

Repentance

The season of Lent brings with it many words about and many calls to “repentance.” But just what is “repentance”? What does it mean to “repent”?

In our Lutheran Confessions, Martin Luther wrote:

“This is what true repentance means. Here a person needs to hear something like this, ‘You are all of no account, whether you are obvious sinners or saints in your own opinions. You have to become different from what you are now. You have to act differently than you are now acting, however great, wise, powerful, and holy you try to be. Here no one is godly.’

“But to this office of the Law, the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the Gospel. This must be believed. As Christ declares, ‘Repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:15). That is, become different, act differently, and believe My promise. John the Baptist (preceding Christ) is called a preacher of repentance, but this is for the forgiveness of sins. That is, John was to accuse all and convict them of being sinners. This is so they can know what they are before God and acknowledge that they are lost. So they can be prepared for the Lord [Mark 1:3] to receive grace and to expect and accept from Him the forgiveness of sins. This is what Christ Himself says, ‘Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [My] name to all nations’ (Luke 24:47).” (*Smalcald Articles* III, III, 3-6)

Repentance is not a ‘one-time-only’ or ‘once-is-enough’ thing. Luther also wrote, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent!’ [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” (Thesis 1, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, 1517)

To our ears, this may sound morbid and depressing. Confessing our sins before God *all the time*? Struggling with our habits and our inner selves to change our lives so that we obey God’s Law, so that our lives look more and more like the life of Jesus?

For people who enjoy being sinners (as most of us do, in one way or another), yes, such a life would be morbid, and depressing—and ultimately unsuccessful! If it all depended on us, we’d never attain such lofty goals. But remember, the Biblical definition of repentance involves more than the Law of God. The call to “repent” also includes the *Gospel*! It includes God’s gift of faith in Jesus Christ and what He has done for us that has earned and given us the forgiveness of our sins, life, and salvation.

Imagine that life: living day to day, hour by hour, confessing the sins that have separated us from God, and then being refreshed and restored in His forgiving love. Tasting the bitter, only to have it replaced by that which is sweet. Cowering at the approach of a dark storm cloud, then rejoicing as that cloud is blown away and bright beams of sunlight shine down. Willing to be crushed by God’s Law because we know that God’s Gospel will rescue us from ourselves.

That, dear friends, is the somber call and the joy-filled good news of Lent! Join us as we travel once again to Golgotha and the Garden, to the cross and the empty tomb, through death and into a life that never ends!

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.