



INTRODUCTION

To Martin Luther, the Reformer, repentance centered around our relationship with God: first in acknowledging how that relationship is broken, and second, on how our love towards God is understood as total commitment to Him. He spells this out clearly when he reflects on the meaning of the Greek term for repentance, *metanoieite* or *metanoeo*, which Luther understands to mean “assume another mind and feeling, recover one’s senses, make a transition from one state of mind to another, have a change of spirit; so that those who hitherto have been aware of earthly matters may now know the spiritual.” Luther envisions a total transformation involving mind, heart, will, and senses. This is why he says that “the entire life of believers [should] be one of repentance.”

But Luther also talks about grace as an “interior illumination of the mind and a kindling of the will, [which] is an eternal emanation into the soul like rays of the sun.” This grace transforms a person, which illuminates the introspective mind and redirects the will toward divine things. This grace imbues the person with humility and charity toward others. This grace overcomes sin and draws us unto God. This grace comes freely - not out of our efforts, not to those who deserve it - but only because God gives it. It is a grace which accompanies, sustains, and heals us every single day.

In that regard, grace is the counterpart to repentance. Both are holistic, embracing, or involving all of Christian existence. One is tempted to see grace as the answer to repentance, but it does not come as an answer; it is what makes true repentance possible in the first place. Repentance is a constant yearning for God - and that would not be present without the equally constant beckoning of God, a call that infuses our being. A life of penance, therefore, is not a life looking for grace, but a life lived in response of grace that God has already given us.

May your Lent be filled with repentance and grace.

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Embracing Repentance:

A Journey of Reflection, Restoration, and Renewal

Lent is a special time of the year when we come face to face with the realities of Jesus Christ's suffering and death. It's a time for self-reflection, repentance, and spiritual renewal. We are invited to take a moment to reflect on our own lives, to understand the weight of our sin, and through the sacrifice of Christ, we are able embrace the opportunity for change. Repentance is not just an act of reflection - it's a profound rethinking of our lives and actions. It is turning back to God, being transformed, and walking closer with Him.

The meaning of repentance: A gift of God

We need repentance because of humanity's fall into sin, which severed our relationship with God. Even though Christ has reconciled us through the cross, humans are still rebellious toward God; we remain sinners and constantly have to turn back to Him. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoeo*, which means "rethinking." Repentance invites us to completely re-evaluate our lives, our behavior, and the direction in which we're heading. Repentance is more than feeling sorry for what we've done; it's a complete transformation - a change of heart and mind that leads to a new way of living. It is the act of not only turning away from sin but also resolving not to return to that behavior.

In 2 Timothy 2:25-26, we read: "...if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will." Here, we see that repentance is a gift from God which opens the door to forgiveness and draws us closer to God, restoring our relationship with Him. Because of this, the call to repentance is an integral part of the proclamation of the gospel and the mission of the church.

Awareness, remorse, and confession

Repentance begins with **awareness**. Often, we are unaware of the ways we fall short, of the thoughts, words,

and actions that separate us from God. It requires time and space for reflection. At the end of the day, it can be helpful to pause, meditate, and examine our actions. Are there any moments where we acted out of selfishness or pride? Did our words hurt someone? Were our thoughts in line with God's will? Awareness can also come through the reading of Scripture and word of God preached in the sermon which speaks to us about our lives and present situations.

By reflecting in this way, we allow God to illuminate our hearts and minds. We may not always see our sin at first, but through reflection and prayer, we can ask God to show us how we have drifted away from Him (Psalm 139:23-24). This awareness is the first step toward repentance.

Once we are aware of our sin, we feel **remorse (regret, penitence)**. When we truly recognize the ways we have fallen short, we feel sorrow - sorrow because we've damaged our relationship with God. We see the depth of His love and goodness in contrast to our brokenness. David experienced this sorrow after his sin, and in Psalm 51, he expresses the anguish he feels over his actions. Similarly, we are humbled when we realize we have no right to God's mercy, yet He offers it freely.

Once we come to this place of sorrow, the natural response is **confession**. In 1 John 1:9, we are assured that, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Confession is not just something that happens during the Lord's Prayer in the divine service; it's a daily conversation with God, one in which we wrestle with our shortcomings and ask for His forgiveness.

