

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:7-10)

What is True Repentance?

I read an article this week analyzing the results of Super Tuesday. The author was mystified by Donald Trump's appeal to people who identify themselves as evangelical Christians. He pointed out what he called Trump's "libertine lifestyle" and very recent conversion to conservative issues. But then he said, "But evangelicals are all about forgiveness." I don't want to get into politics here. My point is how little this writer understood Christianity and forgiveness and repentance. While it's true that all Christians should be willing to look past the sins of a repentant sinner, the writer didn't have a clue how to address the question of whether Trump qualifies. Not being his pastor, I'm not going to try to make an evaluation either. But I'm not surprised that the media is confused on this issue. I am continually surprised that we are. Repentance is a fundamental part of what we Christians believe. It lies at the very heart of our faith in Christ. Yet, it often feels to me like we are confused on this issue. I suppose we can't help but let some of our society's confused thinking creep in. Lent is a time for us to remember what repentance is and what it isn't. So this morning, James, the brother of Jesus, leads us back to a fundamental question of our faith: **what is true repentance?**

I.

All three of our lessons for today are about repentance. The most famous is the gospel lesson about the son who took his father's money and wasted it on prostitutes and then came back and asked to be a servant in his father's house. He was repentant – although his brother couldn't see it. The Old Testament lesson is not nearly as well known. But there, too, we see God's people facing judgement for their sin and humbling themselves before God. God had even told them to go to their idols for help if that's who they believed in. But when they begged for forgiveness, the LORD could bear their misery no longer. He always loves us. He always forgives us. But he is looking for real repentance. Both of these lessons illustrate the point James was making: **True repentance is an attitude of the heart.**

The sin that James is actually addressing is pride. That sin lies at the root of all other sins, so what he says applies in almost every situation where we have sinned. James says, "**Submit yourselves, then, to God.**" Repentance is a complete change from pride. God is looking for us to revamp the way we think about life. The phrase in this reading that most nails that down is "**Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.**" What does it mean to be "double-minded"? I don't think anyone has ever called me that. But it is a common idea in the Old Testament. We often talk about being single minded. Some of the kids that graduated or were confirmed with my kids are single minded in their pursuit of a degree. I'm always impressed when I talk to their parents at how those kids knew what they wanted to study coming out of high school and they have worked doggedly to achieve that goal. To be double-minded would be the opposite of that. They couldn't make up their minds about what they want to do or be.

James is warning us sinners not to be double-minded about our repentance – because we all are by nature. We need a single-minded, laser focus on purifying our hearts and our lives. So true repentance must be sincere. It's much more than just talking about changing. It's much more than just wringing our hands over how sinful we've been and how weak we are. It's more than beating ourselves up and then doing nothing about it. Repentance is a new and different way of looking at our lives. It resists going back to the old, sinful way.

What does that single-minded focus look like? James says, "**Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.**" I struggle with this verse because it has been misused. There have been groups who taught that laughter is a sin and anything that we enjoy in this life must be wrong. That's not what James is saying. But he is talking about real sorrow over sin. Sometimes, kids get the idea that "I'm sorry" is a "get of jail free" card. I can remember my mother saying, "You're not sorry! You're just sorry you got caught!" A Christian should mourn his or her sins. Every one of them is an offense against God who loves us. During Lent, we see just how serious sin really is: we see the cross and everything that led up to it. We see the scourging and the crown of thorns. We see Jesus hanging there in agony, mocked by his enemies and

abandoned to hell itself by God the Father. That's what sin does. It earns death and hell and each one of us is dying a little bit every day because we are sinners. But pride brushes all that off and makes "I'm sorry" a mechanical response. I've checked the right boxes. I've jumped through the hoops. Now God has to let me off the hook.

Repentance with no sorrow over my sin and no distress at what I am and what I do is not real repentance at all. Now, I'm not advocating emotional manipulation – you gotta be this sorry or your repentance isn't real. Nor am I telling you that you need to flood your couch with crocodile tears. But through James, the Holy Spirit is calling us to take stock of our lives and to see how God mourns over our sins. Lent is a time for us to do that.

If we do that, then we will do what James says: **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."** If I see my sin for what it is, there can be no room for pride in my heart. We know that we can't be good enough to enter heaven. We're sinners who deserve hell. And repentance understands that we are asking God to have mercy on us. What do you think would happen if a criminal spent his whole trial smirking at the judge and making faces at the witnesses and just generally being arrogant, but then when he was convicted, he threw himself on the mercy of the court, asking for a light sentence? The judge might very well hit him harder. When you're in the wrong and you ask for forgiveness, you need to show a humble attitude, before God first of all.

