

REPENTANCE AND FAITH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 1:10-21;
Ezekiel 18:20-23,
27-32; Mark 2:1-12;
Luke 3:1-14; 15:11-
24; Acts 2:32-39;
Hebrews 11:1-10

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“This son of mine
was dead and is
alive again; he was
lost and is found!”
And they began to
celebrate.
(Luke 15:24)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Jan. 5	Ezek. 18:20-23, 27-32	Turn Away from Sin
T	Jan. 6	Isa. 1:10-21	Turn toward Righteousness
W	Jan. 7	Mark 2:1-12	Jesus Has Power to Forgive Sins
Th	Jan. 8	Heb. 11:1-10	Draw Near to God by Faith
F	Jan. 9	2 Chron. 7:12-16	Repent and Seek God’s Face
Sa	Jan. 10	Acts 2:32-39	Repent and Be Baptized

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

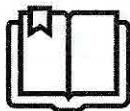
On our first visit to our oldest child’s university, we walked past an area called “The Pit,” a sunken courtyard outside the library and student center. The tour guide told us it was the social center of campus, where students could meet their friends, sign up for clubs, and encounter all types of protest and performance. We stepped in closer to hear better, not because the tour guide was too quiet, but because a preacher was shouting from one corner. He had been a controversial fixture there for decades. His message that day was “Repent!” plus hell, damnation, and the too-short shorts that girls were wearing. The tour guide told us that students liked to engage him in conversation and debate, but no one took him seriously. I took the opening to ask about campus religious life, and the tour moved on. The pit preacher kept yelling as we walked away.

The message of repentance—the call to change one’s life—is important. How one shares it matters. The fiery preacher on campus chose one method, like a modern-day John the Baptist calling out the “brood of vipers” (Luke 3:7) walking past with their backpacks. What I didn’t hear from him was the other part of John’s message—the bit about Jesus the

Messiah bringing forgiveness of sins, which is how and why we are able to repent. Calling for repentance without reference to the compelling and saving grace of Jesus was a missed opportunity to do more than shout at students.

Our primary text gives us another way to share the message of repentance: a story Jesus himself told of a wayward child returning home to a forgiving father. There is plenty of drama, some recognizable family dynamics, and joy over the transformation of one who recognizes their mistakes and wants to change. Which method is more compelling for you: the shouting or a story? Perhaps there is a time and space for both, but let's enjoy the story today, as we find ourselves in it, similarly called to change.

Lord, help us hear your call to repentance and faith. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Luke 15:11–24; Acts 2:38–39

15:11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it,

and let us eat and celebrate,²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

2:38 Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

COMING TO OUR SENSES AND OURSELVES

In Luke 15, we meet a father and two sons in a parable of repentance and forgiveness. The story is set within the wider context of friction between Jesus and the religious leaders over the kind of company he keeps. “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1-2).

The question of the appropriate way to interact with people seen as sinners by the religious establishment followed Jesus throughout his ministry. He was criticized for eating with them, healing them, and declaring their sins forgiven. Instead of avoiding them, or standing on a corner berating them, he comes close enough to touch, listen, and share food and stories and the love of God. The result? People’s lives are transformed by faith. In this parable, when the lost is found and returned to wholeness, a celebration begins. “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (15:7). Even those who criticize are invited to come in and feast.

The younger son had done his best to burn the bridges that led back home. He disrespected his father, squandered his gifts, and lost his money, dignity, and good sense. Sitting among pigs, not just dirty, but unclean according to his faith, “he came to his senses” or “came to himself” (15:17) and saw a way back, repentant. The word *μετάνοια, metanoia*, means repentance, literally to “change one’s mind.” When we come to our senses, come back to ourselves—our true selves as created in the image of God—we change our mind about how we are living. This change of mind leads to change in action. The son gets up and starts back home, practicing his words of repentance, seeking to live a new and

different life. His father welcomes him with open arms, offering forgiveness and grace to the sinner who turned around and came home.

The passage from Acts 2 also shows us the power of a story to change minds and hearts. After Pentecost, Peter speaks to the wondering crowd. He shares the story of Jesus: from prophecy to his life, death and resurrection as the Messiah. Their hearts opened, they ask Peter the same question John the Baptist is asked in Luke 3: “What should we do?” Peter, who knows as well as anyone the power of second chances, answers with what he himself knows to be true and transformational.

 **When have you had an experience of “coming to yourself” or repentance?**

PRACTICING REPENTANCE

Peter’s answer to “what should we do?” is “Repent and be baptized.” Turn away from your sin and walk a different way—walk in the light, as we learned in the last lesson. Baptism marks our initiation into a community of believers who seek to live this kind of reoriented life, following Jesus who has reconciled us to God. The verses following Peter’s words at Pentecost give us a glimpse into a repentant, reoriented, reconciled life. Thousands were baptized, then they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). They shared what they had, and they practiced a life of praise and generous sharing. Their repentant lives were different.

Likewise, John the Baptist answers repeated questions of “what should we do?” from those coming to him for baptism, with instructions on sharing coats and food, and being honest in business dealings. Practicing repentance and faith means living differently than before (Luke 3:10-14). So much of the New Testament epistles contain teaching and instructions for those who seek (and often still fail) to practice together.

