

Repentance

This is the fourth in a series of four talks on 2 Chronicles 7:14. This scripture is a command that God gave to his people and it is fairly self-explanatory. Let's have one more look at it on the screen now:

'... if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.'

So, here God is speaking to His people, the people of Israel and saying that if they fulfil these conditions then He *will* forgive their sin and *will* heal their land.

This week we are looking at the final condition – 'turning from our wicked ways' – or as it is termed:

Repentance.

A word that, by the looks of it strikes fear and dread in every heart. However, I have some good news for you all. Repentance is fantastic! No question about it. However, the reason that we need to repent is NOT fantastic – no question about that either!

So, let's have a look at the context of this passage shall we? This comes directly after the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem – the symbol of God's presence on earth – by Solomon and the people's side of the covenant is that the people of Israel need to follow these commands. And these are expanded upon in the rest of chapter 7, along with the consequences of turning away from these commands – which are severe.

Now I realise that when we hear the word 'wicked' then we have 2 different responses to this word and I think that is curious – that the original meaning of the word has been altered, along with other words by the evolution of slang in popular culture.

I believe that it was Professor David Crystal who spoke on these developments in the English language:

Wicked! Note the intonation. It means 'wonderful', 'great', 'cool', 'splendid'. It came into English from United States' black slang in the 1980s or maybe earlier. Certainly it arrived in Britain in the late 1980s. It was part of a trend which goes back decades to use bad words to mean good concepts, or the other way round. I mean you might remember saying, 'that's great!' meaning 'it isn't great'. And always there's been this use of the word 'naughty' to mean 'nice'. So it's part of a general trend.

It's mainly used as an adjective in front of a noun, you know, 'we had a wicked time!' Or, of course, you can use it on its own, just saying, you know, 'wicked!' as a reaction – that's how youngsters use it.

Wicked is still around. It's meant, of course, that the traditional sense of wicked is now being squeezed out, much as 'gay' made it difficult to use the traditional sense of 'merry' or 'cheerful' when it started to be used in reference to homosexuals. So with wicked, tone of voice is the only way to make the distinction between the old meaning and the new meaning, and even that's ambiguous sometimes, so you have to be careful, and pay very careful attention to the context. And notice that the word is extending its use. The other day, for the first time, I heard somebody say, 'wicked cool' meaning 'very cool'.

Did you hear that? *'It's meant, of course, that the traditional sense of wicked is now being squeezed out...'*

So, we have to be clear when we talk to people that when the Bible talks about wicked it does not mean 'cool'! In fact quite the opposite. The original meanings of wicked are all negative and to give you a flavour a couple are:

- Evil by nature and in practice: *"this wicked man Hitler, the repository and embodiment of many forms of soul-destroying hatred" Winston S. Churchill.*
- Severe and distressing: *a wicked cough; a wicked gash; wicked driving conditions.*
- Highly offensive; obnoxious: *a wicked stench.*

So let us be of no uncertainty, God is calling on His people to turn from their evil ways that are highly offensive and obnoxious. To use phrases and words that we are more familiar with:

He is calling us to turn away from our sin in repentance - to turn back to Him.

This week we are going to look at a passage about repentance – the parable of the Lost (or Prodigal) Son. This is the third of three parables that Jesus preached on repentance and salvation to a mixed audience of 'public' sinners and religious figures of the day that make up chapter 15 of Luke. Now if something is in the Bible it is there for a reason and if something is in the Bible 3 times in a row then it is definitely there for a reason!

I have decided to break this passage down into three parts:

Firstly, Luke 15:11-16 - 'Rebellion'
Then 17-21 – 'Repentance'
And finally – 'Rewards'

So, our first reader will read Luke 15:11-16 – and the words will also come up on the screen so that you can follow.

Reader reads Luke 15:11-16 - Rebellion

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Here we have a father with two sons. Clearly the family are privileged as there is an estate involved and one day the younger son rocks up and says that he wants his share of the estate. This request betrays his rebellious nature in wanting to live independently of his father's will. So we see two things here:

- The son is of a good family but he decides to give all that up – to reject his father
- His father's love is so great for his son that he lets him go – he doesn't imprison his son and force him to remain loyal to him.

Now we know from these parables that Jesus is talking about God's love for humanity. That we are created in His image and so there is something good and noble in all people – even the ones who are perceived as the most depraved and evil. But we also know that through Man's rebellion against God all people have turned away from God in their hearts to live as slaves to sin – that is, we live lives that are characterised by behaviour that is an offence to God.

As we heard the rest of that passage it gave an account of what the son got up to on his travels. Of course it's a hypothetical question but how do you think the father would have felt if word had reached him of what his son was up to?

Not only had the son implied that he wished his father was dead but then he had squandered his inheritance reinforcing the suspicion that he placed very little value on his father's life.

We then see that his son runs out of cash – no credit cards in those days – and is reduced to tending pigs – pigs! To Jesus' Jewish audience this would have been unthinkable because pigs are deemed as unclean by the Jewish people. To have worked looking after pigs would have been incredibly degrading and to have been reduced to wishing that he was eating the pigs' food... We went to a farm up near St Mary Magdalen's the other day and there were some pigs there. Now, I shall just tell you this – there is now way that I would have eaten what the pigs were eating.

