

*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him,<sup>7</sup> he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites,<sup>8</sup> who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites.<sup>9</sup> The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress.<sup>10</sup> Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.”*

*<sup>11</sup> The LORD replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines,<sup>12</sup> the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?<sup>13</sup> But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you.<sup>14</sup> Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”*

*<sup>15</sup> But the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.”<sup>16</sup> Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer. (Judges 10:6-16)*

### What Kills Real Repentance?

The other day, Pastor Schaeewe and I were talking about the Old Testament lessons we’ve been preaching during Lent. Of course, as always, he had a very insightful comment. He subscribes, as I do, to the idea that the Sundays in Lent are supposed to be “little Easters.” They’re supposed to give us a break from the law with the joy of the gospel. But it’s been hard to show that from these lessons – Achan and Shiloh and Korah. These lessons have been heavy with law. When I read today’s lesson to you, it might have seemed like today we’re going to have more of the same. Certainly, God preaches uncompromising law to us this morning. But right at the end of the lesson, God makes a rich statement of his grace. With this lesson, during this season of repentance, God shows us the two central threats to having penitent hearts. That’s what we want to understand this morning, because repentance is the key to trusting in Christ. **What kills real repentance?**

#### I.

If the devil can ruin our repentance, he has succeeded in ruining our faith. So we must understand the attacks he makes against us. **What kills real repentance? Just saying you’re sorry.** The reading we have before us this morning is taken from the time of the judges. That’s the time of men like Samson and Gideon and finally Samuel. During this time, a pattern developed. The people would be at peace under God’s blessing. But then, they would turn away from God. Israel had unbelieving neighbors all around them and even living in their country. They found worshipping the false gods of the people around them to be more attractive than worshipping the true God. So, again and again, Israel turned to idol worship. How did God deal with that? He would send an enemy to conquer them. When things got really bad, the people would remember the old stories about how God had rescued his people from bigger and stronger nations and they would repent and return to him. Then God would send a judge – a leader – to rescue them.

But sadly, the longer this cycle lasted, the worse it got. This story we have before is very far into the process. Our text says, **“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him.”** Naturally, this made God angry. So, the Bible says, **“He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites.”** He didn’t literally sell them. God uses the picture of a slave owner getting rid of a troublesome slave. God handed them over to people who would have no pity on them. The Philistines and the Ammonites conquered them and for 18 years, they treated the people of Israel like dirt. Finally, they turned to the Lord for help.

Only this time, God didn’t come running to save them. He said, **“Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”** Why did God say that? Why didn’t God take them back? Because they had gotten into a pattern. They were making repentance a mechanical coming and saying

they're sorry and bobbing their heads at the right time so God would let them off and they could do what we want. We can see the kind of thing God was addressing everyday family life. We parents teach our children that they need to say they're sorry when they've done something wrong. We want them to understand that they chose to sin. We even want them to feel bad about that choice. They have to show that they understand that what they did was wrong. But once we hear those words, "I'm sorry," we usually put the issue behind us. Often the punishment is much less if we see and hear that they're sorry for what they've done. But sometimes, kids calculate that if they say they're sorry, they're not going to get in as much trouble. They take the forgiveness that we parents give them not as a sign of love, but as a license to sin. All I have to do to get out of trouble is say "I'm sorry."

That can be a huge problem in a family. It's an even bigger problem when we have that attitude toward God. It kills our repentance. What is repentance? It has two parts and a fruit. Part one of repentance is what pastors call contrition. That's a big, scary theological word for feeling sorry for your sins. But contrition is only the first part. The second part is faith. God tells us that we are forgiven. Because our Savior died and rose for us, all that we are guilty of is taken away. And when we hear that good news applied to the sin that's causing us to feel guilty, repentance clings to that promise. The gates of heaven are opened! Repentance is the source of peace and joy.

Contrition and faith equal repentance. If we are truly repentant, we will always bring forth fruits of repentance. Sometimes, those fruits are obvious. If I stole something, I give it back. If I hurt someone, I try to make it better. That's where an apology comes in. An apology is not repentance, rather it's a fruit of repentance. We do have to be careful about how we judge the fruits other people bring. But always repentance brings fruits. The most obvious and most necessary fruit of repentance is stopping the sin. Now, that might be hard. I might slip back into it. I might have to wage war for years against sinful desires that are embedded in my heart. But if I am truly repentant, I will wage that war day by day, asking God to give me the strength to overcome temptation.

What if there are no fruits? Then there is no repentance. That's what the devil wants. He wants us to embrace an easy kind of repentance, a simple "I'm sorry" gets me off the hook and then I can go on. The problem with that is that I have no contrition, no sorrow over my sin and no fear of hell if my faith dies. I once spoke with a young woman who had led a very sinful life. She was a member of one of our churches, but she never went. And when a Baptist condemned her lifestyle, she said to me, "I so glad our God isn't like that. He just says, there, there, it's OK." It's OK to sin? Not on your life! God hates sin. God condemns sin. And when we fall into an easy, mechanical repentance that allows us just to say "Sorry, God" and go on without any wrestling with sin or without any commitment to change our sinful life, then our repentance is dead.

