

The Way of Salvation
#3 Repentance...Coming in From the Far Country
Luke 15:11-24a (Good News Bible GNB)

A young man came to his pastor for advice: "I left home," he said, "and I did something that will make my father furious when he finds out." The minister thought for a moment and replied, "Go home and confess your sin to your father, and he will probably forgive you and treat you like the prodigal son." Sometime later, the young man reported to the minister: "Well, I did as you said...I told my father what I had done." "And did he 'kill the fatted calf' for you?" asked the minister. "No," said the boy, "but he nearly killed the prodigal son!"

Our text this morning is one of the truly great passages from the Scriptures. In fact, it is so rich in meaning that it has been referred to as "the gospel in a nutshell." Few texts from the Bible carry as much meaning and power as this parable of Jesus we usually call "The Prodigal Son." There are so many facets of this gem-of-a-story that a preacher would have to preach dozens of sermons on this text before he or she began to scratch the surface of all the themes and lessons contained in this simple little story.

And I'm sure that, over the years, you have probably heard your share of sermons on this text... Some of those sermons focus on the father in the story, waiting expectantly for his wayward son to return to him. Other sermons focus on the older brother (a part of the story we chose not to read this morning) – the obedient son who stayed home and served his father faithfully. When his younger brother came home, that older brother couldn't even bring himself to speak to him. Still other sermons focus on the setting of the story in the life and ministry of Jesus. After being criticized for eating in the house of a sinner, Jesus tells a "trilogy" of stories... the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son... all with the same basic message: that God stands ready to welcome the sinner... and so must we.

But this morning, instead of focusing on any of these angles, I want us to consider the story from the perspective of the younger son in the story, for in a real sense, HIS is the experience of every sinner as we travel down the path that leads to our salvation.

As you know, this sermon is part of a sermon series I am preaching, in which we are looking at the "basics of the Christian faith." Specifically we are looking at the "Path of Salvation" that John Wesley outlined in his preaching and teaching... a path we ALL must travel along our spiritual journey.

The first two milestones which we have already passed as we traveled our spiritual journey the past few weeks have been: 1) an awareness of our Original Sin, and 2) the Prevenient Grace of God working in our lives even before we are aware of it. Today we come to the third marker along the path, which of course is "Repentance."

According to John Wesley's understanding, "repentance" is absolutely essential for salvation. In fact, Jesus Christ himself summed up His message at the very beginning of his ministry in his

first public sermon: The theme of his first teaching was: “**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Yes, repentance is *central* to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A nun, named Mother Basilea Schlink, wrote a book entitled, Repentance – the Joy-filled Life. In that book, she expressed it like this: She wrote, “*Repentance is the only gate through which the Gospel is received. Repentance is the entrance to the joy-filled life with Christ. It is the prerequisite for attaining forgiveness, and wherever forgiveness is received, there is salvation and joy.*” Yes, our repentance IS essential for salvation.

But what IS “repentance?” There is a popular notion held by many people today that repentance simply means, “being sorry for one’s sins,” and, of course, it DOES mean that. But REAL “repentance” means much more than that – as we will see as we consider the experience of that prodigal son in our Scripture for the morning. So think with me for a few minutes about some of the lessons we can learn about repentance from this story:

As we learned already in this sermon series, the first stage of repentance **is an awareness of our sinfulness**. You know, in every story ever written, there is a pivotal moment – an instant in the drama on which the whole story hinges. That is ESPECIALLY true for this parable. The first half of the parable tells the story of an arrogant rebellious child. The last half reveals a humble repentant young man.

What happened to bring about such a dramatic transformation? WHEN does this remarkable metamorphosis take place? In seven little words in the 17th verse: “At last he came to his senses...” ...an innocent-sounding little phrase which says volumes about repentance... We have to “come to our senses.” Or, as we might say today, we have to “wake up and smell the coffee” ...to take a long hard look at our lives, realistically and honestly.

You see, “repentance” is more than “remorse.” It is “self-awareness” – looking in the mirror...coming to terms with our sins and the mess we have made of our lives, and recognizing that we need forgiveness. As John Wesley put it, “*Repent, - that is, know thyself... know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art.*”

You know, many people today are in denial about their sinfulness and their need for forgiveness. They refuse to see themselves as sinners, in need of a Savior.

In the days of the Wesleyan Revival that was sweeping all across England and the American colonies, not everyone was happy about John Wesley’s insistence on repentance. In a letter written to Wesley from the Duchess of Buckingham, whose name was Lady Huntingdon, she criticized the doctrines of the Methodist preachers. She wrote that the doctrines of the Methodists... “*are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect toward their superiors in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions, as it is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth.*” Lady Huntingdon didn’t like to think of herself as a sinner, and when the truth be told, neither do we.