Resolutions: Fighting against the old nature

When we are baptized or confirmed, we make a promise to renounce the evil one and surrender ourselves to God. It's easy to forget this promise amid the busyness of life, but

Mercy in the midst of Sin:

Stories from Genesis of God's love and redemption

The story of the Fall in Genesis is often seen as a tragic moment in human history - the moment when sin entered the world, fracturing our relationship with God. However, if we only focus on the "bad news," we miss the good news of God's incredible mercy and love. From the very first moment that Adam and Eve sinned, God's response was not one of punishment or rejection, but one of grace, mercy, and an invitation to repentance.

The first act of mercy: God seeks out the sinner

In the aftermath of Adam and Eve's disobedience, they become aware of their nakedness, and in their shame, they hide from God (Genesis 3:7-8). At this moment, one might expect God to respond with wrath or anger. But instead, He seeks them out. The Bible tells us that God came "walking" in the garden, calling out to Adam, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9).

Why would God begin with a question instead of an accusation? After all, God already knew what Adam and Eve had done. God's question, "Where are you?" was not an inquiry born out of ignorance, but rather an invitation. It gave Adam and Eve the chance to acknowledge their sin, to reflect on their actions, and to realize the brokenness in their relationship with God. The question offered them the chance to admit their wrongdoing, though they were still filled with shame.

However, Adam and Eve do not respond with repentance or acknowledgment of their sin. Instead, they cast blame. Adam blames Eve and God ("The woman whom You gave to be with me..."), Eve blames the serpent, and ultimately, both of them seem to distance themselves from taking responsibility for their actions (Genesis 3:12-13). Despite their unwillingness to admit their sin, God, in His justice, pronounces the consequences of their actions—but even here, He balances the curses with promises of future redemption. God's mercy is already at work as He promises that the seed of the woman will crush the

serpent's head, pointing to the eventual coming of Christ (Genesis 3:15). And in an act of compassion, God clothes Adam and Eve with garments made from animal skins, showing His care and provision (Genesis 3:21).

God's continued mercy: The story of Cain and Abel

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 provides another powerful example of God's pursuit of the sinner. Cain, angry and dejected because his offering was not accepted by God, finds himself confronted by God in love. In Genesis 4:6, God asks Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."

This is not a rebuke born from anger, but an invitation for Cain to examine his own heart and behavior. God is gently pointing out that Cain already knows what is right, and He is urging him to turn away from sin before it overtakes him. God's words are not harsh but rather a loving warning, urging Cain to take responsibility for his actions. Yet, Cain does not heed God's warning. Instead of listening to God's voice, he grows more resentful, and in the very next verse, he kills his brother Abel.

Once again, God approaches Cain, asking another question: "Where is Abel your brother?" (Genesis 4:9). Here, God's question is, again, an invitation to awareness and repentance. God seeks to bring Cain to a place of reflection and remorse, but Cain remains evasive, unwilling to own his sin.

Even after Cain's violent act, God does not abandon him. Instead, He responds with mercy. Though Cain faces consequences for his actions, God marks him with a protective sign, ensuring that no one will harm him (Genesis 4:15). This is a further demonstration of God's desire for redemption, even for those who have fallen into sin. As Ezekiel 33:11 reminds us, God takes "no pleasure in

Barriers to Repentance:

Jonah's journey of blindness and self-reflection

The story of Jonah presents us with a powerful lesson about the dangers of ignoring our own flaws and the importance of self-reflection. Jonah's journey, from fleeing God's command to his anger at God's mercy, highlights how blindness to our own shortcomings can hinder our spiritual growth and transformation. His narrative challenges us to confront our own motivations, our resistance to change, and our inability to truly repent when we fail to recognize the depth of our own sin.

The rebellious prophet: A call for self-examination

In the opening chapter of Jonah, we see a prophet who is deeply resistant to God's will. God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, a city notorious for its evil. Instead of obeying, Jonah flees in the opposite direction, sailing to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord (Jonah 1:3). This physical flight symbolizes Jonah's spiritual movement away from God, and it reveals a deep reluctance within the prophet. Even in the face of a violent storm, Jonah remains passive, sleeping through the chaos (Jonah 1:5). His silence during the storm, even as the pagan sailors turn to prayer, further highlights Jonah's failure to engage with the crisis at hand. Unlike the sailors, who repent and make vows to God (Jonah 1:16), Jonah does nothing but evade his responsibility.