This guy had been reduced to the lowest of the low through his reckless and rebellious behaviour. It was a direct consequence of rejecting his father. Imagine if he had stayed at home... Would he have met any of the unsavoury characters that can only have helped him spend his way through his inheritance? Would he have 'lived wildly' if he had been in his father's presence? I remember that when I was a teenager, although I have to say I was never a wild-child (hard to believe I know!) I always had slightly different behaviour around my parents. Slightly *better*, I hasten to add! Good parents have a remarkable influence on their children's behaviour.

But in the absence of his father's influence, by his own choice, he had gone off the rails and in verses 15 and 16 we see him hit his low-point:

¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.'

And we also pay this price when we live sinful lives. In Romans 6:23 the Bible says that:

'... the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

When we follow a sinful path in life we remove ourselves from God's presence by our own volition – if we are stained by sin then we are unable to remain in his holy presence representing as He does all that is perfect and good.

We remove ourselves from God's presence and we become ensnared by the bad things that we embrace but then, sooner or later we come to our senses – verse 17. Now it seems to me that it took a fair old while for this particular fellow to come to his senses. He didn't have a couple of wild nights out and think 'Oh, maybe this wild living is not for me I think I'll head back for Dad now'. Oh no, he went the whole hog – if you'll excuse the terrible pun!

While Cathy and I were in Brazil we were taught for a while by a chap called Pastor Marcello who was really great. He was very direct and pulled no punches – which took some getting used to – but he was a great man of God who was solely motivated by love. He said a great deal of good things and one of them was this:

'There are two types of people in the world. Those who learn from their mistakes... and those who learn from the mistakes of others.'

So, we have a choice when we are sinning – because let's be frank and honest about this – we do all sin from time to time. There is no one here who is perfect. Sorry if that revelation has spoilt your day - but it's true.

We can either carry on living in rebellion to God (either before we humble ourselves before God and become a Christian, or afterwards) for a long period of time ,like the lost son did, or... we can learn from HIS mistake and come to

our senses more quickly. Thereby leaving the behaviour that is damaging us sooner and returning to God sooner.

Sooner or later. Sooner or later. Well, it's our choice. But which type of person do you want to be?

So, eventually the reality of his desperate situation bore home on the Lost Son and he came to his senses. Our second reader will now describe what happened next.

Second reader: Luke 15:17-21 - Repentance

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

At last! The penny has dropped. He's made a big mess of things! He realises that even the people who work for his father are better off than he is – far better off – and so he determines to leave his life of sin and shame and return to his father – whatever the consequences. He is under no illusion that this will be a difficult thing to do. He left so cocky and arrogant and now he is returning humbled and ready to work for his father.

‘So he got up and returned to his father.’

Notice that his father didn't come to him, try to persuade him to return. He had chosen to leave his father – he had to choose to return independently. No one else could make that decision for him.

And so he makes a game-plan.

First – get away from my current situation and get back to my father
Secondly – confess my sins to him in humility

And so he goes, I daresay with a fair amount of trepidation:

Will his father want to see him again at all?

Will he be horrified by what his son tells him and disown him?

What jobs will he have to do for his father to atone for his misdeeds?

However, it soon becomes clear that he has no need to worry. His father sees him while he is still a long way off – he must have been scanning the horizon for him every day since he left - such is his unconditional love for his child! Far

from not caring for his son he is filled with compassion and runs out to him and embraces him – a show of emotion that would have been unheard of from a man in those times, not even under good circumstances let alone under these circumstances.

And then as the father embraces him and kisses his long lost son the young man carries through on his resolution and confesses his wrongdoing to his father.

So we see some principles here that we can apply to our own lives:

- Don't wait to come to your senses. Sooner is most definitely better and there are severe consequences if we don't.
- Repentance is a decision borne out of a change of attitude. It is not something wishy-washy a 'wouldn't it be nice to change' type of feeling. It is something resolute and firm – there is a real sense of shame and sorrow and a real determination to change.
- No half-measures. Notice that the son doesn't look back or delay. He doesn't think, 'Oh, maybe I could come back for a weekend mini-break' or anything like that. He's GONE - Outta there!
- Repentance is a humbling experience before God: a time of confession and acknowledgement of his sovereignty over our lives.
- God's love for us is unconditional, no matter what we have done he loves us. He abhors the sins that we commit, but he loves us unconditionally.

This is something that we need to do to receive our salvation and become Christians, to acknowledge our sinfulness and receive God's grace. To realise that our works are not sufficient to pay the price for our sins (in the same way that someone pays a speeding fine for their wrongdoing) but to grasp onto the hope that it is only Jesus' death – the price that he paid – that is enough to atone for our sins. But it is also something that we need to do on a daily basis as we live our lives. We are, inevitably, going to sin from day to day. Hopefully, we shall sin progressively less and less but we shall not attain perfection in this life. And so we need to repent on an ongoing basis.

