impressed** with his own **unworthiness**, his own **sin**, his own failures. As Paul's years go on his self description moves from the 'least of the Apostles' to 'less than the least of the saints' to the 'worst of sinners'. He marks it well.

But even more than that, he is **impressed** with God's **forgiveness** and **grace** in Jesus. He marks that even better. The closer you get to God, the more clearly you see your sin. And the more clearly you see his mercy. Repentance sees them both. '*Behold the severity and the mercy of God*', Paul would write the Romans.

Repentance helps you to see that there is enough **evil** in your life to bow your head in **sorrow**, but there is enough **grace** in Christ to lift

your head in **joy**.

**Repentance goes to the bottom of my heart and the end of my days – as long as there is sin left in me, as long as there is mercy left in Jesus!**

This morning we are going to use one of the **old confessions**, and it has some jarring language. We will pray in a few moments, "*There is no health in us. But thou, O lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders...*" It is a prayer the Apostle could have written, because he knew that even the best of his efforts were always short of Christ's own. That's what we mean when we say there is no health in us. But we pray also with the confidence that there is **more mercy in him than there is sin in us**. And there is. Repentance opens that door in every season of life.

There is one more surprise in repentance, and it is the best of all.

**Repentance Happens in the Presence of God**

Repentance is hard. Too hard, actually. We just can't get it done. We are too blind, too entrapped, too weak. Every time someone comes to us with an accusation or a criticism, our first reaction is to **defend ourselves**. 'I am not!' Or **accuse them** and say, 'well, what about you?' It is just too hard. And so you see a **third surprise** in the Bible about repentance. The way God gives us repentance **is to come to us**, to bring us **into his presence**.

- **Isaiah** saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and he knew he was undone and a man of unclean lips.
- **Job** saw the Lord and stopped all his talking and repented in dust and ashes.
- **John** saw the Lord; '*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.*'

Revelation 1:17

The list is long, and you could quickly add David and Moses and Mary and Hannah and Ruth and Elizabeth - but the stories are **always the same**.

- The Lord comes to the captives, you repent. And chains fall off.
- He comes to the blind, and **in his great light you can see** what was hidden before. You repent.

It's a moment when you are undone and redone, brought to ruin and brought to life.

The Lord appeared to **Paul** on the road to Damascus and Paul said, who are you Lord? The response? *"I am Jesus."* And that was enough; right there, Paul's life turned. He could see what was hidden. His head bowed and his heart opened. *'Forgive me Lord, forgive.'* Forgiven he would be. In the decades ahead, he would continue to turn, continue to repent. And God would continue to heal.

It happens the same way today that it did 2000 years ago. It may happen in a place like this – or in a quiet moment off by yourself. It may happen as you read the scriptures or seek him in prayer. It may happen in the wreckage of a relationship or the fear that comes in our frailty.

Jesus walks into your life and looks at you and says, *"I am Jesus, I am the first and the last and the one who lives forever. Those whom I love I reprove and discipline, so repent: rethink your whole life, deeply, and change your ways. And come, trust yourself to me."*

And you do.

### **Prayer:**

Today we want to look at you again, to remind ourselves that we are not here alone...

And we look at ourselves, Lord...

Today we let some things go... some thoughts... some desires...  
some criticisms... some anger... some sin...

We repent before you lord... forgive and heal and restore...