

Forgive Us: Repentance and Repair - Making Amends

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[0 : 00] If you are open to it, will you pray with me? Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy. As we enter into this place this morning, I pray that we would have both a sense of our belovedness and a sense in the ways that you are present to us in need, in the rough places in our lives.

I pray that you would prepare us this Lent to let go, to release, to know what it is to embrace wilderness as life.

I ask that this time will just continue to be full of your spirit and nourishment of your life.

Let me hear this now. All right, y'all. So this morning I want to start with a confession, thinking about this.

[1 : 27] And the thing that I want to say is that I fear really strongly that I will cause harm in this community and will not know how to repent.

I don't know if every pastor carries this, but it's something that I think about a lot. When Misha was on staff here, she was in charge of kind of tying up the loose end of the back end of Resurrection City, the church plant that I pastored that merged with the table.

And she would, you know, basically as she was putting a second pair of eyes on our finances and all those things, the administrative things, the practices. I would routinely joke with her, I'm not going to jail.

Am I good? Am I going to be with my family still? Is everything okay? And it was the kind of thing that like was, it was a joke, y'all, but it wasn't really a joke. Like, did I miss something?

Is everything okay? Okay. And like probably many of you in this room, I've seen so many churches and so many pastors who do some really interesting things.

[2 : 38] I was once part of a church and one of the pastors, was that a giant pastoral staff? One of the pastors was like shoplifting. I don't know. The stress was too much. But it was, and like candy or something.

Like something really ridiculous, right? And so I think about this a lot. What does it mean to be in a space and to know that you've always got to be careful about boundaries, violations, and there's always potential to re-traumatize.

And then I think about if that moment comes up, will I recognize it? Would I defensively blame shift? Would I offer shallow repentance?

Would I commit maybe the sin that maybe churches are most and pastors are most guilty of, which is focusing on forgiveness? Because that's easier than talking about repentance a lot of times.

And then at one point in my church, I did attend a church, and it was one of those, again, large, large church. And after I left, I found out that, yeah, they had, in a situation of real abuse, counseled the person experiencing that to forgive.

[3 : 53] They chose to focus on that over real accountability. And it's easy to quote, like, Jesus out of context in this kind of, like, oh, forgive 77 times or turn the other cheek.

And yet I think that oftentimes a lot of that is motivated by desiring really just a quick fix. Because we're all kind of formed in this culture of instant gratification and a desire to appear a certain way.

So to make what is uncomfortable go away, to move through it pretty quickly. Now, for the past few weeks, we have been talking about something that probably feels a little bit different.

We've been talking about hush harbors, which are these communities that African Americans created illegally, enslaved African Americans created illegally outside of plantations.

I propose basically that these are a really important model for the church that we are hoping to become, a liberating church. But today, I want to step away. And when I say step away, it's really just a slight turn away from that series.

[5 : 02] We're going to come back to it later in the year. Because, you know, we can do Black history and Black experience outside of February. So we're going to come back to that later in, you know, later in the year.

And we're going to, again, turn slightly. Because now we're in the season of Lent. And when I say that, I'm aware, I thought Lent was something on your clothes until I was like 25 years old, okay?

So it's this season that developed in earlier church history out of a desire to prepare converts to the faith for baptism at Easter.

So there was this time before Easter of intense preparation for and self-examination for that moment of baptism. And it's become this moment that many parts of the global church still hold as this time of reflection and penance.

In light of our previous focus on hush harbors meeting kind of clandestinely outside of the plantation, I think a good question for us to ask in this season of Lent is what are the plantation gods that the American church continually circles?

[6 : 13] What are some of those? And in particular, in an election year, in a year when we're very aware of and need to be deeply aware of the conflict between Israel and Palestine that is more maybe devastating than potentially ever, what are some of the things that we need to spill away from?

So we'll talk about things like anti-Semitism and how Christians have been deeply complicit in really its formation. We'll talk about Christian supremacy and what that even is.

And we'll talk about Christian nationalism, because I know that that's something we've always got to be talking about, nationalism and how we're leaning into those things culturally. Lent derives from this old English word that means spring.

And I love that because I feel like Lent is as much like the season of the year as it is like a season of the soul that we all need. This space where we need to be asking, how do we participate in the year?

So I'm not going to start, though, today with anything that's particularly big. I realize, like, it's easy sometimes to go like, woo, let's talk about this giant thing out there and not talk about what's in here in our own families and relationships and lives.

