

January 21, 2024

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

“The Joy of Right Repentance”

Mark 1:14-20

The new craze regarding weight loss is drugs like Ozempic and Mounjaro. Originally developed to treat diabetes, these regular injections cause the pounds to start melting away. Oprah says they work, so it must be true. Actually, I myself can attest to their effectiveness.

But why is it that so many people are willing and eager to inject themselves with a relatively new drug with the possibility of side effects such as constipation, nausea, abdominal pain, dizziness and more when there is the time-tested and proven weight loss technique of diet and exercise? The answer is simple. Diet and exercise require sacrifice and self-control. People don't like sacrifice and self-control. We would rather stab ourselves once a week.

It's true. Lots of people truly wish to be thinner and healthier. The problem is that we're surrounded with all sorts of delicious food and we can come up with any number of reasons to ignore all the good reasons not to eat it. “It has been a rough day—I deserve a treat.” “I'm feeling down and tacos would make me feel happy.” “It's Tuesday.” We easily cave to temptation, so if we can get a magic shot that can take care of the problem so we can keep on eating what we want, we're all for it.

We have a very similar problem when it comes to sin. Jesus is pretty straightforward about the life to which we are called, especially in these first words out of His mouth in the Gospel of Mark: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

“Repent” means to turn in a different direction. With regard to the Gospel it means to turn from the sins in which one naturally walks and follow after Christ Jesus instead. Another translation reads *“Let your hearts be turned from sin and have faith in the good news.”* That good news ultimately is Christ crucified and risen for your salvation.

But we're not big fans of repentance. Why? Because actual repentance means sacrifice and self-control. Not that repentance is a work of your own will, for it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that one comes to the saving faith that drives one to sorrow over sins and a turning to Jesus. If you resist temptation, it is Jesus who gets the glory, not you. But this faith does drive us to sacrifice and self-control in striving to follow our Savior.

But we don't like sacrifice and self-control when it comes to sin. We don't. Consider something as meaningless as the television shows one chooses to watch. Christians will regularly view a favorite raunchy comedy of sewer humor or a drama loaded with perversity bordering on soft-core pornography, and explain it away to themselves as “just entertainment.” It is without a doubt opposed to the spirit of purity to which we are called, but sacrifice that from my life? Not a chance! I like that. It makes me laugh. It titillates. The thought of resisting it is a passing shadow if even that! Yet sacrificing that is as easy as changing the channel!

And that's like the lightest example I can give. Think of the grudges, the lusts, the greed, the self-adoring pride, the anger and hatred, the covetousness—all the base sins we allow to stand without raising a finger to give them up on the altar of saving faith in Christ. It's awful.

But doing so would take self-control. It would be a sacrifice. And we'd rather not do that. We'd much rather go for the easy jab of the quick-fix sin loss drug: I'll make myself feel bad about my sins for a minute and then ask Jesus to make it all go away...because He died to forgive sins...and...cool...I don't really have to give up anything.

Do you honestly believe that this is what Jesus is commanding when He says, “Repent”? The Gospel is good news of salvation. Your sin is atoned for and you stand redeemed by Christ’s blood. But “repent” is the command. It is not a magic shot that allows you to remain wallowing in your sins. It is the required response of faith by the new person Christ has made of you.

And in a way I am skating on some thin, thin ice here. I cannot look at you and declare if you have true repentance or not. That’s not our place. Only God can see into human hearts. I believe there can be a genuine sorrow over sins in one’s heart that may never manifest itself in eliminating those offenses in one’s behavior, yet still be saved by God’s mercy in Christ. That said, to sit back and choose to take the easy way out, the Ozempic repentance, is obviously counter to our Lord’s exhortation.

Just look at the Ninevites in our Old Testament lesson from Jonah. The people believe God’s message through His prophet and they don’t react by saying, “Jonah, tell Yahweh we feel horrible about our sins and we’re really, really sorry so we’ll be forgiven and then we can get back to the status quo.” No. They repented. They put on sackcloth and ashes and fasted, imploring the Lord’s mercy. What is more, they ceased the sinful behaviors that brought God’s wrath upon them. Not that they were sinless, but they proactively changed the behavior of their entire society in order to attempt to cease offending the one true God. The king’s decree was *“Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.”*

Ponder the words Paul writes to Christian for five seconds. *“From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.”* Does that in any way, shape or form indicate we are to keep going along in our sins as if nothing has changed? Of course not! “Repent” is a call to action; to intentionally and actively working in opposition to any evil sin hanging out in your being!

Why? Why is obvious! *“The appointed time has grown very short”* says Paul. Jesus is even more point blank. *“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand”* as in standing right in front of you staring you in the face and speaking words to you and those words are simple: *“Repent and believe in the gospel”!*

And whether you take it this way or not, this is a sermon completely loaded with good news Gospel proclamation. “Repent” is an invitation by God for you, a poor, miserable sinner to be forgiven, made holy and ushered into eternal salvation! Really, there is no downside to “repent.” It’s simply a call to turn and seek to live within the perfect design of your Creator God who desires only what is best for you and to receive the forgiving fruit of Christ’s cross.

There is only a down side if you allow your sinful nature to create one by saying, “But I don’t want to sacrifice my sins. I kind of like them. Self-control is such a downer. I’d rather just let Satan’s temptations have their way with me.” And make no mistake about it, that is exactly what you are saying when you attempt to manufacture excuses and clever rationalization for sin. It is simply refusing the wonderful repentance to which you have been invited by God.

Folks, the time is fulfilled. The kingdom is at hand. The only thing waiting to happen is the glorious return of the king for judgment. That king stands before you today in His Word beckoning you to paradise: *“Repent, and believe in the gospel.”*

Answer Him not with empty words and half-hearted emotions as if the reception of this gift is as effortless as a needle prick. Intentionally, thoughtfully and enthusiastically turn away from your sins as you zealously and joyfully then follow your Savior into His eternal glory.

Amen.