

**December 3, 2023**  
**Sermon Manuscript**

How to Watch: (The Gift of) Repentance Done Rightly (Mark 13:24-37)

The good news I want to share with you this morning is that God wants to help us move beyond any misguided impressions about what Christian repentance is - that it includes neither self-punishment nor promising to do better - rather, Christian repentance is coming into agreement with God about how we can live because of his love for us in Christ.

As we begin Advent today, we are embarking upon one of the two penitential seasons in the Church year, the other one being Lent. And the word penitential just comes from the Latin word for repentance, which is the biblical word for having a change of heart that causes us to turn from our sin. And, indeed, in our gospel passage today,<sup>1</sup> when Jesus spoke about 'keeping watch,' the way we are faithful to this command is not by getting on our rooftops and watching for His return, but by watching for how He is at work in our lives to change our hearts to lead us into more righteousness, so we can cooperate with that work and receive this transformation. And living with this posture of watchfulness for how Jesus is at work in us and seeking to cooperate with it is really how we go about repentance.

The good news is that God wants to help us move beyond any misguided impressions about what Christian repentance is - that it includes neither self-punishment nor promising to do better - rather, Christian repentance is coming into agreement with God about how we can live because of his love for us in Christ.

Now, I would imagine that many of us carry with us some conception of what repentance is or some idea about how it is done if we have been in the Church or been Christians for very long. But unfortunately repentance is commonly misunderstood, because the Church has been notorious for teaching about it in unhelpful or even toxic ways. As the guys from Gravity Commons have observed, "most Christians have jacked up views about repentance." When *some* of us hear the word 'repent', some pretty negative images come to mind, whether it's a fire & brimstone preacher, an overzealous & misguided evangelist using a bullhorn on a street corner, or perhaps an authority figure from our past who used the term coercively and unlovingly. And so, some might understandably prefer to just not use that word or include repentance as an essential part of our journey with God.

However, the Gravity guys - Fathers Matt Tebbe & Ben Sternke - explain that while some of us have experienced this word being used in unhelpful ways, we really can't be rid of it. And this is because repentance done properly is meant to be a way of life for Christians to deal with the reality that sin still persists as a problem for all of us. Even if we have put our faith in Christ, all of us still sin in various ways all the time, whether in things we do or don't do, and in some ways we recognize and some we don't, but none of us can read through the sins highlighted in the Great Litany and think, "Nah, none of this is an issue for me." And while Jesus has won *forgiveness* for our sins, the ways sin persists in our lives are nonetheless very harmful; whether we recognize it or not, our sin diminishes both our own life and the lives of those around us, whom we care about the most.

So let me share a small example from my own life. [Recently there was an occasion where the kids and I both had the day off from school and work, and so we were all at the house. But, ya know, as precious as such time-off can be, and as much as you can look forward to it, when you're actually living through it, things don't always go as well as you imagined. So I was off the Sunday night and into Monday that week, but I wasn't really having a good time. Amanda would say something to me and I'd be annoyed or we were doing chores and she'd ask me to do something and I'd always have a different way I thought it should be done. And then, the kids: it just felt like everything they were doing was](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 13:24-37

driving me nuts. And it wasn't going unnoticed. At some point Amanda gave me the loving feedback that I seemed pretty grumpy.

So this was a small example of my sin - no, I wasn't stealing or murdering anybody - but like Jesus says, sin is not just about such extreme behaviors, He takes it to the level of our hearts. And in this instance, my sin was affecting both me and those around me - I wasn't having a good time and they weren't either!

And it had come to my attention when Amanda graciously but candidly said she was experiencing my presence as pretty grumpy. Now, there are different ways we may become aware of our sin.

- The Gravity guys explain that sometimes it's like hitting a **brick wall**: a big event brings our life to a sudden STOP - like getting a divorce or getting fired - that makes it really hard to ignore that we have a sin problem.
- But sometimes there are occasions that are more like a **mirror**, which just allow us to see ourselves in a way we hadn't before - and that's what Amanda's comment was for me - it served as a mirror to help me see myself.
- Then, at other times we become aware of our sin by noting patterns in our life that keep coming up - they call these **speed bumps** - for example, you might notice yourself drinking more frequently or seeking out some other numbing behavior in response to certain situations, you notice yourself telling little lies or half-truths in certain situations, when a certain topic comes up in social conversations you find yourself with an enormous urge to rant or go off about it, or you find yourself gossiping about others in certain situations and feeling a hangover from it later.
- Or finally, our sin may be revealed because we catch a **vision** about how something can be done better or more righteously. You witness someone else parent their child with a level of compassion or with a non-anxious presence or a lack of anger or control that you couldn't imagine doing yourself, or you see someone respond graciously to being wronged or slighted when you know you would've let the person have it or taken great offense.

