

# **Week One**

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*REPENTANCE*

## Call to Worship

*Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

[PSALM 96:1-5, 11-13]

## Confession

Father in heaven, we need to be forgiven. We have tried to heal ourselves. Instead of trusting in the death of Jesus Christ, we have tried to work off our guilt. We have tried so hard to pile up good deeds that outweigh our sins. Instead of trusting in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have tried to change through our own efforts. We have tried to change our hearts through sheer willpower. Forgive us for trying to heal ourselves. Forgive us for neglecting your grace. Forgive us and heal us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by*

*the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."*

[MARK 9:14-29]

## DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a time of particular focus on repentance, which does not mean that we atone for our sins, or even that we feel deep shame about them. Repentance is our response to the fact that Jesus atoned for our sins and bore our shame on the cross.

The word "repentance" has a negative connotation in our culture. To say that someone needs to repent implies they have done something *really* bad, and should feel really bad about it. While that may be true in some respect, the call to repentance is fundamentally good news. One Bible commentator says, "Repentance from the beginning of time to this present hour has been, and remains, the most positive Word from the heart of God."

Because God made us for himself, our highest good is to repent and turn to God.

In the Old Testament, the sins of God's people and their lack of repentance led to their exile. God ordained their ruin and captivity at the hand of Pagan nations. It was horrific at every level: physical, national, cultural, and spiritual devastation. As awful as it sounds, it was actually a demonstration of God's love. As a father disciplines his children, "the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Hebrews 12:6). The point of discipline is correction and restoration. It is an invitation to fellowship.

Paul says it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). God calls us to himself, convicts us of our sins, comforts us with his love, and changes us by his grace. Our repentance begins and ends with God! When we make it about what we will do to make things right with God, we veer off the road of faith into one of two ditches.

On one side of the road, we express resolve: "I will never do that again!" We act as if we can wipe the slate clean with our sincerity and earn a pardon with our passion. When we promise to never do that again, we are saying that we really can be good enough, and we'll prove it this time. But repentance is not a do-over. Nor is it a system of works-righteousness. Rather, it is a means of experiencing the abundant grace of God toward us in Christ. Grace exposes our desire to be good enough and digs to the root of our sins. Who we really are—that is the realm in which grace intends to go to work, to renovate our lives and help us work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Mere resolution defrauds repentance of its lasting true fruit.

On the other side of the road, we express remorse: "I can't believe I did that." Feelings of shame and guilt are natural, but the Bible says there are two kinds of grief: worldly and godly (2 Corinthians 7:10). "Worldly grief" turns us in on self so that we are primarily concerned with our feelings and self-interests. So we feel bad, but only because we got caught. We are troubled, but only until the negative attention goes away. A common symptom of worldly grief is self-loathing: If we can just feel bad enough, or punish ourselves enough, we can make up for what we've done and appease God's wrath

against our sin.

“Godly grief,” on the other hand, “produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

The one who has godly grief understands that her sin is against God as well as others, and that it reflects a deeper wickedness in her heart. She knows that admitting and regretting are not the same as repenting.

True repentance always terminates on Jesus. It does not wallow in self-loathing or delight in self-flagellation. Rather, it allows an honest sense of our sinfulness to drive us toward the depth of Christ’s mercy in the gospel.

### REFLECTION

1. *In what areas are you feeling shame, guilt, a need for a do-over, or drive to “do better”?*
2. *Take a few moments and confess these areas to God. Thank him for his grace and mercy in the gospel that frees us from being slaves to these things.*

### Closing Prayer

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. In this season of repentance, restore to us the joy of our salvation and strengthen us to face our mortality, that we may reach with confidence for your mercy, in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[WSB]

## Call to Worship

*I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely." And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.*

[ISAIAH 63:7-9]

## Confession

Holy and merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. Accept our repentance, O God, and let your anger depart from us. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."*

[MARK 9:30-37]

### DEVOTIONAL

Last Wednesday, people around the world marked their foreheads with ash as a sign of their humanity and mortality. We find this symbolism and practice throughout the Bible. When Abraham petitioned God, he said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to

the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). When the people of Nineveh heeded Jonah’s warning, the king “arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.” This is the posture of repentance.

In the book of 2 Chronicles, God instructs Solomon in a prayer of repentance “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (7:14).

When God’s people went astray, there was often a corporate aspect to their repentance. They would fast and mourn and pray together for God to heal and bless their nation. That kind of repentance is appropriate when we find ourselves feeling the consequences of cultural or national sin. For instance, I am both troubled and tempted by the rampant materialism and objectification in our country. I am a participant, but it is much bigger than any one person. We need to repent corporately for these kinds of things.

