

Life Group Questions April 11, 2021  
Atonement Fargo

In my parents' generation, one of the great challenges in life was to get a man to admit he was lost, stop the car, and ask for directions. In a time before GPS and Google Maps on smart phones, getting lost was a lot easier than you might image. Finding directions was not all that hard either. Locals were more than happy to point you where you need to go. The hard part – the big challenge, if you will – was admitting you were lost and in need of direction.

Recall a time when you were lost? What was that like? Were you calm, panicked, concerned, confident? How did you resolve the challenge of being lost? When you are on a trip in a car, whether local or long distance, how do you feel if you have to turn around and backtrack, realizing you've made a wrong turn? Does backtracking frustrate you more than stopping and admitting you are lost? When it comes to driving from one place to another, are you confident in where you are going or among the directionally challenged? Are you the sort of person that needs to ask for directions even if you have a GPS or Google Maps?

Knowing the right direction to travel on a trip is important. The same can be said of having the right direction in life. Has there ever been a time when you felt you had no direction in life? What was that like? How did you overcome that directionless feeling? Why is it important for us to feel we have a sense of direction in life?

Now you may ask what do being lost and feeling directionless have to do with the topic of the great challenge of repentance? Good question. Let's look at repentance and see if there's a connection that may prove helpful for us in our walk with Jesus. First, in your own words, give a definition of repent/repentance. One dictionary defines the act of repentance as expressing a sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin. Does that sound about right or is there more to repentance than simply expressing ones remorse? What might be missing from this definition? Is there more to repentance than simply saying you're sorry? Second, many times in the New Testament the verb "repent" is used as an imperative or a command. What is your reaction when someone gives you a command? Are you the kind who obeys straightway and falls in line; or are you the sort to ask, why should I do that?

As to giving the command, both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries with the same challenge. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2 and Matthew 4:17).<sup>1</sup> Later in the book of Acts, we see that the apostles – who Jesus assigned to carry on with his mission – challenged people to repent in much the same way. What image comes to mind when you hear the word *repent*? What is your reaction to someone who might be telling you to repent? How does that make you feel? We don't have Bibles that offer a person's tone of voice, but what sort of tone of voice do you think of when

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<sup>1</sup> Bonus questions: What do you think John and Jesus meant by "the kingdom of heaven?" In your mind, what does it mean for the kingdom of heaven to be "at hand?"

you hear that word *repent*? As both John and Jesus use the word, does it sound like they are offering a suggestion, a good idea, or something else? Why do you think Jesus began his ministry with the challenge to repent?

Some Christians believe in order to get people to repent you need to preach a strong message of confrontation and condemnation of sin. Read Romans 2:4. What does Paul have to say about the path and means of repentance? How does this square with the notion of a message of confrontation and condemnation? How does God's kindness lead to repentance? Furthermore, 2 Peter 3:9 we read, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." What does this tell us about God's attitude toward repentance? What does this tell us about the character of God? In what way has God been patient about your own repentance? This passage seems to suggest that repentance is a goal to be reached. How does that align with the idea that repentance was the point that Jesus *began* his ministry?

In another passage in the New Testament, Paul had cause to call the church at Corinth to repent. Sometime when you have a free afternoon, read both 1 and 2 Corinthians back to back in one sitting. For all the admonishment and correction you read in these two letters, you get the impression this was one messed up church. Finally, Paul had to call them to repentance. Read 2 Corinthians 7:6-16. When reading it, take note of the words "comfort, repent, zeal, regret, grief, and rejoice." Discuss in your group the spirit in which Paul called the church to repentance, the process by which the Corinthians church experienced repentance, and the ultimate outcome of this repentance? Is there anything here that might be helpful in how we might challenge others to repentance or how we might receive the same when we are challenged to repent?

Paul was not the only one to call the church to repentance; Jesus did too. In Revelation 2:1—3:22 we find the famous Letters to the Seven Churches. Reading these two chapters might take longer than you have for this session and you may want to take some time this week to look them over. But for now, read Revelation 2:5, Revelation 2:16, Revelation 2:21, Revelation 3:3, and Revelation 3:19. What one word do all these passages have in common? Remember, Jesus' words here are directed at his followers. Sometimes we get the misguided notion that the challenge of repentance is for sinners and those outside the church. Why do you suppose church goers don't feel the need to repent? While a close reading of both chapters might be in order, by just skimming what's said here, what happened in these church that caused Jesus to send them a message challenging them to repent? Do you see the same sort of situations happening in churches today that would cause Jesus to say to us, "Repent?" Before you answer that question, read Matthew 7:3-5. Why is it so much easier to think of reasons why others are in need of repentance than it is to think of reasons why we need to repent?

Luther on Repentance. Many centuries after the New Testament was written, the monk Martin Luther, when challenging the church to return to its foundational principles, saw repentance as a good place to start. In perhaps one of his most famous writings, The 95

Theses,<sup>2</sup> in the very first thesis, Luther said, “When Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, said *repent ye*, he intended that the entire life of the believer should be one of repentance.” Luther again talked about the need for daily repentance in his explanation of Baptism in the Small Catechism. In responding to the question, “What does Baptism mean for daily living?” Luther said, “It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.” He followed this by quoting Romans 6:4 “We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

What do you suppose a life of repentance looks like? For that matter, what about daily repentance? Isn't a one-time confessions of your sins and accepting Jesus as your personal Savior enough? How does this idea of daily and lifetime repentance speak to idea of repenting once and turning Jesus?

While challenging people to turn from the wrong direction they are headed is a big part of repentance, giving them a different direction in which to travel is every bit as important, if not more so. Let's take an even closer look at the word *repentance*. No, not the English word, but the Greek word that we find in the original New Testament.

The Greek word we translate as repent is *metanoeo* (meta-no-ee-oh). The noun repentance is *metanoia* (meta-noy-yah). Both words are based upon a common root word that means literally “to change your mind,” but also came to mean “change your direction.” Think of it like this. You're driving along and you see a sign that says, “Turn Around. Bridge Out.” To continue along in that direction would prove to be disastrous. That gives us the idea of changing direction from our sin.

But there is another metaphor at work here. In this one you are driving along a boring stretch of interstate highway and you come upon an exit with a brown sign that says, “Scenic Route.” Taking that change of direction will take you to the most beautiful vista you had ever seen in your life. The call to repentance not only directs us away from that which is destructive and detrimental in our lives (sin); but calls change our direction and look to Jesus. Heeding Jesus' great challenge of repentance provides us with a new direction in our lives. What are some of the ways that Jesus has provided direction to your life? In seeing this new look to repentance (not simply turning from sin, but turn to Jesus), how does Jesus provide you daily direction? Does the idea of an entire life of repentance make more sense when we look to him for such direction?

In closing, read Luke 24:45-49. As Jesus makes the transition handing off his mission to his followers, he gives them these instructions. In light of this, how are you going to incorporate the great challenge of repentance into your life? How do you see the great challenge of repentance affecting the way you share Jesus with others?

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<sup>2</sup> The actual title of the document posted on the church door in Wittenberg was “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.”