

# Sermon Transcript

*Series: Repentance for the Rest of Us*

## Preacher

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## Date

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## Primary Scripture

Romans 2:1–5; John 18; John 21

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Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome back to our series, Repentance for the Rest of Us. It's already been a really meaningful conversation one week in, and a special thanks to Vince Vitale for bringing our message last week. If you missed it, I'd highly encourage you to go back and take a listen.

I also want to recognize that you've heard it from your campus pastor already, but this is ACM weekend for us. Sometimes this is a separate church business meeting, but for us, we do it inside our services at all four campuses, all at the same time.

First, we get to confirm elder nominations from our elders and nominating advisory committee, and the months of prayerful work and preparation that have gone into it. We release an annual report that gives you a high-level overview of what God has done in our community over the last year, and you can find it at [menlo.church/connect](https://menlo.church/connect).

There's also a place for you to ask questions. You can submit those at that same link, and we record a special podcast today, released today, with your questions answered.

Now, these votes specifically are for covenant partners of Menlo Church. It's how we describe membership. Covenant partners are people who are simply engaged followers of Jesus that call Menlo Church home.

I want to share some updates I am really excited to share, and they're mostly related to our Hope for Everyone initiative. We have a special weekend in just a couple of weeks. There's some good news coming in that conversation, and I'm holding it until then.

Now, if you're wondering why we would talk about all of that, or why we would name this stuff at the top of a service like this, this is really just a church trying to be honest about what God is doing and what's coming up in the life of our community.

This series is not just what we pray in a prayer. It's not whether we're simply saying, "God, at one point in my life, I did this." It's about whether turning back to God is something we do, or just something we did.

And for the person who's new to faith or exploring faith, we get to do that together. God is still working. We need grace today as much as ever, no matter where you are in your faith.

What I've often discovered is that the strongest, most mature followers of Jesus are more and more aware of their need for repentance and the grace of God the longer they follow Jesus. We're going to see some of that even in our study today.

Now, before we get going in our message today, I'm going to pray for us. If you've never been here before, or never heard me speak, before I speak, I pray kneeling. Because the God worth repenting to is the God worth surrendering to.

He's already paid for all of what we need. He's already made the path available. The way is clear. So wherever you are in your faith, would you pray with me?

[Prayer]

## The Problem with Cultural Kindness

Now, I am a child of the nineties, which means I have some very funny memories that sound kind of funny to younger people and to older people, but for very different reasons.

As we think about the moral framework of what it meant to be a child of the nineties, one of my first formal instructions in moral philosophy came on a sticker on a VHS tape that read, "Be kind, rewind."

In order to make them ready for the next person, you rewound the tape you watched a movie on. Here's the thing: this wasn't a virtue, it was a policy. As a matter of fact, if you didn't do it, there was a fine—fifty cents or a dollar, depending on how ruthless your local video store was. Kindness meant not leaving work for the next person.

That's not nothing. But kindness with an enforcement mechanism certainly doesn't seem like the vision we find in Scripture.

Later we learned to practice "random acts of kindness" or "choose kind." But over time, kindness stopped being an active virtue and became passive; it just meant "don't be mean." Then it mutated even more. The opposite of kind used to be cruel.

Now the opposite of kind has become disagreeing with me. Tell me something I don't want to hear, and I don't experience you as being honest; I experience that as you being unkind.

Paul is about to say that God's kindness leads a person to repentance. If kindness means never making anyone uncomfortable, that sentence doesn't work. We have a version of kindness that cannot do what Paul says kindness does. We have a version of kindness that is about a prohibition, when Paul is telling us about a version of kindness that compels us to act.

We have learned in our culture a kind of kindness that costs nothing, so we built a repentance that costs nothing. It's really the same problem, and it just shows up in a couple of different ways.

Let's talk about this right here in Silicon Valley. Maybe you've seen this kind of sticker before. It's on the back of a lot of Teslas, and it basically says, "I bought this before we knew." There are a dozen versions of what happened with Elon.

We see performative gestures all around us—statements or stickers that cost nothing and require no real change. On the flip side, others double down and apologize for nothing. One says sorry without changing; the other refuses to say sorry at all.

