

Repentance

Why repentance brings rejoicing in heaven

December 27, 2020

I. Introduction

A. **Luke 15:1-7** . . . Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near [Jesus] to listen to Him. [2] Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man (*Jesus*) receives sinners and eats with them." [3] So He told them this parable, saying, [4] "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? [5] When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. [6] And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' [7] I tell you that in the same way, **there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.**"

B. Pray

II. A study on repentance through an examination of **Luke 15:7**

A. The focus of today's teaching is on **vs 7**, where Jesus concludes His parable by explaining His purpose for telling it. The first part of His purpose statement is straight forward, while the second part is not so clear.

1. The straight forward part of the statement is, "**there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.**" Now you may have noticed I did not include the word "**more.**"

2. When we add the word "**more,**" the entire statement becomes less clear, for Jesus said, "there is **more** joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

3. To help you see how unclear this statement is, I will ask two questions.

a. **First**, who are the ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance?

b. And **second**, why is there **more** joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over righteous people who need no repentance?

B. Before moving on, I want to make three things clear.

1. **First**, there is disagreement among Bible scholars and commentators as to the answers to these two questions. And though I like my answers, I make no claim to them being better or the only right ones.

2. **Second**, I have not as yet found any commentator or Bible scholar who holds the view I'm presenting today.
 3. **Third**, Luke groups three parables together: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. To me, this grouping is important because the last parable adds insight into the context of the three parables and helps explain the statement we are examining today.
- C. With these three things in mind, let's turn to the question, "Who are the ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance?"
1. The problem is, Jesus doesn't tell us who they are. So who are they?
 - a. Are they the Pharisees and scribes who think they are righteous and therefore don't believe they need to repent?
 - (1) That is a possibility – and the majority of Bible scholars and commentators believe that's the answer.
 - (2) Yet Jesus does not refer to the ninety-nine as people who assume they are righteous and therefore assume they need no repentance.
 - (3) He refers to them as righteous persons who need no repentance, which seems to infer they have no sin to repent of.
 - b. So who are the ninety-nine who need no repentance? If not the Pharisees and scribes, who then?
 - (1) Some commentators say they are individuals who are born again and securely in the sheep fold, while the one needing to repent is the unbeliever who still needs to trust in Jesus for eternal salvation.
 - (2) This too is a possible explanation. Yet even born again Christians are known to practice sin for a time, or to become aware they have been practicing sin years after coming to faith. Therefore, they not only need to confess their practice of sin, they also need to repent and head in a new direction.
 - (3) And so again I remind you that Jesus speaks of righteous persons who need no repentance.
 2. My answer to this question is that the ninety-nine represents a hypothetical group of people who have always been righteous and therefore have nothing to repent of.
 - a. I call it a hypothetical group for two reasons. **First**, no one but Jesus fits this description. And **second**, Jesus was telling this story to the scribes and Pharisees, and I'm assuming He used an indirect approach to get them to think honestly and biblically about God, themselves, righteousness, sin, and sinners.

- b. Interestingly, in the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus paints the older brother who did his father's will and served his father faithfully as a righteous person who needed no repentance – **until** he was faced with his father's joy and celebratory reception over his wayward brother's repentance and return.
 - c. And it is the older brother's attitude and behavior toward his father's response to his brothers return that I believe gives us a clear clue to why Jesus says there is **more** joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.
 - 3. This brings us to the second question, "Why does Jesus say there is **more joy** in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance?"
 - a. Once again, there are differences of opinion among Bible scholars and commentators.
 - b. However, if Jesus' third parable is important for understanding the first two – and I believe it is – then it gives us a clue about how hard it is for someone who needs no repentance to have the right attitude toward God for being gracious to repentant sinners, and a right attitude toward those whose sinfulness makes them undeserving of God's favor – yet because they have repented they receive it.
- D. However, before looking at why there is more joy over one sinner who repents, I want to spend some time examining the place of repentance in the Christian's life.
 - 1. In the four Gospels and the book of Acts, repentance is presented as the **first** step in response to the gospel. For example:
 - a. **Mark 1:4** (*Matthew 3:2*), John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (*notice the order – **repent and be forgiven***).
 - b. **Mark 1:14-15** (*Matthew 4:17*), Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, [15] and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe** in the gospel."
 - c. **Acts 2:37-38**, Now when they (*the unbelievers on the day of Pentecost*) heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" [38] Peter said to them, "**Repent**, and each of you **be baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ for the **forgiveness** of your

sins; and you will **receive the gift** of the Holy Spirit.” (*repent, baptism, forgiveness, given the Holy Spirit*)

- d. **Acts 20:18, 20-21**, And when [the elders in Ephesus] had come to [Paul], he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia . . . [20] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, [21] solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of **repentance** toward God and **faith** in our Lord Jesus Christ (*notice – **repentance precedes faith** or maybe we should say, repentance precedes a life of faith*).
 - e. The point of these scriptures is simple – repentance is at the front end of our response to the gospel and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.
 - f. Paul affirms this place of repentance in the Christian’s life in **2 Timothy 2:24-26**, “The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, [25] with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them **repentance** leading to the **knowledge** of the truth, [26] and they may **come to their senses** and **escape** from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.
2. The essence of repentance is a change of mind producing a change of direction that is evidenced by a change of behavior.
- a. For example, a repentant person changes his mind about the importance of self in comparison to the importance of God. Upon deciding to see God as more important than self, he changes direction as evidenced by a life that is now lived for God instead of self.
 - b. A few more examples are – a repentant person changes his mind about pride, and exchanges it for humility. He changes his mind about self-rule, and replaces it with God’s rule. He changes his mind about the value of selfishness – replacing selfishness with love. And he changes his mind about the benefits and pleasures of sinfulness, choosing the way of righteousness instead.
 - c. In **Acts 26:20**, Paul affirms that this kind of behavioral change is the natural outcome of repentance when he says that he declared God’s truth to Jews and Gentiles, telling them they should repent, turn to God, and perform deeds appropriate to repentance.

