

7/30/2023

“In Repentance, We Come”

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Luke 5:32

SPECIAL MUSIC: Create In Me

The Acappella Company

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noUeQQ64Q1I>



RETURN ME TO YOUR CRUCIBLE

Like the thief on the cross,
Who am I to ask for forgiveness?
For in all of my restiveness
Knowing it should be my blood spilled
As I watch you pay the cost
For my negligence and selfishness,
Reticent to fall on my knees
At your feet.
“I’m sorry”
Doesn’t return the blood
To your body,
A shoddy attempt
At repentance
Behind a veil of
Questionable humility
As I wear an undeserved crown,
In avoidance of true confession,
Refusing to give up possession
Of my Soul.
Oh Lord,
Return me to your crucible
And purify and reduce me
To the purity
That enables me
To become one with your Spirit.

The following is a story by Stacy Marshall printed in Modern Day Parable Church. It has been circulating on various social media sites as well.

A man went to church. He forgot to switch off his cell phone and the phone rang during prayer. The pastor scolded him. The worshippers admonished him after prayers for interrupting the silence. His wife kept on lecturing him on his carelessness all the way home. One could see the shame, embarrassment and humiliation on his face. After all this, he never stepped foot in the church again.

AND

That evening, he went to a bar. He was still nervous and trembling. He spilled his drink on the table by accident. The waiter apologized and gave him a napkin to clean himself. The janitor mopped the floor. The female manager offered him a complimentary drink. She also gave him a huge hug and a peck while saying, "Don't worry man. Who doesn't make mistakes?" He has not stopped going to that bar since then.

"Who doesn't make mistakes?" We've all been in this man's position at some time. We have all, at some point, forgotten to silence our cell phones while we are in church, the theatre, a concert, or other public performance space and everyone in the space turns to look at us with a frown and somewhat angry eyes for disturbing their environment during the event. It even happens to preachers.

Which is the reason that I leave my phone on my desk before coming into the worship space. All too often we forget those times that we were at fault. But when it happens to someone else, and we pass a little judgement on their negligence. And sometimes we bring it up after the service. I have been in services where the pastor points out the offending church goer thinking that shaming them will keep it from happening again and also be a reminder to everyone else.

Now, I want us all to think about that. Where does the sin lie here? Is it with the man that innocently forgot to turn off his cell phone, or with the people that passed judgement on him? I know we think the answer is obvious, but I don't usually go around stating the obvious. We want to feel sorry for the way the man got treated, and we would be right to question the motives of those involved in shaming him. But we do have to acknowledge the fact the man did forget to turn off his cell phone and disturbed the worship of others. Just because all of us have innocently forgotten to turn off our cell phones and it rings disturbing others, does not mean that it is an acceptable thing to do.

I know you remember these verses from Matthew 7:3-5:

3 “Why do you notice the little piece of dust that is in your brother’s eye, but you don’t notice the big piece of wood that is in your own eye?”

4 Why do you say to your brother, ‘Let me take that little piece of dust out of your eye’? Look at yourself first! You still have that big piece of wood in your own eye.

5 You are a hypocrite! First, take the wood out of your own eye. Then you will see clearly enough to take the dust out of your brother's eye.

There have been so many messages preached on these verses. But for me, they often fall a little short. The focus is always on getting yourself right before God before trying to take the splinter from the eye of your brother. And that is a great lesson regarding hypocrisy. We don't need to go around finding fault with others when we have so many faults ourselves that need to be taken care of.

But not once have I heard a sermon that mention that after we have dealt with our own hypocrisy there is an acknowledgement that our brother still has the speck in his eye that needs to be attended to. In truth, we may never get to the point where we have removed all the corruption in our lives and arrive at a place where we can start correcting others. But that doesn't mean those people aren't hurting and in need of us. What they need is acceptance, not judgement. At least not our judgement. They still need us to lift them in prayer and do our best to help them through those dark times in their lives without taking on an air of superiority. We need to approach these opportunities to help with an attitude of humility, grace, and mercy. Just like Jesus when he was speaking with the thief on the cross.

At the same time, we can't get so caught up in our own attempt at growth that we forget there are people around us that still need our help. We can't fall into the trap of "I am too unworthy, I am too sinful, I am too weak to help others." That was never the intent of this message from Jesus.

I believe that the first step towards redemption is acceptance that every individual is unique. Who they are is never dependent on who I think they are, but on their own individuality as seen by God. How strange it is that we can believe that we have some kind of special insight into someone else's pain, that we understand the path that has brought them to this point. We can falsely believe that because Jesus has redeemed us that we are now special and can start fixing other people. We forget that it is God who fixes people, that cleanses their souls, just like He did for us. We forget that we are a work in progress ourselves. While we believe in Jesus and strive to be like him, we will never be completely successful. But a great first step is to admit to ourselves that we don't stop sinning the moment we embrace a relationship with God. And while He continues to forgive us and bring us back into a right relationship, we continue to sin and move away from Him. It becomes a tug-of-war and our success depends on our own dedication to bring about true change in our own lives. Our progress is measured by how far we move the flag on the rope closer to truth.

We are like laundry. We get washed super clean and dried, ready to be worn by God to help our neighbors. Then we get dirty again and need to be washed again. I am so very glad that God allows me to get clean on a regular basis, to wash away the dirt that sneaks into my life. Jesus is always ready with the basin and the towel to clean me up. There isn't a day that goes by that he isn't at the ready to wash the dirt from my feet.