## Closing the Time Gap

Longtime pastor and author R.T. Kendall once said, "I would define a maturing Christian as closing the time gap between sin and repentance."

Kendall takes repentance out of the exclusive moment of conversion and puts it on the clock of your day, your week, your choices, and the consequences that go with them.

That would be an easy quote to give without an example, so let me challenge you:

How many hours have gone by between what you said to your spouse and you going back into the room to let them tell you how it felt?

Or with your roommate, or with a good friend?

Forget hours. How many years have gone by between when you handled money poorly in that situation, in that business venture, and when you had an honest conversation about it that may come with consequences?

What is the lag for you between where you mess up and where you fess up? Where you're honest about what's happened, recognizing that that honesty is going to come with consequences. The real question we need to ask ourselves is, what closes the gap for us?

There are some things we should be really clear that won't fix this. Shame will not fix this, or the world would be way better by now. We tried public shame, and we're still doing it on some

levels; on the other hand, we've gotten to a place where some people seem to be living without any possibility of shame.

Neither shame nor social pressure fixes this. Pressure only creates temporary compliance without a heart compelled to something greater.

Now I want to lean into a passage for a few minutes together, and it's from the book of Romans. We spend a lot of time in the book of Romans because it's the most complete picture of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, that we have in the Bible.

It was written to a church that Paul never visited, and he's writing to a group of people living within a system in which their faith was at significant odds with the cultural promises all around it. Sound familiar? They were feeling the weight of what it meant to try to follow God as people who felt like foreigners even in their own zip code. Paul says it this way in Romans 2.

## Romans 2:1–4

*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.*

*Do you suppose, O man, you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*

He's talking to the people who assume that this letter is about somebody else. The people who think that they have their life pretty well in order. This is the room where nobody thinks they need the very things that he's saying. And Paul isn't caught up in naming all the individual things.

What he does say is that they are not guilty of different sins than the people they're calling out. They are guilty of the same ones. The distance you feel from people you evaluate isn't real; sin runs through every human heart, and only God's grace keeps it from controlling us.

The first word I want to talk about together is the word presume. It's really about assuming something without checking, or making a negative judgment about someone. The second word I want to look at is the word leads. Leads is an ongoing verb in Greek. It's never finished. It's not scheduled, and it's not waiting.

God is leading right now with His kindness. In the middle of this sentence. In the middle of your worst week, a difficult month, your job search, or that relationship falling apart. It's not standing at the finish line. It's not waiting until you get past this hurdle, or until you clean yourself back up. This is a hand on your back the whole way up the hill you are currently climbing.

The two words that are pretty easy to read past in this passage are forbearance and patience. This is not Paul saying that God is just nice to you and me. He's saying that God is slow with you and me. That God's love for you and me is not in a hurry for us to get it all together.

That gap represents God's kindness. It's time that He is buying you at His own expense, and we read it kind of like a loophole, or like God was so busy He missed it. Nothing happened, or nothing happened yet, so it must be just fine.

God is the ultimate unhurried friend. His patience with us is not indifference. It is the most purposeful thing about the way God relates to us. A being that exists outside of time leverages patience within it to call us back into relationship with Him.

## Common Grace and Prevenient Grace

Now there are two kinds of kindness I want to spend a few minutes breaking down:

- **Common Grace:** There is a kind of kindness that everyone here is already getting, sometimes it's called general or common grace. One of the ways we see this in Scripture is phrases like, "it rains on the just and on the unjust." Think about the nature of seasons. The sun comes up and goes down. That your lungs continue to function without your supervision all the time. The kid who laughed at something at your table this week. Every person in this building is swimming in an ocean of God's kindness all the time.
- **Prevenient Grace:** But there's also another kind of kindness, called prevenient grace. It's the kind of kindness that goes out ahead of you. It gets there before you do. It works on you before you even realize. The song that got past your defenses this last week. The friend who said something they did not know was loaded. The unplanned conversation God used to show you who Jesus is.

Now, in our culture, there's a question I think we have to ask in moments like this: Why does God do it this way? Why does God deliver repentance this way when fear would be so much faster?

