

Sermon to February 14, 2024 – Ash Wednesday

Acts 2:36-39 EHV

Theme: The Comforting Relationship between Baptism and Repentance.

- 1) Repentance is a change of mind.
- 2) In Baptism, God grants us that change.

³⁶*“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

³⁷*Now when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Gentlemen, brothers, what should we do?”*

³⁸*Peter answered them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call.”*

Can you imagine yourself being guilty of a sin so horrible that you can't conceive God could ever forgive you? Maybe some of you are feeling that way right now – overwhelmed by some secret shame that causes you to think: “If anyone knew what I thought, spoke, or did in the past, they would certainly turn their back on me in disgust.”

I think Peter's original hearers felt that way. Fifty days earlier, they saw the blood oozing out of the scourge wounded body of a man, whom they knew was innocent. Pitilessly, they continued to call for his crucifixion. They didn't care that Pilate repeatedly declared him innocent – even dramatically washing his hands in front of them to show he wanted nothing to do with their brutal desire to have him crucified. In savage joy, they asked for an insurrectionist to be set free instead of the innocent man – even going so far as to curse themselves by saying that they were willing to let God hold both them and their children accountable for causing his death.

But now, fifty days later, a miraculous event has some of these same sinners outside the disciple's door, listening to Peter prove to them from Scripture that the man they killed was the promised Christ. Not only that, but God raised him from the dead and made him Lord over all. Can you imagine the shock, shame, and horror they must have felt when they realized precisely what they did? They were guilty of killing the author of life! No wonder they anxiously asked the disciples what they should do. I mean, killing God's only begotten Son is no small sin.

That is when the apostle Peter gave the crowd this amazing, comforting news: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

“God is willing to forgive my sins that led to his Son's crucifixion?” Yes, he is. It seems unbelievable, but it is true: God forgives all our sins as we look to Jesus in faith. Not only that, but He also works a beautiful change in us through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism so that we might

belong to him forever. Let us consider these things as we look at **the Comforting Relationship between Baptism and Repentance** based on Peter's Pentecost encouragement to the crowd.

Part One: Repentance is a change of mind.

What should we do when we find ourselves horror-struck over our sins, wondering how God could forgive us? Listen to what Peter told the crowd outside his door: *“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

This invites the question: what does God mean when he calls us to repent? It's probably not what you might first imagine. You see, our English word “repent” does not have the same root meaning as the Biblical Greek and Hebrew words that the word “repent” translates. When we hear the word “repent,” we often associate it with remorse, sorrow, and possibly self-punishment. Why? Because the root meaning behind the word “repent” means: “to hurt.”

Not so in the Bible. The word translated as repent from Old Testament Hebrew carries the idea of turning, not hurting. And the Greek New Testament Word used by Peter in our sermon text? It conveys the thought of changing your way of thinking from one direction to another. Therefore, when the Bible calls us to repent, we are not only called to feel sorrow or remorse over sin. No, we are called to change our thinking – to turn from pursuing our sinful, selfish desires (which only lead to destruction) to seeking the Lord and the everlasting life he offers. Repentance is a change in the heart from sin and doubt to faith and love.

Repentance consists of two parts: 1) First, God uses his law to strike at our hearts -awakening a holy fear in us that leads us to recognize that our sins separate us from God and lead to destruction. That realization will move us to have godly sorrow over our sins – not in the sense that we are sorry we got caught, but because we realize our sins grieve God because they separate us from him and his love. 2) Then God uses his Gospel to move us to see and believe His love for us in Christ. He forgives all our sins and invites us to Himself – to leave behind every sin that entangles us and to trust him and His Word. Everything He has commanded in His Law has been for our protection and good. In the peace of his forgiving love, we recognize this fact and follow him, not the devil. Why? Not to earn heaven but because God gives us heaven as a gift through faith in his Son.

Peter invited the remorseful Pentecost crowd to have a change of mind: to confess and turn away from their sin of hating Jesus and to trust in Him as their Lord and Saviour. Why? Because God would willingly forgive their sins for Christ's sake. Not only that, but they would receive the Holy Spirit, who would work this change in their hearts himself because no human can repent on their own.