That's what God was teaching Israel. God said this to drive them to see how false their repentance had been and to embrace a real, heart-felt sorrow for their sins and a living faith in his promises. They did that. They admitted that they had sinned. They brought forth fruits of repentance. They put away their idols and worshipped God even before he delivered them. And the most important words of this entire text are the last ones: **"[The LORD] could bear Israel's misery no longer."** God takes no joy in punishing us. He wants us to repent and live. He wants us to spend eternity with him.

So when Israel repented but was still dealing with the consequences of their sin, God's heart broke. He sent them another judge to rescue them. And of course, he has done the same for us. He sent the one great Deliverer who rescued all people from death and hell. He sent Jesus. God's heart could not bear sending the entire human race to hell, even though God's justice demanded it. So before time began, God devised a plan to rescue us all. Jesus was that plan. He was born in Israel centuries after this story. He laid down his life so that we will live.

God's justice demands death and hell for every sin. But his love transferred all that punishment to his one and only Son. Jesus, the true Son of God, suffered an eternity of hell on the cross. He suffered everything that every sinner who will ever live deserved. Then he died. Because he was the Son of God, his death counts for every single one of us. His death pays for all the times that we have sinned. His death even pays for all the times that our repentance was mechanical and unreal. He died for our lack of sorrow over sin and for the false faith that thinks that I can just say, "Sorry, God, my bad!" and go on without changing. He died for all the times that my fruits of faith didn't come close to undoing the wrongs that I have done. Jesus died and he paid for it all and he washed all that sin away. You and I are forgiven.

## II.

That truth brings us to the other danger to our repentance: despair. Despair often means being really, really sad. But when we talk about repentance, despair means believing that my sins are so bad they will never be forgiven. If I think that, I have no faith. **What kills repentance? Thinking God will never forgive you.**

Israel could easily have fallen into that temptation. God was pretty harsh with them. But thankfully, they didn't. They said, **"We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now."** "God, you're right. We are guilty. We place ourselves in your hands. But deliver us from sinful men." That was faith. They trusted in God even when he when he had good reason to be angry with them. Then they did bring forth those fruits and waited for God's deliverance because God had promised to protect the nation of Israel. He told them that if they abandoned him, he would punish them with enemies and physical loss and oppression. But he also promised that when they returned to him, he would help them and restore them and love them. The people trusted in God's promise to overcome God's anger at their sin.

That's what faith is. It is the heart of true repentance. Despair is a special blade aimed right at the heart of the serious Christian. We know better. We have been instructed. We know what God says is right and wrong. When we sin – especially when it's a big sin – it's very easy for us to despair, to think that God would never forgive us because we're supposed to be better than that.

Do you hear the pride in that? *"I'm supposed to be better."* "God would never forgive *me*." The devil takes a lifetime of following God, mixes in a little sinful pride, and turns us into Pharisees who don't think we need to repent or into Judases who believe that God will never forgive us. And we might even do what Judas did – kill ourselves in our despair. But my friends, God is greater than our heart. When our heart condemns us, God assures us that we are forgiven, even for the pride in our despair.

Because our hearts are tender and our consciences are weak, God has given us that gospel in a multitude of ways. The only answer to despair is the power of God built into the good news about Jesus. So he gave us the gospel in sermons and liturgies and Bible studies so that when we aren't despairing, we can hear his promises and grow in faith. Then, when we sin, when we can't sleep because of our guilt and our heartache, we remember his promise that his mercies are new every morning. We find peace. God gave us baptism which washed all our sins away, even those we had not yet committed. He tells us to remember we are baptized and forgiven. God gave us communion where we receive the very body and blood of Christ that paid for our sins. In that moment when you receive his body and blood, Jesus says to you personally, "I forgive you." God gave us the Church, where we can come to our pastor and confess our sins and he will apply the gospel to that guilt and that sorrow we are struggling with. In that same Church, we can come to brothers and sisters in Christ and hear that same message of forgiveness.

In all that gospel, God built the power of the Holy Spirit. That power is greater than guilt and despair. It is the power of the crucified and risen Christ. Now, we may need that power over and over again. King David said, "My sin is always before me." But God has given us the gospel to be used all our lives long. It is the cure we need.

Nothing could be worse for us than to have real repentance die in our hearts. Repentance is the life of faith. I see and confess my sins. I trust in my Savior for forgiveness. I bring forth fruits of faith and rejoice in my Savior's love. That's the pattern of our lives until we see the Lord. In that pattern we have peace and strength and a new life under God. Trust in your Savior enough to honestly face your sin and confess it to him. Then cling to his forgiveness. Then turn and lead a new life. Amen.