Jonah's behavior in chapter 1 invites us to ask: How often do we avoid confronting uncomfortable truths about ourselves? How do we respond in moments of crisis or challenge? Like Jonah, we may find ourselves spiritually passive, avoiding the responsibility of repentance or ignoring the ways we fail to live out God's commands.

The prayer of repentance?

In chapter 2, Jonah finds himself swallowed by a great fish, and after three days, he prays. This prayer is often viewed as a moment of repentance, yet it's worth examining whether it truly reflects a change of heart. Jonah's prayer is a psalm of thanksgiving, thanking God for deliverance,

but it lacks any genuine confession of sin. Jonah does not express remorse or take responsibility for his rebellion. Instead, he places the blame on God: "You cast me into the deep...Your billows and Your waves passed over me" (Jonah 2:3). He never admits his disobedience or hubris. While the prayer is beautiful in its structure, it is ultimately an empty prayer, focused on celebrating his personal deliverance rather than any lasting change.

Jonah's prayer, though pious in form, exposes his inability to confront his sin. It suggests that he is unaware of the root issue: his own heart. It's a stark reminder for us that true repentance goes beyond words—it involves deep self-awareness and a willingness to acknowledge our flaws.

A reluctant prophet: Jonah's mission and God's mercy

In chapter 3, Jonah finally obeys God and goes to Nineveh, delivering the message of destruction. Yet, Jonah does not want the people of Nineveh to repent. His heart is hardened against them, and he prefers to see them perish rather than be spared. When the people of Nineveh do repent, Jonah is furious. In chapter 4, he goes outside the city, sits in anger, and waits, hoping that the city will revert to its evil ways. Jonah cannot fathom that God might show mercy to these Gentile people, whom he views as undeserving.

God's compassion for Nineveh leads Jonah to question God's character. Jonah's anger is directed not at the Ninevites, but at God Himself. He accuses God of being "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness" (Jonah 4:2), echoing God's own words about Himself in Exodus 34:6. Jonah's complaint reveals that, despite all of his prophetic experience, he still does not understand the far-reaching character of God's mercy.

Jonah's refusal to accept God's decision to spare Nineveh is rooted in his inability to see beyond his own

Remorse, Penitence, and Regret:

Moving toward God with a broken heart

Remorse, penitence, and regret are powerful emotions that God uses to help us understand our spiritual state. They are not just feelings; they serve as barometers - indicators that we may have strayed from God's will. The key question is not whether we experience these emotions but how we respond to them. Do we ignore them? Become overwhelmed by them? Or do we use them as a prompting to return to God, seeking His forgiveness and restoration?

The burden of remorse

Remorse and guilt are deeply tied to our awareness of wrongdoing. They are defined by how we feel the weight of responsibility for our actions, and that weight can affect not only our emotional and mental state but also our physical well-being. Psalm 38 beautifully yet, rawly, expresses this experience: "There is no soundness in my flesh, because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me... I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long... I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart" (Psalm 38:3-4, 6, 8).

This psalm reveals how remorse can impact us on every level. The psalmist feels physically broken, mentally troubled, and spiritually undone because of sin. The feeling of remorse can sometimes be so overwhelming that it feels like a heavy burden, one that we can't escape. It might even feel as though God is distant or angry, as the psalmist fears in verse 2. But the remedy for these feelings - guilt, sorrow, and distress - is to turn toward God and not away from Him, and confess our sins to Him. Psalm 38:18 encourages this turn: "For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin."

The difference between remorse and repentance

The Bible offers us the stories of Judas and Peter as contrasting examples of how remorse can shape our

lives. Both men were remorseful over their actions, yet their responses were vastly different.

Judas, filled with regret after betraying Jesus, sought to undo his wrongs by returning the 30 pieces of silver to the priests and elders (Matthew 27:3-5). However, his remorse led him to isolation and further distance from help. Unable to receive forgiveness, he chose despair and ended his life in a field, alone.

