

REPENTANCE - KNOWING WHY AND KNOWING HOW - Both Are Important - Part six - Sunday, September 20th, 2012, 6:30 p.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

ONGOING REPENTANCE AND THE FUTURE FREEDOM FROM THE BONDAGE AND POWER OF SIN (Part 2)

Matthew 3:1-12 - "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, [2] "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." [3] For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.' "[4] Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. [5] Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, [6] and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. [7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, [willing to be baptized - *religion* without *repentance*] he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [8] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. [9] And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' [NOT willing to admit and repent of sin] for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. [10] Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [11] "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

We studied the first of four points last Sunday night. All of these points pivot around the single idea that repentance, at least if it's going to be fruitful, New Testament repentance, always had to do with sin. It has to do with thinking rightly about sin - about calling sin sin with New Testament understanding.

The first point we emphasized was ***sin always defines the fundamental inability to please God in fallen human willing***. On our own we can do nothing to free ourselves. We will constantly fall short of the glory of God.

The second point was ***to sin is always to act in rebellion against God.*** As surely as we lack the ***ability*** to please God in our own strength (point number one) we also have inward wills ***unwilling to submit to God.*** We are by nature ***biased against God.*** The important point here is sin is always ***measured by calculating God into the picture.***

There are two more important points on the nature of sin as it relates to the whole subject of New Testament repentance:

3) **WHATEVER IS NOT OF FAITH IS SIN**

These words come from a fascinating verse of Scripture: **Romans 14:23** - ***“But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”***

Before I look at the powerful truth in this verse, I want to expose what is an increasingly popular, and yet cruel misinterpretation of these words - ***“...whatever is not of faith is sin.”***

I have actually seen this happen: Someone is being prayed for, perhaps for healing. But the healing doesn't come. Then, some teacher will come to analyze the situation in this way - “Because healing is promised in the Scriptures, and because you're not healed, then you must not have exercised enough faith. And whatever is not of faith is sin, so there must be sin blocking faith in your heart. Get rid of the sin, or the doubt, and you will be healed!”

Besides being cruel and unchristlike, that is a terrible way of interpreting these words from Paul. There is a rich nugget of understanding in these frequently overlooked words about the nature of sin and the deceitful ruin it brings into countless lives.

“Whatever is not of faith is sin.” This has to be the one of the most ***penetrating*** definitions of sin in the whole Bible. It immediately removes sin from the realm of our lists of do’s and don’ts and sweeps our understanding of sin into the realm of ***attitudes and motives and dispositions***. In other words, Paul is dealing with the ***root*** of sin in these words.

And the really stunning revelation found in these verses is to be seen in this fact: ***The actions described in these verses aren’t, in and of themselves, sinful at all.*** The issue is that of eating foods that some saw as unclean. Some people felt that Christians had the freedom to eat all foods. Others felt that Christians had to avoid meats that had been pronounced unclean.

Paul makes it clear where he stands on the issue at least twice in this fourteenth chapter:

Romans 14:14a - ***“.... I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”***

Romans 14:20b - ***“....Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.”***

And yet, after saying all of this, Paul still says if a person is convinced that eating these meats is wrong - ***even though, in itself, the act of eating these meats isn’t sinful*** - the person who eats, while ***thinking*** his eating is sinful ***is*** guilty of sin, because ***“whatever is not of faith is sin.”***

These are deeply searching words. We need to pay attention as Paul ***redefines*** sin. Sin, says Paul, cannot properly be defined in terms of mere acts of eating and

drinking. Sin must be defined, not merely by the **act**, but by the **root**.

To find out **why** eating this meat is sinful for the person who thinks it is sinful but eats anyway we need to ask another question: ***What would make a person eat the meat if he honestly thought in his heart that such eating was sinful?***

What could **motivate** such eating?

There are several possibilities: He may eat because he felt pressure from others to go ahead and eat against his convictions. This would fit in very well with the context of the weaker and stronger brother teaching of Romans 14.

Or, perhaps this person just went ahead and ate the meat because he just **really loved** meat. He was tempted and caved in to the desires of his appetite. But, whatever his reasons, we know this for sure, he ate the meat - ***even though he thought it was sinful to do so*** - because he thought he would be ***happier, or more satisfied, or more accepted by his peers, than if he didn't eat the meat.***

In other words, there was some other concern - some other desire - some other factor - that, at least for that moment, became more dominant - more important - than the confidence that obeying God would bring the most blessing and satisfaction in the long run.

And, just for that moment, ***even though his judgment about eating meat was mistaken, eating that meat was more important to him than pleasing God.***

And that's a perfect description of a sinful, self-centered heart. That's a heart that isn't standing in good **faith** before God.

This is Paul exposing the **root** of sinful actions. Righteousness stems from the heart. "Sin," in the words of John Piper, "is anything, any act, any emotion, any

attitude, that does not sprout from the soil of rich confidence in the God of hope.”
Whatever is not of faith is sin.

And the reason Paul picks up this issue of eating meat, which isn't a sinful **act**, like committing adultery or some homosexual act, is precisely because in this action of eating meat, ***the issue of heart motive can be clearly isolated because the act, in itself, isn't sinful at all.*** The sinfulness is in the ***desire and motive of the heart alone.***

And if you ***train*** your heart to go against its inward convictions in some ***small*** matter like eating meat, you will have it easy to go against your convictions when tempted in some much more ***serious*** matter. The simple rule is it's always a sin to ***train your will to act against conscience.***

While not the subject tonight, this is also why it is such a serious matter to cause your brother or sister to stumble against their convictions, even in some area where you know you have complete freedom in Christ to do what you're doing. ***He*** may not. And you may be training him to go against his convictions in some area of serious disobedience to the Lord.