[7 : 43] So I'm going to start a little bit more personally with the reality that I can harm people and do harm people and the reality that we all do that and have to be talking about repentance.

One other thing I'll say as kind of preparation is that lately I've been in this book of the book of Ephesians in my, like, personal time, my devotional time.

And I've been struck by this particular idea that the author of that book describes. It's about this passage about the purpose for which the gifts are given or gifts are given to the church.

And this is Ephesians 4, 11 through 13. And all I really want you to note here is just this language of coming to the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

And I read that and I think a lot about what it means to come to maturity, to, as a pastor, help people to come to maturity, to, you know, there's language about Jesus, you know, increasing in years, but also in wisdom and in favor with other people.

[8 : 57] Like, and that's just part of the human task is growing, increasing, maturing in those kinds of ways, learning what it is to be human. So how can we grow up?

How can we grow more deeply in aliveness? Even as we know that our bodies decay, that's part of, that's a major part of what Ash Wednesday is about. Like, facing that reality and growing into new creation as well.

And I think just really clearly it's important to name that to grow in maturity we have to grow in repentance. Even though that can be super hard language, like we have to think about what that means.

So here's what we're going to do. We're going to go to this text in Joel. I know y'all just are deep in Joel right now. It's where you stay in your faith life. We're going to go to the book of Joel. It will be on the screen.

I will not make anybody like scroll, like try to look for that. And this is like a really traditional Ash Wednesday text. It's a lectionary text for Ash Wednesday most years.

[10 : 01] And it is Joel 2, 1 through 12. The lectionary skips the middle part, which I'm going to do in 12 through 17. And here is how it reads. Blow the trumpet in Zion.

Sound the alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble. For the day of the Lord is coming. It is near.

A day of darkness and gloom. A day of clouds and thick darkness. Like blackness spread upon the mountains, a great and powerful army comes. Their like has never been from of old, nor will it be again after them in ages to come.

Yet even now, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart. With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful.

Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him. A grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God.

[11 : 15] And then here's the skip portion. Next part, 17 or 12. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation. Assemble the aged. Gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests and the ministers weep.

Let them say, spare your people, O Lord. Do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, where is their God?

So it's pretty unclear from this passage. To me, at least it feels like it's pretty clear that there is a lot to unpack here.

This is a minor prophetic book, the book of Joel. In the Christian church, most of the time we only intersect with it when we're talking about Peter's sermon in the book of Acts.

[12 : 20] It's like, God is pouring out her spirit on all flesh. Sons and daughters will prophesy. If you came from churches like some of the ones I was in, you might have heard this idea of like, God will restore back to you everything the locusts have taken.

That is Joel, okay? And that meant, you know, everything from you dropped a chain on the ground to like, you know, you lost a job. Like, God will restore everything the locusts have eaten. But in this passage today, like, the thing that I think is maybe the most odd is what the prophet calls the day of the Lord.

There's a sense that in light of that coming day, there is this urgency to repent. And that day of the Lord idea represents this cluster of images that are all about God intervening in human history decisively to bring justice.

And that's, the day of the Lord is about, it's about judgment. And I think with the, for me, when that feels bothersome, like, oh, it is really helpful for me to always remember that oppressed and marginalized people tend to become apocalyptic thinkers.

And apocalypse is just really about unveiling. That's where the literal word comes from, like unveiling, revealing. So this idea that this hope that one day the truth of the world, the truth of injustice will be revealed, that it won't always be like this, is this really important idea.

[13 : 54] It's a psychological aid toward hope. And it tends to form faith communities that can be incredibly rich theologically. And I'll just say, since it's February, that there is this interesting resonance in general between the way in which black theology and the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Old Testament prophets, converge and intersect.

There's a song I really love. It's one of those songs that if I play it one time on Spotify, that's it. Like, I'm singing it the rest of the way. And it's not a happy song. It's like, but everywhere.

I'm like, woo, I'm doing a wedding. Yes. Like, it's like, and it's a Sweet Honey in the Rock song. And the lyrics are, or the chorus is, there's a new world coming.

Everything's going to be turning over. Everything's going to be turning over. Where are you going to be standing when it comes? And again, that song is like the sense of his Old Testament, these Old Testament prophets like Joel.