3. Repentance is often spoken of as an act that takes place in a moment of time. But the reality is, repentance is a process that begins with hearing the truth; or it begins when you recognize that you are being convicted about some specific sin or sinful ways by the Holy Spirit; or it begins when someone confronts or criticizes you for wrong doing.
 - a. The next thing that has to happen is being honest enough with yourself, and caring enough about the effects of your behavior on others to **accept** the truth of the message or the conviction of the Holy Spirit or the criticism of those confronting you.
 - b. Then you have to discern the right way to go – and this happens with the help of God, the Holy Spirit, the scriptures, and believers who know which way to go.
 - c. Next, you have to begin dying to your old self, your selfish beliefs and practices, and your sinful ways, and begin replacing them with the new nature which comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ.
 - d. As you die and put off that which you are repenting of, you must put the supremacy of God, trust in God, love for God, love for others, and godly behavior in its place so that in very real and practical ways you turn away from your old sinful ways and go God’s way.
 - e. And finally, you must persevere to the end if you are to permanently live out your repentance in any area of life.
 - (1) Notice, I said permanently not perfectly. Let us be honest and acknowledge that only Jesus has and only Jesus is able to live a perfect life in this world.
 - (2) The best the rest of us can do is repent and daily make it our aim to do what we ought and what we can – that day – to live as God intends us to live and love as God intends us to love.
 - f. My point is that repentance is a process – even though it begins in a moment of time.

E. And this brings us back to these words by Jesus: **“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”**

1. You see, repentance changes us – not just in relation to our sin, but also in relation to how we see ourselves, how we see God, how we see ourselves in relation to God, how we see sinners who have yet to repent, how we see Christians who have sinned or returned to old

sinful ways, and how we deal with unbelievers and believers who have begun the process of repentance.

2. In Jesus third parable – which is the story of the prodigal son, this is precisely where the good son failed. Unlike his younger brother, he had faithfully and probably fully done the will of his father. He had not taken advantage of his father or asked for things that were not his to have. He did not abandon his father, but rather stayed and worked as he was expected to do. And for certain, he did not squander his father’s wealth on foolish living. In this regard, he was a righteous person who needed no repentance.
 3. And yet, in pride, he saw himself as superior to his brother and worthy of being honored by his father, while he saw his brother as a great sinner who deserved to pay dearly for his sins – which included being rejected and turned away by his father.
 4. In pride, he felt justified in judging his father as a failure for not only allowing his brother to get away with gross sin, but for making it possible.
 5. And again, his pride blinded him to the truth of all that his father had been giving him and was still giving him – so that he only saw what he wasn’t getting in comparison to what his father was doing for his evil brother.
 6. Though righteous in so many ways, he had no mercy or compassion for his younger brother who needed to repent in order to make things right with his father. In fact, he spoke and acted as if the only way to be right with his father was to never sin – like he had done. In other words, in his view, once you’d sinned so horribly, you didn’t deserve an opportunity to repent and to regain good standing with the father.
 7. Because he believed only a righteous person deserved the father’s love and blessings, he did not understand why his father would celebrate and rejoice that his brother who was dead – had begun to live, and who was lost – had been found.
- F. I could go on, but it is possible you are beginning to see why there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.
1. The beauty of repentance is that it changes us – not just in regard to our sin, but in our attitude toward and view of God, our view of ourselves, **and** our attitude toward and view of sinners who have done or are still doing evil things.

2. The reality is, such things as humility, an honest view of self, a right view of God, being grateful for God's grace, compassion, patience, and forgiveness in spite of your sinfulness, being compassionate, merciful, patient, and forgiving toward sinners – including sinners of the worst kind, being grateful for all that God has done for you and is doing for you – these ways of thinking and these qualities of character are essential for loving the sinners around you as God loves you.
 - a. However, due to our humanity, it seems these ways of thinking and these qualities of character most often come out of and are strengthened by working through the process of repentance.
 - b. In other words, genuine repentance produces a measure of completeness that goes beyond being sinless and needing no repentance. And it is this completeness that makes us much more like God when dealing with sinners – which in turn is pleasing to God – which in turn is a reason there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine persons who need no repentance.

III. Conclusion

- A. Without question, God wants us to be righteous. And yet because we sin, we need to repent. But God has so created us that when we repent and honestly work our way through the process of repentance we become more like God in relation to compassion, mercy, grace, patience, forgiveness, and love toward sinners – including those we deem the worst of sinners.
- B. Therefore, though we ought to be like the prodigal son's older brother in relation to doing the will of God, we ought never to be like him in relation to how we think of, deal with, and relate to repentant sinners – including sinners of the worst kind. And we ought never to look down on God – as the older brother looked down on his father – for receiving and restoring repentant sinners, no matter what they have done.
- C. If your repentance has not brought you to this mindset and to these qualities of character so that you deal with repentant sinners like God does, then I urge you to revisit repentance and ask God to use it to bring about its intended, fuller results in your life.