

Repentance, Forgiveness, and the Gift of the Spirit

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance, forgiveness, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it explores the relationship between faith, repentance, and baptism in the process of salvation.

Duration: 37:14

Scripture: Acts 2:38, Acts 10:43, Acts 13:38-39, Acts 15:9

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the mistaken belief that water baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. He emphasizes that the good news of the text is that even murderers of the Son of God can be forgiven and receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The speaker challenges the audience to consider if they have done something worse than killing Jesus and highlights the need for forgiveness. The answer to this need is found in verse 38, which calls for repentance and belief in Jesus who loved and gave himself for us.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org The morning text for this morning's sermon comes from Acts chapter 2. If you please turn in your Bibles and follow along as I read, we're picking up where we left off two weeks ago in the middle of Peter's sermon on Pentecost with response of people to his word. We'll begin reading at verse 37 of Acts chapter 2. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins.

And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promise is to you and to your children, and to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation, so those who received his word were baptized. And there were added that day about 3,000 souls.

The Lord was so good to us Saturday a week ago, as about 90 people gathered to be trained for a prayer ministry that is now a reality at Bethlehem. You saw it in action last Sunday morning, with 25 or 30 people standing all over the hall there, dozens praying with people after the service. And we have a schedule set

up so that there will be teams of people ready to pray after every Sunday morning worship service from now through February.

Now, let me just try to create a community sense about what we're doing here. At the end of this service, there will be four teams who will be here at the front. By teams, I think it's generally two people.

It could be three, and they'll just be here, and they could go anywhere in this room or anywhere else. The reason they are going to be here is simply to create this sense. When the word is preached, sometimes we feel like we sort of end it abruptly, and we just scatter quickly, and we don't have much of a foyer here yet where people can linger and just process and get out because there's another service coming in.

And we just feel like there's business often to be done with God at the end of the service. And not only that, we believe that many of you simply come bringing extraordinary burdens, sickness physically, emotional distresses, relational problems, all kinds of things that are just heavy upon you. And yes, you could go off by yourself and deal with God, but the Lord ordains that we bear one another's burdens like that too.

And so, really, these people have been trained to be open to absolutely anything you bring them. That doesn't make them experts by any means. What it means is they care enough to at least say, I care, and I'll pray the best I can with you.

And so what you'll see, Lord willing, is more and more frequently and more and more relaxed and freely from here on out is prayer going on at the front here after the services. As you walk out, don't feel like you have to be quiet. I want it to be real quiet at the beginning of our services as we seek God and then a hubbub of greeting one another at the ends of the services.

Our people know that that's going to happen, but you just kind of make your way up here, look for somebody who looks like the kind of person that you could talk to and say, can I just tell you about this thing I'm dealing with and have you pray with me? It might last 15 seconds. They might go up with you somewhere and pray with you half an hour. We'll just open to however the Spirit leads.

So that's what's beginning to happen. It's for those who are seeking the Lord for the first time, and it's for everybody who just wants somebody to bear a burden that they have and apply the power of God to them. I expect to see God gift us in extraordinary ways and expect to see people healed and burdens lifted and relationships mended and a lot of other things.

It's a wonderful thing when after years and years of rebellion and denial and resistance to the Lord, a person feels the sword of the Spirit sink mercifully all the way to the core of his being and he just lays down the instruments of rebellion, gives it up and says, what must I do? Isn't that a beautiful sentence? What must I do? That's what we have in verse 37 here. They were cut to the heart. Finally, these people who had killed Jesus, they had mocked Him, they had resisted Him, all His ministry there in Jerusalem, and finally God catches up with them in mercy and they just lay it down and say, what do I have to do? That's a beautiful question.

And my prayer is that more and more through your prayers and your sensitivity and God's blessing upon our church, we will find ourselves coming to the end of services with more and more people simply saying, what must I do? What must I do? Now, there's an answer to that question in this text we're going to talk about. But before we get to the answer, I think we need to ask, what's the need that they're feeling?