I mean, think about it. Everything around us all the time is prompting us toward fear. Both sides of the aisle are trying to pit us against the other. Ideologies and groups of people are playing on fear as fast as they can.

But here, I think, is the main reason God doesn't use it that way: Fear works until it doesn't. Fear might get us temporary compliance, but it will never compel us to be who God created us to be. Fear-based religion doesn't produce better people; it produces better hiding.

If we think about the very first humans shown in the Scriptures, in the Garden of Eden, the first thing that fear ever did to a human being was make them hide. God Himself is walking through the garden. Adam is in the trees. God asks a question that He already knows the answer to.

Then, before anything is resolved, God makes them clothes in kindness. When the political ads get louder, when you hear the other side of that argument, or that relationship, or that conflict, remember these words:

Fear will change you for now, but kindness will change you for good.

## Two Charcoal Fires

We see this very thing play out so many times in the life and ministry of Jesus, and I want to show you two different fires to give you this picture.

The first one comes in John 18. Jesus has been arrested, and Peter follows Him at a distance into a courtyard. The courtyard is so cold that he warms his hands at a fire. Three times while he's at that fire, he does what he told Jesus he would never do, which is deny that he knows Him. Peter leaves weeping, ashamed at his betrayal of Jesus.

Now here's something very interesting. The type of fire that we see Peter at in John 18 is described very specifically as a charcoal fire. It's a word used in the original that shows up only twice in the New Testament.

The first is in John 18. The second is in John 21.

This time, it's after Jesus' resurrection. Peter has already seen the resurrected Jesus, which feels like it makes it even worse, because nothing has been said about the courtyard.

So Peter does what we do when something is unresolved. Maybe you grew up in a family like this. Maybe you're in a marriage like this. Maybe this is the way it works with your roommate. We just go back to normal and pretend nothing happened, and we hope everyone will play along.

So Peter goes back to fishing. Six guys go with him, and they don't catch anything all night. When morning comes, they see a man on the shore they can't quite recognize. He challenges them to put their net on the other side of the boat, which is not the first time Jesus has done this successfully.

And John, recognizing that connection with a full net, recognizes that it's Jesus. Peter, so excited to see Jesus, throws himself into the water and swims to the shore. The man who denied knowing Jesus, who hasn't even had the conversation he's dreading yet, finds out that Jesus is a hundred yards away, and his body chooses to move toward the difficult conversation.

Think about that difference. Adam in the garden heard God coming and went into the trees. Peter heard Jesus was on the beach and jumped into the water.

It was the exact same situation. Somebody who knew they had blown it, in front of a God who knew they had blown it, responded in completely opposite ways. What decides the direction is entirely what you expect to find when you get there.

What is waiting on the beach is the second charcoal fire in John. He finds bread on it, fish on it. Jesus had rebuilt the scene. He lit the same kind of fire that Peter was standing at when he had denied Him, and He did it on purpose, and He put breakfast on it.

Jesus, in the part of His kindness that is soliciting Peter's repentance, leads with hospitality. He feeds him breakfast first.

Now don't miss it. Kindness did not skip the hard part of their conversation. Kindness never avoids the reckoning that's necessary for the reconciliation. It simply hosts it. It recognizes that kindness can still be extended. We don't need to add insult to injury.

And so after breakfast, Jesus says, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He asks him three times, one for each denial, at a fire that was built to look like the one where it happened. The smell was similar. One happened in the evening, and one happened in the morning, but probably the temperatures were pretty similar.

And John says that Peter was grieved at the third question. So this was not comfortable. It wasn't fast. And nobody pretended that the courtyard didn't happen. And Jesus doesn't use this question as a condition. He doesn't give him probation to see if he really means it.

No, Jesus gives Peter an assignment. "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." He doesn't tell Peter to sit down for a year and think about what he did. He says, "Go take care of what I love." It doesn't mean every mistake comes with an instant assignment, but this one did.

Jesus tells him plainly that it will cost him something. It's going to cost everything. But He says, "Follow me anyway." So don't hear Jesus' kindness as a promise of an easier road. He promises the real road, the one that is worth traveling on, with something to do along the way.

