

(A Good Foundation) 1. Repentance

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the critical role of true repentance in achieving genuine faith and a solid foundation in the Christian life.

Scripture: Proverbs 9:10, Ezekiel 36:31, Matthew 3:8, Mark 1:15, Luke 19:1-10, Luke 24:47, John 10:1, Acts 20:21, 2 Corinthians 7:10, James 4:7

Topics: "True Faith", "Repentance"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the critical role of genuine repentance as the foundation for entering God's kingdom, highlighting that many believers today lack the depth of faith due to insufficient repentance. He explains that true repentance involves a complete turning away from sin and idols, and it must be accompanied by a willingness to make restitution for wrongs done. Poonen warns against false repentance, using biblical examples to illustrate the difference between mere regret and true transformation. He encourages believers to forgive others and to renounce any ties with evil, asserting that a life of continual repentance is essential for spiritual growth. Ultimately, he stresses that without a solid foundation of repentance and faith, one's Christian life will be unstable.

Transcript

Jesus said that the right way to enter His sheepfold (His kingdom) was through the door. But He said that some would try to come in by climbing over the wall (John 10:1).

The way that God has laid down for man to be saved is by repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the only way. God can never accept a man who tries to climb in any other way.

John the Baptist who came to prepare the way of the Lord preached repentance. That was the only way that the nation of Israel could be prepared to receive Jesus as their Saviour. There is no other way for us either.

Repentance and Faith

Most of today's believers don't seem to have the depth or the dedication or the power that the early Christians had.

What do you think is the reason for this?

The primary reason is that they haven't repented properly.

They have believed in Christ all right. But they have believed without repenting first. And so their conversion has been shallow.

Just look at these words of a well-known hymn:

"The vilest offender who truly believes

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Is that really true - that the vilest offender can receive a pardon merely by "truly believing?"

Doesn't he need to repent first?

You may say that true faith involves repentance too. But unless that is explained to the vilest offender, he can go away thinking that he is born again just because he believed. And he can go away deceived.

The message Jesus Himself preached was: "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He commanded His apostles to preach the same message (Luke 24:47). And that's exactly what they did (Acts 20:21).

The Word of God is very clear on this. Repentance and faith cannot be separated if you want to be well and truly converted. God has joined these two together. And what God has joined together no man should separate.

Repentance and faith are actually the first two elements of the foundation of the Christian life (Hebrews 6:1). If you haven't repented properly, then your foundation is bound to be faulty. And then, of course, the whole of your Christian life will be shaky.

The Bible says that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning (or the ABC) of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). And if we really fear the Lord, we'll "turn away from sin" (Proverbs 3:7).

So those who haven't repented and turned from sin, haven't learnt even the ABC of the Christian life.

False and True Repentance

If you have repented, you must ensure that you have repented genuinely. For Satan has his counterfeit repentance too, with which he deceives people.

Satan knows that most people live by just one commandment that says, "You shall not get caught!" And so he teaches them ways and means to sin without getting caught by anyone.

Even a thief will feel sorry if he is caught. But that's not repentance.

We see some examples in the Bible of those whose repentance was false.

When King Saul disobeyed God, he admitted to Samuel that he had sinned. But he didn't want the people to know that. He still sought man's honour. He hadn't really repented. He was just sorry that he was caught (1 Samuel 15:24-30). That was the difference between him and King David who openly acknowledged his sin when he fell (Psalm 51).

King Ahab was another like Saul. He felt really sorry for himself when Elijah warned him that God was going to judge him. He even put sackcloth on himself and mourned for his sins (1 Kings 21:27-29). But he didn't really repent. He was just afraid of God's judgement.

Judas Iscariot's case is a clear example of false repentance. When he saw that Jesus had been condemned to death he felt bad and said, "I have sinned" (Matthew 27:3-5). But he made his confession to the priests - just like some do even today! He didn't repent - even though he may have felt sad about what he had done. If he had truly repented, he would have gone to the Lord in brokenness and asked for forgiveness. But he didn't do that.

There's a lot that we can learn from these examples - as to what repentance is not!

