

**Sermon Study Guide Based on  
Assistant Pastor Fred Steven's Message of February 21, 2010  
"What Is Repentance?"**

**[The Scriptures teach us that repentance isn't about doing better, promising to be good or about a new improved self. Rather repentance is a change of how we think by putting our trust in God instead of in ourselves and to believe in him to change our behavior and our hearts.]**

**[Topics: Repentance; Change in Perspective; Forgiveness; Jesus Christ]**

**Excerpt:** Sometimes things are not as they seem. Did you ever notice that? You often think things are one thing and they are really something else. So we need to come here and open our minds and broaden our knowledge by just being open to what God is going to teach us by learning new things.

Now this reminded Fred about a man, he'll call Bob, who had a terrible problem. He just couldn't seem to get up in the morning and get to work on time. He was always late. And this really bothered his boss. And so Bob went to his doctor and explained his problem to him.

In response to his situation, his doctor wrote out a prescription for him and told him to take one of these pills before going to bed every night. So Bob took his first pill. And, wow, what a difference. He woke up feeling great. He had even woke up before his alarm went off and he had time for a leisurely breakfast. And so he strolled into work before 8 o'clock.

Bob told his boss that what his doctor was doing for him was really working. And the boss replied, "That's all well and good, but where were you yesterday?" So the moral of the story is that things aren't always, as they seem.

We're talking about the subject of repentance, which is an important topic. We need to think about what we would tell somebody, if they asked about repentance.

Now Fred needs everyone's help. In the back of the seat pockets in front of the pews are some 3 by 5 cards. Write on the card your best short answer to this question: Repentance happens when .... Give it your best shot. [The members wrote down their answers.]

Now please stand up and trade cards with those around you. You should be trading cards a couple of times with different people. Now pair up with someone else and rate the answers on your two cards. On the back of the cards, you are going to rate the answers with a total of seven points. You might rate one card a seven and the other one a zero. Or you might rate one card a four and the other a three. Both scores have to add up to seven.

Now trade those cards again and pair up with somebody else and rate those cards again. [This process was repeated three more times so that there were five rating numbers on the back of each card.]

So each of these cards have been scored five times against another card. Now add up the card's total score. So the maximum number any card could have would be 35. So whoever has a card with 35 points hold it up please, so it can be picked up. Wow, there was one card that scored a 35.

Who is holding a card with 34 points? [one card] How about 33 points? [One card] How about 32 points and then 31 points? [A couple of cards].

What we've done as a group is to come up with what we think are the best answers. The first one reads: "Repentance happens when you stop sinning." The second one: "Repentance happens when you turn around and go the other way."

The next one: "Repentance happens when you confess your sins and Christ will forgive you." And the next one: "Repentance is when you turn your life around to follow God." And the last one: "Repentance happens when the Holy Spirit opens your heart to see you need to change."

There's a couple of reasons to do this exercise. First, it causes all of us to think. It also shows us how other people answer that question. This will encourage us to strengthen and interact with each other. Also we have a real group of experts in repentance, because that's what Christians are.

So we have some pretty good answers about repentance. But we need to remember that things aren't always as they seem. So what we need to consider today is that repentance is more than a change of action – it's a change in perspective.

It's kind of like looking out a window as opposed to looking in a mirror. You see what's happened over the years of Christianity is that we have devised our Christian understanding concerning repentance. And we think that repentance is when we look in the mirror and see our problems.

But when you study the Scriptures, a little more carefully and with a little more open-mind, things might not be as they seem. In truth, repentance is not looking in the mirror, it's looking out the window. Who do you see when you look in the mirror? Who might you see if you look out the window?

See, if we look in the mirror, we become so focused just on ourselves, and our issues and our problems. Now everybody's got issues and problems. Sometimes they are called sins. If we just focus on ourselves, we become vain as to how bad we are. Sometimes we need to ask God, "Show me the way you look at me."

Now if we look out the window instead of the mirror, it's kind of inviting to see what's out there. It's kind of bright because of the sun shining. Here's the point – if you look out the window you might see the sun. And in this context, it's spelled "Son".

