



Challenging Every Person to Take God More Seriously

WordPoints Discussion Guides

Repentance

Changing Our Direction Because of the Gospel

Discussion 1 — Turning from the Power of God to Satan

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Repentance: Changing Our Direction Because of the Gospel

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TURNING FROM THE POWER OF SATAN TO GOD

... to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Acts 26:18

PAUL WAS AN APOSTLE AND WE ARE NOT, BUT THE MISSION ASSIGNED TO HIM IS ONE WE CAN LEARN FROM. He was given the task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles, and in the text above, God was telling Paul what the purpose of his preaching would be. We, no less than Paul, need to understand the purpose of the gospel. Indeed, there is nothing more important for us to understand.

To open their eyes. The gospel provides the solution to our worst problem, the remedy to our worst illness. But in order to help us, the first thing the gospel has to do is open our eyes to the truth about our situation. We must see our *need* for the gospel.



So that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. If our problem is sin, and if God is offering forgiveness, what we need to do is *turn around*. In denial of the truth about God, we've been going in the wrong direction. We've submitted ourselves to the power of Satan. That can change — and God will forgive us — but not without a real *conversion* (or “turning”).

That they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. Here are the two things that result from the gospel. First, the forgiveness of sins. This is why Jesus died, and it is what the gospel is about.

Second, those forgiven have “a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” This is what is unique about those who are faithful to Jesus Christ. They still struggle, as all do, but they have a hope based on “the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (**Philippians 3:9**).

All of this is a wonderful plan, of course, but it requires life's most serious choice and its greatest love. For those living under the deadly power of Satan, no moderate remedy will do. **Jesus Christ can save us, but we must turn to Him decisively. In sin, we took our hearts away from our God. We must give them back.** For after all, there are only two alternatives, only two possible “fathers” waiting for us in eternity. We must choose between them.

There is no heaven with a little of hell in it — no plan
to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets.
Out Satan must go, every hair and feather!

GEORGE MACDONALD

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. Read **Acts 26:15-18** carefully. What God said Paul would be preaching sounds very different from what is preached in many churches today. Why do you think there is so little emphasis on repentance today?
2. In your experience, what has been the hardest part of turning “from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God”? God will help us, of course, but what part of this must we do? What is the commitment He asks us to make?
3. Do you agree that the gospel of Christ “requires life's most serious choice and its greatest love”? What were the things you had to turn away from in order to turn to Christ? What are the things still awaiting your repentance?

SELF MUST BE CRUCIFIED

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Matthew 16:24,25

FOR JESUS, THE JOY WAS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CROSS. The “joy that was set before him” could only be His after He “endured the cross” (**Hebrews 12:2**). If we wish to follow Jesus, what will we do? We want the joy He now has with the Father, but will we follow Him to the cross? “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

There have been some of the Lord’s disciples who have died by crucifixion as Jesus did. Peter seems to have suffered such a death (**John 21:18,19**). But that is not what the Lord was talking about when He said we must “take up our cross.” Regardless of what happens to our physical bodies, there is something else about us that must die. There is something that must be “denied.”



“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.” For all of us (at least those old enough to have committed sin), it is “self” that must be crucified. Paul said of his own conversion, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (**Galatians 2:20**).

God created us for the joy of living inside the limits of His love. He never wanted anything for us but “life.” Yet we rebelled. We threw off His restraints. And what we found was not greater life, but “death” in all of its many forms. So this “self” — this stubborn, greedy demand to grasp what is “ours” — is what got us into trouble. If we’re to be saved, it will have to be gotten rid of.

If we’re not willing to put our self-will to death, we make a tragic and foolish mistake. Jesus said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” It is life’s ultimate irony that *we only get what we’ve given up*.

It sounds like a good thing to be “resurrected,” doesn’t it? But there is some dying that has to be done before a resurrection can take place. *If there is anything other than God that we can’t or won’t give up, then the devil has our heart.* “Give it up,” Jesus says. “Hold on to it, and you will die. But die, and you will live.”

