

Theme: The Battle of Repentance

Luke 18:9-14 Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others: 10 "Two men went up to the temple courts to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.' 13 "However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 "I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Our midweek Lenten series this year is all about battles. Battles that the Lord fights for us in our lives and battles that Christ fought when He secured our redemption. Our series is appropriately named after the same confession of David when he declared before Goliath – “The Battle is the Lord’s.” We are reminded how God is always with us and always in control, especially as we retrace the steps of our Savior to the greatest battle of all – paying for our sins upon the cross. Tonight, we consider the Battle of Repentance.

When I think of earthly battles, I’m always amazed at all the factors that go into them, especially when they are waged on a global scale. Take World War II for example. It’s fascinating to consider all the variables that went into that conflict. Though we often focus on one thing as most pivotal of all, that is rarely the case. So many things in our lives could be drastically different had just a couple of factors been changed. There was the domestic production factor, especially for the United States. Since the U.S. entered the war after it had been going on for a couple of years, they were behind in production. It took until about 1943 for the U.S. to ramp up production efforts, but when they did, they were producing half of all the wartime materials that the Allies used.

Or, consider the diplomatic factor. What if leaders like Neville Chamberlain had taken a stronger stance toward the aggressive policies of Hitler and Germany? What if the leader who took over after Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, had settled for a peace treaty of some kind instead of continuing the fight at all costs? What would the result of the war have been? What would the world look like today?

Or, consider what we might call the espionage factor. Would the Allies have won the war if they hadn’t found a way to decipher the German enigma code machine?

Or what about the technology factor. What if, as many projected during the war, Germany was the first to unlock the power of atomic energy and utilize it as a weapon?

And of course, one must always consider the factor of the battles themselves and soldiers waging them. So many decisive moments occurred throughout the war, where if the factors were changed, could have led to a much different outcome.

One always asks the question of “what if?” when it comes to historical circumstances like these. And it’s fascinating to consider all the factors that went into the result we know today. Battles may seem simple, but they are often not. There is a myriad of factors, some known, some unknown, that contribute.

As we think of the battle of repentance, we're reminded of the same lesson. When we study what repentance is, we're faced with many important truths – think of them as “factors of victory.” These are the elements that lead to success instead of failure – to blessing instead of despair.

For one thing, repentance is despised by the world – looked down upon as outdated and unnecessary. Our culture today hates repentance. It claims that repentance is based on intolerance and bigotry. The world says that instead of bringing sins to God, we should rather accept all beliefs – except, of course, the belief that says we should repent.

God, however, speaks (often through those who have repented) of repentance as a wonderful and amazing blessing.

Acts 3:19 “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

Luke 15:7 “I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

God wants us to see repentance for what it is, a spiritual blessing based on the work and merit of Christ. Repentance is, in some ways, like a special power given to the believer – an amazing gift that removes the burdens of sin, guilt, and condemnation. Repentance renews the heart and mind, better conforming us to our Creator and Redeemer – to the nature of the new man - what we were always meant to be. Why would anyone ever despise or look down upon such a blessing?

Well, in searching for the answer to that question we see another unique factor about repentance – it's not of ourselves, but completely dependent upon our Savior, Jesus. The scene depicted in this parable is not unlike the mindset of our culture today. The Pharisee had no need for the gift of repentance because he was content to trust in his own worthiness. Because of his overconfidence he literally looked down upon the tax-collector – who turned only to the mercy of God. This is where the difference between despising and valuing repentance is found. Looking to ourselves instead of looking to God.

True intolerance, bigotry and selfishness are not found in calling out sin and needing forgiveness. They're found in the ugly pride of the sinful heart which wants to exalt itself over and above others. Repentance drives us to despair of our own efforts and plead the love of Christ alone. Yet, even in faith we still need repentance. Even Christian piety with well-intentioned effort can be twisted by sinful pride. The pride that uses God's Word to exalt myself over others is the same pride that leads people to resist bringing their sins and guilt to God. They are of the same nature.

This is why – whether Christian or non-Christian – we all need repentance. Consider the parable again. How well do you apply it to your life? I think most of us, as lifelong Christians or at least Christians for some time, are familiar with the lesson of the parable. We know that it is better to be like the tax collector. It is better to plead for God's mercy, rather than trusting in our worthiness. But even with the knowledge, even at that point, how easy it is to see the “Pharisees” in our lives and look down upon them with disdain and pettiness. How quickly, even under the guise of sanctity, Satan attracts our sinful flesh to use our faith of all things as a prop for our own status. How easily – even as

we so intently see ourselves, and want ourselves, to be the tax collector, do we end up becoming the Pharisee. [Fake humility during Ash Wednesday as an example]

We all need repentance, and we need it all the time. Repentance is not a stepping stone to holier living, something which we need for a time and then move past. Instead, it is a gift to be desired and to be used, daily. It renews us with new life. It strengthens us with Christ's might. It equips us with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Repentance, in its simplest definition, means a change. How desperately we need our hearts to be changed as tax collector's. We see and realize that change comes only through Jesus. He is the greatest factor of victory. Jesus fought the battle of repentance, and He won.

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax-collector's response pointed directly at that change. **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"** What a simple, yet profound confession. Yet, just like the battles we face, there's more to this cry for help than what appears on the surface. The word used for mercy is more literally translated as "atone." Another way, perhaps a more specific way, of hearing the tax-collector's words is "God, atone for me, a sinner." It's the same word used in Hebrews 2:17 to describe that mercy of Jesus. **Hebrews 2:17 Therefore, He had to be like His brothers in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make propitiation (define) for the sins of the people.**

The Battle of Repentance is one we face everyday, and in this battle there are many factors that lead to success. We see that...

- Repentance is not a chore or obligation, but an amazing blessing and gift.
- Repentance is not about me, but Jesus.
- Repentance works because Jesus fought the battle – and won.

May God give you confidence by faith in the blessing of repentance, through your victorious Savior, Jesus. Amen.

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