

Repenting About Repentance

Series: Repentance for the rest of us

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Primary Scripture: Acts 11:18, 2 Corinthians 7:10, 1 John 1:9, Revelation 3:21

Good morning Menlo, Mountain View, Saratoga, San Mateo, and all of you joining us online! My wife Jo and I love your church. Thank you for being such good friends to us. It really is a privilege to worship with you again and to speak to you today on one of my absolute favorite topics: *repentance*.

That might seem like a particularly weird favorite topic. Isn't repentance that thing preachers yell angrily about from the pulpit? Sadly, sometimes it is. But if that is our mental image when we hear the word repentance, we are completely missing God's heart in it.

As we start this series, I want to bring this message titled "Repenting About Repentance." Do we need to "change our minds" about repentance? That is the literal meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*—a change of mind in the deep sense of a complete reorientation of the self. Do we need to reorient the way we see repentance?

My subtitle for today is: "Sorry for the Tomato Plant," which makes zero sense right now. You need to keep listening as we explore our confusion about repentance, which so often begins long ago with the family patterns around conflict that we grew up with and inherited.

INHERITED CULTURAL AND FAMILY PATTERNS

In the Italian-American New Jersey culture I grew up in, we would never say sorry. Never! We bought into all the worldly wisdom: "Love means never having to say you're sorry," and "Time heals all wounds." We would be ten years into a massive family estrangement, and we would still cling to the idea that somehow mere time was going to bring healing. We clung to that because we had no idea where else to turn.

One time, two men in my family got into a fistfight that caused a massive family split. Apologizing was not an option. So what did they do? They did not speak to each other for so long that no one could remember what the fight was about in the first place. Then, one of them showed up at the other's door with a tomato plant. When the door opened, the sacred tomato plant was extended and received. Then they had espresso. No words were exchanged. No apology was offered. No expression of forgiveness was made. A tomato plant—that was it. In fact, it is probably the same poor tomato plant that keeps being dug up and passed back and forth between my family members.

That was my family's approach to apologizing. Then I married my wife Jo, who comes from England—where apologizing is a national pastime. In England, you apologize for everything. If you are drowning in a river and see someone who can rescue you, you don't yell "Help!" Of course not! You keep calm and politely say, "Excuse me, sir. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you would mind helping me a moment, as long as it's no trouble, of course."

In case you think this is an unfair caricature, many of you know Jo. Last year while out jogging, she was hit by a moving car! Thankfully she was okay, despite being badly bruised. But before she even had time to assess whether she was seriously injured, she started profusely apologizing to the driver: "I'm so sorry. Please forgive

A POWERFULLY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE OF REPENTANCE

Five years ago, I experienced something very different. One of my best friends called me out of the blue, and he did not sound like himself at all. He told me that two days prior, he woke up with a feeling in his stomach that he described as "impending doom," and it never went away. He was right in the middle of a mental health crisis, and he did not know why.

I called a Christian counselor I knew, and my friend was open to meeting with him even though he was not a believer at the time. The counselor suggested starting with a several-day intensive. I flew out to join them, and together with the counselor, my friend, and his wife, we began unpeeling the layers of what was going on.

What emerged on our first day together was that twelve years earlier, a significant conflict had occurred in their marriage—a way my friend had hurt his wife that was simply swept under the rug. They never dealt with it. So often we think we can lock conflict or hurt away in a closet, throw away the key, and keep it from affecting the rest of our lives. But it never works. Conflict is contagious. It cannot be contained. It inevitably begins to leak into every corner of your life, until as King David put it, "my bones wasted away." That was literally what my friend was experiencing: impending doom in his stomach.

The counselor walked us through the core components of biblical repentance. It didn't involve offering a quick "sorry," nor did it involve digging up any tomato plants in the backyard. When he finished, my friend said, "I'd like to do that. I'd like to do that right now if that's okay."

Right there in front of us, my friend:

- Acknowledged his wrongdoing.
- Acknowledged the deep hurt he had caused his wife.
- Grieved over it deeply.
- Fully owned it without making any excuses.
- Committed to a new direction and to doing everything he could to repair the damage.
- Looked his wife straight in the eyes and asked, "Will you forgive me?"

Then we waited in silence. It was incredibly intense. My friend's face looked like he was carrying two hundred pounds. It was probably only five or ten seconds of silence, but it felt like forever. Then his wife said, "Yes, I will forgive you."

The weight fell off, and they burst into the most stunning, childlike smiles. I have never seen my friend smile the way he did that day. They both instinctively lunged toward one another and embraced. It was absolutely gorgeous.

We were about to move on to the next phase of counseling when my friend's wife jumped in and said, "Wait, can I ask for forgiveness for something?" Repentance is even more contagious than conflict! Her experience of her husband repenting had been so freeing, so joy-filled, and so life-giving that now she wanted to try it! She slowly and intentionally walked through biblical repentance for something she had done, looked her husband in the eyes, and asked, "Will you forgive me?"

Again, there was vulnerable, silent anticipation. Then my friend said, "Yes, I will!" The weight fell off, the childlike smiles returned, and they embraced once more. It was quite possibly the most beautiful interaction between two people I have ever witnessed in my entire life.

WHY IS REPENTANCE SO RARE?

After that experience, I started asking myself: Why have I never seen that before in my life? Why is repentance so rare, even in the Christian life?

Have you experienced that kind of restoration?

Have you ever experienced anything like that interaction?

