

Sermon for Ash Wednesday: February 22, 2023 jj

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Return to the Lord your God, says the prophet Joel. This is your call to repentance for the season of Lent. Forty days of preparation for Easter start today with Ash Wednesday. Forty days during which you are called upon to return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; that verse is a confession-phrase, by the way, that I found in the Old Testament 10 times. It almost sounds like some kind of ancient creed. Before we celebrate the bright joy of Easter, we have first the dark introspection of Lent. Alleluia and Gloria are set aside in our prayers and singing until April 9th, and purple is the color we'll have up front. All of this is to remind you that now is the time for repentance.

But how do you do it? By what means are we to return to the Lord our God? Especially today as Lent begins, God's Word gives us direction in our repentance. In fact, from what you heard read today, you can find two ways you should not repent, and two ways that you may repent. All four of these we should consider, so that your repentance this season may truly return you to God your Savior, and lead you at the end of these six weeks to a more fulfilling Easter feast.

First, the repentance that should not be done. Jesus was very clear in His Sermon on the Mount about the "hypocrites in the synagogues." I don't know much about the synagogue here, but you would still be able to notice what our Lord meant. That's an easy one to detect. Even our non-attending friends, and perhaps some family members of ours are all too eager to point out as a reason why they don't come to church, those hypocrites who point out to others how holy and Christian their own lives are. Now, it's a good reply if you were to point out to them that we're all hypocrites, that is, we

all say one thing and do another, but they do have somewhat of a point. Hypocrites, the ones like Jesus was using as an example, make everything a little uncomfortable for us. They get me mad when they're up there on their high horse looking down on me, am I right? All their sounding trumpets in the streets, their praying with huge gestures on street corners, and their twisted, disfigured faces crying out for attention is just sickening. And who wants that sappy, look-how-holy-I am stuff from those super Christian people on facebook? So you get 'em Jesus! I'll never repent in a self-centered show like those hypocrites!

The second way that repentance should not be done is a little more subtle, because it involves not outward behavior that others can see, but rather it is a matter of the attitude of the heart. For you could keep your face washed clean of all smudges and ashes, and you could pray and give in secret, with nobody knowing what you're doing, even your right hand is ignorant of your left. Yet, with all of Jesus' recommendations being followed closely, you could still be doing the wrong kind of repentance. If you thought that anything you do as a Christian is to be done in order to appease God or to fulfill a duty for your salvation or forgiveness to take effect, then the Law convicts you, too. It does so by pointing out that nothing you do can save you. If you think it will, or that it couldn't hurt to try, then you are rejecting Christ and all that He did to take your place completely on the cross.

I'm sure no Christian ever starts out saying to himself, "I'm going to work my way to heaven." You will not have a hard time keeping it straight in your head that you are saved by God's grace alone. You'll hear that declared with trumpet fanfare on Reformation Day, even using the Latin: Sola Gratia! So you may think that you'll

never fall for the idea that eternal life is something that you earn. However, you could get duped into this false kind of repentance if someone were to ask if you truly were sorry enough, that you were sincerely resolved never to do those sins ever again. Lutherans, even confessional Lutherans, are not immune to this sneaky form of works-righteousness. The human nature in you is going to mess up, the Law of God is going to remind you that you fall far short of His perfection, and naturally you're going to try to make things better on your own.

Now, you're not rubbing other peoples' noses in it, like the boisterous "hypocrites" are doing, but it is just as bad because looking for something that you can do to make up for your sinful life, in fact, shuts you off from the Gospel and kills your soul. It was the very kind of repentance against which Paul warned the Galatians, since they were falling for what certain false leaders were requiring of them in order to "prove" their faith, so they claimed. So merely belonging to a church, helping someone to the best of your ability,

giving an offering, participating in this or that church activity, all of this is generally what you would expect Christians to do naturally, but these actions do not in themselves make you one, nor do they improve your Christian status, whatever that may be. Taking stock of all the things that you do as a Christian is the second type of repentance that is dangerous to your faith.

So what use is there in repentance at all? By now we've seen two forms of repentance that we should avoid at all costs. Maybe it wouldn't be worth it to do anything, if we're putting our faith at such risk. But that would be the wrong conclusion. Repentance is not optional for the Christian, and Scripture is clear on that. "Return to the Lord your God," even though it occurs 10 times in the Bible, it's never followed by, "whenever you feel like it." Repentance is the only way to heaven, no matter what church you

go to. Martin Luther urged us all the way back in 1517, when he nailed the 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, that we should make our whole life a life of repentance. And the way that repentance takes over your whole life is when you get out of the way and Jesus does it Himself.

This is the one true way that repentance can be done—that is, the way Jesus led a life of repentance. This Lent, you'll see Jesus suffer temptation and overcome the devil, witness Him getting the Temple ready for the ultimate sacrifice of Himself, hear Him go into great detail about His being your servant, then say nothing when demanded to defend Himself. All of this, combined with His passion (that is, His love combined with suffering) His death and His resurrection, is the sum and substance of your repentance, no matter what your age. You didn't have to do a thing to have perfect repentance, which is good because for you that means that your salvation is entirely in the hands of your Savior. As the Lord has promised to you, so let it be done: your forgiveness is complete, heaven is yours as a total gift. No sin is too great, no one is too far lost, simply believe what already is true: Jesus did it all. That's repentance, and it's yours for the taking.

Then why would there be another form of repentance that can be done, you may ask? As I just clearly said, nothing else you do will accomplish a thing toward your salvation. But Jesus did say in Matthew 6, "When you fast..." and "when you pray..." assuming that you may avail yourself of some very helpful Christian disciplines to help guide you on the path of repentance. To be sure, the fasting and the praying, just like giving offerings, doing good works, even "giving something up for Lent," can be fine things that a Christian can do, and God does command some of them, but they are only fruits of the repentance that you already have in your life due to your belief in Christ. You could confess your sins, volunteer more time to help those less fortunate, read and study

the Bible more often, and those things the Lord could use to increase your hunger for His Gospel Word of forgiveness. Such extra activities that Christians can do during Lent are helpful only when you remember that Christ did it all for you first.

So if you had the ashes drawn in a cross on your forehead, be aware that it wasn't necessary for true repentance for that to be done. It's something extra that is meant to be helpful. As you walked into church this evening, that ritual with roots going back into antiquity was a literally touching reminder of the Bible verse that was spoken: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Take a moment to think through the sins that have separated you from God your heavenly Father, then be assured that at the cross, those ashen sins have been washed away clean in the blood of Jesus. And whatever else this Lent you may decide to do or not to do as an exercise of your faith, know that everything having to do with true repentance has been already done perfectly for you. By God-given faith in Christ you have fulfilled already the call to repentance for the season of Lent now begun: Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.