There is great confusion when it comes to what repentance is. Many think and teach that it is our work – a decision we make for Christ. The problem with that theory is that the Bible describes all people as dead in sin and incapable of doing the good God requires. And just as it is impossible

for physically dead people to make decisions, it is equally impossible for spiritually dead people to make them either. How, then, can we repent, that is, be changed from spiritual death to life? The same way a physically dead person regains his life: God must do it, and he does - using the power of his Word to awaken faith in us. Therefore, just as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead by simply saying, "Lazarus, come out!" so also, Jesus raises the spiritual dead through his call to repent. His powerful word causes the needed change in us – creating faith through the Gospel promises he speaks.

Yes, all glory belongs to Jesus. He forgives our sins for his mercy's sake. He reaches out to us through His Law and Gospel – sending His Spirit to awaken faith in our hearts that we might repent, that is to say, turn from sin and to him in faith.

Part Two: In Baptism, God grants us that change.

But why does Peter call us to be baptized alongside repenting? What role does that sacrament play in receiving Christ's forgiveness?

To understand that, we must understand what baptism is. It is not, as some like to think, a dedicatory act on your part showing that you genuinely made your decision for Christ. Instead, it is an act of God through which he washes away your sins, clothes you in Christ's righteousness, and declares you to be his beloved child – just like he declared at Jesus' baptism. And why can God make that declaration over you? Because He changed you at your baptism – awakening faith in your heart through the power of his word. Whenever God looks at you, He sees His Son and what Jesus did to save you, as the apostle Paul wrote: ²⁶*In fact, you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.* ²⁷*Indeed, as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.*ⁱ

Since repentance is changing from unbelief to faith, Baptism is the means through which God causes and reaffirms that change. How so? Because that change is always God's work, not our own. The Holy Spirit may cause that change in an adult hearing his Word before he is baptized. In the peace of God's promised forgiveness, that adult will seek baptism in obedience to Christ's command – trusting that the Holy Spirit is keeping his promise to reaffirm and seal him in Christ's righteousness, which he already received through faith in God's Word. In the case of an infant, the Holy Spirit awakens faith through the sacrament of Baptism – causing a change in that little child's heart. How? Through God's Word and command connected with that Sacrament. Yes, God causes the change and not us. Why? Because faith is not a decision of our will. No, it is a God-given confidence that moves us to recognize Jesus as our Good Shepherd and trustingly follow him.

Yes, through baptism, God forgives our sins by connecting us to Christ. The Holy Spirit causes a change in our hearts (repentance), awakening a new spirit that wants to follow the LORD. And the Holy Spirit doesn't just work these blessings in adults who can make decisions. No, as the apostle Peter states: ³⁹*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call.*"

Again, notice that all this work is God's doing. He is the one calling out to us. His Spirit is the one working repentance in the hearts of young and old alike – using his Gospel in Word and Sacrament to accomplish it.

But let's go back to the beginning of this sermon when I asked you if you could imagine yourself feeling shame of a sin so horrible that you wonder if God could ever forgive you. If you ever feel this way, remember Peter's Words to the crowd guilty of crucifying God's only begotten Son: *“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

In other words, God will forgive you for Jesus' sake. Repent, that is to say, turn away from your shame, sin, and guilt – confessing to the LORD your sinfulness and need for His mercy. Then, remembering that Jesus' death on the cross was for you, trust that God forgives you for Jesus' sake. In the peace of that forgiveness, stop pursuing the desires of your sinful heart and pursue Christ as the Holy Spirit prompts and guides you through His Word. Remember your baptism and the new identity God the Father gave you to be his beloved child on that day. Your guilt and shame have been washed away. You belong to him. Live in the peace of that Baptismal forgiveness – dead to sin and alive to God, knowing that heaven is your home and the Holy Spirit your guarantee that you belong to the LORD. That, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is the Comforting Relationship between Baptism and Repentance. Amen

ⁱ Galatians 3:26-27 EHV