

PEOPLE, WE MUST KNOW OUR GREATEST PROBLEM IS UNREPENTANCE:

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent:” Acts 17:30.

Paul continues faithfully, relentlessly presenting the challenge of following Jesus Christ to these aristocrats and judges in Athens. They were all worshippers of idols and so he has told them that they were not to think of God as an image made of gold or silver or stone. “That is sheer ignorance,” he says as the first Christian missionary to go to them and bring the truth to them. “God has been overlooking this ignorance until now,” he tells them. In other words God had not sent a flood of judgment upon Greece or anywhere else in the world because the world outside Israel to whom Jesus Christ had not yet come hadn’t known what they were doing going along to temples and sacrificing to their statues. God passed by it all and even blessed them every day with health and food and happy marriages and wonderful cultural achievements in literature and architecture, and even now sending his servants there to preach Jesus and the resurrection to them.

“But now . . .” he says, “but now . . .” things have changed. You have heard about Jesus Christ and Him crucified. You have learned that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. That truth requires a response. Once you have heard the gospel you are under obligation to respond to the good news.

What would you think of a doctor who discovered an antidote to a plague sweeping the nation, that had brought a painful death to thousands, and he did nothing about it? He kept the truth to himself. Thousands were dying; grief overwhelmed the land. He knew the cure but he did nothing! What a wretch! The discovery of the truth puts us under an obligation to respond to it, first of all in our own hearts and lives. Here is the living Creator who has spoken in times past to our fathers through the prophets, but now he has come very, very close and he speaks to us by his Son. “I am the way, the truth and the life,” he says, and so we are under obligation to respond. What are we to do? The apostle tells us . . . “but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” God requires a change of direction, a change of values, new attitudes, new affections, new convictions and new sorrow

for sin, hunger and thirst for right living, trust in Jesus Christ and a determination from now on to do his will. You prayed, “Thy will be done on earth in my life as is being done in heaven right now.” It means turning from unbelief to keeping God’s commandment

The theme of repentance was the message that John the Baptist preached to the nation of Israel when God restored the gift of prophecy to the people after 400 silent years. John’s message was mightily used so that thousands turned back to God and were baptized in the river Jordan. John was the forerunner and herald preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. Then the people who had not appreciated John’s clarion call for repentance went to hear Jesus’ preaching expecting him to tell them that God loved them and had a wonderful plan for their lives, but Jesus’ first words were identical with John’s, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.” The kingdom was at hand because the King was at hand, and his words were a call to repent. Later God the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples and filled them on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Peter, filled with the Spirit, preached to them so powerfully that 3,000 men were converted. His message to Jews was a summons to them all to repent and be baptized. In other words, it was the same message as John’s and Jesus’ and it was just what Paul preached to Gentiles here as he stood in the heart of Athens. “Jews and Gentiles, Repent!” Clearly then the message of repentance is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel without the keynote of repentance is a truncated and inadequate and diluted gospel, and often diluted substances do more harm than the strong stuff they are replacing. Someone who is a stranger to repentance is a stranger to the gospel.

So let me remind you what God requires when he addresses you on this theme because repentance is not a suggestion. It is rather a commandment that comes from the King of kings. It is addressed to all men, and it comes to every person in every nation in the whole world and throughout human history. So God is saying to you at this moment, however moral and immoral you might be, are you a repentant man or woman? What does that mean? I’ll explain. It means this first of all:

YOU’VE GOT TO BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF.

I might be able to improve my teaching so that I could speak with the tongues of men and angels, but still I couldn’t help a liar. I can counsel people who’ve broken all the rules. I’ve dealt with everything you can imagine, every sort of sexual sin, cheating, breaking the law. You name it

I've heard and seen it. But if a person in trouble tells lies about himself I can't help him. I think by the grace of God I've been able to help many people make amends and set their lives on a new path. But I can't help a liar.

Now I believe that lying has almost become a non-issue today. Everyone lies, and they lie all the time. It's almost as if it's not a sin any longer to lie. Perhaps it's a sign of post-modern relativism, the notion that there is no absolute truth and no absolute error, and so people have come to accept that lying isn't wrong and telling the truth isn't essential. So they easily tell lies. Or perhaps it is just a fulfillment of the depravity described in Romans 3:13, "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." Certainly we all know how people routinely lie to cover up their sin, but then you can't help them. You can help anyone struggling with any sort of sin as long as they tell the truth. But you can't help a liar because you can't trust anything he says.

