

John the Baptist
(Repentance)
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McLean Bible Church
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Hey you know, a while back I was talking to someone, and they asked me a question. Here's what they said. They said, "You know, I have a friend who claims to be a Christian, but she lives a really profane and a really unholy lifestyle." The person talking to me said, "I don't get it, Lon. How can a person live like this and be a true Christian?" I said, "Well, they're probably not a true Christian." The person talking to me said, "Well, I don't get it. How can that be? This lady walked down a church aisle. She went to the front of a church. She prayed the sinner's prayer and asked Jesus Christ into her life. How can she not be a true Christian?"

Well, that's an excellent question, isn't it, folks? You say, "Yeah it is, Lon. What's the answer?" Well, friends, why don't we let Peter answer that question in Acts chapter 3. Peter said to the Jewish people of his day, "Repent and turn to God, so that your sins might be wiped out." The apostle Paul said in Acts chapter 26, "I preach to all people everywhere that they should repent and turn to God."

You see, the point is, my friends, without repentance, the sinner's prayer never reaches critical mass in a person's life. This is what we want to talk about today. We want to talk about repentance, because if you remember, we're in a series called "People Jesus Met." Today Jesus is going to meet John the Baptist in Matthew chapter 3. Of course, John the Baptist was all about repentance. That's our subject for the day.

Let's begin in Matthew 3:1. "In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent'"—hey, there's our word!—"for the kingdom of heaven is near. This was He of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke, when Isaiah said, "A voice calling in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for Him." And people were coming out to John from Jerusalem and all Judea, confessing their sins and being baptized by John in the Jordan River, and John said, 'I am baptizing you

with water for repentance” —there’s our word—“but one more powerful than I is coming, whose sandals I am not unworthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John, and John tried to deter Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and You’re coming to me?’ But Jesus replied, ‘Let it be for now. It is proper for us to do this, so that we may fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented, and he baptized Jesus.”

Now it’s obvious, my friends, from their encounter here in Matthew chapter 3 that the Lord Jesus endorsed the ministry and the message of John the Baptist. The ministry and the message of John the Baptist, my friends, was all about repentance. That raises the question, “Why? Why did God send John ahead of the Lord Jesus, preaching repentance?” We just read the answer in Matthew 3:3. The Bible says, “It was to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is the critical point we need to see today to get this, namely that the ministry of John the Baptist is what prepared people, is what got people ready for the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, the ministry of grace, the ministry of dispensing to us what we don’t deserve, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and heaven. To put it another way, the Bible teaches that in God’s economy, repentance always precedes grace.

Let me tell you why that is. It’s because, according to the Bible, repentance is the one and only basis upon which God does business with sinners. May I repeat that? Repentance is the one and only basis upon which God does business with sinners. This is why, in Acts 3:19, Peter said, “Repent and turn to God, so that”—notice the order of things—“then your sins may be wiped out.” In Luke chapter 24 after His resurrection, the Lord Jesus told the disciples that we are to go into the world and preach—notice the order—repentance and then the forgiveness of sins. Friends, this is God’s unchanging, eternal order of things.

So let’s go back to our original question of the day, shall we? Our original question was, “How can a person walk a church aisle, pray the sinner’s prayer, ask Jesus into their life, and not be a true Christian?” Listen, my friends, you can pray the sinner’s prayer once a day every day from now until doomsday, but unless it is

accompanied by true, godly, soul-deep, Holy-Spirit-generated repentance, then that sinner's prayer is not going to result in true, born-again salvation.

Now that's as far as we want to go in our passage where Jesus and John the Baptist met. We want to stop now and ask our most important question of the morning, so are we all ready? (audience responds) We're ready? All right, nice and loud, here we go now. One, two, three—SO WHAT? Yeah!

You say, "Lon, so what? See, look, I appreciate what you're saying, but you know, repentance is what a person does when they come to Christ, when they get saved, when they get eternal life for the first time. Lon, I've already done that, so really I don't understand why you're here talking to me. Repentance is over for me!" Oh, not so, kemosabe! No, no.

Listen, to Christians, Jesus said this in Revelation 3:19. He said, "Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline; therefore, be earnest and"—what's the next word?—"repent." Listen, this was not spoken to non-believers who needed to come to Christ; this was spoken to those of us who already belong to the Lord Jesus. You see, friends, when we come to know Christ as our personal Savior, then God sets out on a mission in our life. His mission is to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ, to make us Christlike in everything we say and everything we do, but there are a lot of impurities in our life that stand in the way of this. As God points these impurities out to us, as God rebukes these impurities in our life, Revelation 3:19 says that He expects us to repent over these things.