That at some point, there will be justice. And because of that, there is a need to turn and to repent. And spoiler alert, if you have not ever talked to me, I tend to think that God's justice is restorative and not punitive.

[15 : 12] But you know, we can argue about that really publicly if that's what you would like. That's what I think. Okay. I want to say just a couple things here about repentance, because there's something underneath it.

Hence, this is a little bit more of a teaching sermon. So I'm going to say a bunch of teaching kinds of things. If talk of repentance seems, you know, uncomfortable, I want to name that underneath of that is often this discomfort.

It can be this discomfort when talking about sin. And it can feel like maybe the best option is to let go of that language, because sometimes it's been weaponized.

The language of sin has certainly been weaponized. And yet it's something that we see, we participate in, we, you know, witness in the world, this kind of real harm.

And so I think that sometimes when we abandon the language of sin or kind of the semantic range of that word, and it becomes really easy to become kind of speechless when harm happens.

[16 : 26] You don't have as a, you know, as a person, particularly as a person of faith, kind of a repository of thinking around it. So I think that we have to grapple with these ideas. So for most of my life, sin has been, I was told this over and over.

Little pigtail girls, eight, they're like, sin is missing the mark, little eight-year-old girl. Like, you know, I was, that was drilled into me. And that does that very much like there, that has biblical, there's biblical truth underneath that in terms of the way the words are translated.

Sin is missing the mark. There's an archer shooting a bow at a target and missing. But what I didn't actually realize as that little eight-year-old girl and then 15-year-old girl, all of that, is that it matters what the target consists of.

Like, it matters, right? And I was taught growing up that the mark was purity, moral purity, and perfection. Those were the marks. So things then, like, sex apart from marriage were, like, really high up as, like, what we talked about when we talked about sin.

But then, as Scott McKnight says, the way that we define the problem shapes the way that we define the solution. And that's true in every part of religion.

[17 : 43] If we think about sin in terms of moral purity and perfection, then that has a certain set of outcomes for our faith. But I don't think that's the right way to think about it, particularly at a larger level.

I think that when we talk about missing the mark, that the larger scriptural thread is around shalom. Shalom is this Hebrew word for peace, but it's not like shallow peace like we often use that word.

It's deep relational peace. It's active. It's about wholeness and harmony and flourishing for every human being. I think that's the mark. Here's what Lisa Sharon Harper says in her book, *The Very Good Gospel*, about this.

She starts by talking about the beginning of creation, how there's shalom, and the way that is described is as creation is good and then very good. Tov.

Tov is the Hebrew word for good. But the word does not refer only to the goodness of the object. It also refers to the tie between things. In the Hebrew conception of the world, all of creation is connected.

[18 : 53] The well-being of the whole depends on the well-being of each part. The Hebrews' conception of goodness was different than the Greeks'. The Greeks located perfection within the object itself.

A thing or a person strove toward perfection. But the Hebrews understood goodness to be located. The good between things. Now, as somebody who grew up with kind of the ideas of sin and moral perfection, and as somebody who just, in terms of personality, tends toward perfectionism, I'm trying to get over, I'm trying to recover, y'all, but I tend toward perfectionism.

You know, I read that and I was like, okay, the good, how do we talk about the good between things? And that certainly has very individual ramifications, right, for growing.

But it's about this relational wholeness. So a couple of definitions of sin that I like. Sin, this is like my favorite actually probably right now, is culpable shalom breaking.

Culpable shalom breaking. It is shalom is God's design for creation and redemption. Sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities.

[20 : 09] And an affront to our creator. The essence of sin is not the violation of laws, but the violation of relationships.

So to be a people who follow a God of shalom, the God of shalom, is to develop in these skills in making relationships right after shalom has been disrupted.

To become a people of repentance. Okay. So for the rest of this sermon, I want to do two things. If you haven't realized yet, I'm going, I'm trying to go really, I'm going to go really practical on this.

There's not going to be like, oh, we need to, we need to repent before God. No, we're going to talk about like, we need to get right with people around us. And how do we do that? Because we are human and we always are going to be doing harm.

And how do we think about that? So I'm going to talk about the biblical language. I'm going to do this pretty quickly. The biblical language behind repentance. And then I'm going to talk about some hard skills of repentance.

[21 : 14] And when I say that, I just mean like more like stages of repentance. And I'll say that in contrast to, I really believe there are also soft skills behind repentance. Like things like learning to let go of defensiveness.

