

***“The Big Words of the Bible:  
Repentance”***

***Romans 7.14-25***

Ash Wednesday 2006

The Word of God for our sermon meditation on this Ash Wednesday was recorded for us in the Epistle to the Romans, the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 14-25 as read earlier.

Every discipline has a language all its own and unless you learn the language you cannot converse and understand what is happening within that field. Whether that is the realm of medicine, astronomy, biology, the law, construction, computers, architecture and more, this is true. It is also true of theology, the language of the church used by God’s people through the ages to speak of God and His works throughout the ages. We have a language, a vocabulary that must be understood rightly so that we may learn and grasp the teachings of salvation.

Knowing that right knowledge precedes right living, we will begin tonight a series of Midweek Lenten meditations under the title of “The Big Words of the Bible.” We will examine each word in turn to learn what God means and teaches when He uses these words in Sacred Scripture and apply these words to our faith and life with God. This evening, on Ash Wednesday, we inaugurate our Midweek Lenten series with the word “Repentance.”

What is repentance according to God? What does His inspired Word and not the words and ideas of men and the world tell us what this word means? To understand what the word “repentance” means, it may be helpful, in the first place, to understand what it does not mean. Repentance, according to the Scriptures, does not mean “Oops! I’ve been caught!” It is not a basic “I’m sorry and regret that I was caught red-handed.” It is not crying a certain amount of tears or thinking that you are basically a good person what has done some bad things.

In our world today this is many times what is meant if the word repentance is even used. Normally, what we see and hear in the world is the idea of avoiding responsibility and a lack of admission to wrongdoing and sin. In fact, in court and in public, it is actually possible to apologize for a wrongdoing without ever admitting that you did anything wrong. Typically one will say that they are sorry if what they said or did hurt anyone but not that they are guilty and personally responsible for the reprehensible words and actions.

Such attitudes and admissions are not repentance according to the Scriptures. Repentance, the Bible teaches, is, in the first place, contrition, the “terror of the conscience that feels God’s wrath against sin and grieves that it has sinned.” It is, if you will, what St. Paul expresses in our sermon reading for tonight. Notice that Paul has the usual arguments with himself that many do when trying to understand why one behaves the way one does.

But in the end the Apostle Paul comes to one and only one conclusion. “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” That is repentance and contrition. That is the godly rending and tearing of one’s heart as a result of guilt produced by the Law of God. Notice that Paul, the great Apostle, doesn’t try to blame anyone or anything else. He says, “I am carnal, sold under sin...I know that no good dwells in me.”

St. Paul explains that great conflict that exists in the heart and lives of the believer and admits that there is a side of him so evil, so wicked, so corrupt, and so heinous that he is grieved and crushed that he cannot and does not fulfill the whole will and Law of God. This is the first part of repentance – a crushed heart so devastated by its evil and wickedness that all it can do is cry out for mercy and help.

It is the heart that St. Paul exhibits, that King David exhibited in his own life when confronted by his sins by Nathan the prophet. It is what God calls for on the part of every sinner when He speaks in our Old Testament reading. “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your hearts...return to the Lord!” This is what our Lord Jesus calls for when He proclaims in our Gospel reading “Repent, and believe in the Gospel!”

So, naturally the question arises – is this your understanding of repentance or has the world watered down what you thought true, godly repentance is? Is this your attitude and the posture of your heart when you confess your sins, when you admit to your wrongs and misdeeds? Are you like Paul, like King David, like the tax collector in the Temple, crushed and horrified by your sinful wretchedness before God and man?

Sometimes, right? But only sometimes, right? Whether we know it or not, we have adopted the world’s ideas and the world’s ways when it comes to the admission of guilt and sin. We try to assign some of the blame and fault, if not all, to others, to our schedules, to other circumstances in life. We try to mitigate the seriousness of our sin and try to convince ourselves that it wasn’t all that bad and certainly not worth an eternity in the fires of hell. After all, there are far worse sinners in this world than I, aren’t there?

Not if our understanding of our wretchedness and sin is that of the Scriptures, of what God tells us in His Word. For repenting as God calls for means that we admit we are the worst of sinners. We are confessing that we deserve God’s wrath and displeasure for our sins, even those we think are not as sinful as another. It is being torn up and lamenting that the things we want to do we do not do and the things that we do not want to do we end up doing. It is being terrified of eternal punishment, crushed in our guilt, and wanting to amend and change our sinful ways.

Godly repentance has another part to it as well. It is more than just contrition the Bible teaches. Repentance is also faith in the Gospel, the good news that for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, all our sins and wrongs are forgiven us. Repentance is also believing that on account of Jesus’ redeeming work, on account of His innocent sufferings and death on the cross, our iniquities, our transgressions, every and any wrongdoing we have ever committed is fully and freely pardoned us, even our sins of wrong understanding of repentance in our lives.

For notice that our Lord Jesus says in the Gospel reading “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” St. Paul, after confessing his wretchedness and asking who will save him, says “I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.” For in Jesus and in His saving work we find the salvation and the rescue from God’s wrath that we need from our sins and transgressions. In Christ Jesus our Lord we find that our Lord is indeed “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and He relents from doing harm.”

For, instead of visiting that wrath and displeasure on us for our sin, it was visited on Jesus our Savior. He, who took to Himself human flesh and blood at Christmas, takes the wretchedness of

St. Paul, of you, of me, of every sinner on His own body and lays down that body unto death on the cross. Our Lord Jesus, the Sinless Son of God, bears the wrath of the Father, which includes His own wrath towards the sinner, and pays the piper, if you will, for all our sins.

On account of that saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ we have forgiveness for all of our sins. On the basis of Jesus' sufferings and death we through faith in His name, by believing the Gospel of salvation, have been spared God' wrathful judgment and have instead received His good will and favor, just as the angels proclaimed the first Christmas night. God for Jesus' sake has been merciful to us and has not visited us nor will He visit us with death and damnation in hell.

For the sake of the One crushed on the cross, our crushed spirits have been revived by the word of forgiveness. For the sake of the battered and bloodied One on Calvary's tree, our weary and downtrodden souls are raised and cleansed from all sins. For the sake of the One who fasted for us, wept for us, prayed for us, lived and died for us, we have been given life and the promise of life eternal in Heaven's glory.

Through faith in Jesus we have peace for our troubled consciences. For the one terrified of sin there is comfort, for Jesus has paid for our sins, endured the terrors of Hell for all, and poured out the Spirit of God into our hearts through the Gospel of salvation. And by that Spirit we who repent, who humbly confess our sin and wretchedness, who believe on the Gospel of Christ for the salvation of our bodies and souls, are given the power to amend, to change our sinful ways and by God's grace strive to walk with Jesus.

For repentance actually characterizes the entire life of the Christian for daily we are admitting our sin and wretchedness and that we deserve God's wrath. Daily we rejoice that through faith in Jesus we have been forgiven and that we have peace and pardon before the Father's throne in heaven. Daily we strive by the Spirit to amend our sinful lives. Daily we do that which we do together here in God's house at every worship service because this is our life as God's people of faith. So taught Luther when he wrote this

as his first thesis of the 95 Theses. "When Christ said 'repent!', He meant the whole life of the Christian be one of repentance."

So teaches the Spirit of God what repentance truly is and so the Spirit works in the hearts of those who have faith. It is a conscience terrified by God's wrath against sin and grief that one has sinned. It is a heart that believes that for Jesus' sake, on account of His sufferings and death on the cross, is freely forgiven any and all sin. God grant that we live in godly repentance until we reach heaven's glorious rest. Amen.

**+Soli Deo Gloria+**