As necessary as corporate repentance was and is, it can become more about ritual than relationship. The prophets spoke out against this kind of empty worship. The prophet Joel warned Israel to “rend your heart, not your garments” (Joel 2:13). One commentator summarizes the point like this: “What was needed was not ritual alone, but the active involvement of the individual in making a radical change within the heart and in seeking a new direction for one’s life. What was demanded was a turning from sin and at the same time a turning to God. For the prophets, such a turning or conversion was not just simply a change within a person; it was openly manifested in justice, kindness, and humility.”

The term used extensively by the Prophets (*shubh*) means “to turn” or “return,” so the idea of returning from exile is in view. John the Baptist was cut from the same fabric as the prophets. He called his own generation to make a radical turn in the direction of their lives by pointing them to the soon-coming Messiah. Life as usual is crooked. Right side up is upside down. Make room for the straight path of Jesus.

Here is the beginning of repentance: in humility we must turn to God. This is simple, but essential. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, the primary mover, the ultimate point of reference, and our highest good—King of kings and Lord of lords. Because the world and everything in it belongs to God, any form of repentance must be addressed to him.

That seems obvious, but it is possible to believe in God and functionally exclude him from our lives, to act as if we are ultimate. How often do we consider our circumstances and think, “What do I need right now? How do I feel about this? What do I like or not like about this?” We even enter into prayer and worship with these kinds of self-focused questions. In these moments, though we believe in God, we are not functionally aware of his presence with us and his providence in our circumstances. If we were, we might say, “Father, you know what we need;” “How do you feel about this?” “Teach us your will, that we may know what is ‘good and pleasing and perfect’” (Romans 12:3). Notice two key differences: the questions are directed toward God, not self, and are concerned

for “us” and not just “me.”

So the first step in repentance is to address God. Acknowledge his sovereign control over all things, recognize his presence in our circumstances, and invite him into the stuff of our lives. Questions about what we think and feel and need are not bad questions, but they are secondary matters. Our primary focus is on God, his kingdom, and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Above all else, repentance is an address to God in which we plead for his mercy and rest in Christ. In Christ, our ashes are turned to beauty, for he has clothed us with the garments of salvation and covered us with the robes of righteousness (Isaiah 63).

### REFLECTION

1. *What areas of your life seem apart from God’s control? Where is it difficult to feel God’s presence in your circumstances?*
2. *Is there any area of your life in which you are resistant to God’s control? Confess this in prayer to him.*

### Closing Prayer

God of love, as in Jesus Christ you gave yourself to us, so may we give ourselves to you, living according to your holy will. Keep our feet firmly in the way where Christ leads us; make our mouths speak the truth that Christ teaches us; fill our bodies with the life that is Christ within us. In his holy name we pray. Amen.

[WSB]

## Call to Worship

*Let us worship God, who has done great things. We rejoice in our God, who made a way through the desert of this world. Let us worship God, who has caused streams of mercy to flow in the wasteland. We are the people God has formed through Christ; we worship him, and we rejoice! Let us worship God in spirit and in truth. We praise God for the grace that has saved us. Alleluia! We rejoice!*

[BASED ON ISAIAH 43:19-21]

## Confession

Almighty and merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You and one another in both our actions and our inactions. We recognize that in Jesus Christ our light has come, yet often we choose to walk in shadows and ignore the light. Gracious God, forgive our sins and remove from us the veil of darkness that shrouds our lives. Illumined by your Word and sacrament, may we rise to the radiance of Christ's glory. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."*

[MARK 9:38-50]

### DEVOTIONAL

An honest friend once confessed, "My struggle with repentance has to do with knowing myself well enough to see what I should repent of." Even when we know that repentance is important in general, we do not know what to repent of in particular. Similarly,

sometimes we have a matter to bring to God, but we do not know the depths of it. This is why we begin by seeking the face of God, because we need the bright light of God's presence to shine into the dark corners of our soul.

This is the good news that John proclaims: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). In the Old Testament, "light" speaks to the character of God and the truth of his word. In John's writings, "light" is the glory of God in the person of Christ and the practice of his Word. The latter is an unveiling and extension of the first. God has revealed himself, not only in Christ but also in his Word. There is no falsehood in what he has revealed. It is right and trustworthy, truth in its purest form.

Addressing God is not a formality. It is a desperate cry: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me" (Psalm 139:23-24).

But that sounds mechanistic. What about the mysterious working of God? What is the dynamic of spiritual repentance that differentiates it from natural penitence? And more practically, "How do I get from regret over my sin to true repentance?"