Peter, on the other hand, denied knowing Jesus three times, yet when he experienced remorse, he allowed his grief to lead him back to the disciples. He wept bitterly after his denial (Matthew 26:69-75, Luke 22:54-62), but his remorse led him to repentance. After the resurrection, Peter encountered the Risen Christ, who forgave him and restored him to fellowship (John 21:15-19). Peter became the rock on which the church was built, while Judas is remembered as a tragic figure.

The crucial difference between Peter and Judas was not their remorse, *but their response to it*. Peter allowed his remorse to move him toward the fellowship of disciples and reconciliation with Jesus Christ, while Judas, in his shame, withdrew and isolated himself from the grace that could have healed him.

The power of confession and the need for community

Judas allowed himself to be so overwhelmed in his guilt, that he could not comprehend that forgiveness was possible. Judas could not create God's word of grace for himself, nor could he proclaim forgiveness to himself. Sometimes we may also doubt if God will forgive us when we come to Him. In order for us to believe and know that we are forgiven, we often need someone to say it to us. This is where the power of a community of believers and the spoken word assuring our forgiveness come in. And this is what Jesus gave His apostles the authority to do - to proclaim forgiveness, and to preach forgiveness in

Returning to God:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, or Lost Sons

The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 is one of the most beautiful and profound teachings of Jesus, showcasing the deep mercy of God. It is a story of repentance, grace, and reconciliation, revealing to us that returning to God is an encounter with His incredible mercy. The theme of God's mercy is echoed throughout Scripture, as the biblical authors often remind us: "How great is the mercy of the Lord, and His forgiveness for those who return to Him!" (Ecclesiasticus 17:29, 2 Chronicles 30:9).

The parable is divided into three key parts: *the departure of the younger son* (15:11-19), *the return of the son and his welcome by the father* (15:20-24), and *the episode between the father and the older brother* (15:25-32)

The younger son's request to his father for his inheritance is rash and disrespectful, even by today's standards. In the context of the time, it would have been perceived as a death wish to ask for one's inheritance before the father's passing, as it implied the father was no longer needed or valued. Moreover, by leaving home and venturing into a "far country," the son distanced himself from his family and community. He chooses a life of debauchery, squandering his wealth in a way that, while not explicitly immoral, results in deep consequences. Eventually, a famine strikes, and the son finds himself desperate, feeding pigs and even longing to eat their food, a humiliating condition for any Jew at the time.

At this lowest point, the son "came to himself" (15:17) - a pivotal moment of awareness and the turning point in the story. This realization marks the first step of repentance: awareness of our brokenness and recognition that we need help. The son rehearses a heartfelt plea: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (15:19). He plans to confess his sin and ask for forgiveness, willing to be treated not as a son but as a servant. Like David (in Psalm

51), he realizes that his sin is not only against his father, but also against God.

The father's overflowing mercy

The son's return home is met with overwhelming grace. Before the son can even finish his apology, the father sees him from a distance, "had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (15:20). This extravagant expression of mercy takes place even before the son can say anything. The father, filled with love, cuts him off mid-plea, ordering a feast to celebrate his return, signifying the son's full restoration to the family and community. The father's actions are filled with grace - he not only forgives the son but also restores him. The father's response shows us the nature of God's mercy: it's not earned, it's freely given. Even when we feel unworthy or lost, God is always ready to forgive and welcome us back with open arms.

The older brother's struggle

However, not everyone shares in the joy of the son's return. When the older brother hears of the celebration, he becomes angry and refuses to join the feast (15:25-27). The father, undeterred, goes out to speak with him, offering the same grace and love he extended to the younger son. The older brother's reaction reveals a transactional view of his relationship with his father. His obedience has been motivated by a desire for reward, not out of love or gratitude. His words reveal a heart filled with resentment and entitlement: "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends" (15:29).