True repentance is a "turning to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Idols are not just those made of wood and stone found in heathen temples. There are equally dangerous idols that people worship that don't look so ugly. These are the idols of pleasure, comfort, money, one's reputation, wanting one's own way etc.

All of us have worshipped these for many years. To repent means to stop worshipping these idols, and to turn away from them to God.

True repentance will involve our whole personality - our mind, our emotions and our will.

First of all, repentance means that we change our mind about sin and the world. We realise that our sin has separated us from God. We also see that the whole way of life of this world is anti-God. And we want to turn away from that God-dishonouring way of life.

Secondly, repentance involves our emotions. We feel sorrowful about the way we've lived (2 Corinthians 7:10). We hate ourselves for our past actions; and more than that, we detest the greater evil that we see within us that no one else can see (Ezekiel 36:31).

We weep and mourn that we have hurt God so much by the way we have lived. That was the reaction of many great men in the Bible when they became aware of their sins. David (Psalm 51), Job (Job 42:6) and Peter (Matthew 26:75) - all wept bitterly when they repented of their sins.

Both Jesus and the apostles have encouraged us to weep and mourn for our sins (Matthew 5:4; James 4:9). That is the way back to God.

Finally, repentance involves our will. We have to yield our stubborn self-will - 'wanting our own way' - and make Jesus Lord of our lives. That means that we are willing to do whatever God wants us to do from now on, whatever the cost and however humiliating it may be.

The prodigal son came back home to his father as a broken, yielded young man who was willing to do anything that his father told him to. That is true repentance (Luke 15:11-24).

We don't have to confess to God every single sin that we've ever committed. It would be impossible to remember all of them in any case. The prodigal son didn't do that. All that he said was, "Father, I have sinned." And that's all we need to say too.

But remember that Judas Iscariot also said, "I have sinned." There was a world of difference however, between his confession and the prodigal son's confession. God doesn't listen only to the words we say. He senses the spirit behind the words, and deals with us accordingly.

The Fruit of Repentance

John the Baptist told the Pharisees to bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8). If we have truly repented, it will change our whole way of life.

One of the first things that we should do, after we have repented is to make restitution for the wrongs that we have done in our life.

We read of Zaccheus in the gospels, that he was convicted of his sins as soon as Jesus entered his house (Luke 19:1-10). Zaccheus was a man who loved money. But he understood what repentance involved. He knew that if he was going to be a disciple of Jesus he would have to make amends for all the wrongs that he had done in his life.

That meant a great loss of money to him, for he had cheated so many people. But he decided to be wholehearted in his repentance. And so he told the Lord that he would give away half his money to the poor and then give back four times what he had cheated others of.

It was only when Zaccheus said that he would make restitution, that Jesus said that salvation had come to that home. A willingness to make restitution is one of the evidences of true salvation (Luke 19:1-10).

The wise man, in the parable that Jesus spoke, dug deep and laid his foundation on the rock beneath the layers of sand (Luke 6:48). The foolish man also built his house in the same area. But he didn't dig deep enough. He laid his foundation superficially on the sand.

We could apply this parable to true and false repentance. Only when we take pains to make a thorough restitution in our life do we dig deep.

When we come to Christ, it is good to take time right at the beginning, to sort out all matters relating to our unconverted life that need to be settled. If we are superficial here, and gloss over some matters, we'll find that our foundation remains weak and our house collapses one day.

What Restitution Involves

What does restitution involve?

It means that if you have cheated the government of taxes etc., you must now repay those taxes. Sometimes it may not be possible to repay the amount to the department concerned. But where there is a will, there will always be a way - if we want to obey God! We can buy Post Office stamps or railway tickets and destroy them, to ensure that the money we owe to the government does indeed go back to it.

If you've cheated people, you should also apologise to them while making the repayment. Tell them also how the change came in your life! If you find you don't have the courage to do this all by yourself, take a brother along with you, while making the restitution.

If you are not able to settle all your debts at once, never mind. Do it in instalments. But make a beginning - even if it be with only five rupees! God accepted Zaccheus the day he decided to pay back his debts - not

after he had completed all his repayments!

If you have cheated someone and you don't know where he is living now, then you should return the money to God - the original Owner of all money. That was the rule that God laid down for the Israelites (Numbers 5:6-8).