That God is the one who beckons and arouses the repentance is what makes it more than empty ritual. Natural repentance is aroused by fear or pride. Regarding fear, I turn from my ways because I dread consequence or loss of approval from others. Regarding pride, I tell myself that I need to turn from my ways because "I'm a good Christian." I must stop doing this because I don't want to be like the kind of person who does this. I'm not like that.

We cannot fix or manage the problem of sin. You can only be rescued from it and sanctified in the midst of it.

If you are observing Lent – denying usual comforts, reorienting your life in some way around the things of God – then isn't this your prayer? *God, illuminate my path! Search my heart and test my anxious thoughts. Shed light on my dark ways. I want a clear picture of what my life is about, and where it is headed. How will I turn from my ways if I cannot see them?*

When we feel the pains of hunger, the habitual desire to watch TV, the consuming desire to buy something, our thoughts turn here: "Search me, O God." We want to know the ways that sin has entangled us, blinded our perception, distorted our tastes, and weakened our desires. We are preparing the way in our heart for God to speak, making straight a path in our soul for the Spirit to work.

How does God search and test and illuminate? God has many instruments, I suppose, but we must begin with the sharpest one. The Bible is the Word of God, "sharper than any double-edged sword ... dividing soul and spirit ... judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). His word searches us, convicts us, enlightens us, and leads us. This is why a greater devotion to the Bible is a good idea during the Lenten season. Remember, we give up and take up. When we give up something, we make a clearing in

our lives, but unless the clearing is filled up with light, we stumble around in the dark. “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:103-105).

### REFLECTION

1. *In what areas of your life are you merely trying to fix or manage the problem of sin?*
2. *What would it look like for you to move toward true repentance in that area?*

## Closing Prayer

Creator of the heavens and earth, Speak light into our immeasurable darkness. Expose the chaos of our steps and bring order to our lives. Light of the World, full of grace and truth, open up the kingdom of heaven to us. Tell us what you hear and see and give us ears and eyes.

## Call to Worship

*Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works! Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice! Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually! Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of Israel his servant, children of Jacob, his chosen ones! Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens.*

[1 CHRONICLES 16:8-13, 23-26]

## Confession

Father of mercies, we confess that we have sinned against you. By your Holy Spirit, come and work repentance into our hearts. Help us to see you as you are: with outstretched arms, a loving heart, and power to save. Help us to see Jesus, the friend of sinners, and to follow him more faithfully. As we have received him, so strengthen us to walk in him, depend on him, commune with him, and be conformed to him. Give us an experience of your grace that makes us bold, that we might joyfully live for the good of others. Amen.

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."*

[MARK 10:1-12]

### DEVOTIONAL

I have a friend who tells me, "Reality is your friend." I have another friend who replies, "But sometimes your friends are ugly."

When we bring our lives into the light, they aren't as pretty as we thought they were. But that is the reality we must embrace. It truly is our friend because it points us to God, who "is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The primary means by which we walk in the light with God is the simple act of confession. Confession does not secure forgiveness, but rather facilitates the power of forgiveness and its cleansing effects in the life of the believer. The acting agent is the blood of Jesus, his sacrificial death on the cross (1:7). Jesus is willing and able to cleanse us and restore our relationships if we will just get the real us in the light.

To walk in darkness means to neglect or even deny the truth about God, or about ourselves. A toddler may close his eyes and believe that he cannot be seen, but only because he does not see. So it is with the one who walks in darkness. He thinks his way of seeing things is in fact reality, but nothing could be further from the truth. He will not be able to have fellowship with God or with others until he sees according to truth. In the realm of truth, he will be able to relate to God and others on the basis of what is real, and experience the cleansing power of Jesus' blood.

That sounds great "on paper," but when it comes to our actual lives, we are not always so eager to be honest. Instead, we deal with reality in other ways. We distract ourselves with the artificial lights of work, entertainment, and hobbies. When ordinary busyness doesn't work, we take it up a notch and give ourselves to something so completely that it consumes us. These are our addictions. When we feel stressed or bored or frustrated or empty inside, they take us to another world where we can forget all our troubles, at least for a little while. Addictions are dangerous because we are not only ignoring reality, but also making it far worse.

Pretense, excuses, busyness, addiction, and despair are not our friends. They turn us in upon ourselves, which leads to death. An honest look at reality, with God's help, gives us insight into the way sin works and how God can bring healing and transformation to those areas of our lives. We can only repent of what we are able to see.

