

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"What Does Repentance Look Like?"*

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and we find ourselves at **Luke 15:18**. Please stand with me for the reading of God's Word. We will start at verse 11 for context.

Luke 15:11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. **14** And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. **16** And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. **17** "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

You may be seated. Let's pray.

This chapter contains three parables dealing with repentance and joy. I told you earlier that the third parable does something different than the previous two. Instead of using the words repent and joy, we get to see repentance and joy demonstrated by the individuals in the account:

- The son is never said to repent, but we get to watch him repent
- The father is never said to be joyful, but we get to watch him rejoice over his son's repentance

I am going to draw out many of the wonderful lessons we can learn about repentance and hopefully apply to our lives.

Look at **verse 18**...

Luke 15:18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

Notice the words, "**I will set out and go back to my father.**"

And this brings us to lesson one...

Genuine repentance (Lesson One) seeks to return to the Father.

It seems like the son tried going just about every other place he could. He was even willing to hire himself out to a Gentile and feed his pigs.

But, finally, he reached the point that he was willing to go back to his father.

Considering the father in the account is a picture or type of our Heavenly Father, this is a perfect example of what should happen in our lives...

We are like the son, and we are tempted to look for other solutions before turning to God. We try everything else; it goes terribly, and finally we reach the point that we say the same beautiful words the son said at this low point in his life: **I will arise and go to my Father.**

And this is how repentance begins: with a desire to return to the Lord.

Interestingly, the son didn't think of his village or his home, but of his father. He did end up returning to his village and his home, but he thought about his father.

I see a parallel for us...

Our focus should be on returning to the Lord. That will cause us to come back to our church and our church family, but our focus should be on the Lord.

Lesson two...

Genuine repentance (Lesson Two) takes responsibility

Notice the words **I have**. He took responsibility for what he did.

There is no justifying, vacillating, minimizing, or rationalizing.

He didn't shift blame

- He didn't blame his brother for mistreating him while they grew up together
- He didn't blame his father for being too strict and never letting him have any fun

He didn't make excuses:

- He didn't talk about how he never really meant to waste the family's wealth, but there was a terrible famine that took everything from him.
- He didn't talk about being a weak man and having a sin nature that was passed to him from Adam.

Also notice his confession is only a few words.

It is surprisingly short for how rebellious he was, but we can tell that it is more than enough because it is set down as an example for us. Confessions don't need to be long and drawn out to take responsibility.

The other prominent confession in Scripture, perhaps the most well-known, is David following his sins of murder and adultery.

Nathan confronted David and listen to this...

2 Samuel 12:13a David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

That's it!

Considering what David did, we might wish his confession was longer.

But in response...

2 Samuel 12:13b Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

David's confession brought forgiveness despite its brevity.ⁱ

Now in contrast to the prodigal son's short confession and David's short confession are Saul's confessions...which are long and drawn out.

When Saul offered the sacrifice he shouldn't have offered...

1 Samuel 13:11b Saul said, “When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, 12 I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the Lord.’ So I FORCED MYSELF (I didn’t really want to do it. I had to!), and offered the burnt offering.”

When Saul was confronted after failing to wipe out all the Amalekites...

1 Samuel 15:15 Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.” 16 Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night.”

It’s like Samuel couldn’t even listen to Saul go on any longer.

Sometimes long confessions – and I’m using the word confessions loosely – are nothing more than excuses.

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The next lesson...

Genuine repentance (Lesson Three) uses the word, “sin.”.

Let me get you to think about something for a moment...

Our world has been removing the word sin from our language, and there are three ways this is happening...

First, the world makes everything relative. When people do something wrong, they can provide reasons it was acceptable and justifiable.

Second, the world simply uses an alternative word that doesn’t sound as bad. For example:

- There are certain things you can abort. You can abort a program if you’re using a computer. In movies heroes talk about aborting the mission. But if you abort a baby, it is not an abortion, it is murder. But we say abortion because it sounds better.
- An affair is an event or situation. For example, you could say, “It was a troubling affair.” If you go through a trial you could say, “It was a difficult affair.” But if a married person has a relationship with someone that is not their spouse, it is adultery. But we call it an affair because it sounds better than adultery.
- We want to say, “He stretched the truth,” or “He exaggerated a little bit,” or “He left out some of the details.” We don’t want to say, “lie.”
- When people of the same sex have relationships with each other we want to say they are gay or queer or some acronym that has lots of letters in it to cover the different titles. But the words we will never hear are homosexual or sodomite, because those words sound like sin.

The third way the world has been removing sin from our language is by saying certain sins are diseases:

- Drunkenness is a sin that has ruined countless lives and relationships, but our world says it is a disease.
- Pedophilia is a perverse sin, but the world is saying it a disease.

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I could go on, but my point is this...

With the world doing its best to prevent anything from being called a sin, it is going to be even easier for us to avoid calling something sin.

