

“How to Respond to...”

SIN & REPENTANCE

Adapted by Pastor Neal Radichel from a March 2013 “Journal of Theology” article written by Pastor Frank Gantt of St. Luke’s, Lemmon, SD (†CLC)

Introductory Thought:

What is “Ash Wednesday?” It is the day, historically, Christians have applied ash, the remnants of some burned-up material, to their foreheads. Many still do this church custom today. In Old Testament times ashes signified sorrow, grief and came to be used as a ceremonial symbol of human sorrow over sin and disobedience to God. Some today continue to apply ashes to their foreheads on Ash Wednesday as an outward sign of something spiritual, namely, “repentance,” though the outward part is not spiritually necessary.

What is repentance?

Jesus answers this very important question with an example:

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” [Matthew 6:16-21 ESV]

Jesus addresses, what was for the people of His day, another outward sign of repentance; it was the custom of fasting. The act of fasting wasn’t just a sign, but was considered to be a physical aid to the spiritual discipline of repentance. The essence of repentance, however, is invisible to anyone else but God. It lies within the human heart and is held up in the Bible as a critical part of Christian life.

“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” [2 Peter 3:9]

The wearing of ashes and the custom of fasting have, historically, served Christians as bodily reminders of the spiritual reality that we are mortal. We are mortal because we are sinners. God said to Adam: *“In the day that you eat of it [the forbidden fruit] you shall surely die.”* Ezekiel said: *“The soul that sins, it shall die.”* St. Paul wrote: *“The wages of sin is death.”* We can recognize both fasting and the use of ashes as helpful reminders of our mortality and our total dependence on God. But neither of them alone can ever make one truly repentant. The heart of repentance begins between the individual and God. Repentance *begins* with an acknowledgement that we have brought upon ourselves our own destruction.

What does true repentance look like?

Repentance *ends* with the sinner’s firm reliance on the God who saves by grace. And so we realize that repentance is two things joined together: Contrition and Faith.

1. **Contrition** is sorrow over one’s sin, which, to be clear, is not sorrow over the pain or punishment that sin brings. It is not sorrow for getting caught in the act of committing sin. Contrition is sorrow over the sin itself. It is wishing that it was never done. The contrite heart hates the sin on account of it being an offense against God. It wants to avoid the sin in the future. There will certainly be a conflict because the one who is truly contrite, who is genuinely sorry for the sin, still has an old man within him that yearns to sin. But in spite of that, true repentance will involve sincere admission of one’s guilt and condemnation, and a genuine sorrow for the ugliness of sin in one’s life.
2. **Faith** is the divinely worked confidence in the Gospel that proclaims the forgiveness of sins. Faith is not hoping that God might forgive us. Faith is not resigning ourselves to whatever God chooses to do with us. Faith is not even a resolution to avoid the sin. Faith is none of these things. Faith is trust. It is trust in the gospel that declares to us that God, for Christ’s sake, forgives us all our sins. Faith looks to Jesus’ suffering and dying for the sin of the world and says: This was for me too; it was for my sins He suffered and it is my sins that are washed away by His blood.

“You know how I testified...of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” [Acts 20:21 ESV]

How do you respond to sin and repentance?

You've heard the expression "Hate the sin, but love the sinner" right? That is good to keep in mind when responding to sin and repentance. We can say we hate sin, however, according to the sinful flesh we love it. In order to effectively respond to sin we need to effectively understand it from a Biblical understanding.

"The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." [Romans 8:7-8 NIV]

We need to respond to sin personally, and encourage others to run to the God from whom we have turned away by our actions. If the sinful activity is dismissed or ignored, there is no repentance. Faith is born and renewed as God smashes the idols within our hearts and creates in their place a confidence in Christ as our Savior from sin, death, hell, and the power of the devil. This change He accomplishes through the preaching of His Law and Gospel. God's Word helps us define the word 'repent' to mean to "turn around" or "turn away from the sin." God chose this word to describe the change of direction in the sinner's life.

"As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways!" [Ezek. 33:11 NKJV]

Repentance is seen outside of the heart when a life once headed toward hell in sinful rejection of Christ and His Word is 'turned,' so that the person now heads toward heaven in clinging to Christ. The sinful and shameful things of this world that allures, that captivates a heart, that controls affections, that claims loyalty, are all seen as temporary and disposable pleasures. When worldly wealth and sinful pleasures capture and take over the heart they are gravely damaging to, ultimately, our relationship with God.

"But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed." [Rom. 2:5 NIV]

Read **Matthew 18:15-17**. Jesus taught how to address the heart of sin, in order to "gain your brother" – to bring the person to repent of his or her sin(s). True repentance is a window to the heart. *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* [Mt 6:16-21 ESV]

Repentance is all about God's eternal treasure!

Our treasure is with Jesus. The goal is to lead others to that treasure also and pray that it would be the focus. The Gospel of Christ's suffering and death for us -to take away our sins and to reconcile us back together with God- is more precious than the things of this world which all can be broken, lost, stolen, and destroyed. Since our treasure is in heaven, so will be our hearts.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart -- These, O God, You will not despise." [Psalms 51:17 NKJV]

The essence of repentance always involves contrition and it always entails faith in Christ. There can be no true repentance when someone refuses to acknowledge his sins to God. If churchgoing people attempt to defend those who have fallen into fashionable sins by insisting that those sins are not sins, they actually do harm by standing in the way of repentance. In Christ, God has forgiven the sins of homosexuals, fornicators, liars, thieves, and every other kind of sinner. But anyone who refuses to repent of the sin throws God's forgiveness back at Him, as though they have no need of it. They reject God's forgiveness. Without contrition there is no need of faith or care for God's treasure gifted in Christ. David confessed,

"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin." [Psalms 32:5 NIV]

With the Grace of Christ, we look to Him who bore our sins away on the cross. For His sake God looks upon us and pardons us of all our sins. Repentance is being confronted with the wages of our sin, but also made the recipient of God's amazing grace toward us in His Son, Jesus Christ. As the Holy Spirit turns us in sorrow away from sin, He turns us confidently in faith to Him who says:

"Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." [Luke 15:10 NKJV]

In view of sin, repentance is a great gift that our Savior has worked in our hearts through the preaching of His Law and Gospel, to receive the eternal treasure of heaven. To a repentant heart that turns away from sin, Jesus comforts,

"Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."

[Matthew 9:2 NKJV]