So, how did the father respond to his son's confession? Did he recoil in horror shouting, 'You did what?'

Our third reader will read Luke 15: 22-32 – The Reward – Salvation!

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he

replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Far from it. He is so happy that his son has returned. We have already seen the father's unconditional love for his child but he has 4 more gifts in store for his son! And these are of particular significance to us:

- The best robe,
- A ring on his finger
- Sandals on his feet
- A Feast!

In my Bible I have a copy (a copy!) of a painting by the Dutch artist Rembrandt entitled 'Return of the Prodigal Son'. There is also a book by the Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen called 'The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming' and it's available on Amazon for about 7 pounds - though I would hastily add that if there was sufficient demand CJ's very own bookshop would be able to stock a few copies of this. This describes his own personal meditation on this painting and how that has helped him in his Christian life.

Here it is on the screen. OK, so I think that it is pretty clear who the two main players are: the father embracing the son before him on his knees.

We can see that the son's condition is pitiful, to say the least. His clothes are in tatters, his sandals are falling apart and his head is shaven which suggests that he is either ill with scurvy or has had his head shaved because of lice or, conceivably, both. In short he could do with a makeover.

So, the robe would restore his dignity. It would signify a removal of shame and a welcome back into the family fold. Notice how the father specifies not just the 'spare' robe but the 'best' robe. Is it any coincidence that Isaiah 61:10 reads like this?

'I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.'

So we are made righteous through the work that Jesus did on the Cross for our salvation.

Secondly, the father calls for a ring to be placed on his son's finger. A ring – what for? Why does the son need 'the bling' all of a sudden? Doesn't the father realise what he did with all his wealth before?

Well, this most likely refers to a signet ring which denotes membership of a family and the authority of that family. Well, as Christians we are members of a new family – we are Children of God and there are many references to attest to this in the New Testament. As Christ's followers we are equipped with His authority to carry out His work.

The sandals. It wasn't just that the father felt sorry for his son and decided to give him a new pair of flip-flops. No. Sandals were worn by free-men whereas slaves went barefoot. So to reinforce that his son was reinstated to his former position his father made sure that his feet were shod.

Even with, let's face it, pretty shocking pasts in God's eyes, he is ready to reinstate us to the position he had always intended – as his children.

In Romans 8:13-16, Paul writes thus:

*¹³For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live,
¹⁴because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.
¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*

So, we are fully received into God's family (as children by adoption, incidentally). We are not seen as inferiors but as His children.

Lastly, the feast. A symbol of the father's love for his son – a celebration of joy. Fellowship between the father and his lost son. But someone wasn't 'feeling the love' that night.

The story goes that a Sunday School class was once asked 'Who was not happy when the Prodigal Son returned home?' and one little boy answered: 'The fattened calf?'

Well, I daresay the fattened calf was not too happy but more significantly the older brother is shown to be most angry that the younger son has been given such treatment. Look at his reaction. He storms out and refuses to eat with his brother. Well, I'm not a psychiatrist but I think someone's been bottling up their feelings for quite a long time. In fact, I was thinking this morning that this kind of family scenario would be material for one of those voyeuristic TV 'talkshows'. You can imagine it can't you –

And coming up after the break we'll be talking to the OLDER brother and he feels that his father should have been throwing the party for HIM. Don't go away – we'll be right back!

But, seriously, look at how the pent up anger and frustration boils up as he speaks to (or shouts at?) his father who goes out to plead with him to join the party. He's been keeping a score. He thinks his brother (he can't even refer to him as his 'brother' but refers to him as 'this son of yours') should be on the naughty list – doesn't his father realise how diligent he's been?!? Notice the father's reply which shows impartial, unconditional love for both his sons.

'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

But, here's something curious – Luke 15:1-2. Remember this parable comes at the end of Jesus' teaching to a mixed audience and let's see what is happening at the beginning of Luke 15:

¹Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

It is interesting how these references 'top and tail' Luke 15. Could it be? Is Jesus speaking directly to the Pharisees and reprimanding them? Does another parable that Jesus told about a banquet come to mind? I think that Jesus is sending out a warning to the religious people. Those who, like the older brother, live by the rules trying to earn their inheritance or their salvation from God by their own efforts – out of a sense of duty. They toe the line but they forget the greatest commandment of all: they are short on love for their father and also for their brother (fellow man) – and also forgiveness. At the end of the parable we see the older brother rejecting the father's love and leaving his presence. In a sense it could be argued that *he* is the lost son. At the end of the story it seems that he is – after all, the other has returned to his father's love.

So, we have a challenge. How do we live our lives? How are we going to live our lives in the future? Are we going to be an 'older son' or a 'younger son'? Are we going to live our lives as outwardly respectable people out of a misplaced sense of duty? Or are we going to – to borrow a phrase – 'let it all hang out' in God's presence? Are we going to be real with Him, Real with ourselves – no masks? Realising our dependence on Him, on His unconditional love and coming back to Him, to dwell in His presence enjoying the fullness of our life in Him?

Return of the Prodigal
Rembrandt (c.1668-9)



First Reader

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.

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Second Reader

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Third Reader

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