

Christian, Repent!

3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

*"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'*

⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Have you ever noticed that there are statements that just don't seem to apply to our lives anymore? They're kind of outdated. For example, if someone says, "Can I borrow a dime to make a phone call?" or "Let me save that to my floppy disk," or "I have to shovel coal into the furnace," or "Remember the Alamo," you might say, "None of those statements really apply to our lives today. There all from a different time and place.

Sometimes, people think the same thing is true about things that Bible says. They think, "That doesn't apply to our lives today." Take for example, the statement that John the Baptist makes in our text for today. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" For a lot of people, that sounds like something from another era. That sounds so old fashioned. Or it reminds them of the guy on the street corner with a sign that says, "Repent, the end is near!" But what about you? Do you think that the concept of repenting has any relevance for your life as a Christian in the year 2022?

The fact is, the Bible uses the word repent or repentance over 150 times in the pages of Scripture. And a lot of the times those words are not directed to unbelievers. They're directed to people like you and me. People who are interested in hearing what God has to say. Just as surely as John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance, as surely as Jesus once said, "*Unless you repent, you too will all perish.*" (Luke 13:1) Just as Martin Luther once wrote in the first of his 95 Theses, *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance,* so surely is that also a message that applies to our life today. In fact, it's our theme today, namely,

Christian, repent!

Maybe the first question we should ask is, “What does the Bible mean by that word, repent? Well, from a Biblical perspective, repentance involves two parts. The first part of repentance is called contrition, that is, a sincere sorrow over our sins. It’s the acknowledgement that we have offended a holy God not only by what we have thought, said and done, but by who we are, by nature. It’s the confession that we are by nature sinful, and worthy of God’s righteous wrath and punishment. To repent is to be sorry for our sins. But that’s only the first half of repentance.

The second half is where many people get off track. They think that if they are really sorry, then need to somehow make up for what they did. Our Catholic friends call that “doing penance,” somehow balancing the scales by doing something good. But true repentance is not what I do for God to show how sorry I am. Rather true repentance, the kind that John and Jesus and the Apostle Paul preached, is all about believing what Jesus has done for us. True repentance is something that God works in our heart through the message of the Gospel as he leads us to trust that for the sake of Jesus’ suffering and death, our sins are all paid in full. We’re not guilty in God’s eyes. When you put those two halves together, sorrow over sin and faith in God’s forgiveness won for us in Christ, you get with the Bible calls repentance. Or in the words of the Augsburg confession, *Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace. (A.C. Article XII)*

But now, maybe you’re thinking, “Yes, I know all that. I know I’m a sinner. I know Jesus died to take away my sins. I’ve believed that for years. So why does the Bible keep saying that I need to repent? Haven’t I done that already?” I don’t know. Have you? The Greek word for repent literally means to have a change of heart, or to turn away from something. It means that if we recognize that we are doing something is evil, we don’t try to hide it or justify it. Instead, we get rid of it. We let go of it. How does the Bible put it? *He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)* Whoever confesses and renounces them. Who says, “No more of that for me.”

But you see, this is where Satan lays a trap for each one of us. The trap is this. Satan gets us to think that as long as we know we’re sinners and as long as we believe that Jesus died for our sins, we’re good to go. I mean, “Jesus paid for all our sins, right?” Yes, that’s certainly true. John said it well, *“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* The question is, do you believe that? Or more specifically, do you believe that Jesus has taken away every one of your sins. Or are you still holding onto one or two of them? Are you saying, “Jesus, I don’t need you to pay for this one, because I don’t think it’s that bad. In fact, I might want to keep doing it. In fact, I’ve become kind of comfortable with it. I think I’ll just hang on to it. I’ll not let go of it. I’ll not confess it, and certainly not renounce it.

My friends, did you know that just one sin, if left unrepented, will separate you from God. And if you die in that state of spiritual impenitence, you’re damned. Not because that one sin was any worse than any other sin. Every sin is equally worthy of eternal punishment. The difference is that rather than letting go of that sin and letting Jesus pay for it, you decided you’d pay for it yourself.

Do you know what that’s like? (Some of you have heard me use this illustration before.) It’s like if I’m fishing on the bank of the Wolf River and I hook into a big old sturgeon—if you’ve ever caught a sturgeon as they come up the river to spawn, you know that it’s like hooking onto a submarine. There’s no turning them around. They just keep going and going and going.

Well, if my attitude is, “I’m not going to let this one get away,” and it starts pulling me into the water. And pretty soon I’m up to my ankles and then to my waist and eventually I’m pulled under the water, and I drown, tell me, was it the fish’s fault? Did that fish kill me? No, what killed me was my refusal to let go of that fish. It wasn’t the fish that caused my death, it was my attitude about that fish. In the end, I valued that fish more than I valued my own life. My friends, that’s what unrepentant sin is like. There are going to be good, church-going people, who are going to end up in hell—because they refused to let go of their sin.