But in our Romans 14:3 text we see the importance, in the words of the Old Testament, of ***“keeping the heart with all diligence.”*** We see the importance of never violating the inward sense of compulsion or restraint. We see that nothing - ***not even an innocent act*** - must be allowed to draw our devotion and orientation to God alone.

We face these kinds of situations over and over again in life. You've been offered a promotion in Winnipeg. It's more money. And housing is cheaper in Winnipeg. And immediately, while excitement begins to mount, you feel something else

happening in your heart. You try to crowd out those thoughts about how well your kids are doing in the youth group, and how hard it is to find a good church home. You try to focus on how much you will be able to reduce your mortgage.

Little by little, you push back those darker feelings and questions until they don't really bother you anymore.

Listen, there's not a verse in the Bible to tell you whether or not to move to Winnipeg. But don't do anything you can't do in good faith. ***Don't do anything that can only be justified by making other considerations more important than spiritual considerations*** - "I can make more money" - "I can get a bigger house." ***Bring spiritual commitments into the picture.***

4) **TO FAIL TO DO WHAT WE KNOW WE SHOULD IS SIN**

James 4:17 - "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

How often I've heard this from people: "You know, pastor Don, I really feel the Lord has been dealing with my heart lately. I really think I ought to...." And there it is, that little telltale word - "***ought.***" It's God's moral imperative to the conscience.

"I really ought to spend more time with my wife."

"I really ought to get my family out to Church."

"I really ought to start tithing"

"I really ought to pay for those stamps I've been using from the office."

"I really ought to quit smoking."

"I really ought to treat my employees better than I do."

“I really ought to get out to church more regularly.”

The list is absolutely endless. And they don't all apply to everybody. But they describe so perfectly the simple process of the Spirit of God, in simple, direct terms, placing His finger right on your chest - ***“Don, you ought to do this!”***

“Well what about it, Pastor Don? Do I go to hell for not quitting smoking, or not taking my family to Church?”

Actually, I don't think heaven or hell is the issue with most of these promptings, at least not at the beginning. I don't think heaven and hell ride on each individual prompting from the Lord. But let me tell what I **do** think happens in homes and churches all across Canada every week as a result of people **not** responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit about things they ought to do:

It's Sunday night - prayer time - at Cedarview Community Church. Only it's not November, 2012. It's September, 2020. The prayer list gets handed out. People read the names. “Please pray for brother Jack. He's dying of lung cancer.” And so we pray. People call out to God. But Jack doesn't get healed. In fact, he gets much worse, and eventually dies. And the whole church is thrown into distress because brother Jack was a good man. Why didn't he get healed?

Of course, what most of that crowd present on Sunday night, 2020 won't know at all is that prayer request never would have been there at all if, way back in 2012 Jack had ***responded repentantly***, if he had obeyed the voice of the Holy Spirit when the Spirit, with nothing but love and power and grace to offer, began to gently say to Jack, ***“You know, My dear child, it grieves My heart to see what you're doing to your body. I have so much more in store for your life. You really***

ought to quit smoking.”

Again, the prayer list goes out, dated September 2020. “Please pray for son Willie. He’s not living for the Lord. He’s married a non-Christian girl and has no interest in the things of God. There seems to be no hope for their home staying together.”

And again, there is no way of that congregation knowing that this request never would have been there if, way back in December, 2012 a father had been listening when the Holy Spirit, with nothing but grace and love and provision in His heart, was saying, ***“You know, you really ought to work harder at getting your family out regularly to Church on Sunday.”***

Whenever God speaks and says, ***“Don, you really ought to do so and so....”*** I will miss the ***future grace*** that would have been manifested on my life by ***not*** paying attention to His firm, but loving voice. God always speaks to ***free*** my life from consequences of neglect that I can’t even see yet. ***Nothing can save my life from the axe head of judgment if I fail to respond repentantly when the Spirit speaks to my heart - Matthew 3:10 - “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

I said at the beginning of this teaching that I wanted to wrap up by describing again the call of repentance, particularly as it’s offered to these religious people.

Repentance is always issued to people who know better than they live.

Repentance is what you ***do after*** you come to ***understand*** what God is saying to your heart.

Because this is so, there is always the particular temptation to ***avoid*** repentance

by ***pretending religious knowledge and ceremony is, in and of itself, enough to produce godliness.***

“We have Abraham as our father” is the cry of religion trying to avoid repentance. That’s why John’s words are so stark and raw to these Pharisees. John sees the potential in them - and in religiously upright people of all generations - to become like the ***“generation of vipers” - just like Satan himself - who knew the most and fell the farthest.***

There is nothing to ***force*** repentance in people who hear and know the truth. And the accumulation of more knowledge, without genuine, ongoing repentance, will be totally fruitless to transform the heart.

The ongoing call of repentance is to ***“bear fruit in keeping with repentance”(3:8)***. Those aren’t the words of an unloving, angry God or a goofy, desert-crazed prophet. They’re the summons of the Holy Spirit to keep the gates of our hearts ongoingly open to the preparation of a highway for the King, to keep developing and expanding His gracious, fruitful reign until He comes again.