But to the prodigal son’s credit, he didn’t say, “I made a mistake...or a gaffe...or a blunder.” He said, “**I have sinned.**”

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J. Edwin Orr tells the story of a woman who stood up in church to make a confession, but said...

“Please pray for me. I need to love people more.”

The pastor said, “That’s not a confession, Sister. Anyone could have said it.”

Then she said, “I should have said my tongue has caused a lot of trouble in this church.”

Then the pastor said, “Now you’re talking.”

It is very easy to say:

- *I’m not everything I should be*
- *I wish I was a better Christian*
- *I hope I can be more spiritually mature*

But it is hard to say:

- *I have gossiped*
- *I have been bitter*
- *I have lied*

Genuine repentance involves a confession that uses the word sin.

The next lesson...

Genuine repentance (Lesson Four) knows the sin is against God.

Let me back up a little for this lesson...

It was very fitting for the son to say that he sinned before his father, because Proverbs makes the point that the way a son acts affects the father.

A son’s behavior can bless his father:

- **Proverbs 10:1 a wise son makes a glad father**
- **Proverbs 15:20 a wise son makes a glad father**
- **Proverbs 23:15 my son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be gladⁱⁱ**

And a son’s behavior can grieve his father:

- **Proverbs 10:5 he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame**
 - **Proverbs 28:7b a companion of gluttons shames his father.**
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Similarly, just as a son’s behavior affects his earthly father, our behavior affects our Heavenly Father...because all sin is against God. It’s against His ways, His character, and His commands.

Great men of the Bible recognized this truth...

When Potiphar’s wife kept trying to seduce Joseph, listen to how he responded...

Genesis 39:8 He said to [Potiphar's] wife, “Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against...”

Now pause right here...

Because Joseph was talking so highly of Potiphar and all he had done for him, what would you expect him to say?

How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against Potiphar.

Instead, he said...

How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"

Even though it would seem to us to be a great sin against Potiphar, Joseph recognized it was ultimately against God.

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Consider what David said in his great psalm of repentance after confessing his sin...

Psalm 51:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, YOU ONLY, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

There were many people David looked like he sinned against: Bathsheba, Uriah, Eliam, Ahithophel, the other men who died in battle as part of the conspiracy. But David said his sin was **ONLY** against God.

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Even though it looks to us like the prodigal son sinned against his earthly father, he said his sin was **BEFORE** his father, which simply means his father aware of it without it being against him personally.

Instead, he said the sin was **against heaven** which is synonymous with saying against God.

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Let me give you two things to take away from this...

First, we want to remember that all our sin is against God, even when it looks like it is against someone else.

Second, when it looks like people sin against us, we can tell ourselves that their sin was ultimately against God. I try to tell myself this because it helps me forgive and overcome bitterness. Suddenly, other people's sins against us aren't so personal.

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Now look at verse nineteen...

Luke 15:19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

Notice the contrast from the beginning of the parable that shows how much he's changed:

- First, he said in **verse 12 "Father, GIVE ME the share of property that is coming to me."**
- Now he says, **"I am no longer worthy to be called your son. TREAT ME as one of your hired servants."**
- He went from, "Father, give me;" to "Father, make me."
- He went from entitled to unworthy.

He realized he had no right to claim any blessing upon returning, nor did he have anything to offer except a life of service to make up for his rebellion.

William Barclay said, *"The ordinary slave was in some sense a member of the family, but the hired servant could be dismissed at a day's notice. He was not one of the family at all."*

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We know what is going to happen to the son when he returns home, but he did not know that. This shows his repentance was genuine.

If the son thought he could go home and return to the position of prominence that he enjoyed before his rebellion we could question the sincerity of his repentance. We could wonder if he was acting sorry simply to regain the stature he had before.

But he didn't expect to be a son again. He was willing to be a servant.

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This also shows he was willing to accept the consequences of his sin...and this brings us to lesson five...

Genuine repentance (Lesson Five) accepts the consequences of sin.

Let me briefly take you back to David's repentance. Yes, he was forgiven, but there were consequences.

Listen to what God said to him...

2 Samuel 12:10 THE SWORD SHALL NEVER DEPART FROM YOUR HOUSE, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

I used to struggle with David's forgiveness because his sins were so terrible and according to God's law he deserved to be executed...twice. But honestly – and I mean this – the rest of his life involved was so painful that it was probably worse discipline for him to remain alive.

The greatest suffering in life is caused by children rebelling and that's what David experienced from multiple children...for years...until his last breath:

- Amnon raped Tamar
- Absalom murdered Amnon
- Absalom raped David's wives, took the throne from him, and tried to murder him
- Joab executed Absalom
- Adonijah tried to take the throne and Solomon executed him

David died while his son Adonijah was rebelling against him. It really was discipline to the very end of his life.

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Forgiveness does not mean the absence of consequences.

For example:

- We can lose our temper, scream at people, confess our sin, be forgiven, but still damage our reputation
- We can get drunk, get pulled over, confess our sin, be forgiven, but still lose our license
- We can gossip, or listen to gossip, confess our sin, be forgiven, but still lose friendships
- We can fornicate confess our sin, be forgiven, but still end up with a disease

We need to understand that repentance produces forgiveness, but there can be consequences.

