

iRepent

Responsive Reading, “iRepent”¹

We have three more iMessages in this series. Today’s topic is “iRepent,” followed by “iWorship,” and finally, “iHope.” As we consider “iRepent,” I imagine that you know that the word, “repent” basically means to reverse direction or to do an “about face.”

In the realm of faith, to repent means to abandon a way of life that is headed away from God and God’s purposes or to reverse course on a particular part of our life journey. To repent means to agree with God that our previous direction was either faulty, or rebellious, or both, and that we choose to realign our will and actions with what we understand to be God’s will.

While God really does give us the freedom to choose our own course in life, we are no more free from the consequences of our choices in the moral and spiritual realm than we are in the realm of the physical. If you choose to drive recklessly, you are very likely to hurt your car, yourself, and other people. If you jump out of a plane without a parachute, you are not likely to survive the fall. If you walk a dark path without a light, you are fairly likely to be injured in that project.

By the same token, if you choose to ignore the moral and spiritual guidelines God has set for human life, you will experience the consequences of those choices. And if you choose to ignore God’s purposes for your particular life, you will miss the adventure and the blessing God desires to give you.

C.S. Lewis wrote that “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘*Thy will be done.*’”²
To repent means to abandon “My will be done” for “Thy will be done.” It is that simple. It is that hard.

Psalm 106 is a Psalm of repentance in which the poet offered repentance for his nation, lamenting his people’s persistent unfaithfulness, ingratitude, and disobedience. In Psalm 106:6 the poet confessed, “*We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly.*” John Durham noted that “It is an abject confession . . . leaving no defense and making no excuse. It is confession as it should be but seldom is.”³ Pastor John Ortberg told a story that makes the point well:

“Many years ago, early on in our marriage, my wife and I sold our Volkswagen Beetle to buy our first really nice piece of furniture. It was a sofa. It was a pink sofa, but for that kind of money, it was called a mauve sofa. The man at the sofa store told us all about how to take care of it, and we took it home.

“We had very small children in those days, and would you like to guess what the Number One Rule was in our house from that day on? ‘Don’t *sit* on the mauve sofa! Don’t *play* near the mauve sofa! Don’t *eat* around the mauve sofa! Don’t *touch* the mauve sofa! Don’t *breathe* on the mauve sofa! Don’t *think* about the mauve sofa! On every other chair in the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 9, 2012.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1945; HarperOne, 2001), p. 77. The rest of the quote goes like this: “All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.”

³ John I. Durham, “Psalms,” *Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol., 4, ed. Clifton Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), p. 387.

house, you may freely sit, but on this sofa—the mauve sofa—you may not sit, for on the day you sit thereon, you will surely die!

“And then one day there appeared on the mauve sofa a stain . . . an awful red stain . . . an awful red jelly stain. My wife called the man at the sofa factory, and he told her how truly bad that was. So she assembled our three children to look at the stain on the sofa: Laura, who then was about 4, and Mallory, who was about 2½, and Johnny, who was maybe 6 months. She said, ‘Children, do you see that? That’s a stain. That’s a red stain. That’s a red jelly stain. And the man at the sofa store says it’s not coming out, not for all eternity. Do you know how long eternity is, children? Eternity is how long we’re all going to sit here until one of you tells me which one of you put the red jelly stain on the mauve sofa.’

“For a long time they all just sat there until finally Mallory cracked. I knew she would. She said, ‘Laura did it.’ Laura said, ‘No I didn’t.’ Then it was dead silence for the longest time. And I knew that none of them would confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they had never seen their mom that mad in their lives. I knew none of them was going to confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they knew if they did, they would spend all of eternity in the ‘Time Out Chair.’ I also knew that none of them would confess putting the stain on the sofa, because in fact, I was the one who put the stain on the sofa, and I wasn’t going to confess, either!”

And then Ortberg went on to say, “Here’s the real truth about us. We’ve all stained the sofa.”⁴ The poet who wrote Psalm 106 listed seven major ways in which the nation had “stained the Sofa.” Throughout the Old Testament, prophets called the nation to repentance for its sin, but such calls were rebuffed, time after time. Jeremiah lamented, “*Lord . . . you struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent*” (Jeremiah 5:3).

Ezekiel cried out, “*This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices*” (Ezekiel 14:6). And Zephaniah warned, “*Gather yourselves together, you shameful nation . . . before the LORD’s fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD’s wrath comes upon you*” (Zephaniah 2:1-2).

