

February 18, 2024  
First Sunday in Lent

### “Completing the Turn”

Mark 1:9-15

Mark moves really fast in his Gospel account. We don't get many details of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. We simply know he spent forty days being tempted by Satan and that there were also wild animals about and angels ministering to Him. Then Mark quickly moves into Christ's exhortation that is so appropriate for the First Sunday in Lent: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.”*

Repentance is a huge theme in Holy Scripture and, of course, in the penitential season of Lent. Frankly, it should be a huge theme at all times for the Christian. Here repentance is part of the first words Jesus speaks in this Gospel. Elsewhere He tells a powerful parable of how a repentant tax collector leaves the temple justified while an unrepentant Pharisee does not. Our entire life of faith is to be one of repentance—continually turning from sin and the world to go in another direction, that of following Christ in this kingdom of God that is indeed at hand in Jesus Himself.

But do you ever struggle with questions like, “Have I repented enough?” “Is my repentance even sincere and genuine?” “Is it even repentance when I'm sorry for a sin but I turn right around and do that same sin again? When I know that's going to happen even as I repent?” While I do think it is good to ponder the quality of our repentance and even create strategies to more successfully combat sin in our lives, contemplating how well we execute repentance in our lives can be downright depressing because, if we're honest with ourselves, it looks like failure. Repent as much as we can, we still keep on sinning.

But before you get all doom-and-gloomy here, take a step back and consider what has just taken place in this reading.

Jesus gets baptized, the Spirit descends and the Father declares, *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* Then immediately Jesus is compelled by the Spirit to go into the beast-filled wilderness, being sustained by angels as He engages Satan in spiritual battle. We know from Matthew and Luke that Jesus is completely victorious in this contest. From there Jesus then marches into Galilee and begins His ministry with those words: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.”*

Jesus has just soundly defeated Satan in the first combat of the war which Christ is destined to win by His cross and empty tomb. As if flushed with the victory, Jesus makes His proclamation in no uncertain terms. When He says “Repent,” it is not marching orders that you must now go forth and resist temptation and defeat the devil as He had done. “Repent” is the victory cry of a warrior who is bulldozing the forces of evil as He brings the kingdom of God to you, liberating you from sin, death and the devil.

Your repentance does not work because doing so wins the forgiveness of Jesus. Your repentance is effective because Jesus wins the victory in and of Himself. “Repent” is not a call to fight sin as if it is our battle to win. “Repent” is a call to follow the one who has already on our behalf won the war!

This is an important distinction to make because we very often tend to confuse repentance with obedience. Now I've got nothing against obedience of course. It is very good for one to obey God's law of love and keep from sinning. But Scripture is quite clear about obedience not leading to salvation and lack of obedience not disqualifying a person from Christ's deliverance. It is repentance, not obedience, that is a prerequisite for receiving the blessings of the Gospel.

And repentance is turning and following. And perhaps we put too much emphasis on the turning away part, making that an act of obedience by which we are saved. The turning is not the main thing

though. It is the following, the faith in Christ, that is the main thing which receives His victory. It is the following that believes in and receives the Gospel. Repentance works not because you are turning away from sin, but because you are turning toward the crucified and risen Christ who has destroyed the power of that sin.

People make this mistake with the book of James a lot. That's why Luther once termed it "an epistle of straw." James writes, "*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*" We tend to take that to mean not sinning in the face of temptation as if obedience is the point. But "remain steadfast" isn't talking about obedience. James opens this letter just ten verses earlier saying, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*" He is talking about faith, which is following Jesus, which is the critical part of repentance.

So, you see, the point is not the cessation of all sin. It is the focus on and following of the One who has won the battle, won the war, won the victory, with no doubt whatsoever won salvation for all who trust in His Gospel of forgiveness.

Yet also, don't downplay the importance of repentance as if it makes accommodation for sin. If you are getting comfortable with any sin, big or small, that is a lack of repentance. That is deciding not to turn and follow Christ but instead remain steadfastly pointed in a different direction—that is being "lured and enticed" by your own desire to look to something other than Jesus. "*Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*" Ultimately what brings death is not so much the sin, but the unbelief following sin has wrought because it meant turning away from Christ, the forgiver of sins.

So, yeah, repentance is real, real critical. How do we do it better?

Well, I'd say do not get totally caught up in the me-stopping-sinning side of things. That's not bad, but if that's what it's all about for you where is your focus? It's on me and on that sin I'm trying to cease. There is not a whole lot of Jesus in that mix...and He is actually the one who defeats sin, not you.

No. The better way of repentance is to focus on who you are turning toward—the giver of the wonderful Gospel that guarantees your forgiveness. When you focus on Him, His grace, goodness and love toward you, His glory grows and your desire to follow Him grows. Repentance grows because you can't help but be eager to follow such a One whose desire is to do so much good to you. Turning from sin becomes so much more natural because it is not about you battling temptation, it is about you being received into the kingdom of God through the Gospel.

When those troubling questions about the quality of your repentance come upon you (and I do think it's a good thing that the Holy Spirit does that once in a while), do not despair because it looks like you are failing at it. Stop looking at things like repentance is you against sin. Complete the turn and look to Christ. Dwell on His victory over those sins. See how good He is and draw strength from His promise of forgiveness. In the power of His victory, struggle toward Jesus and in pursuit of His grace allowing that sin to drop behind you, lost in His love.

And know going in this is a life-long endeavor. St. Paul describes it as a race for a reason. It is not a one-and-done thing. It's a struggle each and every day. With practice in the strength of the Holy Spirit you may improve, but the devil's fallen world is right in front of you, so your repentance, your faith is a constant turning from that toward your Savior.

But such repentance always works, not because of you, but because the Savior to which you turn is always there, always victorious, always blessing you with the Gospel gifts cementing you where you belong—the kingdom of God now and forever.

Amen.