Which leads me to this question: “What is the sturgeon in your life? What’s the sin that you just don’t want to let go of?” Maybe, it’s the sin of bitterness. You just can’t let go of what he did to you or what she said about you or how they mistreated you. You’re holding it in your heart. You can’t let it go. Or more accurately, you won’t let it go. And it’s that unforgiving spirit that will separate you from God and his forgiveness. What did Jesus say? *“If you don’t forgive others their sins, your Father won’t forgive your sins.”* (Matthew 6:15) Your unrepented sin will separate you from God.

Or maybe, the sturgeon in your life, the sin that has the potential to drag you under forever, is sexual immorality. You’re sleeping with someone you’re not married to. Or you’re engaging in behavior that God says belongs only in a marriage bed. And you’re trying to justify it with statements like, “Everybody else is doing it. We’re not hurting anybody. We love each other and plan to get married.” Or maybe you even admit to yourself and others things like, “I know it’s wrong, I know God doesn’t approve but...” But what? But you’re going to do it anyway? Do you know what the Bible says about that? Hebrews, chapter 10: *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we receive the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.* (Hebrews 10:26-27)

Actually, that passage is not speaking specifically about sexual sins. In context, it’s talking about people who know that God says that he wants his people to gather together for worship and mutual encouragement and still they say, “Nope, I’m not going to do it.” I’m going to find something else to do with my time. Any time we deliberately sin against God’s will, that’s impenitence. And in the end, impenitence damns. Isn’t that the point that Saint Paul makes in Galatians chapter 5? After running through this whole list of what Paul calls the acts of the sinful nature, for example, sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, drunkenness, and the like, he says what? He says, *I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.* (Gal. 5:19-21) Now, there’s an important distinction to make in that verse. Notice that Paul doesn’t say those who do these things, those who fall into one of these sins, will not inherit the kingdom of God. No, he uses a different Greek word, one that means, “to continue to do”, or “to practice”, or as the NIV says, “those who live like this.” In other words, if we go make to my fishing illustration, there’s a difference between accidentally hooking a sturgeon and hanging on to a sturgeon till you die. You may not be able to prevent yourself from falling into sin, but living in it, that will kill you!

...Especially if you think that it won’t. Especially if you think, “I’m good. Man, I’m a religious person. I believe in God. I even read the Bible.” You realize, that’s exactly the kind of people that John the Baptist was preaching to here in our text. And what did he say to them? Matthew tells us. *When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees* (in other words, some of the most religious people of his day) *coming out to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”* In other words, “You hypocrites. You children of the original Serpent

Deceiver. Putting on a good show for everybody all while clinging to the sins that rot at your soul. You say you are the children of Abraham, but you don't live or believe what Abraham believed. That's why John says. *"The ax is already at the root of the tree and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."* (Matthew 3:10)

My question to you is this, if John the Baptist were here today, would he be saying to you and me the same thing he said to them? I mean, let's face it, we look pretty, sitting here in church. Might John be saying to us, "You hypocrites! What are you hiding. What sins are you holding on to?" My friends, if you think that John's words could never apply to you. If you think that you don't need to repent. If you think that you can live in sin and live with God, then for you, this sermon needs to end right here where John's ended. And that's with the picture of Jesus coming on the last day as judge, to clear his threshing floor by burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. For the unrepentant sinner that's where the story always ends.

But, on the other hand, if you know that John's call to repentance really does speak to your heart. If you know that you have sins that you need to let go of. If you can say with the Psalmist, *I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.* (Psalm 51:3) If you know that your eternal life is on the line, then I can end this sermon the same way that John began his sermon. And that's with the words, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* (Matthew 3:2) What does that mean? It means that King Jesus, who alone can open the gates of heaven, has now come near to you. Not only by being born into this world to pay for the sins of the world. But also, by coming near to you in his word and Sacrament. That's how God binds up our broken hearts. How does King David put it? *A broken and contrite heart, o God, you will not despise.* (Psalm 51:17)

And exactly how does Jesus bind up broken hearts? By saying to us what he once said to the paralyzed man: *"Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven."* (Matthew 9:2) Or what Jesus once said to the thief on his dying day, *"Today you will be with me in Paradise.* (Luke 23:43). Or what Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, *"Neither do I condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin."* (John 8:11)

Ultimately, it's Christ's love for sinners like us, people who know our sins and are tormented by them...it's his willingness to take on our sins and take the rap for them, it's his willingness carry our sin to the cross—it's that love and forgiveness that ultimately changes our hearts. It leads us to say, "Jesus, I don't know why you would do it, but if you're willing to take my sin, then I guess I'll give them to you. And I mean, all of them.

My friends, that's what it means to repent. It means turning away from our sin and turning toward our Savior. It means bringing all our baggage to the cross, and then hearing from Christ's called servant, as from Jesus himself, in the words of the absolution or here in the Lord's supper, those most powerful, life-changing words, "Be filled with joy. Your sins are forgiven!" You realize what that means, don't you? It means that your sins are no longer clinging to you. And more importantly, you no longer need to cling to your sins. For in Christ, your sins are all forgiven. Believe it. And live it. For Jesus' sake. Amen.