The father's response to the older son is just as gracious as his response to the younger son: "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours" (Luke 15:31). The father assures him that his relationship with him is not at all based on merit, but on love. All that the father

David's Confession:

Examining the power and intensity of Psalm 51

Psalm 51 stands as a powerful and profound example of true confession. It emerges from a pivotal moment in David's life when the prophet Nathan confronts him about his grave sin - his taking and sexual assault of Bathsheba and the orchestrated conspiracy against and murder of her husband, Uriah (see 2 Samuel 11:1-27). The weight of David's actions and the public consequences of his sin are laid bare by God through Nathan's accusation. Yet, it is also in this moment of deep conviction and shame that we see the beauty of repentance and the mercy of God. Psalm 51 gives us a raw, heartfelt model for confession, showing us how to come before God with humility, remorse, and a desire for true change.

Acknowledging the depth of his sin

David's journey begins with a brutal acknowledgment of his sin. After Nathan delivers God's rebuke, David responds in 2 Samuel 12:13 with a simple yet profound statement: "I have sinned against the LORD." It's an honest admission, not an attempt to justify, minimize, or hide his wrongdoing. In Psalm 51, we see David's deepened reflection on his sin and his heartfelt confession before God.

In the opening verses of Psalm 51, David pleads for mercy and acknowledges the depths of his sin: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions" (51:1). David understands the faithfulness of God's love. He knows he can come to God. The first step in authentic repentance is recognizing our profound need for God's mercy and knowing we can come to Him. Just as David pleads for cleansing and restoration, we too must come before God, not in self-sufficiency but in recognition of our need for His grace.

David's recognition of his sin is far from superficial. He goes on to confess, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (51:3). This is not a casual admission; David acknowledges that his sin is ever-present and

burdens him. In verse 4, he says, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight." David's understanding is profound: While his sin was committed against Uriah, Bathsheba and even his people (as their king), he recognizes that ultimately, all sin is an offense, first, against God. This is a critical part of confession: seeing our sin as a break in our relationship with God, and understanding that He is the ultimate judge.

The desire for cleansing and renewal

David doesn't stop at confession; he seeks restoration. His plea, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (51:10), highlights his understanding that only God can change his heart. Sin taints not just our actions but our very nature, and David seeks God's intervention to create something new within him. He understands that without this divine act of renewal, he will remain bound by his old sinful nature.

Repentance requires more than just feeling sorry for our actions; it demands a resolution to transform our hearts. David's prayer is for a heart that is clean, a spirit that is steadfast, and a life that reflects true obedience to God. This is the work of the gift of the Holy Spirit within us, making us new and transforming our desires and actions.

In verses 16-17, David highlights the essential truth of confession: "For You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." David realizes that no amount of religious ritual or sacrifice can atone for his sin. What God desires is not external offerings but a heart that is broken over its sin and humbled before God. This is the kind of sacrifice that God honors - a sincere, repentant heart.

Come Down from the Tree:

Zacchaeus' resolution to change, repair, and restore

The story of Zacchaeus, found in the beginning of Luke 19, offers us a powerful picture of repentance and conversion. It reveals the transformation that takes place when we feel remorse for our actions and also take steps to resolve to change, repair, and restore what is broken. Thus, repentance is not simply a turning away from sin, but about turning toward God with a heart ready to transform. Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus shows us that the end goal of repentance is the restoration of our lives and relationships through forgiveness.

Jesus: The Salvation-Bringer

Before He meets Zacchaeus, Jesus has already interacted with those on the margins of society - people whom others have ignored, rejected, or despised. From healing lepers (Luke 17:11-17) to blessing children (Luke 18:15-17) and restoring sight to a blind man (Luke 18:35-43), Jesus continually reaches out to those who are dismissed by society. Zacchaeus, a rich and corrupt tax collector, would have been among the most despised. Yet, he, too, is invited into the embrace of Jesus. Jesus's willingness to extend grace to the most unlikely people - those on the fringes, rejected, silenced, and marginalized - reminds us that the kingdom of God is open to all.

Zacchaeus: The Seeker

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector - a position that often entailed dishonesty and exploitation of the people. He was rich (19:2), but his wealth came at the expense of others. He was also short in stature (19:3), which prompted him to take some unusual actions. Despite his status, Zacchaeus' actions in seeking Jesus are noteworthy.