Like when I, I mean, I'm married, so I might have to do some of that work sometimes when me and my wife argue. But yeah, I often like counsel couples. And like what exercise we do, we always do is like active listening.

How do we let go of defensiveness? Which always feels hard. So I think that's what I think. Letting go of perfectionism is a soft skill behind repentance. And I think for many of us, like letting go of messages that we are unworthy and shameful is also really key to repentance.

That because you had to repent, does not mean you were unlovable. And I, you know, I think about when Jesus goes into the wilderness, like this 40 days in the wilderness, this primary thing we often talk about during Lent.

Before that, Jesus receives like deep confirmation, affirmation of his belovedness, right? Before the wilderness time. So I think it's important to think about that. But today I'll talk about mostly the hard skills.

[22 : 25] Okay. First, the biblical language of repentance. And a lot of this, there's this thinker I've mentioned probably from the platform before that, I really like Peter Choi. He's got a great talk on this, called A Deepening Call to Repentance.

So the Bible uses a number of different words to shade, and a different, you know, to shade what repentance is. So in terms of the Hebrew, two of the major words are shuv, which means like physical turning, like actual turning, coming back, returning, maybe to yourself, coming back home, et cetera.

And the other word is niham, which is about your interior state. It's about like, you feel remorse. Like you recognize I actually did something wrong, and there's something that happens in my emotions around that.

So you have this, with those two major words, it's like there's sort of an inward, yeah, it does matter that I understand that there is real wrong. And there's an exterior component, that I actually changed something.

So there's this kind of holistic body-soul process. And then there are three words that I think are important that are related to the Christian past. One of them is often talked about, it's the noun form of it is metanoia.

[23 : 44] It's Greek. It means to basically change your mind. The accent is on what you're thinking about. The accent is on the intellect. And if that feels maybe a stripped down version from like the physical turning, just consider that in the process of repentance, considering what I need to unlearn and learn is really important.

So there is this cognitive aspect that we need. Then, now we're going to get into some fun Latin words. I never took Latin. I am sorry, okay? So if you are like a Latin scholar, I am sorry.

So there's one. This is where the repentance was translated this way in the Latin Vulgate in many instances, which was a Latin Bible that came out in the fourth century.

Penitentium agate, which means to do penance. Think about that for a second, to do penance, which may be if you come from a Catholic or higher church tradition, like liturgical tradition, like that idea of going and confessing and doing penance is important.

And because of this, in some ways, the idea of repentance lost a little bit of like that richness because it was like, if I do a thing, if I say the thing, the right thing enough times, or I do whatever I was assigned, it's done.

[25 : 05] I'm absolved. It became this kind of singular thing without the richness that repentance really demands. And it became somewhat transactional. That's why also, you know, you get into, you know, toward the time of what Luther, like selling of indulges becomes a thing because people are like, yeah, if I can do a thing, I'm going to do a thing.

And most of us feel that way. You know, really, if we could, I can just do a thing. And then we get later into the 16th century when the humanists started to recover the original languages of scripture.

And their choice for this word was, this is the one I have a hard time, reciprocite, reciprocite, which is to be penitent.

So still this idea of, you know, penitence, but the idea is about being versus doing. So had a little bit more of that richness.

So I wanted to like go through those because I know y'all, why are you not going to go home and be like, I want to think about shoo. You know, you might, but you know, you might not.

[26 : 13] But I think it's important, like big picture to remember that repentance has all of these shades to it. And I think when you think about that, it is much easier to hold and grapple with the language.

That it's a much richer process than we remember sometimes. All right. The next thing I want to do is talk about stages of repentance. In some ways, this is probably the work I wish had been done in the church when I was younger, that somebody had just said like, there are these things you should always be thinking about practically with repentance.

So these come from a book called On Repentance and Repair by Rabbi Danya Rutenberg. Her work is based on the work of a Jewish philosopher named Maimonides, who basically came up with laws of repentance from the, like by, as he correlated the, you know, Jewish tradition.

So a couple of things. So one, the goal is always transformation in all of this. Transformation, not just did that person forgive me or did that group forgive me, but am I transformed?

And then also, did the person I offended or harmed get what they needed as they understand that? So step one is naming and owning harm.

[27 : 37] This is that overcoming defensiveness enough to say, I really did do your thing. And in prepping for the sermon, I looked up, I just Googled worst apologies ever.