Repentance isn't just the matter of the actions we need to change or take. Oh, yes, there are changes we all need to make. But repentance is stopping the direction we are going and changing our perspective. Does this make sense? Does this fit with our experiences? Does it fit with our understanding of the Gospel?

When Fred gave his last sermon in January, he spoke about the ministry of John the Baptist. **Matthew 3: 1, "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2) and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"**

**Matthew 3:11, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."**

If you recall, we talked about another baptism that Jesus brings and it's a little different than John's. John called on people to change their lifestyles. But the reality is – how many of us have been trying to change our lifestyle and are not very successful?

And sometimes people who think they have done that are kind of dangerous people to be around. And maybe some of us have been in that position in the past. We thought we've changed everything and felt righteous. We were just looking in that mirror and getting a false impression.

Now the Scriptures point out that John was preparing the way for Jesus and pointing out who he was. And John also spoke out against the king. And what did the king do? He put John in prison and eventually beheaded him.

Now John also said that he must decrease and that Jesus would increase. And so, **"When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee" (Matthew 4:12).** And, **"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matthew 4:17).**

Now John said, "Repent, the kingdom is coming." And Jesus said, "Repent, the kingdom is near." Now what did Jesus mean by that? What did he mean when he said to repent? If you go to the dictionary and look up "repent", you get how the word is used today. They don't really tell you the definition but rather how the word is used.

And so we know that definitions or how words are used change. So if look to see how the word "repent" is used today, that might not be how Jesus was using it. Remember, things aren't always as they might appear.

So when Jesus said, "Repent," who needs to repent? Everybody – from Adam and Eve on down. OK, so what do we need to repent from? Sinning. Wicked ways. Where did sin start? From Adam and Eve. What did they do? They decided to take upon themselves the decision of how to live, rather than listening to God. They decided to live their own way.

And guess what. All of our ancestors including all of us have been doing that ever since. We decide what were going to do. We decide what we're going to believe. We decide what we're going to think. We decide what we're going to say.

The whole of mankind needs to repent, which means stop going this way. Stop and turn around and look to God. When God came through the Garden looking for Adam, Adam went and hid, because he sinned. What should he have done? Instead of hiding, he should have run towards God.

So what happens when we face God? There are some lumps to take. This is the part of repentance that we're used to – the self-inspection part. And once we do that, we erroneously think that we've got to go fix it. We think, "I've got a sin in my life, so I've got to fix it. I've got a weakness in my life, so I've got to fix it." We tell ourselves, "We got to do this and we've got to do that." And so we're looking in the mirror again.

When Jesus said, "Repent the kingdom of God is near" who was he talking about? Jesus is the kingdom of God. Repent and turn to God. Repentance is not as much actions taken but as a perspective, the direction we're looking. So when Jesus says to repent, he is telling us to stop and look this way at him. Look to God and put him first, because we all deserve death, which are the wages of sin.

Notice what Jesus said in **Luke 17:3, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."** The question we all have is, "Do I have to?" Here's Jesus' answer.

**4) "If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."** So here, Jesus ties repentance with forgiveness. In our examination of ourselves, sometimes we forget that. We look at ourselves, we examine ourselves, and we often beat ourselves up – thus forgetting what Jesus said in dealing with each other.

Do we think he would deal any less with us? If we turn to God, seven times in a day and say, "I repent" what does God do? He forgives us! That easy to say but hard to retain, hard to live by. So we can tell God, "I'm sorry, I did it again. I've got a flaw in my hardware and in my software. I just do things wrong. I apologize. I repent."

And God says, "I forgive you." Have you ever found that even though God has forgiven you, you can't come around to forgive yourself? Don't we all do that? Don't we beat ourselves up and then feel down, disgusted, discouraged? That's not repentance. That's just looking in the mirror.

Now once we look in the mirror, we need to turn around and look at Jesus, because he is NOT a sinner. You become like the company you keep. So who should we spend time with – ourselves or Jesus? Jesus is the person we all need to run to and seek.