This is why community is such an essential context for true repentance. Our friends and family can see our blind spots, and we need them to tell us. We need a community where it is okay to talk about our struggle against temptation and sin, how sin is wrecking our lives, and how our brokenness causes us to look for worth and joy and peace outside of God. Can we talk about these things without condemning each other, or condoning sin? Can we talk about our problems without someone always fixing it with their "solutions"? Can we weep with those who weep, and pray for those who are struggling?

Search us, O God! Every dark corner and every hidden place.

#### REFLECTION

1. *What is your practice of confession and repentance like? Where do you need to grow?*

- In what areas of your life are you guilty of walking in isolation? What areas of your life does no one know about? What areas of struggle do you need to invite your community into?*

## **Closing Prayer**

God of call, God of transformation, God of the Lenten journey, help us to discern your still, small voice. Open us to change and growth, that we may walk with Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[WSB]

## Call to Worship

*Let us worship God, for whom our souls thirst and our bodies long. Listen, listen to me, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. We have come to hear the Word God has sent. God's Word will not return empty but will accomplish through us his holy purpose. Let us worship God in spirit and in truth. Then we will go out with joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will sing; the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

[BASED ON ISAIAH 55:2, 11-12; JOHN 4:24]

## Confession

Everlasting God, fountain of all life and the true home of every heart: our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Yet we confess that our hearts have been enslaved by selfish passion and base desire. We have sought after many things and have neglected the one thing needful. We have not loved you with our whole hearts; help us to turn to you and find forgiveness. Lead us home, that we may again find in you our life and joy and peace. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.*

[MARK 10:13-16]

### DEVOTIONAL

Let's return to God's instruction to Solomon: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Repentance begins with seeking God, embracing the way things really are by confessing them, and then turning from our wicked ways. For confession and turning to occur, we must take responsibility for our sin.

The word "sin" has been defined and applied in so many ways that I think most people have adopted a rather trite view of sin that is focused on specific actions that break God's rules. The biblical concept of sin is not less than that, but it is more, much

more. Let me share a helpful definition of sin from a 19th century philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard: “Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from God.”

We were made for God, to center our entire life on him and find our sense of worth and purpose in him. Anything other than that is sin. Tim Keller summarizes Kierkegaard’s point this way: “Sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship with God.”

This is a meaningful way to think about sin because we all identify with trying to build our identity on something. In our culture it tends to be things like achievements, or relationships, or being thought of as a good Christian. Everyone is building his or her identity on something.

In my experience of trying to establish myself on the basis of other people’s approval, I found it to be an exhausting and frustrating endeavor. This is what St. Augustine meant when he said, “We were made for God, and that our hearts are restless until they find rest in him.”

This is how Israel got to where they were. They made other things ultimate and whored themselves out to false gods who could not save. Israel was always running to other gods and then coming back to the Lord. This is the nature of our sin. We give ourselves out to false gods and then come running back to God when our life is in ruins.

The gospel sets us free from this kind of fickle faith. God approves of us in Christ, without condition. We are accepted and adopted into his family. We don’t need anything more than what we have been given in Christ. We cannot accomplish anything more than what he has already done on our behalf. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Therefore, we are free to accept responsibility for our sin without fear of condemnation.

We not only admit that we have sinned, but also that we have sinned because we were tempted by our own desires, and willfully gave ourselves to them. This kind of ownership is necessary for true repentance, and stands in contrast to many of the ways we typically try to deal with our sin.

We try to justify our sin. When you become aware of sin, do you feel the need to nuance everything, explain how complicated things are, or make excuses? Taking responsibility for sin means we say, “I lusted because my desires are perverted” ... “I lied because I am afraid of what people think about me” ... “I ate that because I do not have self-control around food.”

We try to downplay our sin, hoping or assuming that God overlooks our sin. We don’t think sin really affects our ability to relate to God, or hinders the flow of his blessing. We think we are the exception. Taking responsibility for sin means we say, “My sin is

destructive and grieves God. I will not be right with him until I deal with this.”

We pretend things are better than they really are, cleaning the outside of the cup while we are filthy on the inside.

Taking responsibility means we say, “It doesn’t matter how good people think I am. God sees right through me, and is not impressed or tricked by my lip service. God hates hypocrisy!”

Our problems are bigger than our circumstances: we are broken on the inside. And repentance is deeper than what we do: we need to repent of who we are. Remember, repentance is good news. It is hope that God will restore us. Conviction of sin is a difficult pill to swallow, but it is good medicine to the soul.