First, he does two things that would have been surprising for a man of his rank: he runs and climbs a tree. Running was considered undignified, especially for a man of importance, and climbing a tree was something children did, not men of Zacchaeus' stature. But Zacchaeus, feeling the urgency of his desire to see Jesus, sets aside his dignity

and social position. He seeks Jesus with determination, overcoming both physical and social obstacles.

Why was Zacchaeus so desperate to see Jesus? We don't know exactly, but perhaps he was tired of living in shame, excluded from his community, or struggling with guilt over his actions. Maybe he had heard of Jesus's acceptance of others like him - tax collectors - such as Matthew, who was now one of Jesus's disciples. Whatever his reasons, Zacchaeus' actions speak volumes: he was seeking something more, and he believed Jesus had the answers.

Jesus's invitation: A call to transformation

When Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree, He does something remarkable: He calls him by name. Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (19:5). In a single invitation, Jesus offers Zacchaeus acceptance, restoration, and a new way of life. The crowd, of course, grumbles. They cannot understand why Jesus would choose to associate with a sinner. Yet, for Zacchaeus, the invitation from Jesus is not just an honor; it is a life-changing moment. The idea that Jesus - whom Zacchaeus may have heard so much about - would want to spend time with him, a corrupt man, opens the door for Zacchaeus to experience transformation. "He received Him joyfully" (19:6).

This is where Zacchaeus' conversion begins: in the presence of Jesus, he finds the courage to look at his life, acknowledge his wrongs, and resolve to change.

The crowd: The Accusers

The crowd's criticism reveals an important aspect of Zacchaeus' transformation. They accuse Jesus of associating with a sinner: "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner" (19:7). At first, Zacchaeus may have felt the weight of their judgment. But sometimes, it is through being confronted by others - through hearing the truth about ourselves - that we are brought to deeper

awareness. Sometimes these realizations come through criticism, which we usually resist. Zacchaeus, rather than becoming defensive, accepts the accusation and uses it as the starting point for his transformation.

Just as Zacchaeus was made aware of his sin through the judgment of others, we, too, may experience moments where we come face-to-face with the brokenness in our lives, whether through personal reflection or the words of others. It is not easy to accept, but Zacchaeus' willingness to become aware of and face his own flaws is the beginning of his repentance.

The resolution to change, repair, and restore

Zacchaeus does not just acknowledge his wrongdoing, he resolves to act: "Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold" (19:8). His response is not only to stop his unjust practices, but to repair the damage he has done. In a culture where restitution was important, Zacchaeus goes above and beyond what was required.

His willingness to change his behavior shows us that repentance is not just about feeling sorry for our mistakes but about taking palpable steps to make things right. The transformation in Zacchaeus is evident not just in his heart but in his actions. He resolves to restore what he has wrongfully taken, not out of obligation but *out of gratitude for the grace he has received* (see Session 8).

In our own lives, we can reflect on what we need to repair. Is there someone we've wronged, or an area where we need to make restitution? Repentance involves change, and change often requires us to do more than just ask for forgiveness - it asks us to restore what has been broken, whether in relationships, finances, or personal integrity.

Jesus' words: A promise of restoration

Jesus's declaration to Zacchaeus is profound: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (19:9-10). Jesus, the Salvation-bringer, affirms that Zacchaeus, though lost, is

now found. The word "salvation" in this context is not just about spiritual forgiveness, but about restoration - about being made whole again.

Zacchaeus is restored not just to God, but to his community. Though the crowd still grumbles, Jesus's words make it clear that Zacchaeus' transformation is real and significant. No longer defined by his past actions, Zacchaeus now has the opportunity to live a new life. This is the power of grace: it transforms, restores, and makes all things new.

Zacchaeus' story teaches us that repentance is not just about confessing our sins, but about committing to change, repair, and restoration. Jesus's invitation to Zacchaeus is extended to all of us: He seeks out the lost and offers us the opportunity for transformation. But this opportunity requires a response. Jesus's encounter with Zacchaeus shows us that repentance involves both an inner change and an outward commitment to repair and restore what has been broken. It's not just about turning away from sin but turning toward a new way of life - one that is shaped by grace, fueled by love, and marked by action. Like Zacchaeus, we must be willing to climb down from the tree, face our past, and embrace the new life that Jesus offers.