In our story today, where do we find the greatest amount of grace and mercy, in the church or in the bar? The bar of course. The people in the bar didn't judge the man even when he made a mistake. Instead, they chose to help him through his moment of embarrassment and engaged with him at a much higher level of grace than the people in the church did. I, for one, would rather be like the people in the bar and be gracious and non-judgmental than to get so comfortable in my skin that I feel it is my right as a Christian to judge people. We have all heard the phrase, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum or hotel for Saints." The moment that we forget that, we start widening the gap between us and our Lord. We find ourselves becoming more exclusive than inclusive, the exact opposite of Jesus and his teachings.

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Why do you think Jesus phrases the verse this way? Aren't we always striving for righteousness? As Christians, isn't that the nature of our journey? There is a significant difference between striving for righteousness and believing that we have achieved it. We try to turn redemption into some kind of game. If we win, we go to heaven. And if we don't, we go to hell. This is twisted logic where we believe that if we have earned more brownie points than someone else, we are in a position to be critical of the that person. "I know the Bible better than you, so you need to listen to me." "I come to church every Sunday. You need to step up your game." "I volunteer at the food bank. Where were you?" "I gave X amount on Sunday. How much did you give?"

The very moment that we feel that we have achieved righteousness, we have failed in the very basic teachings of our Lord and Master. We are all running the same course and it isn't a race. We are all trying to achieve the same goal of pleasing Jesus, but there are no winners or losers. There is only Jesus. And if we are truly following the tenants of Jesus, every step we take is an opportunity to help someone else as they struggle with the same course that we are on.

I love those stories where athletes are in a competition where someone gets injured and another participant stops to help them, thereby losing the contest, but winning the true trophy of grace and mercy, a greater example of true sportsmanship. Some people laugh and condemn the contestants that do this, pointing out that the event is a competition. They do not realize that the real competition is not in our brains or our muscles, but in our hearts. Do we have the heart to compete in such a way that our compassion is our priority? Isn't personal growth as a human being far more important than winning a race?

10 “One day there was a Pharisee and a tax collector. Both went to the Temple to pray.

11 The Pharisee stood alone, away from the tax collector. When the Pharisee prayed, he said, ‘God, I thank you that I am not as bad as other people. I am not like men who steal, cheat, or take part in adultery. I thank you that I am better than this tax collector.

12 I give up eating twice a week, and I give one-tenth of everything I earn!’

13 “The tax collector stood at a distance. When he prayed, he would not even look up to heaven. He beat on his chest because he was so sad. He said, ‘God, have mercy on me. I am a sinner!’

14 I tell you, when this man went home, he was right with God. But the Pharisee was not right with God. Everyone who makes himself great will be made humble. But everyone who makes himself humble will be made great.”

John 18: 10-14

There are times when our situation prevents us from doing all that we want or feel we need to. That is the way life works. When the widow gave her last coin at the temple, it may not have been 10% of what she had received. But she gave all that she could, and no one has the right to stand in judgement of her gift. It is with humility that we stand in the presence of God, offering what we have. Pride has no place in a relationship with God.

The thief on the cross humbled himself next to Christ, acknowledging that he was getting the punishment that he deserved, and that Jesus was innocent. He didn't pray the sinner's prayer, but he understood who was on the cross next to him and it humbled him. The other thief felt no such humility. The first thief understood, in spite of his circumstances, that Jesus truly was the Son of the Most High.

Who are we in our everyday lives? Are we like the Pharisee looking down on the tax collector? Or are we the tax collector acknowledging that we are

sinners, unworthy of redemption, but seeking grace. Are we like the widow, giving what we can. Or are we in our wealth sitting in judgment of her believing that she should give more? Are we the thief on the cross lacking in humility, believing that life had dealt us a bad hand, or are we like the thief that acknowledged his transgressions that led him to that moment on the cross where, in humility, he acknowledges the righteousness of the Son of God?

I'm going to say something a little harsh here. But do understand this is directed at me as much or more than anyone. Jesus is not interested in our excuses. There are no righteous excuses when we are in the presence of Christ, who was without fault and willingly sacrificed his life for us. There is no "but, Lord, there were extenuating circumstances."

It all boils down to our priorities. Where do we take our stand? Do we define ourselves by our politics, or by our relationship with Christ? We cannot serve two masters. Jesus tells us that it just isn't possible. Do we define ourselves by our bank accounts, or by our relationship with Jesus Christ? **"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."** You cannot serve both God and anything else. Are we given to humility before our Savior, or are we resting in our pride believing that we are "Good enough?" That there is no need for repentance because we are above that?

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Why doesn't Jesus call the righteous to repentance? Well, beyond the fact that no one is righteous but God, people who believe that they are righteous are generally not interested in repentance. Why would they believe they need repentance if they believe themselves to be righteous? People who believe themselves to be perfect are not looking for criticism and if they do get it, they are not open to hearing it. As a matter of fact, they usually get indignant, believing that the criticism is without merit.

We are born into imperfection. We live our lives in imperfection. We will die in our imperfection. But acknowledging our imperfection before God is our call to repentance with the reward of redemption. God loves us in our imperfection and just loves it when we submit our flaws to Him so that He can work to hone us into better human beings, better able to serve his children.

This week, even if we haven't done it in a while, let us spend some time in prayer just admitting our flaws to God. Yes, we know what they are, and God knows what they are, but he really wants us to come before Him in humility and present those flaws. Let us allow Him to work out the kinks in our lives and turn those deficits into assets to further His Kingdom. Let God throw us back into his crucible so that he can correct our flaws, allowing God to make us into the tools that He needs by humbling ourselves at His feet.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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