### REFLECTION

1. *What has God been bringing to your mind today? What is your reaction?*
2. *How are you trying to justify it in your head? Do you want to keep hiding it?*
3. *Do you have worldly grief over that sin?*

### Closing Prayer

God of mercy, you are full of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy, and always ready to forgive. Grant us grace to renounce all evil and to cling to Christ, that in every way we may prove to be your loving children, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

[WSB]

## Call to Worship

*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

[2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-17, 21]

## Confession

God of compassion, in Jesus Christ you did not disdain the company of sinners but welcomed them with love. Look upon us in mercy, we pray. Our sins are more than we can bear; our pasts enslave us; our misdeeds are beyond correcting. Forgive the wrongs we cannot undo; free us from a past we cannot change; heal what we can no longer fix. Grace our lives with your love and turn the tears of our past into the joys of new life with you. Amen.

[WSB]

## Contemplation

### GOSPEL READING

*And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal*

*life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”*

[MARK 10:17-31]

## DEVOTIONAL

Martin Luther said the Christian life is a walk of repentance and faith. Understanding the various aspects of repentance and putting them together through reflection helps us keep them together in our theology and practice. So let's retrace some of our steps this week.

**Repentance is a response to God's grace.** It leads to joy and restoration. Not frustration from trying harder, and not despair from beating yourself up. Those are forms of penance. Jesus is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes, not tries harder or feels worse (Romans 10:4). He condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1-4). Therefore, repentance is motivated by love for God and a desire for fellowship with him.

**Repentance is addressed to God.** King David's famous confession is a great example of addressing God: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:1-3). His transgressions were adultery and murder, two sins clearly against other people. Yet, he says to God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (51:4). This does not abrogate his responsibility to others, but simply underscores the primacy of God in all things.

**Repentance is walking in the light.** There was a time when David walked in darkness, unwilling to see things for what they were. In Psalm 32, he writes: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." (32:3-4). Only when he came clean with God did he experience the grace of God: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (32:5).

**Repentance is taking responsibility for our sin.** In Psalm 51, David locates the problem: "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (51:4). He does not blame or justify or look for a way out. He goes on: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (51:5). The problem is not just that he sinned, but that he is sinful. It would not be enough to clean the outside of the cup, which is why he seeks a deeper cleansing: "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (51:6-7, 10).

**Repentance is turning to God in faith.** In everyday language, repentance means to "change your mind," to reconsider how we are living our lives in light of our new identity

and purpose in Christ. We are prone to wander, to pursue life on our terms, to locate our sense of worth and joy and peace outside of God. So the call to repentance is a standing invitation to give up our idolatrous pursuits, and turn to the one true God who restores us to the life for which we were made. We cannot save ourselves.

**Repentance is initial and ongoing.** You may get in the light, and feel very liberated. But then it won't be long until you are unmotivated, feeling the disappointment of another rut. This does not underscore the failure of repentance, but merely teaches us that repentance is both initial and ongoing. Real change always requires a clean break, reaffirmed through subsequent decisions. If you are in a mess, and it has happened over weeks or months or years, it is not going to get cleaned up right away. It's a lifestyle.

"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Psalm 51:12).

### REFLECTION

1. *How has studying repentance this week changed your attitudes and affection for Christ's work on the Cross?*
2. *What is God speaking to you about this week? Where is he bringing conviction? What actions do you need to take in response?*

### Closing Prayer

God of compassion, through your Son, Jesus Christ, you reconciled your people to yourself. Following his example of prayer and fasting, may we obey you with willing hearts and serve one another in holy love through Jesus Christ. Amen.

[WSB]

## Second Sunday of Lent

We believe the Word was in the form of God and did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and was born in our own likeness. We believe he humbled himself and became obedient unto death. We believe God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. We believe that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth; and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

[BASED ON PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11]



Rise, O church, and lift your voices, Christ has conquered death and hell.  
Sing as all the earth rejoices; resurrection anthems swell.

Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the risen King!

See the tomb where death had laid Him, empty now, its mouth declares:  
“Death and I could not contain Him, for the throne of life He shares.”  
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the risen King!

Hear the earth protest and tremble, see the stone removed with pow’r;  
All hell’s minions may assemble, but cannot withstand His hour.  
He has conquered, He has conquered, Christ the Lord, the risen King!

Doubt may lift its head to murmur, scoffers mock and sinners jeer;  
But the truth proclaims a wonder thoughtful hearts receive with cheer.  
He is risen, He is risen, now receive the risen King!

We acclaim Your life, O Jesus, now we sing Your victory;  
Sin or hell may seek to seize us, but Your conquest keeps us free.  
Stand in triumph, stand in triumph, worship Christ, the risen King!

[JACK HAYFORD]