Now, perhaps there are some instances where our sin is laid before us and we can have an instance change of heart: we have a vision for why God's way is better, we confess & receive His forgiveness, and we are able to turn away from continuing in that sin. Perhaps. But if something has sorta been the way we've done things for a long time, it's not that easy. Most of us don't set out to sin just for the heck of it, but because we find it to be necessary: we feel like we *need* that drink, or we *need* that control, or we *need* to be less than honest... for whatever reason.

And what about when we are confronted with sin that we don't really want to give up or that we really struggle to give up? What do we tend to do when we are confronted with our badness, when it is suggested that something we've been doing is wrong or when we realize that some attitude we've been committed to is inconsistent with God's heart? What do we do? Or better yet, what *should* we do?

Well, the guys from Gravity observe that we tend to respond in one of three ways. We either

1. deny that we've done anything wrong at all; so we refuse to repent
2. or we respond by feeling really bad about ourselves
3. or by making promises to ourselves or others that we'll do better, that we'll stop it and act differently moving forward.

And it just so happens that in the example I shared with you, when I was confronted with my grumpy attitude and behaviors, I think I tried all three of these responses on for size. :)

First I was defensive. Now, I didn't so much deny I was being grumpy; I think I sort of already knew that, but just needed someone to name it for me. But my *first* reflex was to deflect blame onto the kids or her. "The problem is not with me; it's with others" or "these circumstances."

But when no one was buying that, I felt shame and I sorta went away and began to feel really bad about myself and to beat up on myself. And I think this - self-condemnation - is a really common response

for us to try to mitigate the feeling of being faced with our sin. Indeed, for many Christians self-flagellation is sorta what they think **repentance is**.

Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't feel guilty at all when we sin - feeling guilty is part of having a conscience and the process of realizing we've done something wrong - I'm more talking about what we do with those guilty feelings. And the Gravity guys suggest that it's really common to respond to those guilty feelings with self-condemnation, by heaping even more bad feelings upon ourselves. Indeed, many Protestants have been led to mistakenly believe that this is what repentance is: that the way we repent is by self-inflicting emotional torture in order to compensate or 'make up for' our badness. We sort of punish ourselves before God has to.

But this brand of repentance is both theologically problematic and unhelpful from a practical standpoint. Theologically, it's problematic because God's posture toward us when we sin is not that of a punisher, but a forgiver. While our impulse when we sin may be to hide from God, like Adam & Eve did, and to think that punishing ourselves will somehow make us worthy of coming into God's presence, the gospel is that in Christ is that God is already near to us and loves us, and no sin we commit can change that. Moreover, the bad feelings we heap upon ourselves, actually make us more likely to commit the sin again; in fact, when it comes to addictive behaviors, self-condemnation is part of the additive cycle that increases our desire to do the addictive behavior to make ourselves feel better again.

Well, even though self-condemnation is one of my reflexive responses to being confronted with my sin, in recent years I *have* been learning how counterproductive it is and that it is inconsistent with God's *heart* toward me when I sin - it's not actually living in the truth of the gospel. So after starting down the road of self-condemnation, I reminded myself of how God really feels toward me. One thing I'll even tell myself in these situations is "John, you may not love you right now, but God does!"

But then, what I was inclined to do next was to try to *just stop* - to stop being a jerk - and to start being pleasant, start being happy, be a super-dad and super-husband. This is that other common response where we resolve to try harder to do what we know we're supposed to do or even want to do. And I *did want* to be a blessing. But I quickly realized I couldn't; I couldn't just flip a switch and fake being in a good mood or loving, not in any sustainable way. And the problem I was running into is that we *cannot change our own hearts*; we can't fix ourselves apart from God - if we could we wouldn't need Jesus - but only God's grace can really change our hearts.

So the good news is that God wants to help us move beyond any misguided impressions about what Christian repentance is - that it includes neither self-punishment nor promising to do better - rather, Christian repentance is coming into agreement with God about how we can live because of his love for us in Christ.