Without sacrifice there is no resurrection.

ANDRÉ GIDE

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. Is **Matthew 16:24,25**, a text that *challenges* us, in conflict with **Matthew 11:28-30**, a text that *comforts* us? What did Jesus mean by denying ourselves and taking up our cross?
2. In **Galatians 2:20**, what was it about Paul that had been “crucified with Christ”? As a human being, he still had some kind of “self” or personhood, obviously. So what was it that had been put to death? Did God put it to death or did Paul have to do it?
3. What if we refuse to let go of the part of us that Jesus said must be put to death? Discuss His statement that “whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (**Matthew 16:25**).

WHOLEHEARTED REPENTANCE VS. PRETENSE

Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 3:10

AS CHILDREN, WE SOMETIMES EXCUSED OUR FAILURE TO KEEP A PROMISE BY SAYING THAT WE “HAD OUR FINGERS CROSSED.” The promise was not binding (we said) because we didn’t really mean it, as indicated by the secret crossing of our fingers. A lawyer would say the contract was not a *bona fide* commitment made in “good faith” — we never intended to do what we said.

In the days of Jeremiah, the people in Jerusalem and Judah had become guilty of idolatry just like the ten northern tribes of Israel. Having been called to repentance by the preaching of the prophets, there had been occasional reforms, but the repentance had not been genuine or thorough. “Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD.”



Were their “fingers crossed” when they said they would return to God? Did they not even intend to repent? We don’t know. But in any case, the Lord said that they did not return to Him with a “whole heart.” The person lacking a “whole heart” is one whose mind is not made up. He may not be deliberately dishonest in the statement of what he plans to do, but his plans are complicated by doubts. Like a man in a wedding ceremony who pledges to love his wife with “all his heart” but has not really closed the door of his heart to a previous relationship, the people of Judah only pretended that they had put away every “god” except God.

The opposite of wholeheartedness is double-mindedness. It is the problem of the person whose mind is torn between competing loyalties — and it is a problem we are told to get rid of. “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (**James 4:8**).

There is no damage to our souls that Christ cannot repair. But He will not be manipulated by fake repentance on our part. If we expect His forgiveness and help, we’d better lay it all down before Him, with extreme honesty. No exceptions and no excuses will be allowed, and if we have in mind anything other than complete repentance, we’d better not insult Him by saying that we’re “sorry.”

Christ can do wonders with a broken heart
if He is given all the pieces.

OLD SAYING

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. In your own words, what does it mean to return to God with our “whole heart”? How would you describe the opposite of that, the kind of repentance that is mere pretense? What did Peter mean by “if possible” when he said, “Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you” (**Act 8:22**).
2. In addition to **James 4:8**, can you think of other passages that talk about the danger of being “double-minded”? Within the context of **James 4:8**, what does it mean to “purify” our hearts?
3. When we engage in repentance, does God know what is in our hearts? What is said in **Hebrews 4:12,13**? When praying for God to help us with our repentance, what are some things we might ask Him to do?

FLEE! DON'T LOOK BACK!

Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.
Genesis 19:24-26

THE ADMONITION TO FLEE IS SOMETIMES MORE IMPORTANT THAN WE REALIZE. If we were in a difficult situation, the advice to “get out of there” might not sound very savvy or sophisticated. But we should not underestimate the wisdom of simply . . . *fleeing*.

As we have seen in previous readings, repentance is a crucial part of the gospel. It is not reasonable, even at the level of common sense, to expect God's forgiveness if we're not willing to give up the sins we want God to forgive us of. But repentance is hard, especially when sinful habits are deeply ingrained in our way of life. From a practical standpoint, there is not much chance of getting away from the clutches of sin if we don't flee from it — decisively rejecting it and pointing ourselves in a new direction. Even more important, our discipleship and consecration to the Lord require us to flee. The Lord's invitation to “forsake all and follow Me” is diametrically opposed to “stay where you are.” It's time we realized that discipleship is an adventure, not a “staycation.”