My point is that repentance is not just for non-Christians, friends. The Bible teaches that repentance is the one and only basis upon which God deals with all sinners, whether we're lost sinners or whether we're saved sinners. It doesn't make one bit of difference.

Now in light of that, it means that every single one of us here is either a lost sinner or a saved sinner, but every one of us here needs to know how to repent. This is something that God expects us to be doing either for the first time when we come to Christ for salvation or on an ongoing, daily basis as He is conforming us to the image of Christ and pointing out impurities in our life.

I want to talk to you today about what repentance is, how you do this. If someone walked up to you on the street and asked, "How do I repent," I want you to have some practical handles you can put on this for them and tell them how to do it. So from the Bible, let's answer the question, "How does a person repent? What does it look like?" To illustrate what repentance is, we're going to use the story, what I think is the greatest repentance story in the Bible, the story of the prodigal son.

Just in case you don't remember the story, let me give you the details very quickly. The story is that this rich man had two sons. The younger son came to him and said, "Father, I want to cash in my inheritance. Give me the money. Shekels, here we go." So the dad gave it to him, and the young son went off with his money and spent it all in sinful, profligate living, the Bible says, until finally he ended up with no money, no friends, no food to eat, living in a pig pen fighting with the pigs for the slop that was thrown to him.

Now this is a Jewish fellow in a pig pen. Do you understand what I'm saying to you here? This does not go together. Devout Jewish people and Red, Hot and Blue do not go together. (laughter) Do you understand what I'm saying to you? This was the worst thing that could ever happen to a devout Jewish person, to live in a pig pen and fight with pigs for the food. He had hit rock bottom.

Once he is there, he repents. We're going to watch him do this, and he is going to illustrate the four steps involved in true, biblical, godly repentance. He's going to illustrate all four of them, so here we go.

Step number one, if you and I want to do true, godly repentance, then step number one, we have to admit that we're going in the wrong direction. Here's how the prodigal son put it in Luke 15:17. He said, "My father's lowest servants have plenty to eat, and I'm here starving to death!" The prodigal son made a brutally honest assessment of how his life was going there in the pig pen. He was forced to admit that he had made a complete mess out of his life.

You see, for most of us, my friends, this is the hardest step in repentance, because none of us like to admit that we're wrong. None of us like to admit that our lifestyle is deeply flawed and that our behavior is self-destructive. The issue here is

pride, pure and simple pride. As sinners—listen to me—we will cling to our pride right down to the very last gasp. We will cling to our pride right as it takes us into the pig pen, just like the prodigal son did.

If I were to ask you who was the greatest baseball player of all time, we might have some disagreement, but according to the price of baseball cards, there's no question. It's number 7, Mickey Mantle. If you know anything about his life, Mickey Mantle lived a really tough life. He did a lot of drinking, a lot of smoking, a lot of other things. I mean, he lived a really tough life. Finally, at the end of his life, there was an article in *Sports Illustrated* by Mickey Mantle entitled "My Life as an Alcoholic." After telling about how he had reached the point where fear was consuming his life and he was afraid to even leave his room and go out of his room, here's what Mickey Mantle said. He said, "After 42 years of drinking, I was physically and emotionally worn out. I'd hit rock bottom. I knew I couldn't go on like this. I knew I needed a change."

It wasn't long after that, that Yankees great second baseman Bobby Richardson led Mickey Mantle to faith in Jesus Christ. Folks, this is where all repentance begins, with a contrite, broken-hearted, humble admission that our behavior is self-destructive and wrong. This is where repentance has to start.

Number two, if we want to repent, then we must come clean about our sin. Here's what the prodigal son said. He said, "I will get up and go back to my father, and I'll say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.'" Do you notice here that there is no blame shifting, there are no excuses, there are no alibis, there is nothing in this boy but a straightforward admission of guilt. He doesn't say, "I'm going to go back to my father and say it was society's fault, my parents' fault, the economy's fault, my friends' fault, the devil's fault." No, no, no. He says, "You know what? It's all my fault. It's all on me."

Friends, until a person is willing to say this and mean it, we're not candidates for true godly repentance until we're prepared to take the full responsibility for what we have done upon ourselves.