Any approach to repentance that is characterized by self-condemnation or by promising to do better is misguided. The first lacks the truth of God's unconditional love and the latter lacks an understanding of our need for His grace - not just our need for grace for forgiveness but to ever truly change: we are completely powerless to change our own sinful hearts.

So instead, what does godly repentance look like when we're faced with our sin? Well, it begins by treating ourselves with compassion - with that same love and forgiveness God has toward us - and then asking God to give us insight into the *reason* for our sin - Why have we thought that this sinful attitude was best or that this sinful action was necessary? - and to ask God for a vision of why His way is better.

So, returning to the story of my grapple with grumpiness, after I realized that I couldn't *make myself* be in a good mood or *make my heart feel* loving - faced with my own powerlessness over my sinful attitude - I admitted it to God. I said in a short prayer, "Lord, I know you love & accept & forgive me. And I desire to be loving, but my heart is feeling other things. Will you help me?"

Now, at this point, you may be guessing that I'm gonna tell you that God *answered* that prayer. And He did, but perhaps *not* in the way you might be thinking. Because God did not just zap me and put me in a good mood or fill my heart with love. As nice and easy as that would've been, in my experience God doesn't usually work like this, just *zapping* the darkness from our hearts.

I wish He had. But instead, over the next half a day or so God showed me that there had been a reason I had been grumpy. God showed me that the root of my grumpiness was some unresolved grief that had been brought up by it being near a certain date on the calendar. In this case, God gave me this revelation sorta progressively through the combination of a conversation I had with someone about something else and a seemingly random memory that later came to mind, which led me to realize: oh, my grumpiness at least in this instance is about trying to avoid being sad. We *often* use anger as a cover for other emotions. And I had been treating others poorly, particularly if they were seeking something from me - sort of angry at these requests - because my subconscious was saying, “you don't have anything to give, so get these people to buzz off,” (and being hard to be around is one way to get people to leave you alone). My inability to be caring toward others was a sign of my need for care myself.

So what repentance looked like was recognizing this reality and taking action. And yes, I needed to apologize or make amends, but the more important action I took was the space to grieve what I needed to - to feel that sadness and to ask God for comfort. And in doing *this* my heart began to feel freed up to love others - not through trying harder, but organically: through receiving the care it needed. We love because He first loved us.<sup>2</sup> What enables us to love is allowing Him to love us.

[[Just anecdotally, I've actually been wondering a lot in recent years how much the things that get us agitated - or into hateful or cynical attitudes toward the world & others - how much of that could actually be the fruit of an unwillingness to grieve, not being practiced at grieving the changes in the world that we can't control. But,]] of course an unmet need to grieve is not always the root of a sin; not at all. There are all sorts of potential root causes for us to believe something sinful is best or necessary. But godly repentance - the way forward when our sin is staring us in the face - is compassionate curiosity about *what has made us believe this is best or necessary* and asking God for revelation about what we've got wrong, what truth about the reality of life in Him that we've missed.

So in our Gospel passage to open this Advent, Jesus commanded us to “keep watch!” Well, I would submit to you that what “keeping watch” means during this era of awaiting Jesus' return is learning to notice what in our lives is awry - trusting we can do so without fear, knowing God does not seek to punish us but rather desire to change our hearts to believe more in the truth, so that we experience more freedom and become more of a blessing, become more like Jesus.

If we desire to have a meaningful Advent, it could come by taking just *one* of area of sin you notice in your life - or asking God to show you one - and beginning to asking God about it, inviting the perspective of others whom we can trust won't just dismiss our concern or judge us or offer some easy fix, and guarding against those impulses within ourselves to fix or self-condemn.

This past week, I had a revelation about some hardness of heart I've had about a situation. And I haven't done anything about it as of yet - other than resist the impulse to self-condemn or to just fix it and change my external behavior even though my heart is not there - because I know I'm going on clergy retreat and have a few colleagues there whose insight I'd like to seek out. And I'm literally excited for God to show me why there is a better way, what lie I'm believing, and what is really true, so I can organically take on a posture in that situation that is more in line with His heart, and will therefore be better for everyone involved.

The good news is that God wants to help us move beyond any misguided impressions about what Christian repentance is - that it includes neither self-punishment nor promising to do better - rather, Christian repentance is coming into agreement with God about how we can live because of his love for us in Christ. If we learn to approach repentance in this way, we will discover the absolute gift that it is, and how it is indispensable for living into the flourishing God has for us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Jn 4:19