Repentance is not a one-time event, though we may mark as significant certain moments of realizing our sin and our need for change. Turning around and stepping forward into a new kind of life is the beginning of a process of spiritual maturity and formation. The disciples who left their nets made a choice for a new kind of life, but they had much to learn about faith as they followed Jesus. Just so, we live out our baptism and participation

in a community of faith as an ongoing process of choosing to walk in the light of God's grace, as forgiven people.

The preacher shouting on the corner knew that we all have need to repent. We all sin and need to recognize it and turn away from it. What he failed to make clear is the communal joy and celebration that follows from experiencing the grace and forgiveness of God. He seemed more like our parable's older brother, standing outside the celebration, sure of his own righteousness but focused on the mistakes of his wayward brother (Luke 15:25–30). Imagine the difference if the campus preacher stopped yelling, sat down, offered a snack to a hungry student, and simply told his own story of transformation and grace through Jesus, and how he is still trying to live out a life of faith. Imagine the difference between a student listening alone to a preacher shout “Repent!”, and one who finds a group of believers with whom to practice repentance, praise, and prayer.

② How is repentance practiced in your community of faith?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In our study of the Enduring Beliefs of the Christian Faith, we've looked at what we know from Scripture, particularly about the providence of God, salvation that comes through Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In light of the goodness of our Creator, we have recognized the pervasive reality of sin in us and in the world. The good news is that we are not left hopeless. Grace abounds through Jesus Christ! Hearing this good news, and no longer desiring sin's separation from God, we determine to repent, turn around, and live a different way, in restored relationship with God and with our neighbors.

John the Baptist told those who would repent and be baptized to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). Living out repentance requires action and effort. Salvation does not—that sacrifice and work is done by Jesus alone. Repentance asks us to see our sin, turn from it, and get going in the other direction, bearing fruit. Eugene Peterson says that repentance is “the no we say to the world's lies and the yes we say to God's truth” and is “always and everywhere the first word in the Christian life. It . . . is a feet-on-the-ground kind of word.”¹

The path of repentance is not one that we walk alone. We are connected to fellow travelers through baptism and in the church. Together we practice saying no to the lies of the world

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 25–26.

and saying yes to God. Just as our understanding of sin requires that we see the ways we fail not just intellectually or in theory, but in embodied ways that hurt people and our planet, and we grasp that Jesus suffered and died as a fully embodied Messiah for our sins, so too must we embrace an embodied repentance. This might mean that we look for ways not just to say we are sorry, but to help actively repair some of the damage done by our sin.

The mission and outreach work we do in congregations and communities is part of this feet-on-the-ground repentance. We join our efforts with others, and we actively practice a new way of life, oriented toward God, our neighbors, and the kind of world God imagines. Strengthened by the assurance of our pardon and by forgiven followers alongside us, we step out in hope and faith as we serve meals, provide shelter, support children and families, care for the sick, work to dismantle racism, and alleviate poverty. This is more than just doing good and loving our neighbors, it is repentance in action.

 **In what active ways are you saying yes to God's truth and embodying repentance?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Luke 15:1–2 introduces the question of who is in and who is out. Religious outcasts gather to hear Jesus, but the religious members of the community grumble when they see that Jesus eats with sinners. The underlying tone to chapter 15 is joy: When the sheep and coin are found (15:4–10) there is “joy in heaven” (15:7) and “joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10). Such good news leads to an invitation to “Rejoice with me” (15:6, 9). There is an implicit call to Jesus’s table companions to rejoice in each other.
2. Jesus’ audience would immediately remember Old Testament stories of brothers (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers). In each of these stories, the younger son is the favored one, in contrast to the cultural norm of conferring favored status on the eldest son. In Jacob and Joseph’s case, the younger son carries the promises of the Abrahamic covenant.

2. Richard Jensen, *Preaching Luke's Gospel* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., 1997), 175.
3. Kenneth Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 167.
4. Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. X, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022), 68.
3. Richard Jensen comments on the younger son's repentance: "The father simply gives him back his sonship as an act of grace. The son accepts. He repents: he accepts being found!"² Jensen credits Kenneth Bailey who suggests that one's understanding of the relationship is changed, which comes from the actions of the Finder, not the lost one.³
4. Acts 2:14–36 relates an account of Peter's speaking at the festival of Pentecost after the Holy Spirit was poured out. Peter names the event as a fulfillment of prophecy (Joel 2:28–32). The hearers' response is described as "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37).
5. In Acts 2:37, the people ask, "What shall we do?" Peter responds with two directives in verses 38–39: Repent; be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Those who do are granted the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The "promise" is Israel's restoration (Acts 1:6; see Isa. 32:16–20). It is to them and their children and to all who are far away, as many as the Lord will call.
6. Repentance, an inward change that produces outward changes (cf. Matt. 23:26; Mark 7:21–23). John the Baptist called the people to "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8; see also Acts 26:20). "The principal difficulty in the history of the interpretation of [Acts 2:38] is whether Christian baptism is a condition for or a consequence of the 'forgiveness of your sins' and thus the reception of the 'gift of the Holy Spirit'"⁴