

The Repentant Prayer

Jonah 2

October 15, 2000

[I told story of tearing up note teacher sent home. Father asked child are you sorry you got caught or sorry for the things you did in this note.]

I had a similar experience. I guess we all do as children and I didn't say it aloud but I was really only sorry I didn't get rid of the note in a more efficient way. But what my father was asking really had to do with repentance--was I sorry that I got caught or was I truly sorry for the acts I committed? In a similar way we often have to answer the same question before God when we sin. When we say "I'm sorry" to God, are we only sorry that we are paying the consequences for sin or are we truly ready to turn from our sin and embrace God. The latter is genuine repentance. We are going to look more closely this morning at true repentance and what true repentance looks like. You will remember when we last left Jonah he had an opportunity to repent but instead Jonah chose death; but God wouldn't allow Jonah to die. God provided this great fish to swallow Jonah and inside that fish Jonah finally decides to turn back to God. Jonah finally repents and his prayer of repentance is recounted for us in Chapter 2. (Read)

As we look at this prayer of repentance I want to take verses 1-7 and make one observation then from vss 8-9 I want to point out to you three elements that should be part of a repentant prayer.

First vss 1-7. I was talking with a young man one time and he was distraught over the fact that he kept struggling with a particular sin. I remember telling him the first step to finding peace was to turn back to God--to repent of that sin. I will never forget his reply. He said, "I have burned my bridges with God. I have repented so many times that

I don't think God will hear another prayer." I think many people find difficulty repenting because they feel like they have burned their bridges with God. They feel like because they are at a sinful point in their lives God won't hear them. But notice what Jonah says. V2, "In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. From the depths of Sheol/grave I called for help and you listened to my cry." V6, "I was sinking down the earth barred me in forever but you, O Lord, have brought my life up out of the pit." V7, "When my life was ebbing away, I remember you, O Lord, and my prayer rose to your holy temple."

In traditional Jewish understanding, if one was in Sheol/grave they were cut off from God. But Jonah said, it seemed as though I was in Sheol, I was cut off from God but I called for help and God heard my cry. You may be here this morning feeling like you are cut off from God. You may feel like you have burned your bridges with God but the story of Jonah teaches us there is no place you can go where you will be cut off from God. Wherever you think you are in relation to your heavenly father cry out to him he will hear your prayers.

I want you to know this morning you can never burn your bridges with God because there is only one bridge to God--Jesus Christ. That bridge can never be destroyed. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, spans the gulf between God and humanity and we will always have an audience with God through Jesus Christ. Remember what the author of Hebrews says, "Since we have Jesus, this great high priest representing us to God, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness that we may" what? "Receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." So, wherever you are this

morning, you are not too far from God. Cry out to him. Repent of sin and turn back to him.

Now, on to vss 8-9. We are ready to cry out to God. We are ready to repent. What does a repentant prayer look like? Well, I don't think there is any formula to it. There are no magic words. We all will pray in somewhat different ways using different words. But I do see in vss 8-9 certain attitudes that should be present as we come to God in repentance.

The first attitude is release whatever you are clinging to. Let me explain. Vs 8 Jonah says those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. Whenever we sin, when we run from God it is usually because we want something else more. We are clinging to that sin more tightly than we are holding on to God. And Jonah says whatever we are holding on to more tightly than God is an idol. It is a worthless idol but it is an idol. We are elevating something higher than God.

Jonah here repents of clinging to worthless idols. Now, let me ask you, what worthless idol is Jonah clinging to? It is his hatred of the Ninevites. He doesn't want to let go of that hatred. He doesn't want God to show mercy to Ninevah. In running from God, Jonah was saying to God I would rather cling to this hatred than let it go and cling to you. But Jonah has come to the realization that when you cling to those worthless idols you are really abandoning the grace of God. You are rejecting the love and blessing of God in favor of that sin. Let me ask all of us another question this morning. What worthless idols are we clinging to? Maybe it is some action or attitude or activity; but are you clinging to something more tightly than God? Part of repentance is the attitude that

says I am willing to let these things go. Father, I am ready to release my grasp on these worthless idols and I am ready to embrace you and your grace.

A second attitude important in repentant prayer is to return to God with thanksgiving. Notice in v9 as Jonah turns back to God he says, "with a song of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you." This sacrifice is likely part of Jonah's repentance and notice the attitude with which he brings the sacrifice--thanksgiving. Picture in your mind what it looks like when someone repents. We often picture that person with a solemn, contrite, even mournful look. We may picture the person with tears of sorrow. Certainly, all of those attributes may be appropriate but that should not be the whole picture.

Part of the biblical understanding of repentance and we see it here is that when we return to God we do so with thanksgiving in our hearts, with rejoicing and praise on our lips. God has not left us alone out there to die in our sinfulness. He has brought us back into a right relationship with him and we ought to give thanks. Give thanks for his faithfulness to us. Give thanks for his grace and mercy. Give thanks that forgiveness is offered so freely. I think, at least in part, our attitude ought to mirror the thankful celebration that occurs in heaven when a sinner repents. We read about it in Luke 15. There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. It is a wonderful, joyful, thankful experience to be forgiven. When we, with repentance, return to God like Jonah, we ought to return with thankfulness in our hearts.

A final attitude important in repentant prayer is to remember your promise to God. As Jonah finishes his prayer of repentance he says to God, "What I have vowed I will make good." What is Jonah's vow here? Well, I think the vow is to follow God

wherever he leads and whatever he asks. And we all as believers in Christ have taken a similar vow. When you place your life with Jesus; when you trust in him for salvation, you are saying by that decision, "God, it is my desire to follow you. I am giving you the reins of control in my life." Now, when we sin, when we run from God, we are in essence taking those reins of control back. We are saying, "God, I will no longer follow you. I am going to follow my own desires."

Part of repentance is remembering your vow to God. It is remembering that at one time you told God he could have control and that you would follow him. Like Jonah resolve to make good on that promise to God.

Well, let me close with this. I want you to know this morning you are never cut off from God. Through Jesus you always have a way back to God. He will hear your prayers. As you pray, remember these elements of a repentant prayer. Release whatever worthless idol you are clinging to; return to God with thanksgiving for his faithfulness and forgiveness; and finally, remember your promise to follow him.