Flee. When we leave “Sodom,” we ought not to leave there in a leisurely way; disaster is on our heels, and we must make haste. And we should keep this in mind: we aren't just fleeing punishment or judgment; we are fleeing sin itself. In our daily lives, that means we should avoid temptation as much as possible, cutting

ourselves off from any influence that might drag us back into sin.

Don't look back. For repentance to be genuine, sin must be rejected decisively — a firm “no” must be said to the very thought of going back. ***If we “look back” by letting ourselves long for the nightlife in Sodom, it won't be long before we go back to live there.*** This does not mean we won't ever think about the past, but when we do, we will gently bring our minds back to where they need to be in the present. Tempted to reminisce, we will remember the decision we made to flee, and no matter what it costs, we will keep going toward God. Returning to Sodom is simply not an option.

When you from Sodom flee, the judgment to escape,
Salvation will depend on never looking back.

ANGELUS SILESIVS

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. In regard to repentance, what would it mean to “look back”? When we're dealing with sin, what is the difference in outcome between a decisive “no” and a tentative “maybe.”
2. How do we “flee” from a sin that we've been committing? As long as we live in the world, we can't completely remove ourselves from temptation, of course, but there are some things we can do that will help. What kinds of “fleeing” techniques have you found effective in your struggle with sin?
3. Sins that have become deeply ingrained habits present a special challenge to us. What wisdom have you learned in dealing with such habits in your own life?

A DECISION ONLY WE CAN MAKE

“Return to me . . . and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts.
Zechariah 1:3

THE MESSAGE PREACHED BY THE PROPHETS WAS THE MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE. Despite their blessings, Israel had frequently strayed from God, and they needed to turn back. This was not a popular message. Nobody ever likes to be told that they have departed from God, but in Israel’s case, this would have been especially true.



Given the privileges of their special role in God’s plan to save the world, there would have been many who presumed that Israel’s unique relationship with God guaranteed that His favor was automatically theirs. So when the prophets called upon the Jews to return to God, many in the audience might have said, “What in the world are you talking about? We’ve never left God.”

Yet Israel *did* need to return to God. The preaching of the prophets was desperately needed (even if it was not wanted). And today, we need to hear God’s appeal no less: “Return to me . . . and I will return to you.” It does no good to suppose that (a) we have such a privileged status before God, or (b) we are such good people, there could never be a breach between us and God. Both John the Baptist and Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (**Matthew**

3:1,2; 4:17), Peter preached repentance on Pentecost (**Acts 2:38**), and Jesus even called upon several of the congregations in Asia to repent (**Revelation 2:5**; etc.). And not only is there a universal *need* for repentance; there is a universal *possibility* of repentance. The fact that it is commanded presumes that it is possible for us to do it. *While there is still breath in our lungs, none of us is a hopeless case. We are never so distant from God that, by His grace, the trip back home can’t be made.*

As long as we sojourn in this world, God will never give up on us. He will always, always, always be calling us to come back home, just as He called Israel through Zechariah. Since God gave us a free will, the decision to return is one that only we can make, but we shouldn’t underestimate the desire with which He longs for us to make that choice. He loves us more than we can imagine, and He will pursue us down all the hard pathways of life, persistently pleading, “Return to me . . . and I will return to you.”

I strayed, and yet I remembered you. I heard your
voice behind me, telling me to return.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. To avoid repentance, what are the lies we sometimes tell ourselves about our situation? Explain why it takes both *honesty* and *courage* to repent of our sins?
2. Discuss the statement in **Jeremiah 17:9**, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” In **2 Samuel 12:1-14**, what did it take for David to see the seriousness of his sin and repent of it?
3. In the end, only we can make the decision to repent of our sins, but God will surround us with helpful influences. What did Paul mean when he said that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (**Romans 2:4**)?

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