Now let's think about the thief on the cross. Here's a guy that when it comes to changing his actions, it was too late. He couldn't get down off the cross and live a different lifestyle, because he was moments away from death. Too often we get judgmental about the other person's actions and think, "Well, they haven't repented." Well, how do you know? It's between them and God.

Remember Jesus said that the thief would be with him in paradise. Talk about a time in your life when you might have your mind on yourself. Yet, in that moment of pain and desperation, the light bulb came on and the thief looked to Jesus. He said, "You are the Christ." And Jesus said in effect, "I forgive you," because he said that the thief would be with him in paradise.

You'll notice that the thief didn't have any time to go and do any works. This is called "deathbed repentance." Would deathbed repentance work for anyone of us? Would it be sincere? Would it be heartfelt? Most definitely. We can't be the judge. God is the judge. It's the Lord's relationship with that person.

And the Lord's relationship begins with all of us when we stop going our way and change our perspective and start looking at him.

Now let's look at what Peter told Cornelius and his household in **Acts 10: 37) "You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – 38) how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power...**

**42) He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43) All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."**

We see again that forgiveness is tied to repentance. What we really need to see is that the Bible is all about Jesus. And we need to read it from that perspective. Now, yes there are some things in there about what we should do. But that's not the main focus.

Now when Peter got back to Jerusalem he had to explain to the elders there what happened. **Acts 11:15, "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16) Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"**

So it was about baptism, repentance, forgiveness, a change. The Old Testament and the New Testament – a change. And who is in the middle? Jesus is. Our lives before repentance (looking to self) and our lives after repentance (looking upward). Who's in the middle? Jesus. To whom should we be looking at and focused on? – Jesus

This is the Apostles' response to Peter. **Acts 11: 18, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'"**

This verse struck Fred that it's not repentance just from sin but it's also repentance unto life. It's not a repentance that we are going to do better; it's repentance that we are going to change our perspective, because they now have access to God.

We're going to take a look at a few things written by C. S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*.

*Now repentance is no fun at all. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years.*

None of us have lived thousands of years. So what C. S. Lewis is saying that throughout the whole history of mankind, we all need to repent. As Christians we are waiting for God to bring about what he is doing in the whole family of mankind. God is so good and so big that he isn't just saving you and me. He's got big plans for all humanity. And we can't wait until he brings everything together.

C. S. Lewis continues. *It (repentance) means... undergoing a kind of death.*

When we do stop and reflect what has been in our heart and what has been in our life, it's a killer. Indeed, the wages of sin is death.

*Remember, this repentance... is not something God demands of you before He will take you back... it is simply a description of what going back to Him is like.*

Repentance isn't a demand from God but rather a description of what going back to him is like. God has already said he will take us back. God says, "I'm over here. Repent – turn to me!"

*In fact, it needs a good man to repent.* Isn't that an interesting thought? To turn around and look the other way takes some character, accountability and integrity.

*Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly. The worse you are the more you need it and the less you can do it.* Doesn't that describe the people all around us that we read about in the paper or on twitter?

*The only person who could do it perfectly would be a perfect person – and he would not need it.* That's a fascinating way of pointing this out. We can't change our perspective by ourselves. We can't turn around by ourselves.

*...we now need God's help in order to do something which God, in His own nature, never does at all – to surrender, to suffer, to submit, to die.* God doesn't need to do any of these things because he hasn't done anything wrong. He's perfect. But it's us who need help doing it. We're so stuck in our ways, we can't do it ourselves. So how can God help us?

*...the one road for which we now need God's leadership most of all is a road God, in His own nature, has never walked.* Wow, that's a profound statement. C. S. Lewis is pointing out that we need God to help us with something that God has never had to do.

*Supposing God became a Man... He could surrender His will, and suffer and die, because He was man; And he could do it perfectly because He was God.*

Is it up to us to turn mankind around? No. It's the Savior; it's the Lord that does it. So how does he do that? He does it by working in us. He said that he would write his law in our minds and in our hearts. He comes and dwells in us. And bit-by-bit he reveals things to us and helps us change our perspective.