But if we are to progress down the “Path of Salvation,” we MUST, like the prodigals we are, “come to our senses,” and see ourselves as we really are. Or as Haddon Robinson so aptly put it: *“Some time in your life, if you are going to be made RIGHT with God, you must admit that you are WRONG with Him.”*

Sitting in a pig-sty, starving and lonely, that young man had a lot of time to look at himself. And he didn’t like what he saw.

Once we have “come to our senses” and recognized that we are sinners, the next stage in repentance is that **we must NAME our sins...** we must confess them to God. I once heard a preacher on the radio say something that is – oh so true: “We like to sin retail, and confess wholesale.” We like to think we can sin all day long, then at bedtime simply pray “forgive my sins,” and be done with it.

That’s not the way it works. Repentance means nothing if we don’t know what we are repenting FOR. As I said, repentance is much more than just “feeling sorry” for our sins – in general. We must DO something about them – we must NAME them. After all, the last time I checked my dictionary, “to repent” is an action verb!

Well, that prodigal son resolved to DO something about his sins... “I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, *“Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.”* In other words, the boy experienced a kind of “conversion.” Now - to “con-vert” means to change directions – to stop moving in the direction you are headed, turn around, and move forward in a new direction.

The evangelist, Billy Sunday, was notorious for his flamboyant pulpit style that included lying down on the stage, throwing chairs, and even firing guns. But he sure knew how to get people’s attention and how to make a point! One time, as he was responding to his critics, he said, *“They say I rub the fur the wrong way. I don’t. I just tell the cat to turn around!”*

After coming to his senses, the prodigal decides, like Billy Sunday’s cat, that its time to “turn around” - to muster up all his courage, swallow his pride, crawl back to his father, ...and beg for mercy.

One of the great rabbis, Rabbi Eliezer, taught his disciples that they should turn to God one day before their death. One of his disciples replied, *“But how can a man know the day of his death?”* The wise Rabbi answered, *“Then you should turn to God today; perhaps you may die tomorrow. Thus, every day will be employed in re-turning.”*

If we are serious about repentance, then every day we must be, as the good Rabbi said... “employed in re-turning.” We must go to OUR Father in heaven and confess, *“Father, I have sinned against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son or daughter.”* We must re-turn!

After we have come to an awareness of our sinful condition and named our sins before God, comes the final (and most wonderful) phase of repentance – **“FORGIVENESS.”**

In the First letter of John, we hear this loud and clear: *“If we confess our sins to God, He will keep His promise and do what is right: He will forgive us our sins and purify us from all wrongdoing.”*

When his wayward son came staggering down the road ready to confess his sins to his father and receive the condemnation he knew he deserved... what happened? The father, instead of passing judgment on the boy, embraced him weeping for joy, and welcomed him with open arms back into the family. In other words, the father forgave the sins of his son.

In Ernest Hemingway’s short story, *“The Capitol of the World,”* a father comes to Madrid, Spain, to find his son. His son, Paco, had left the farm after a misunderstanding. (Now, if you have ever been to Spain, you would know that “Paco” is a very popular name there.) The father, in order to find his son, put an ad in the newspaper that read, *“Paco, meet me at noon, Tuesday, at the newspaper office. All is forgiven.”* Signed simply: *“Your Father.”* In the story, there were 800 young men named Paco who came that day and stood in line, waiting to see if it was THEIR father who had granted them forgiveness.

My friends, we are ALL “prodigals:” We have all left home, gone to the “far country,” and separated ourselves from fellowship with our Father; We have all squandered our inheritance and grieved God; We have all “sinned against God,” and long for forgiveness and the loving embrace of our Father’s arms. To put it bluntly: We have all screwed up our lives ... and we need to GO HOME!

The Good News is (and hear this) – that no matter how badly you may have screwed up your life, you CAN come home again! And instead of judgment and condemnation, you will receive love and grace. All you have to do is recognize that you are a sinner, climb out of that pig-sty in which you are wallowing, and come in from the “far country.”

Do you need to make that journey this morning? Is there something in your life that you need to confess to your Heavenly Father so that you can rest in the shelter of his embrace? Do you want to “Come Home?”

My dear fellow prodigals, the road “home” is shorter than you think. Your Loving Father stands on the road before you with outstretched arms, eager to embrace you.

My hope and prayer is that you will run into the Father’s arms with joy, knowing that he stands ready to forgive you, reclaim you as his child, and welcome you home.

For its just as Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz said,
“There’s no place like home.”

Friends: Hear, and respond to this invitation:

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
full of pity, love, and power.

I will arise and go to Jesus;
he will embrace me with his arms;
in the arms of my dear Savior,
O there are ten thousand charms.