The situation is compounded by the fact that when most of us get caught, we confess as little as possible. That's a fallen human problem. So I'm beginning to explain to you what is genuine repentance. It begins on a personal one-to-one basis when a man tells you something you didn't already know. On a divine and eternal basis it begins when you volunteer to tell God what he already knows but what you've never told him before, you confess to God what you've done wrong. When I counsel people and I know already know A + B + C, when that person adds D + E + F, then I know that this person is really starting to repent of what he's done. His repentance is deeper than murmuring, "I'm sorry I got caught." True repentance always involves coming clean about what you did and coming clean to God about it. Coming clean means owning up to the whole pattern of wrongdoing, not just to the thing you happened to get caught doing. God desires "truth in the inward parts" Psalm 51:6, truth from the inside out. It's very hard for us to come to such a place of honesty with God and with others. We need a message from God which has come to us with the power of the Holy Spirit. For most of us, it's a continual battle to be transparent in all our dealings, especially when we have sinned, because it's so easy to cover up.

Lying has almost become a non-issue today. I can't get this statement out of my mind because of its implication: "You can't help a liar." As long as a liar is telling lies, you cannot trust anything he says. It's like the old observation, "If a liar says he's telling the truth, can you believe him?" It shows how difficult it is for people to take personal responsibility. We live a culture of victimization, a culture that rewards us for blaming others. In

one of the school massacres in the USA the gunman left a note behind saying, "You made me do this." That's a cheap and easy way out, isn't it?

It's easy when we've done wrong to say, "Everyone does it." Everyone cheats on their spouse. Everyone yells at their children. Everyone breaks a promise now and then. Everyone lies a little bit. Everyone uses bad language. Everyone picks up something and slips it in his pocket. Everyone covers up his sin. We live in a society that encourages us to make excuses, but most of us don't need any encouragement. We are born knowing how to pass the buck. So that is the first point. True repentance is being honest with yourself to others and to God.

YOU'VE GOT TO REMEMBER THE FALL OF YOUR FATHER ADAM.

We are all chips off the old block. What our first parents did we do, it all goes back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. The serpent came to Eve and sweet talked her into eating the fruit. She offered some to Adam and he didn't challenge what she was doing. He ate the fruit too, knowing full well the consequences of his action, and then the whole world changed. It became cold and dark. There were shadows and wild beasts and thorns everywhere. The children hated one another and quarreled and killed one another. East of Eden became a very unfriendly place. Fear entered the human heart for the very first time. When Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they hid from him. Sin had changed everything; where once they talked with God freely, now they hid in the forest lest their sin be discovered.

We are born knowing how to pass the buck. At length God called out to Adam, "Where are you?" Adam answered and said, "I hid because I was naked." God said, "Who told you that you were naked?" Then the dreaded question: "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" Adam is cornered, caught red-handed, and stripped of all his excuses. God knows! Adam does what men usually do. He passes the buck. His answer is a classic form of evasion: "The woman you put here with me she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it" Gen. 3:12.

Do you get that? "The woman you put here with me." Adam passes the buck twice. First it was the woman. Then it was the woman you put here. "Lord, it was her fault. She gave me the fruit and so I ate it. What was I supposed to do? Say no and watch her pout all night? And anyway, who put her in the garden? You did! She wasn't my idea. I'm not complaining, Lord, because

she's beautiful and cute and all that, but I didn't have this particular problem of a wife when it was just me and the animals."

Adam passes the buck twice, there was no repentance, and so it goes. The first man, the father of the human race, is also the first one to pass the buck. Make no mistake. The Bible is telling us something significant. It is in our nature to deny our own guilt and to try to shift the blame to others. That's what the first part of Gen. 3 is all about. It's no coincidence that the first sin led to the first cover-up. The first disobedience led to the first denial. The first trespassing led to the first buck-passing, and there was no repentance.

In the thousands of years since then, nothing has really changed. Human nature is the same. Passing the buck is in our spiritual bloodstream. We do it now because our father Adam did it back then. In Adam we live. In Adam we refuse to take responsibility for what we have done. In Adam we are strangers to repentance. Adam established the pattern. We are defensive and that leads to disobedience which leads to guilt which leads to shame which leads to fear which leads to hiding which leads to blaming others.

YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN FROM SOLOMON'S COUNSELS

Let me come to my thesis: the fundamental mark of true repentance is being able to say, "I was wrong. I did wrong." Blessed is the man who can say those words because that man is on his way to spiritual health. If you want a verse to go with my thesis, jot down Proverbs 28:13, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

You see what Solomon is saying? When we sin, we have two options. Option one is to conceal it. That means to cover it up, to make excuses, to rationalize, to pass the buck. When that happens, we don't prosper. We don't prosper emotionally. We get torn apart with a guilty conscience. In the words of Psalm 32 and the third verse, our bones waste away and our strength is sapped. We suffer physically and mentally because we conceal our sins. Nothing works right. Solomon says, "Whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." He alone is the one who mercy seeks and mercy finds. Both those words are important. To confess means to own up to what you did. When you confess your sins, you are saying, "Yes, I did it and I know it was wrong." To renounce your sin means taking steps to break the destructive patterns in your own life. When you renounce your sins, you are saying, "I've been walking in the wrong path and now, with

feet feeling utterly unworthy of looking up to heaven, and all he could do was express his repentance. He had nothing else to offer to God. He cried, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” and Jesus said that God heard his prayer that very moment and justified him, in other words, God declared him righteous. Another man in the temple was full of himself and he felt he had no need to repent and he disdained the repenting tax-collector, but he was as lost as the devil in the pit.

YOU’VE GOT TO LEARN TO SAY, ‘I HAVE SINNED.’

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and God commands every single person in the world, everywhere, to bow before him and acknowledge it, in other words to say to the Lord, “I have sinned.” In Luke 15 Jesus told the most moving story in the world about a young man who felt an urge to leave his father’s house. It’s a familiar story, one that’s happened in almost every family. This young man demanded his portion of the family estate and then the country bumpkin left for city life far away. There he squandered his money on wild living. Days of partying passed, then weeks, then months and at last the day came when the young man had spent the lot. Now friendless, broke and destitute, he found himself in a desperate place, far from family support. Although he was covered in shame and drowning in deep regret, he applied for a job with a farmer who put him to work looking after pigs. His wage was a pittance and he was so hungry that he found himself ready to eat with the swine.

At that precise moment the light was switched on in his brain. In a flash, he saw himself; he saw what he’d become. Most of all, he saw that it was his own stupidity that had gotten him into this mess. No longer would he blame his father or criticize his older brother. Self-destruction had done it. No longer would he pretend to be something he wasn’t. In that moment of self-revelation, he saw what he’d become, and more than that, he knew that there was just one way back.

The strange irony of his situation hit him like a ton of bricks. His father’s servants were eating their fill back at home, while he, the master’s son, was living with the pigs. Then he thought to himself, “I’m going to get away from these stinking pigs and I’m going back home. When I get there, I’m going to say, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired hands.’”

With that, the young man got up, brushed himself off, and gathered the two or three things he still had and he began the long journey back home. He was still about a hundred yards from the front door of the farmhouse when his father spotted him walking down the country lane. Before the young man knew what was happening, his father was running towards him, and throwing his arms around him, crushing him, kissing him and saying, “Welcome home, son.”

The son began to repeat the words that he’d memorized in the pig pen. “Father, I have sinned against you and against heaven. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father cut him short. He would hear no more of it. He shouted to his servants running after him, “Now! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Find the fattened calf and kill it. Call the neighbors and spread the good news. Tell everyone you see. This son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.” No more sleeping with the pigs.

I make one observation and one only. This young man, whom we call the ‘Prodigal Son,’ turned his whole life around by saying three simple words: “I have sinned.” He said it while he was still living with the pigs. He said it while he was still far away from home. He said it while he was still broke and hungry. But those three words turned his life around. The boy repented. It’s a parable of your life and of mine. When we have sinned, we are so ashamed to acknowledge our folly. Old people who’ve been conned out of thousands of dollars by fraudsters won’t tell anyone because they are full of shame. When you find yourself in the pig pen then you aren’t to tell anyone where you are. What we do is try to clean ourselves up, we try to be presentable, we brush our teeth and comb our hair, but we still have pig dung under our fingernails. People know we’ve been fools; we’ve been with the swine. Are you getting the message here?