Because if you say, what must I do? What you really mean is I need something. What must I do to get it? So let's ask first, what was their need? And then we'll ask, what did they have to do to get it? Now, the answer to both of those questions is given in verse 38.

Let's take the first question, what is their need? And get that from the last part of the verse. We'll read the whole thing. Repent, be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.

And here comes the needs. One, for the forgiveness of your sins. And two, you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So you need two things. You need forgiveness and you need God. You need the Spirit in you, with you, on you.

So let's just take those one at a time. The need of these people, our need, is for forgiveness from God. Now, one of the saddest things of American culture today, which is shot through with relativism, one of the saddest things of relativism, especially in its therapeutic forms, is that it undermines the glory of the grace of God in forgiveness.

Relativism undermines the reality and the glory of forgiveness. Now, let me try to explain what I mean. Relativism minimizes the absoluteness of God and His character.

Relativism functions as though God had no contours that were clear and precise, as though God had no fixed character, no standards, no expectations, no law, no threats. Relativism minimizes the divine measure of human character. Relativism does not get along well with biblical sentences like, Be holy, for I am holy.

Or, Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Relativism minimizes the absoluteness of God and His will. On the other side of the coin, relativism maximizes the absoluteness of self.

Relativism says that the way to healing and the way to wholeness is to stop measuring yourself by any standards outside yourself or any expectations, even God's. Instead, relativism says, Be yourself absolutely. Make yourself the measure of what is good and acceptable.

Accord to yourself absolute, unconditional, positive self-regard. The only role that God is to play in a relativistic worldview is to be the divine endorsement of your self-affirmation. God, in the relativism of our day, functions as a kind of booster to the absoluteness of self.

If He comes forward and presents Himself as a God with standards, a God with expectations, a God with a holy law and will for humankind, He's part of the problem and not part of the solution. Now, I say this is sad, it's heartbreaking, because it undermines forgiveness. It undermines the reality of God's grace in forgiveness.

It sounds gracious on the surface. Oh, it sounds like such good news to be told. There's no law, there are no standards, there are no expectations, no commandments, no threats.

And God only exists to affirm you in your self-affirmation, whatever you may happen to be. But there's just a slight glitch in this grace. It destroys forgiveness.

It absolutely destroys the biblical reality of forgiveness. Because where there's no law, no standard, no just and legitimate expectation, no normative way of relating to God and man, there can be no forgiveness.

Because forgiveness is a letting go of real offenses.

Forgiveness is a letting go of real transgressions and real violations and real fault. And where there is no law to be transgressed, no standard to be offended against, no expectations to violate, no commandment to disobey, there will be, can be, is not any glorious divine forgiveness. It is a meaningless concept.

What looked like grace turns out to be the undermining of grace by the undermining of forgiveness. Now I want to hold out to you this morning a glorious hope. A hope and a news that is so good it defies all human description, exceeds all human expectation, fills the heart with unspeakable joy and glorified, as Peter called it.

In verse 37, these people were cut to the heart because God had made Jesus Lord and Christ and they had killed him. And they saw immediately the implications of this preaching. God had endorsed Jesus as a great miracle worker, the one who died for sin, the one raised from the dead, the one exalted to God's right hand, the one pouring out of the Spirit, and they'd killed him.

They were utterly at odds with God. They were radically against God. They had violated God, offended God, transgressed God.

They could not in any sense affirm themselves, nor should they, nor did God affirm them in that moment. They were evil. And they needed something desperate.

They needed to be forgiven and they needed the Holy Spirit to inhabit them. And their only hope was, might it be that this God against whom we've sinned by killing his son could still be God and let it go? Just let it go? So I take the words of verse 40 at the end there and I apply it to you with as much urgency and as much earnestness as I know how in the American setting in which we live, which is radically relativistic. Save yourselves from this crooked generation.