Now there’s certainly a place for prophets who call entire nations to repentance, as Martin Luther King, Jr. did here fifty years ago; and God continues to call out leaders from time to time to “stand in the gap” for the nation (Ezekiel 22:30). You and I need to be serious about the business of praying for our leaders and for our nation in such days as these, and we do well to be in frequent contact with those who represent us; but at the same time, our most productive effort may lie in another direction.

Jesus told us, “*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye*” (Matthew 7:3-5).

I’m afraid that it’s awfully easy for us—especially those of us who are fairly regularly in church—to persuade ourselves that our own sins aren’t really all that bad, and that the real problem in our world is with everybody else. Without intending to, we “climb up on our high horses” and look down our noses at “all those other people” who are Real Sinners.

⁴ John Ortberg, “Why Serious Preachers Use Humor,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Zondervan, 2005).

Unfortunately, many surveys have demonstrated that “those people” are quite aware of our attitude, and it keeps them from coming to Jesus.

It seems to me that if we who attempt to follow Jesus were to really take Him seriously, we wouldn't be nearly so bothered by the shortcomings we perceive in others as we would be about the “stains on our own sofas.” Abbot Moses wrote long ago that “They who are conscious of their own sins have no eyes for the sins of their neighbors.”⁵

If we were to really take Jesus seriously, we'd realize that John Wesley was right when he noted that “As a very little dust will disorder a clock, and the least sand will obscure our sight, so the least grain of sin which is upon the heart will hinder its right motion toward God.”⁶ And knowing this, we would cry out with the psalmist, “*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Even worse, the sin that is available to us these days includes not only the tried-and-true ancient ones but some the world has never seen before. Jeff Hooten wrote, “I have killed with swords and shotguns, handguns and grenades. I have shot, stabbed, and bludgeoned. I have crushed skulls with golf clubs and hammers and baseball bats. I have slaughtered men and women, drug dealers and crime bosses, soldiers and secret agents, mad scientists . . . and the pizza guy. I have killed hundreds, even thousands—so many that I lost count long ago. . . .

“I have killed with Xbox and GameCube, with PlayStation and PC. I have killed with joystick, mouse, and keyboard. I have killed for hours at a time, on screens big and small; on laptops and high-resolution monitors. I have killed in my basement, in my living room, at the local arcade, at a neighbor's house, with a co-worker's teenage son. I have killed late into the night, until three or four in the morning—because my adrenaline was surging, because my kids were safely in bed, because . . . I was winning and they were dying.

“Every weeknight I play, late into the night, and come Saturday morning, I'm at the computer again. I hear the muted thud of feet on the stairs, and there, standing to my right, eyes fixed on the screen, is my little boy. I tell him to go back upstairs, but he doesn't budge. . . I call for my wife, asking her to please come get her son. And then this little boy asks a question I never saw coming: ‘**Daddy, can I watch you play the bad game?**’

“Forgive me, O God, for I have killed.”⁷

Max was a well-to-do businessman who had been admitted to a 28-day inpatient treatment program for alcoholism. The group began by sitting in a circle and trying to tell the truth to each other about the extent of their drinking. When it was Max's turn, he said, “I never really drank that much.”

Knowing that truth-telling is one of the first casualties as addiction takes root, the group leader challenged Max, and then said, “I'm going to call the bartender near your office and ask him.” When the bartender told the group, “Oh yes, Max is the best customer we have!” Max conceded, “Okay, I've had a lot to drink.”

In another session, the question was, “Have you ever hurt anybody while you were drunk?” Many in the group did their best to tell the truth, but Max was still mired in self-deceit: “I would never, ever hurt anybody. Not when I'm sober, not when I'm drunk.”

⁵ “The Wisdom of the Desert,” *Men of Integrity* (September/October 2004).

⁶ John Wesley (1703-1791), *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Beacon Hill, 1966), p. 110.

⁷ Jeff Hooten, *Citizen* (February 2006).

Knowing the extent of Max's self-deception, the leader said, "You know, Max, we don't believe you. We're going to call your wife."

Max's wife said, "Well, yes he has. Last Christmas Eve he took our nine year-old daughter shopping and bought her some new shoes. On the way home he passed the bar and couldn't resist 'a brief stop.' It was a bitterly cold night, and when Max finally staggered back to the car hours later, our daughter's hand was so badly frostbitten that her thumb and forefinger had to be amputated. Her ears were so frostbitten that her hearing was badly damaged." When Max heard these words, he began to writhe in the floor in the middle of the group, unable to face the reality of the magnitude of his sin.