But notice the second part. **"And he will lift you up."** There is no doubt about it. This isn't a sales pitch in which we hope we can persuade God to be merciful. There's no doubt what his verdict is going to be. Humble yourself and God *will* lift you up. When you are repentant, when you come to him for mercy, he wipes all your sin away. He erases all record of your pride and all the sins that came from it. He turns weeping and grieving into real joy – the joy that comes from being forgiven. That's what he wants you to have. True repentance is more than just feeling bad about our sins. It's trusting that we are forgiven. It's taking comfort in his love. It's moving forward in our lives with the healing that only God can give. Why does he lift us up? Because Jesus went to that cross for us. Because Jesus has already suffered death and hell there and he paid all we owe. Because Jesus was punished in our place for every sin we will ever commit. Before we begin the process of self-examination, we already know how it will end: with love and forgiveness and joy. That's true even in Lent.

II.

But if that attitude of our heart is real and true, repentance never stops there. It always makes changes in our lives. In these verses James gives a series of commands because the Christian life is an active, driven set of changes – we turn away from sin. If there is no change, there is no repentance. **True repentance is the source of a new life.**

That is perhaps the biggest misunderstanding that I encounter as a pastor. People have the idea that if I just say I'm sorry, God will forgive me no matter what. That could be true if you understood it correctly. But most of the time when people say it to me, they mean that they can go on with their sin and God's OK with that because they said they're sorry. Well, imagine that you pull up to your house and someone you know is robbing it. You confront them and they're terribly embarrassed by the whole thing. They profusely apologize, but then go on robbing your house. In fact, when you ask them if they're going to put all your stuff back – or even if they're going to stop taking stuff out to their truck, they honestly and cheerfully say no. Is that person sorry? Of course not!

So then why do we think that we can say we're sorry to God when we have no intention of changing our lives? "I'm sorry I don't get to church, God. But it's just so early on Sunday morning and I like to stay out late on Saturday night" "I'm sorry I go to websites I should avoid, God. But everybody does it." "I'm sorry I'm getting a little drunk right now, but I'm going to have a few more beers and then I'll drive home. But I will repent when I'm done. I might even put a little extra in the collection plate." Is any of that real repentance? NO! You cannot be sorry for your sins and have no intention of stopping the sin. That is very different from someone who is striving to turn from their sin, but is weak. Take a person who can't stop fighting with their spouse. They feel bad. They pray for wisdom and strength and try to do better, but their sinful nature gets in the way. That person is repentant. They're just growing. But saying, "I'll repent later," or making excuses for our sin because we're unhappy, because life has been unfair to us, because this is just the way we feel – that is not true repentance.

So what is? James says, **“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”** The devil wants you to sin. But repentance resists him. Look at God’s promise: he will drive the devil away from you. When you resist sin, Christ is working in your heart. When you resist sin, the Holy Spirit who lives in you, is giving you strength. Who do you think is stronger? Jesus or the devil? It’s Jesus! So resist the devil, clinging to Christ for strength, and God will drive that evil doer away.

So James tells us, **“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”** Again, a promise! You come near to God when you come to his word, when you confess your sins to your pastor, when you seek strength and comfort from your fellow believers. God’s promise is that he will never be too busy to help you. He is always here in the gospel, full of strength and life for you! He is always here in communion, in the memory of your baptism, in the announcement of forgiveness that I give to you publicly and privately. He has all power to lift you up.

Only then does James tell us to wash hands and purify our hearts. He is talking about doing something. You wash your hands of the sins you’ve been doing and leave them behind. You wash them down the drain. And you purify your heart. What do you think about? How angry your spouse makes you? How unfair your life is? How little you have and how much more other people have? Do you think that’s purifying your mind? Christ died and he paid for you. Christ died and he paid for all those people in your life who sin against you. God has given us power over our thought life. It’s not absolute. The devil loves to whisper in our ears and he makes the most of it when we listen. We will never be completely free of the sinful nature inside us. But we can redirect our minds to more wholesome things. By the power of God, every day we wash our hands and purify our hearts. Every day, we renew our commitment to turn from sin and live for God. Every day, the Holy Spirit is there in the gospel to give us power to live like that.

Repentance is throwing ourselves on God’s power. We humble ourselves and Christ lifts us up. That is God’s promise. He calls us to trust him and turn from sin. He calls us to trust him and adopt a new and better way of thinking about how to live. You know what? He will keep his promise. True repentance knows that before it even begins. Because that’s true, our whole lives are exercises in repentance. Most of the time, it’s quick and quiet. I recognize that I should have done better and thank God for forgiveness. But sometimes, we need the in-depth evaluation. We need to see the horror of our sin so that we can see the beauty of the cross. When we feel the love of Jesus that takes our sin away, then we have the power of God to fight against our sin again today. Tomorrow, that power will be there for us again. Amen.