We should in any case, never have any money with us that has been obtained unlawfully. God can never bless that sort of money.

If we have hurt or injured someone, in some way that doesn't involve money, then we should go and apologise to him and ask for his forgiveness.

I know of brothers who have saved money for months and then emptied out their bank accounts in order to make restitution to the government for taxes and customs duties that they had cheated on. And God has blessed them with something better than a large bank account!

I also know of others who have carefully calculated the fares for the times when they travelled without purchasing tickets on buses and trains and who have paid the amounts back. Those who are faithful in the small things are the ones who will do great things for God.

I also know of some who have gone to university authorities with their degree certificates and acknowledged that they had cheated in their final examinations. They were ready to sacrifice their degrees if necessary, in order to have a clear conscience. God has usually given such believers favour in the eyes of the authorities, so that they have been pardoned.

But it may not always work out like that. In your case, God may allow the university to take away your certificate! But then that will be God's perfect will for you.

I know of one brother who wrote a letter of apology to someone from whom he had stolen a small stamp many years earlier. A theft is a theft, however small the value of the stolen article may be. It is in little matters that our faithfulness is tested.

I am not suggesting that you now torture yourself, trying to rake up from your memory the little wrongs that you've done in your past life. No. You don't have to do that. God will remind you of what needs to be settled; and you need to settle only what God reminds you of.

There will also be cases where you can do absolutely nothing, because the wrong done is so complicated. In such cases, all you can do is express your sorrow to God and ask for His mercy.

We shouldn't in any case, allow Satan to keep us feeling guilty and condemned forever, just because we can't set a certain matter right. God understands our situation fully - and He doesn't torture us. If you have a willing mind, God will accept whatever you are able to do - even if that be nothing (2 Corinthians 8:12).

Praise God that He is so merciful!

God will honour those who honour Him (1 Samuel 2:30). And one way that we honour Him is by being faithful in the little things.

If we don't make restitution, we'll be dragging a chain with us, all through our life. God will test us to see if we value a clear conscience more than our money, our honour, our degrees and even our job.

Many fail the test. But, praise God, that there is a remnant, in every generation, of those who love God more than anything on earth.

Forgiving Others

Repentance also includes forgiving others who have harmed us in any way.

Jesus said,

If you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:15).

He went on to say that we must forgive others from our heart, and not just superficially (Matthew 18:35).

It is impossible to be forgiven by God if we don't forgive others wholeheartedly and completely.

We may not be able to forget what others have done to us. But we can certainly refuse to think about the evil they did, whenever we are tempted to do so.

Perhaps someone has harmed you so badly that you really find it difficult to forgive him wholeheartedly. Ask God to help you to forgive; and you'll find that He is more than willing to give you both the desire and the power to forgive anyone.

When we think of the millions of sins that God has forgiven us so freely, it shouldn't be difficult for us to forgive others in the same way. It's when we don't forgive others that Satan gets power over us.

"Forgive," says Paul, "so that no advantage be taken of us by Satan" (2 Corinthians 2:10, 11).

A Changed Attitude Towards Satan

There's one more area where matters need to be settled - and that's the area of contact with Satan and evil spirits.

If you have dabbled in astrology, idol worship, palm-reading, black magic etc., or if you have been interested in rock-music and harmful drugs, you need to renounce these contacts with Satan - even though some of these contacts may have been unconsciously made.

The first thing you should do is destroy (not sell, but destroy) all idols, occult books and amulets etc., that you may have (See Acts 19:19). Then you should pray saying,

"Lord Jesus, I renounce every contact that I have had with Satan, knowingly or unknowingly."

Then tell Satan directly,

"I resist you Satan, in the Name of Jesus Christ my Lord and Saviour. You can't touch me any longer, for I now belong to the Lord Jesus Christ."

James 4:7 says,

Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Thus Satan won't have a hold on you any longer.

If we continue to walk with the Lord, He'll give us more and more light on different areas of our life. It could be in the worldliness of our dress or speech or in the harshness of our tone of voice, or in the way we are being defiled through our reading habits etc. Thus we'll discover new areas constantly where we need to repent and be cleansed.

We should walk this way of constant repentance all our days.

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