After he told this story, Pastor Bill Hybels told his congregation, "I'll tell you why I bring this up. If I had the time, I could pass a microphone down the aisle and ask, **'What is that one sin that you feel so desperately bad about that you can't even bring yourself to acknowledge that you actually did it?'** The one that you can't bring out of the darkness into the light to let God forgive it? What is that one sin that keeps you under a cloud of guilt day in and day out?"⁸

Roger Barrier had an experience that helped him find the way out of such darkness and guilt. It happened during his first semester of college: "When I left for college, my mother—who'd always done my laundry—sewed a canvas duffel bag for me. 'Put your dirty clothes in this every night,' she said. 'At the end of the week, wash them at the Laundromat.'

"So seven days later, I took my dirty clothes to the Laundromat. To save a little time, I threw the whole duffel bag in the washer, put in some laundry powder, inserted the proper change, and turned on the machine. Moments later, a loud 'thump, thump, thump, thump' echoed through the Laundromat. A pretty Baylor co-ed approached me with a grin. 'I watched you load your washer. I think the clothes would get cleaner if you took them out of the bag.'

"One day not long after that, when my relationship with God was hurting, I remembered my laundry episode. I realized the way I confessed sins—'Dear God, please forgive me for all the sins I've committed today'—was about as effective in cleansing them from my heart as my first attempt at washing clothes. **Each sin needs individual attention.**"⁹

She had come to my office in another city with her common-law husband, wanting to be properly married. When I asked them about their spiritual journey, it was clear that neither knew what it meant to be born again, so I went through "the Roman Road to Salvation" with them. When I looked up from the last passage in Romans 10, that we read together earlier, tears were streaming down her face. "I have wanted for so long to feel clean again," she said, "but I didn't know how." That young woman not only found what it means to be Clean that night, but through her conversion several other people became believers, and more may have come into the Kingdom since.

John Jefferson robbed the Krispy Kreme Doughnut store in Kingsport, Tennessee—the next town west of Bristol—in 1999, and then moved to Kansas to escape the law. John was so plagued by guilt, though, that he eventually decided to confess. He called Detective David Cole of the Kingsport Police Department and turned himself in, serving six years in jail.

⁸ Bill Hybels, telling a story from chapter 7 of Brennan Manning's *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat Up and Burnt Out* (Multnomah, 2005) in the sermon "Telling Yourself the Truth," April 14, 2002.

⁹ Roger Barrier, "Listening to the Voice of God," *Men of Integrity* (March/April 2006).

Upon his release John asked Detective Cole to go with him to Krispy Kreme, where he repaid his debt, with interest. Afterward, John told the *Kingsport Times-News*, “I felt like a million bucks when I walked out of that place!”¹⁰

In the film, *Amazing Grace*, William Wilberforce had asked his old pastor and friend, John Newton, to write an account of his years as a slave-ship captain to strengthen Wilberforce’s argument against the transatlantic slave trade in Parliament, but Newton refused, saying that his “20,000 ghosts” haunted him too greatly to record on paper. Years later, after Newton had gone blind, Wilberforce discovered that Newton had actually written his account. “You must use it, William,” Newton said. “Names, records, ships, ports, people—everything I remember is in here. Although my memory is fading, **I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior.**”¹¹

As you probably remember, it was John Newton who wrote *Amazing Grace*. As we sing that hymn in just a moment, I invite you to take the *Post-It Note* in your worship order and to write on the back of it some specific stain that needs to be removed from the sofa of your heart. Bring it to the front and put it on or near the Cross. No one will read the notes. After the service they will be destroyed as a holy offering to God.

Psalm 106 says, “*We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly.*” And God says, “**Come now, let us settle the matter,**” says the LORD. “**Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool**” (Isaiah 1:18). God’s Word promises that “**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness**” (1 John 1:9).

My friend, do you need amazing grace today? Are you ready to be clean again?

¹⁰ “What Goes Around, Comes Around,” www.foxnews.com, 12.21.05.

¹¹ *Amazing Grace*, Samuel Goldwyn Pictures, 2006, directed by Michael Apted.

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- Leader: *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 I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).*
- People: ***“I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. . . . For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! (Ezekiel 18:30-32).***
- Leader: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin (Psalm 51:1-2).*
- People: ***Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. . . . My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise (Psalm 51:10, 17).***
- Leader: *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15).*
- People: ***If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:9, 13).***
- Together: *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24). Amen.*