Most people haven't. I hadn't either. Yet consider how foundational repentance is throughout Scripture:

- The first command from John the Baptist was: "Repent!" That is how you prepare the way for the Lord.
- The first command from Jesus was: "Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand."
- The first command from Peter after the Spirit fell at Pentecost was: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you."
- Repentance is what the Old Testament prophets called Israel back to over and over again.
- Repentance is what Jesus called the New Testament churches back to in Revelation 2 and 3.

In Romania, believers historically referred to themselves as "Repenters." Initially, it was applied to them as a pejorative term, but they thought about it biblically and said, "We'll take it! We'll embrace that name."

I found that deeply convicting. Even though "repent and believe" live side by side all throughout Scripture, I am so much more comfortable with "believing" than with "repenting." We often talk about someone being a "committed believer," a "serious believer," or a "new believer." When is the last time you heard anyone called a "committed repenter"? Yet that is exactly what Christians were known for in Romania, and it is what the early Church was known for.

From the Didache (1st Century Early Church Text):

"On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins... But let no one who has a quarrel with a companion join you until they have been reconciled."

"If anyone wrongs his or her neighbor, let no one speak to that person, nor let that one hear a word from you, until he or she repents."

While we do not view the Didache as Scripture, it gives us insight into how serious the early Church was about repentance, confession, reconciliation, and unity. If repentance is so central to the Christian life, why do we see so little of it in the church today?

PRESENT TENSE AND HORIZONTAL REPENTANCE

Maybe we think, "I already repented twenty-five years ago when I gave my life to Jesus. I checked that box." But why would we think we repent once any more than we believe once? Think how odd it would sound if someone said, "I don't need to believe anymore because I believed when I converted," or "I don't need to love anymore because I loved when I came to faith." Nothing in the Christian life works like that. Repentance is intended to be present tense just as much as it is past tense.

Another mistake we make is assuming that repentance is something we do only with God, without needing to do it with each other. We assume repentance is past rather than present, and vertical rather than horizontal. But

THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF REPENTANCE AS SELF-HARM

A number of years ago, Jo and I lived through a season where we needed to repent for ways that we had sinned and for the hurt we had caused others. The moment we began confessing our sin, we felt such freedom and rest in the Lord. It was only the beginning of a challenging process, but at a soul level, we experienced repentance as a gift. The crushing weight fell off, and we could breathe and smile again.

We experienced the truth of Scripture: it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. But we struggle to believe that, don't we? That is not how our hearts instinctively fill in the blank.

When Jo and I began our process of repentance, we were surprised by how some people reacted. People kept coming up to us saying they were praying for all the "shame" we were carrying, praying that we wouldn't get "stuck in the past," and hoping we wouldn't "beat ourselves up too much." It all felt so heavy—as if repentance were an oppressive burden we needed to break free from. We felt a stark contrast between the freedom of repentance we were experiencing and the heavy words being spoken over us.

It concerned us. If repentance is seen as a form of self-harm or beating ourselves up, no wonder people don't want to embrace it. There is a strong tendency, even among Christians, to see repentance as punishment or as an atonement we must make for our sins. If that were true, I would tell you: Don't repent! Stop repenting right now! You cannot atone for your sins. That is the whole point of the Gospel.

While doing an exercise on repentance with a group of business executives, one man said, "I need to make up for some things in my past." Everyone immediately started affirming him because it sounded humble and relatable. But as soon as he said it, I felt a deep sense of Jesus responding: *"That's My job."*

The wages of sin is death. Can you make that payment? You can't. I can't be my own savior, and I cannot make up for my past. Only one Person can, and praise God, He already did!

THE FOURFOLD VISION OF BIBLICAL REPENTANCE

Repentance is not self-harm, punishment, or atonement. What is it? Over the coming weeks, you will dig into various aspects of repentance, but I want to give you a 30,000-foot view of how Scripture speaks about it.

Acts 11:18

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Notice the language: repentance is something God *grants*. It is a gift! Repentance is not a punishment God inflicts; it is a life-giving grant from a merciful Father.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Worldly sorrow leads to death, but godly repentance leaves *no regret*. Have you ever repented biblically and regretted it later? You never regret biblical repentance because it brings life, freedom, and light.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

When we confess, God purifies us. Repentance is the doorway to divine cleansing and true relational freedom. It restores intimacy both with God and with those around us.

Revelation 3:20–21

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

We often use Revelation 3:20 as an evangelistic verse for non-believers, but Jesus wrote these words to a church! He is knocking on the door of the church, asking believers to repent so that He can enter into deep, intimate fellowship and table communion with them.

CONCLUSION: A REORIENTATION OF THE HEART

So what is repentance? It is a fourfold invitation from God:

- **Repentance is a Grant:** It is a divine gift of grace, not a self-inflicted punishment.
- **Repentance brings No Regret:** It leads to life, freedom, and joy rather than worldly despair.
- **Repentance Purifies:** It cleanses our conscience and restores horizontal and vertical intimacy.
- **Repentance Restores Fellowship:** It opens the door for Christ to sit and feast with us in deep communion.

Let us stop handing out tomato plants. Let us move past worldly wisdom that tells us time heals all wounds or that love means never having to say we are sorry. Instead, let us embrace the life-giving, liberating gift of biblical repentance—present tense, vertical, and horizontal.

Where in your life is God inviting you to change your mind about repentance today?

Who do you need to go to, not with a tomato plant, but with genuine, heart-felt repentance?

May we be a church known not just as believers, but as joyful, free, and committed repenters.