Number three, if we want to repent, then we must accept the consequences of our actions and, if possible, make amends for what we have done. The prodigal son

said in verse 19, "I'm going to say to my father, 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Just make me like one of your hired men.'" Here's a kid who was prepared to accept the full, unblunted consequences for his sin. He says to his father, "Father, I've lost the right to be your son. I forfeited the right to be a member of the family because of what I've done, and I'm willing to accept that consequence. I'm just asking for mercy that you'll even make me like one of the hired men living in the barn; that's all I want."

See, friends, true repentance demands more than just private confession of our sin to God. It does demand that, but beyond that, true repentance demands the accepting of full responsibility and the consequences for what we've done publicly. It also means that, if possible, going back to the people that we have hurt and making things right with them, no matter how much that might cost us, just like the prodigal son did.

When I think of this, I think of Zacchaeus. Do you remember Zacchaeus in the Bible? Sure you do. (sings) "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he." Do you remember Zacchaeus? Yeah, (sings) "he climbed up in the sycamore tree." You know him.

Well, Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and the way he made a living was by defrauding people and stealing their money. He collected more taxes than he had to, and he kept the difference. He had the Roman government backing him up, and nobody could argue with him. They were helpless against him.

When Jesus visited Zacchaeus' home, and Zacchaeus gave his life to Christ, let me tell you the very first thing after that he said to Jesus. Here's what he said. He said, "Lord, whatever I have cheated people out of, I will pay them back four times that amount." Notice what Jesus said in response. He said, "Today, Zacchaeus, salvation has come to this house." How did Jesus know that? Well, He knew it because Zacchaeus would never have agreed to do that unless true, godly repentance had taken hold in his life.

This is why the apostle Paul said in Acts 26, "I preach that people should repent and turn to God"—watch—"and that they should prove their repentance by their

deeds." You see, friends, if there is true, godly repentance happening on the inside, then people are going to see it on the outside, because true, godly repentance can't hide. For some of us, to repent here today may mean we need to go back and file amended 1040's. For some of us to repent here today, it may mean that we have to return stolen property or pay for property that we stole, if it's already gone. For some of us here to repent today, it means we need to go back to people that we have hurt in our life and ask their forgiveness for the things we did to them. For some of us to repent today, it may mean that we need to go and admit to legal authority some crime we committed and accept the penalty. For some of us, it may mean that we need to go to our spouse and tell them that we have had an affair.

Listen, when you repent, my friend, there is a willingness to accept the consequences for what you and I have done and to make things right, whatever it costs. That's true repentance.

Finally is step number four. If we're going to do true repentance, then step number four means that we must make a clean break from our sin and from our sinful behavior. Look at what the prodigal son said. The Bible says, "So he got up and went to his father." He left the pig pen, and he left where he'd been living and went home to God. He left the far country of sin and went back to God.

Friends, no matter how you slice it, I don't care whether it's salvation (repentance for the very first time) or whether it's Christian life (every day repentance). Unless there is this kind of deliberate decision to make a clean break from our sinful behavior, then repentance can never reach critical mass in our life. This is why Proverbs 28 says that he who covers his sin will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes it—whoa!—will find mercy.

When I came to Christ when I was 22 years old, 38 years ago—I'm 60; I'll save you the trouble. (laughter) Now pay attention!—when I came to Christ at 22, the man who led me to Christ in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I was in my fifth year of undergraduate study. I was doing a victory lap, if you understand what I'm saying. (laughter) Yeah!

Anyway, he said to me, "Now Lon, listen. If you're serious about this commitment to Christ, you need to make a clean break from this town. You need to get out of this town. You need a clean break from your fraternity brothers, from your drug buddies, from your old drinking pals, from your old girlfriends and everything else." He said to me, "Unless you are willing to make that kind of clean break with your sinful behavior up to this point, you are never going to amount to anything for God." And you know what? He was absolutely right! He was.

Because by God's grace, there was true repentance that had taken hold of my life, do you know what I did? I packed up everything I owned on a knapsack on my back, took my dog Noah, and we left Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and never went back. He was right.

Listen, friends. We fail to tell people this as part of repentance. We tell people the first three steps but fail to press step number four, and what we end up creating are people who are three-step repenters. Do you understand? They just go round and round and round and round like the gerbil in the cage, repenting, but it never seems to click, never seems to take and never seems to produce a transformed life. Why? Because there's one more step you've got to do to make it work! That is, if you're going to punch the ball over the goal line, friends, we have to have a deliberate decision to make a break with our sinful behavior.