Be saved from this crooked generation. I just beg of you, be saved from the crookedness of this generation. And what is the essence of the crookedness and deviousness of this generation? The essence of the crookedness of American culture is that we continually create salvation without God and therefore salvation without law and therefore salvation without forgiveness and therefore salvation without hope.

That's the deviousness from which I plead with you to wake up because it is pervasive in the church and out of the church. Relativism, the minimizing of God's absolute character and its bearing upon our lives is epidemic. Save yourselves from this crooked generation.

On the basis of God's word I declare to you this morning there is a God, there is a holy law and in the name of Jesus, wonder of wonders, there is forgiveness. That's need number one. Now number two.

Repent, verse 38, be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. That's the first need. Now the second need.

And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. You see, I don't just want to be forgiven. I want God.

I want Him. I don't just want a declaration off in some courtroom. I want God.

As close as He'll come to me, I want Him. As much of a friend as He'll be to me, I want Him. As much fullness of Himself as He'll give me, I want Him.

And that's the other gift. You want that too, if you know what your heart's desire really is. But let's ask the question, now what is this? Gift of the Holy Spirit.

Is this what we've been talking about? Is this the baptism of the Spirit? Chapter 1, verse 5. Is this the empowering of the Holy Spirit extraordinarily? Chapter 1, verse 8. Is this the filling of the Holy Spirit? Chapter 2, verse 4. Is this the outpouring of the Holy Spirit from the risen Jesus? Chapter 2, verse 33. Is this the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Romans 8, 9. 1 Corinthians 6, 19. What is the gift of the Holy Spirit that's being promised here? And I spent more time thinking about that question on Friday than any other question in this message.

What is being promised here? The longer I thought, the more I meditated, the more I came to the conclusion there is no warrant in this text for choosing between these alternatives and saying it's this but not this, and it's this but not this, and it's this but not this. So my answer to the question, what is the gift of the Holy Spirit is simply this. What are you promised when you repent and are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus? I think you are promised this.

If you repent and are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, you will be given the Holy Spirit. And from that day on, you will have the Holy Spirit. And when you have the Holy Spirit, you have whatever the Holy Spirit chooses to do in and on you.

You have Him. And so that maybe we can divide it into two at least, although I think they mean... When you repent, when you identify yourself with Jesus Christ, you may have the assurance from that day forward that the Holy Spirit is yours as a gift to be your friend and change your life and work in and on and for you. That's one.

And by implication, you may also from that day forward pray toward and expect that He will begin to empower you and give you the extraordinary blessings and clothe you with power from on high, according to Luke 24, 49, that we need for world evangelization. And you may also seek Him for all the gifts that He may be pleased to give you. In other words, once you have the Holy Spirit made over to you by covenant through repentance and faith, then you may open your life to and expect and pray toward all His fullness and all His gifts.

So I just don't feel any constraint in this text to say, well, it has to be this, not this, or it has to be this and not that. I just think you will be given the Holy Spirit from that day forward. He will be yours.

He will dwell within you. And in His sovereign plan for you, He will gift you accordingly. He will baptize you accordingly.

He will fill you accordingly. He will clothe you according to His sovereign will. And what we've been doing in these weeks, those of us who know what it is to walk with a hand in the Father's hand, glad across the bridge, are simply asking for more and more manifestations of His extraordinary blessing for the doing of more good for people in this city and around the world.

Those are the two needs that they had and we had, the need for forgiveness and the need for God, the Holy Spirit, indwelling and empowering for all that they were capable of doing through Him. Now, what shall we do to get these two blessings? That's the question of verse 37. What shall we do? And the answer is given in verse 38 in two parts.

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus. Now, let's just take those one at a time. First, repentance and then baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the name of Jesus Christ.

What is repentance? This is familiar territory for many, but it's good to tell the old, old story again and again. First, a negative. Repentance is not merely feeling sorry for what you have done.