See, kindness is what God uses. It's not a technique that always works. In Mark 10, Jesus looked at a rich young ruler, and He told him a difficult and true thing with kindness, and that man walked away. If you're praying for someone who hasn't decided to follow God yet, you're not doing it wrong. You are doing what God does, and you can extend the same kindness that He does.

## Understanding God's Righteous Judgment

I want us to return to Romans chapter 2. Immediately following the four verses that we read, Paul writes these words.

# Romans 2:5

*But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*

We have a problem with a verse like that in the American church right now, so we've solved it two different ways:

- **We sand it off.** God is love, and that's it. Wrath is leftover damage from our childhood preacher who yelled at us, or who yelled at somebody's funeral, and it's one reason we don't go to church anymore. Now, this has been misused in very hurtful and damaging ways, and I don't want to dismiss those. But the God who is left after we sand Him down is powerless. Warm but incapable. Concerned about the world's problems but completely inadequate to do anything about them. That kind of God is comforting in a good season of your life, but is useless in a terrible one. The kind of wrath being described here, the kind of wrath we see described of God, is not like a temper that God is going to lose. No, instead this is the settled, active opposition of a good God to everything that destroys what He loves. It's not the opposite of His love. It's actually a manifestation of it. He is against what is wrecking you because He is for you, whether you know it or not.
- **We relocate the wrath.** This is the one Paul is actually addressing in his context: we keep the wrath, but we relocate it. God can be the kind one, and we will be God's enforcer. This shows up in lots of different ways. The quote tweet. The comment section. The group text about your "friend." The sense that somebody has to be held accountable and a strange willingness to be the one who does it, but rarely to their face. The tell, every time, is that we are most wrathful about the sins that we do not struggle with, and endlessly patient with the ones that we do.

That's what we see in the first verse: "You practice the very same things." We have built a whole public expression of Christianity on a prescription we do not take ourselves. Paul calls out the consequences of this approach, which we might think are harmless because we haven't directly felt or noticed them ourselves.

What Paul says is that we are storing up wrath for ourselves, not for them. Whether it's the right kind of treasure or the wrong kind of treasure, it's the same word. We are storing up wrath for ourselves.

Think about that. Everybody is making a deposit. You just get to choose which account you deposit it into. So while His patience holds the gap open, time is still passing, and that time is either closing the distance or compounding the problem.

Now, the amazing thing about the good news of Jesus is that God is not asking you and me to deal with His wrath. God didn't delegate His wrath. He absorbed it.

The kindness in verse 4 is not sentimental, and it's not cheap. It's the most expensive thing that has ever existed. And it's the only reason that the gap of kindness in your life still exists today—that the timeline is still open and available.

And I know that it can feel, in culture and even in Christian culture, that when we pick up this idea of wrath ourselves, when we feel like we're the ones judging the people around us, that we're somehow more serious about sin. But here's the thing:

When we take that from God, we are being less serious. We try to make somebody pay for something God has already paid for. When we do that, we get momentary satisfaction maybe, but they get the cost of our judgment. When Jesus did it, He took that cost and He handed us the satisfaction.

## Responding to God's Kindness

Paul asks us to diagnose ourselves as hard and impenitent. In other words, the opposite of repentant isn't wicked. It's hard. So is your heart getting softer or harder? Not compared to your neighbor. Compared to who you were yesterday?

If your heart seems more cynical than you want, try this:

First, find your gap—the specific one where you already know what you did, and you have been letting the clock tick. Close it out this week with that actual person. Not with an audience. Not with a post. Not with a statement to a room that wasn't even hurt. A phone call. A check-in. A dinner where you say what is real and true and unqualified.

And the second part is lead with kindness toward one person who hasn't earned it—someone whose behavior you would honestly like to see change. Not pretending that it's not hurtful. Notice that when you lead with contempt, you are leading with the one thing God doesn't use to bring people back.

Because with Jesus, the fire is already lit, breakfast is waiting, and the bill for your ongoing disobedience has already been paid.

Jesus is not standing on the sand waiting for you to get better at swimming. He's asking if you're hungry. Would you pray with me?

[Prayer]