

April 27, 2025
Second Sunday of Easter

“His Gift of Repentance”

Acts 5:12-20

If you've never been addicted to cigarettes, you may not be able to identify with this very well, but smoking is an insidious habit. It typically grabs you when you're young, stupid and think you're going to live forever. By the time you realize it really isn't all that cool, and that it's expensive and that it's unhealthy and that it literally stinks, it's too late. You're addicted and quitting seems beyond your capability. The symptoms of withdrawal always get to you and you light one up.

And let me just clarify that I'm using smoking as a sermon illustration here. I'm not targeting smokers as a special class of sinners. If you want to discuss addiction as sin, come to Sunday school later and we can have that conversation. What I'm preaching here and now is aimed at everybody, because we're all sinners.

Sin is worse than addiction. Many smokers despise the habit and would like nothing better than to be rid of it. Lost in our sins, we just don't care. St. Paul describes mankind in our sins as “dead in our trespasses” and “by nature children of wrath” and “enemies of God.” Despite whatever moral compass we might construct for ourselves here, we're running the show and there is no room for the One True God in the mix. It's not a perfect analogy, but you might say we were addicted to sin.

In my struggle with cigarettes, I experienced what you might call an epiphany of sorts. One day I was addicted to nicotine and couldn't see anyway out from under it. My attempts to quit were half-hearted failures. Then one day when cigarettes reached the outrageous cost of \$2 per pack my entire way of looking at things changed. I wasn't a smoker trying to quit. I was not going to be a smoker anymore at all. I simply would become...was now a non-smoker. It took some struggle and suffering, also some prescribed medication, but that was it. My attitude toward cigarettes had totally changed and I was now an ex-smoker.

From the reading from Acts: *“But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.’”*

Did you catch that? We always think of Jesus gifting us with forgiveness of sins and know it is true because of the agony of His cross for that very purpose. But what is the first gift the apostles reference that Jesus gives? Repentance! Think about that.

I have long thought that repentance fell completely on the “me” side of the equation when it came to repentance and forgiveness. But Peter and the apostles quite clearly say repentance is a gift Christ gives. This should really shake up our thinking.

My bet is that all believers struggle with the quality of their repentance. How can we not? We're abject failures at it. “Repent” means to turn in a different direction from sin. Like many attempts to quit smoking there may be a short period of success and then at the slightest excuse to light up you crash and burn. Even if we somehow do master one sin, there are endless others. We're still addicted. We repent and so desire to do better, but it all seems hypocritical and hopeless because our best effort is failure.

But knowing that repentance is a gift of Christ changes the game. You were dead in your trespasses, unwilling and unable to approach God's throne of grace by any power of your own. But now you come before Him in repentance! Never mind the quality of that repentance—that you are repenting at all means that the risen Christ is at work in you through the Holy Spirit. Your repentance cannot mean you failing because it is part of the work of Jesus Christ who stands forever victorious over the enemy sin, Satan and death. Your contrition over sin, desire to improve, desperation to be free of judgment—that's all faith-driven stuff there looking to the Gospel that saves by grace!

Mind you, just like faith, with repentance, sure, there is always room for improvement. Better strategies for avoiding temptation, better practice of running to God in prayer when temptation strikes, better understanding of God's good design and will for you—His creation—as He has revealed in His Word; all godly training we can pursue on the “me” side of things guided by His Spirit.

But that Christ gifts you both the repentance and the forgiveness—this makes obvious how great your God's desire is that you be saved! As if His intentional suffering and death wasn't enough proof of His love, He gifts you with the proper reaction to the cross to gain the fruits of that sacrifice! That's some crazy, crazy love there that God has for you! And it gets even crazier!

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.’”

Christ gifts this hapless group of His followers cowering in a locked hideaway with the divine gift to proclaim or renounce forgiveness of sins! The keys of the kingdom! He gives lowly sinners the authority through His church to not only spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, but to apply it in effective ways for salvation! And He does so not in difficult, strenuous, and extravagant ways by which sinners must prove themselves worthy through piety or penance. He lets them speak it, pour it, feed it in simple means of words, water, bread and wine.

Jesus wants you to have it; to have Him, for forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. He wants you, lowly you to be His. He more than wants it; He does the deed.

Seeing this can be a kind of epiphany when it comes to who you see yourself as in your repentance before Christ. Like me, you've probably long seen yourself as that poor, miserable sinner dragging yourself before Christ desperately striving for some necessary amount of shame and sorrow to somehow rightly receive His grace. Well, I'm not going to argue with the poor, miserable sinner part; truth is truth.

But the dragging yourself before Jesus part, not so much. This repentance—He gifted it to you. The Holy Spirit delivered it to you. The Gospel invited you to it! You are on your knees before Him confessing your sins because Jesus wants you here for the singular purpose that those sins would be forgiven.

The change in perception here is as big as night and day. Too often, because we sin daily, we see ourself as still dead in our sins and our repentance is some kind of hollow, hypocritical ritual because we just can't be rid of those sins. If that's you, wake up and see the truth; have the epiphany.

Your repentance is Christ's redemptive work having its way with you. It is the working of the very faith that receives all the goods Christ is giving! Sure, there is shame and regret because you have erred and yes, failed your Lord and Savior. But He is your Savior. You're humbly before Him because He is still your Lord! You are not cast out. You are still a child receiving good gifts from your Father—He gifts a new human nature that desires to repent and receives the ultimate gift of full forgiveness of all your sins and life forever in your Lord's kingdom.

When I saw myself simply as a smoker who wanted to quit, it didn't do me any good. When that changed and I saw myself as an ex-smoker it made all the difference in the world.

If in your repentance you're seeing yourself as a poor, miserable sinner trying to get right with God, you're setting yourself up for failure because you simply can't pull off a feat like that. See things rightly: Your repentance is a gift from Christ in which He is drawing you to Himself to deliver you the gifts of the cross and empty tomb. You have a new identity: Child of God.

Accepting this as truth—His truth—you are now equipped to go and better live out this reality in your day knowing that yes, you'll mess it up and sin again...and His gift of repentance will call you again into His arms.

Amen.