And what does this have to do with genuine repentance?

Genuine repentance is willing to accept those consequences...which the prodigal son was willing to do: **I won't be a son. Make me a servant.**

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Now up to this point we have been reading what the son was thinking. Verses 17-19 are the son's THOUGHTS. It is encouraging to read what he thought – or said – to himself...but it's only thoughts versus actions.

The question is...

Will he act on these thoughts, which is to say will he return to his father...or just think about repenting?

Look at the beginning of verse twenty...

Luke 15:20a And he arose and came to his father.

The son was going one direction and he changed and went another direction. This is great example of the nature of repentance: he went the other direction and headed to his father. Repentance is turning from sin to God and that is what he did.

And this brings us to the next lesson...

Genuine repentance (Lesson Six) produces a change in direction.

Let me illustrate what is behind this lesson by sharing something that I have observed in other people's lives and my own, and I will use the example that I saw at a youth camp...

I took a bunch of youth to a Christian youth camp which concluded with a dramatic altar call. There was a strong emotional appeal and many young people went forward...including some of the youth that I brought to camp.

Now this is important...

I believe that most, if not all of the youth who went forward were sincere...at that moment. In other words, I believe when they went forward:

- They wanted to change
- They wanted to follow the Lord
- They wanted to stop certain things they were doing
- They wanted to start doing things they knew they should do

But if you fast-forward a couple weeks many of their lives looked exactly like they did before they went forward.

My point is it is easy to think about something without acting on it:

- It is easy to think about doing something without doing it
- It is easy to think about stopping or changing, without actually stopping or changing

In other words, it is easy to be convicted and committed to repenting, but as time goes on lose that conviction and fail to repent:

- Sometimes we make excuses for ourselves.
- Sometimes we justify why we don't really need to repent.

But whatever the case is important to recognize that it is very easy to think about repenting without actually repenting.

In the prodigal son's life, it was easy to think about turning from his prodigal lifestyle and returning to his father, but he didn't just think about it. He did it.

Spurgeon said, *"Some of you whom I now address have been thinking, and thinking, and thinking, till I fear that you will think yourselves into perdition. May you, by divine grace, be turned from thinking to believing, or else your thoughts will become the undying worm of your torment."*

A few months ago, Katie and I were in Texas at a homeschooling conference. We met a man who shared with us that he used to be a drag queen and practicing homosexual who was very active in the homosexual scene...whatever that means exactly.

But then he shared with us that he repented, and God changed his life.

There are certain things I don't know:

- I don't know how much he still struggles with homosexual temptations
- I don't know if he would say that God frequently delivers people from homosexuality
- I don't know if he would say that many people in his situation might have to resist this temptation throughout their lives

But I do know that he was convicted about his homosexuality, thought about changing, but he did not stop at thinking. He committed to changing and God granted him repentance and helped him change his life...and we met him at the conference because he is the assistant of one of the most prominent speakers.

All that to say, repentance must be more than thinking.

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Our last lesson...

Genuine repentance (Lesson Six) gives hope.

I would like us to do something.

We must get an elevated view of a few of the verses to contrast the way the son felt before his repentance with how he felt after his repentance.

Look back with me at verse fifteen...

Luke 15:15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

Now this is not a trick question: how do you think he was feeling at this moment?

I think completely hopeless. I can't imagine him feeling much worse.

Now let's read verses seventeen through nineteen...

Luke 15:17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."'"

Now after thinking about repenting and returning to his father, how do you think he was feeling?

I think hopeful! I hear hope in his voice.

The son felt hopeless, but when he thought about his father and returning to him he was hopeful.

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Repentance should do the same for us.

Let me conclude with this...

Repentance is hard, but it brings such hope because it means the end of sin:

- Sin that has plagued us
- Sin that has caused us suffering like we read about last week

- Sin that has ruined relationships
- Sin that has caused us guilt and shame
- Sin that has caused us to feel distant from God

And repentance brings all of this to an end. How much hope should that bring us?

Struggling with something for years but turning from it to God should be one of the most hopeful things we can imagine.

And we have a Heavenly Father who is willing to receive us following our repentance as joyfully as the father in the account

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I will be up front after service, and if you have any questions about anything I've shared, or I can pray for you in any way I would consider it a privilege to speak with you.

Let's pray.

ⁱ *"The words are very few, but that is a good sign of a thoroughly broken spirit. There is no excuse, no hiding, no concealment of the sin. There is no searching for a loophole, no pretext put forward, no human weakness pleaded. He acknowledged his guilt openly, candidly and without any denial of truth."* Keil and Delitzsch

ⁱⁱ Also:

- **Proverbs 23:24 the father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him**
- **Proverbs 27:11 be wise, my son, and make my heart glad**
- **Proverbs 29:3 he who loves wisdom makes his Father glad**