Now, the reason I say that is because verse 37 is a description of how bad they felt, is it not? They were cut to the heart, they felt awful to be at odds with God, to have killed His Son, and they cry out, what shall we do? If that had been repentance, it would have been an odd answer to say, well, the way to solve this problem is to repent. See, so repentance clearly is more than being cut to the heart. Repentance is more than feeling rotten for the bad things you've done.

Repentance, I believe it's including that, but it's more than that. Repentance is following through now, recognizing where you've been heading in being at odds with God and turning and going toward God. We all have heard, I believe, somewhere along the way, that repentance means a change of mind or a change of heart that turns from the pathway of sin and disobedience and rebellion and self-reliance and swings right around 180 degrees and goes toward God.

Now, let me show you that in a text. In Acts 26, 18, Jesus is speaking to the apostle Paul as Paul recounts his conversion, and he describes how he's going to bring people to the experience of forgiveness. Instead of using the word repentance, he uses the word turn, and so I think you can see it's a paraphrase of repentance.

The verse goes, Acts 26, 18, I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins. Now, that's just a paraphrase of repentance, is it not? Turning from darkness to light, from Satan to God, and you could keep going with the alternative, self to reliance on Jesus, sin to righteousness, and so on. It's just a decisive turning.

It doesn't mean you live the rest of your life in perfection. The Bible does not teach that we earn or gain salvation through becoming perfect at the point of conversion. But there is a difference between being perfect and having the course of your life altered.

It's like a river that's flowing in one direction that's all muddy. You turn that river, and it may be a long time before the mud clears up. You know there's a difference in your own life between a decisive turn and the gradual cleansing that comes through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life.

So that's repentance. Now, the second means of obtaining forgiveness and the Holy Spirit is being baptized in the name of Jesus. You see that in verse 38.

Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Now, we've got to work hard here to avoid a misunderstanding because I have dealt in my office with enough people that have been pursued by the disciples and have been utterly confused by the place of baptism that I want to make crystal clear this morning the place that I think it has. There are groups that teach that baptism by water is an essential means of being forgiven.

Now, take that phrase, essential means. I choose that very carefully. By essential means, I mean you cannot conceive of being forgiven apart from it or before it.

That's how essential it is for certain groups. And I get the kickback from those groups often in my office. This verse is one of their main arguments.

Verse 38. Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. They say there it is, as plain as day.

If you want to be forgiven, you get baptized. And if you don't get baptized, you don't have forgiveness. And therefore, baptism is an essential means of obtaining forgiveness.

Will you make of that? Now, when you read verse 38, it could carry that meaning. I don't deny that. It could carry that meaning.

Let me suggest another meaning and then try to justify that meaning, not from Paul, where it would be real easy to argue that we're justified by faith, but from Acts. Now, here's an alternative reading of verse 38. Let me paraphrase it like this.

Receive the forgiveness of your sins by repenting and by identifying yourself with the name of Jesus Christ in faith, which you then signify through baptism. That's my understanding of this verse. And I want to make sure that you ask yourself, is that fair? Are we twisting the verse? By making baptism the act in which we signify our faith and repentance, which themselves are the essential means by which we are forgiven.

All right. Now, let me try to justify that reading by taking you on a quick whirlwind tour. It's only take a few minutes through several texts in the book of Acts where Paul and Peter say that forgiveness of sins or salvation is given to faith without any mention of baptism.

First, Acts 2, verse 21. Peter comes to the end of his sermon or quotation of Joel there and he says, Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Period.

So you get the impression that the essential means of being saved is calling upon the name of the Lord. Or, chapter 10, verse 43, Peter is coming to the end of his sermon to the Gentiles at Cornelius' house. Listen to the hope that he holds out to them.

In verse 43, To Jesus, all the prophets bear witness that everyone, watch this now, everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Period. No mention of baptism.