So many things came up. So many things came up. So like where you actually, it's not like, you know, in your heart, you realize like, it's not, I'm sorry, but I'm sorry.

And I'm sorry you feel that way. You know, fine. I'm sorry. You know, like all of those ways, it's like there's real like recognition. All right, I own it.

And then there's confession in a way that's proportional to the harm. So like if I accidentally misgender somebody in a meeting at work, then I, in some way with those people involved, like make a confession.

Like, oh, okay, I did this thing. And I see that I did this thing. So yeah, that is proportional. Step two, and I'm gonna probably just go through, I have a bunch of slides.

[28 : 39] Bless you, production team. Bless you. Thank you. So I'm not gonna say all of these things, but step two is just starting to change. So that's the stage at which like there's prayer and there's meditation and there's thinking about like, what might the impact have been and what might the like response to that impact be?

There's just starting to change. Are there things I need to learn? Are there things I need to read? Are there things I need to talk to to understand what the harm really is? Step three, she says, is restitution and accepting consequences.

In Maimonides, there's this clear idea of like paying damages at times, which, you know, reparations, you know. If a person is damaged, like thinking about are there real financial things I need to do?

Do I need to become an, you know, like by repenting, like become an advocate in some way or volunteer somewhere or whatever. I mean, sometimes you can't always make perfect.

Like the person may not be around anymore, but what do I need to do to repair? Step four is apology. And I think that this is really important, like affirming that what happened happened because I feel like it's kind of popular when we talk about gaslighting and how that happens in our culture.

[30 : 00] But we don't really apologize to people we gaslight, like because it's not affirming the truth of what happened. And so then the person that's harmed is like, oh, I think it happened like that, like that.

But then there's not really any. And the emphasis here is on, with apology is on, this is the language here. And I will read this one.

Even after a person has made restitution of monetary debt, they are obliged to pacify the person harmed to beg forgiveness. The emphasis is on appeasing the person who's been hurt.

How do we do that? Step five, the last one, is essentially you find yourself in a similar situation. You're able to do harm again. You make a different choice, right?

You have been transformed. So that was just one framework. There's, you know, thankfully more things going on in terms of transformative justice and things like that.

[30 : 59] But this is one model to think about. The skills that we need to grow in repentance and thus to grow in Christ. So here's where I'll end. We've got to grow in repentance.

We've got to grapple with the language of repentance and sin. We've got to develop these skills. And if you're wondering right at the end, like why I didn't talk about more than, again, like the repent before God, it's because I kind of believe that if we don't have the skills to repent before people that we see, like family members, that like it's going to be really hard to like repent before God in ways that really matter.

So next week, we're going to move into talking about the implications of some of these bigger sins. So that's what the end of that Joel text is about, like group repentance. What is that about? How do we engage in repair as groups around specific things, these plantation gods?

But today I want to end with this image. That's a bowl that's been repaired through the Japanese art of Kintsugi. Also, you can see it in the actual thing.

There should be a slide too. But you can see it in the graphic for the sermon series. So, and I'm not an expert in Kintsugi. I learned about it a few years ago from a friend of mine who's an artist.

[32 : 23] But it basically is the Japanese art of taking a broken piece of pottery, mixing it with lacquer that's mixed with gold or some other precious metal and then putting it back together.

And the idea is that the process of repair is illuminated. It's not hidden. It's illuminated. I've never tried this. I'm not much of an artist.

But I, when I think about it, it reminds me and it feels like good news. The good news that God is faithful to help us repent and repair towards shalom.

The good news that new things do come out of things that were once broken, including relationships. And the good news that repentance doesn't have to be, that it doesn't have to be hidden.

When things, when there's breakage, you don't have to hide that or be ashamed of that. If you believe that you can damage, believe that you can fix.

[33 : 32] If you believe that you can damage, believe that you can heal. Those are words of Rebbe Naman of Breslov. If you believe that there is damage in our world, believe that you can help prepare it.

And if you believe that there is damage in our world, believe that our God is a God of healing and restoration. Amen.

Lord, you are the Lord of life who helps us grow up, grow in repentance, grow in the things that feel hard, grow away from the old messages we've received about ourselves.

Help us to know what it is to be those who are, as Zach said earlier, living on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us wisdom, Lord, as we enter into this Lenten season for ourselves and for our community. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 02] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.