C. Lewis continues. *You and I can go through this process only if God does it in us; But God can do it only if He becomes man. Our attempts at this dying will succeed only if we men share in God's dying.*

Now remember Jesus came to John the Baptist and asked to be baptized? And John said, "Oh no, you should be baptizing me." Jesus told him to do it "to fulfill all righteousness." And when Jesus went under the water – he took the sins of all mankind as to where those sins became his own.

Do you know what? We, as human beings, in our sins and in our problems compared to God's righteousness, are and should be dead. We're dead! Question: What does a corpse do? What does a corpse say? What does a corpse accomplish? Nothing! Dead is dead.

Our works aren't going to accomplish anything. It's Jesus who is doing this. Our sins created a debt, which Jesus paid for. Did he do that because we repented, we changed, and we

cleaned ourselves up? NO. Jesus did it because he wanted to. He did it because he chose to, because he cares to.

C. S. Lewis concludes: *That is the sense in which He pays our debt, and suffers for us what he Himself need not suffer at all.*

So what is repentance? Well, here's what repentance is NOT.

- ◆ Repentance is NOT about doing better.
- ◆ It's NOT about promises to be good.
- ◆ It's NOT a way of getting God to do something. [If I just repent, he will solve my problem. He'll fix my bank account. He'll give me a job, etc.]
- ◆ Repentance is NOT about a new, improved you or me.

But isn't it tempting to think that we need to do all those things?

In **Romans 6:11** it says, "**In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.**"

John put Jesus under the water and brought him up. And mankind put Jesus on the cross. And he died and went into the grave. And then he did what no man can do. He came up. He's alive! And not because of anything we can do. It's all about who he is and what he can do.

**14) "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."**

Grace is that beautiful, wonder and unmerited pardon and gift of God. So rather than each of us beating ourselves up all the time – yes we should acknowledge our shortcomings, our problems and our sins and want to stop and change our actions, we need to realize that we're not going to do that by our own efforts.

The only way you or I are going to be a better person is not by looking in the mirror, but by looking to him – Jesus Christ and submitting to him and allowing him to live in us. And do you know what? He might not change everything right away.

He didn't for the thief on the cross. But he did make some promises to him. And he has made some promises to us. It's by Jesus doing.

What is repentance? Hopefully this message has been helpful to you to better understand what repentance is. And as we go forward through life and as we reflect on the improvements we all wish to have in our lives and will always have before us, hopefully, instead of looking in the mirror, we'll look out the window.

**General Group Question:** What was your definition of repentance before you heard the sermon? Did it change afterwards? If so, what is it now?

**Additional questions for the entire group or in groups of two or three of the same gender (15-20 minutes). If appropriate, please pray for each other's needs afterwards.**

1. What is the point of the mirror verses the window analogy concerning repentance? Which is the better analogy? Why?
2. What was the difference between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism? (Matt. 3:11)
3. When Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near", what did he mean by that? Who needs to repent? And Why?
4. In the process of repentance, what should we stop doing and whom should we turn to?
5. What is the connection between forgiveness and repentance? Why did Jesus tell us we must forgive others? (Luke 17:3-4)
6. Did the thief on the cross have time to change his lifestyle and do works of repentance? If not, then why did Jesus tell him that he would be with him in paradise?
7. What role does Jesus play in the forgiveness of sin? Why? (Acts 10:43)
8. C. S. Lewis said, "Repentance) means... undergoing a kind of death." What did he mean by that?
9. How would you explain Lewis' statement to others, " Repentance is simply a description of what going back to him (God) is like"?
10. Would you agree or disagree with the statement, "The worse you are the more you need it (repentance) and the less you can do it"? Briefly explain your answer.
11. Is this statement true or false: Repentance takes God's involvement in us? Please explain how you reached your conclusion.
12. If repentance is NOT about promises to be good and NOT about a new, improved you or me, then what is repentance all about?