Jesus’ parable is for everyone who is tired of eating with the pigs. If you are ready to go home then I’ve got good news for you. The Father is standing in the road waiting for you. His arms are open wide. He knows where you’ve been, and he is still waiting for you. The only thing that matters is for you to repent and come home. That’s what the grace of God is all about. “What is repentance unto life?” And the answer is, “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it to God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after new obedience.” You see that phrase, “apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ”? The man who truly repents believes that the Father will listen to him. He will be merciful

and will open the door to him. He will give him a job on the farm. He won't refuse to see him. He won't shout out to him, "Get back to your pigs!"

If you acknowledge your sin you can come home. If you repent and turn from your sin then you can start all over. You can be forgiven. The slate can be wiped clean. You don't have to live the rest of your life in hiding. You don't have to live in fear that someone will find you out. You don't have to eat with the pigs forever. It is possible, and it depends on one thing. You have to do what the Prodigal Son did. You have to come to your senses and say, "Father, I have sinned." When you do that, you will find the mercy that Solomon talks about in Proverbs 28:13. When you do that, you will discover 1 John 1:9 is true. God is faithful. God is just. God will forgive your sin and will cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

YOU MUST KNOW YOUR GREATEST PROBLEM IS UNREPENTANCE

That is man's arch-problem. There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin. There is a way for man to rise to that sublime abode. There is a way of reconciliation and union with God. There is a way to get peace with God no matter how bad you've been. That way is to turn from our sins, and to turn to God. But ever since Adam, we want to excuse ourselves when we sin. We hide, and we blame someone else. Most of us are pretty good at it. We know all the good hiding places and we've memorized a thousand excuses. Until you come clean, you cannot be forgiven. There is no salvation without repentance. No one is in heaven who didn't repent of their sins on earth. Listen carefully. As long as you live without repenting of your sin, you can never be forgiven. Never! Your refusal to own up to your sin means you'll live with the burden of your past. It will hang like a millstone around your neck.

Through Jesus Christ it is possible to be forgiven. That's the good news. Now here's the bad news. As long as you refuse to admit you've done anything wrong, you can never be forgiven. Therefore, you will stay like you are right now: unforgiven, unhealthy, fragmented, broken, confused, divided, locked inside the citadel of your own self-justification forever and ever, as you are now.

But if you own up to your mistakes, then you can be forgiven. Here are three hard words that could change your life: "I was wrong." Let me ask the basic question this way: Are you ready to say, "I was wrong?" I hope the answer is yes. This is where your spiritual journey must begin. Wouldn't you like to be forgiven? Wouldn't you like to see the power of the Holy

Spirit released in your life? Wouldn't you like to see God do something supernatural in the relationships that matter most to you? Are you willing to say those tough words of true repentance that lead to freedom? If so, the healing can begin right now.

"Our Lord Jesus calls sinners," you say, and that gives you some comfort. He calls on them, and that is true, not the righteous, no, just ordinary people like ourselves. Lost people whom he came to seek and to save, Jesus indeed calls the unrighteous, but to what does he call them? To what? I will tell you. He calls them to repentance. He calls them to turn their backs on sin and to turn their faces to live a life pleasing to God. That is repentance. He calls lustful people to become pure, and he calls thieves to live lives of honesty and hard work so that they can help others. He calls bullies to be meek. He calls ungodly men to become truly religious. And all he calls effectually he gives grace to change. He gives you power to live new lives that please God.

This demand of Jesus to repent goes to all the nations. It comes to us here today, whoever we are and wherever we are, and it lays claim on us. This is the demand of Jesus to every soul: Repent! Be changed deep within. Replace all God-dishonoring, Christ-belittling perceptions and dispositions and purposes with God-treasuring, Christ-exalting ones.

God calls all men and women everywhere to repent. That is His word to you today. The same Jesus who was by blue Galilee and preached repentance to His first hearers is with us today by the green Chesapeake Bay. Christ has come to town; He is here in Marion Station now, and He is preaching the same message, and He is giving you grace to hear it and to respond to it. Come to the present Jesus and say, "Mercy . . . mercy . . . mercy." And He will hear and answers all who join together every little bit of faith and every bit of godly sorrow and make a gift of it before our Lord. He will take our sin and he will give us in its place a new heart that's set free from sin and guilt. You ask him now and keep asking until you know he has heard you.