You see, godly repentance hits critical mass when an alcoholic decides to stop drinking and join AA, when a workaholic father decides to reduce his hours and come home early to be with his family and his children, or when a dating couple decides to stop having sex until they get married and if one of them is not willing, then the other partner says, "Well, then I'm done with you, because I'm done with sex. We're going to do it God's way." Godly repentance hits critical mass when a manipulator decides to become a person of full disclosure in everything for the rest of their life or when a person with a pornography problem decides to become truly accountable to some friends and to cancel HBO, Cinemax, Showtime and Pay Per View and put controls on his computer that can be checked by his friends. Godly repentance hits critical mass when a person having an affair decides to call it off for good and go back and repair his

or her marriage and their family. True repentance hits critical mass when a man decides he's done undressing women in his mind and when a woman decides that she is going to recapture her integrity and change the way she dresses and lives to become a godly woman in the way she carries herself and the way she behaves. True repentance happens when a person with friends who are drawing them into sinful behavior decides they're getting a whole new set of friends, that they don't need these friends any more.

Folks, when we put all four steps together like this, what we've got is full, complete, biblical repentance that produces transformed living for Jesus Christ, but you've got to have all four steps to do it.

So let's conclude. Whether it's first-time salvation repentance or whether it's ongoing Christian repentance, there are four steps that have to happen. Number one, we have to admit we're going in the wrong direction. Number two, we have to come clean about our sin. Number three, we've got to accept the consequences for our actions and make amends if we can. Number four, we've got to make a clean break from sinful behavior.

You say, "But Lon, nobody can do this in their own energy. Nobody could do this in their own strength. I mean, without the supernatural power and enabling of the Holy Spirit, nobody can do this!" Friends, you are absolutely right. The Holy Spirit must empower all of this.

Let me show you some great news from the Bible. James 4:6 says, "God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace"—He gives help, He gives assistance, enablement—"to the humble." I maintain that repentance is the greatest, the ultimate act of humility in the universe. You can't humble yourself more than to do true repentance, which means that based on James 4:6, we need to understand that repentance evokes God's highest measure of grace and assistance. To put it another way, friends, look here. If you want to repent, my friends, God will see to it you get all the power necessary, all the resources you need in order to do it if you want to repent.

This is God's promise to every person who repents. God says to those people in Ezekiel 36, "I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will

remove from you your heart of stone, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you, and"—watch—"I will empower you to follow My laws." That is God's promise to people who want to repent. So you see, God will provide the power, but folks, we've got to volunteer for repentance first.

Now let me close by saying that I would suspect there are a lot of us here who are already followers of Christ who need to repent about some things in our lives. If you need help with that, you call us. We'll be happy to have you meet with one of our pastoral staff, and we'll help you with that.

But today, I'm especially concerned about those of us who have never repented for salvation in our life. Maybe you've walked an aisle, prayed a prayer, or whatever, but it never took, because you never repented. We're going to give you a chance to do that and hit critical mass today if you really want to. Let's bow our heads together.

With our heads bowed and our eyes closed, with nobody looking around, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to pray a short prayer of repentance and salvation, and I'm going to ask you to pray along silently with me one phrase at a time. Let's get the ball across the goal line when it comes to salvation in your life. Here we go. I'm going to pray out loud; you pray silently.

Lord Jesus, I come to You today because I want to repent and trust Jesus Christ for salvation. So today, I admit that my life is going in the wrong direction, that I've made a mess of things, and I come clean about my sin before You, Lord. I offer no excuses. I'm willing to accept the consequences in whatever way You choose to have them come, but I ask for mercy. Lord, I am willing to go back and make things right, with Your help. With Your help, I am prepared to make a clean break from my sinful behavior. So Lord Jesus, today I invite You to come into my life and to be my personal Savior and Lord. Put the Holy Spirit within me, and empower me to repent and to live a transformed life for Jesus Christ. Be my personal Lord and Savior today, I pray, in Jesus' name.

Father, I want to pray for the folks who prayed this prayer, that You would confirm in their hearts right now that a great transaction has taken place in the heavens, that they have passed from death into eternal life and become Your child.

Lord, do exactly what they have asked. Give them the power they need to repent biblically from the heart. Lord, cause salvation to hit critical mass in their life. For all of us here who are followers of Christ, Lord, teach us to repent on a daily basis for the things in our life that displease You, Lord. Make us good repenters by the grace of God in our life. Thanks for speaking to us today, Lord, and teaching us. Change our life because we were here today and sat under the teaching of Your Word, and we pray these things in Jesus' name, and God's people said, amen.