When he recounts that event, by the way, the Holy Spirit fell upon them before they were baptized. And then they got baptized. In verses 44 and 45 of chapter 10.

When Peter comes to the council in Jerusalem, chapter 15, verse 9, and tells them what happened, listen to how he describes it. God made no distinction between us Jews and those Gentiles, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Period.

No mention of baptism again. Or, take Paul's preaching in chapter 13, verses 38 and 39. In Antioch, he concludes with this promise.

Let it be known to you, therefore brethren, that through this man, Jesus, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and by him, everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be free in the law of Moses. Period. No mention of baptism again.

One more. Two more. When the earthquake shook the prison there in chapter 16, verse 31, remember the jailer cried out, what must I do to be saved? And this earthquake shorthand reads, believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Period. He didn't say, be baptized. Though he was baptized.

And finally, in Ephesus, in Acts 20, verses 20 to 21, where Paul sums up his message and says, I didn't leave anything essential out and here's what I preached. Listen. I did not shrink.

This is 20, verse 20. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Period.

No mention of baptism in that sermon either. Now, my point in saying that in these many places baptism is not mentioned, my point is not to say baptism is unimportant. My point is not even to say it's not essential.

Oh, that's a tricky word, isn't it? My point is simply to say the essential means by which we receive the gift of forgiveness is by identifying with Jesus Christ through faith. And then baptism assumes its profound and proper role as the public expression and acting out of that faith and that identification with Jesus Christ as we are buried with him in baptism and raised with him to walk in newness of life. And our Lord Jesus commanded us go and make disciples baptizing them.

And therefore we will baptize disciples. But we will not say that the thief hanging on the cross could not this day be with Jesus in paradise because he had not been touched with water. Nor will we say that any baby who dies in childbirth without having the holy rites cannot go to heaven.

Nor will we say many mistaken ideas that I believe come from insisting that water baptism is the essential means by which forgiveness of sins is obtained. Well, let me close by simply summing up in a sentence or two the good news of this text. And I really want you to hear it because it is unspeakably glorious and good news.

Namely, murderers of the Son of God can be forgiven. Do you hear that now? Murderers of the Son of God are offered freely the gift of forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Now I want to ask you, is there anybody in this room I wonder who would dare to say to me, I have done something worse than that.

I have done something more heinous, more terrible than to kill the Lord of glory, to nail him to the cross, to cry crucified, to spear his side, to spit on him and throw stones on him. I've done something worse than that. I don't know what it would be.

I can't conceive of it. And therefore, I'm holding out to everybody in this room the promise of Jesus Christ. Call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved.

Repent, turn from the old way to the new way. Identify with Jesus Christ through faith. In due time, follow him in the obedience of baptism and you will be forgiven everything you have ever done or ever will do wrong.

And the Holy Spirit will come to you. He will minister to you. He will help you and guide you and empower you.

And little by little, from one degree of glory to the next, bring you home. Now there's one verse that I have left out. Very important and I want to use it in my closing prayer.

The promise is to you and to your children and to all those who are far off, everyone to whom the Lord our God calls to him. Everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. So I just want to pray now that God would call people in this moment to himself.

Father, would you exert your sovereign power to cut to the heart every needy soul and bring them home. Bring all of us to cry out, what must we do? And then apply this word by your spirit, repent and believe in Jesus who loved you and gave himself for you. And as we close, Lord, I pray that as the teams of praying people stand here at the front for the next 10 minutes or so, many of us who have burdens, needs, would simply linger here and talk to them and enjoy seeking your face together.

And Lord, gather into your kingdom many. And all the people said, amen. There you'll find hundreds of sermons, articles, radio broadcasts and much more, all available to you at no charge.

Our online store carries all of Pastor John's books, audio and video resources. You can also stay up to date on what's new at Desiring God. Again, our website is www.DesiringGod.org or call us toll free at 1-888-346-4700.

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