

The Pressure of Pretending

On Sunday we continued our sermon series on “Jesus, Light of the World,” by exploring what Jesus meant when he said we must “repent.”

1. Warm-up question: When you were a kid, engaging in flights of fancy and imaginary role playing, who would you pretend to be?
2. From the very beginning, repentance has been at the core of Gospel message. Mark 1:14 describes the launch of Jesus’ public ministry like this: “Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. **Repent** and believe in the good news.’” On another occasion Jesus said, “Except you **repent**, you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13:3. In other words, repentance is key to our salvation. So it’s critical that we understand what repentance is – and isn’t. The first half of Sunday’s sermon was devoted to what repentance is NOT.
 - a. Many people misunderstand what repentance is because of misconceptions about God. Our subconscious view of God is often shaped by a combination of what we were taught in the churches of our past and how our parents (or other authority figures) related to us. Jeff told about a friend whose mother’s love was conditioned on her meeting unattainable standards of perfection and how that tainted her relationships with God even as an adult. How did your relationship with your parents affect your early understanding God, for better or worse?
 - b. The churches of our past also played a formative role in our understanding of God. What characteristics of God were most emphasized in the churches of your past?
3. Churches often teach that God is an exacting, punishing being whose love is conditioned on us meeting impossibly high standards of behavior. In this view, “repentance” is often misconstrued as self-reformation. The basic idea is that we must clean ourselves up and turn ourselves around if we want to be in relationship with God. Jeff identified three dysfunctional ways people often respond to this misconception of God and the meaning of repentance.

Option 1 – Push away from God, give up on spiritual life, and pretend not to care.

Option 2 – Try to reform, but fail, then keep repeating that cycle with ever-growing guilt and shame. “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I get myself to be good?”

Option 3 – Pretend to be perfect in an effort to convince myself, God, and others.

- a. Given the way you’re put together, which of these three forms of spiritual dysfunction are you most apt to fall into? What is it about your personality and past that makes you susceptible to that particular pitfall?

- b. For those who tend toward Option 1, what does it feel like when you push away from God? Does it work for you? What are the downsides?
 - c. For those who tend toward Option 2, what does it feel like? Does it work for you? What are the downsides?
 - d. For those who tend toward Option 3, what does it feel like? Does it work for you? What are the downsides? Do you relate to Jeff's farting story?
 - e. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Most of the evil in the world does not come from evil people. It comes from people who consider themselves good." What do you think he meant? Do you agree?
4. Each of the foregoing dysfunctional responses makes it impossible for us to have an authentic relationship with God or even ourselves. There must be a better way! Jesus came to show us that way. The New Testament word for repentance – *metanoia* – does not mean a change of behavior, it means a change of mind, *i.e.*, a change in the way we see ourselves, God, and others. For a graphic example of this new way of thinking, contrasted with the old, read Luke 18:9-14.
- a. The Pharisee was pretending to be perfect. What might have motivated his pretending? Do you find him to be a sympathetic figure? Why or why not?
 - b. Note two key phrases. The Pharisee was "standing by himself," and he said "I thank God I am not like other people." These phrases suggest that pretending to be perfect is a lonely and dehumanizing way to live. In what way is it lonely? In what way is it dehumanizing?
 - c. By contrast, the tax collector is brutally honest about his shortcomings. How do you think his confession before God and the people around him made him feel?
 - d. Nowhere in his prayer does the tax collector promise to change his behavior, yet Jesus says the tax collector went away justified, *i.e.*, right with God. Why didn't the tax collector promise to change? Why didn't God require such a promise?
 - e. Do you see yourself as a "sinner"? Why or why not?
 - f. Note that the tax collector asks for God's mercy and places his faith in that mercy. What does this suggest about the tax collector's view of what God is like?
 - g. Based on Jesus' parable, what kind of "change of mind" is required to bring us into right relationship with God? By that definition, do you feel you're living a repentant life?
 - h. At the end of his sermon, Jeff said, "There is no such thing as a perfect parent, so stop feeling like you have to pretend to be." He went on to say the same thing about there being no such thing as a perfect spouse, child, boss, pastor, etc. How does that make you feel? Why is it "good news"?