The Unforgiving Servant:

Living out grace and reconciliation received from God

The Bible teaches us that forgiveness is not just a command; it's an invitation to participate in the profound and transformative grace of God. In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35), Jesus presents a striking image of how we are to understand God's forgiveness - and how it should shape our own attitudes toward forgiveness and reconciliation. The direct relationship between God's forgiveness and our own forgiveness is vital.

Already, in Ecclesiasticus 28:2-4, we read: "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? If one has no mercy toward another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?"

This passage challenges us to recognize that forgiveness is not a one-way street. Our relationship with God's forgiveness directly influences our ability to forgive others. Similarly, the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:32 urges believers to: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *even as God in Christ forgave you.*"

In the same way, in Colossians 3:13, we are reminded: "... bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; *even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*" Forgiveness is integral to the Christian life. If we are to follow Jesus, we must imitate His mercy - not just admire it from afar.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

The parable in Matthew 18 sheds light on what happens when we fail to forgive. In this story, a servant is forgiven a debt by his king - an astronomical sum, equivalent 200,000 years of a labor's wages. Yet, when the same servant encounters someone who owes him a far smaller debt (about 3 months of wages), he refuses to show mercy. The king, enraged by the servant's lack of compassion

and emulation of his grace, reverses his forgiveness and hands him over to be punished.

Jesus uses this parable to emphasize the consequences of failing to forgive. If we fail to forgive others, we risk forfeiting the grace that God has so generously offered us. The forgiveness that God extends to us is without limit, and it is this same boundless mercy that we are called to reflect in our relationships with others.

Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer guide us to a radical understanding of forgiveness. "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). What would it be like if God forgave us with the same limited forgiveness we often offer to others? The servant's failure to forgive highlights the danger of this kind of selective mercy. His refusal to forgive was a direct reflection of his failure to understand the magnitude of the grace he had received. The parable shows us that forgiveness is a radical decision - a choice to let go of the offense, to release the person from their wrong, and to reconcile the relationship. It's not a passive act but a deliberate one.

Forgiveness and reconciliation: Intentional choices

The parable also highlights how the servant's debt was impossible to repay - a sum so outrageous it was beyond his capacity. Yet, the king forgives him completely. In contrast, the debt the servant holds against his fellow man is minimal - just a fraction of the debt he was forgiven. The contrast in amounts is intentionally stark, and the lesson is clear: the grace we receive from God is far greater than any offense others could ever commit against us. If we cannot forgive the transgressions of our fellow humans in light of the overwhelming grace we've received, we risk becoming like the unforgiving servant. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

As followers of Christ, we are called to be agents of reconciliation - not just receivers of God's forgiveness but also the ones who extend it. This reconciliation is rooted in the forgiveness we have already received. We do not forgive out of obligation but out of a deep sense of gratitude and transformation.

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian message: it was Jesus' mission and is our mission. *Jesus came to reconcile humanity to God, and He calls us to be agents of that same reconciliation.* In 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Paul writes: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God."

Reconciliation begins with understanding what God has already done for us. Through Christ, we have been forgiven, restored, and made new. This transformation empowers us to forgive and reconcile with others. Rather than human forgiveness being necessary for God's forgiveness, the parable teaches the opposite. Forgiveness received is the basis for the forgiveness we give (Ephesians 4:32). It's not based on our ability to forgive perfectly, but on the mercy of God, who has forgiven us despite our imperfections. The goal of reconciliation is healing - restoring what was broken, healing the wounds of conflict, and building relationships based on grace and love.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not passive acts. They require intentionality and a willingness to step out of our comfort zones. Just as Jesus left His heavenly throne to reconcile us to God, we are called to step beyond our own boundaries to seek and restore broken relationships.

The heart of forgiveness

"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matthew 18:35). In the parable of the unforgiving servant,

Jesus makes it clear that forgiveness must come from the heart - the center of a person's will, emotions, and actions. It's not just a matter of going through the motions but of deeply, genuinely letting go of the offense and choosing to extend grace.

Forgiveness is powerful because it opens the door to healing. It's an act that transforms relationships and restores peace. But it's important to remember that true forgiveness doesn't come from our own strength. It's rooted in the love of God that dwells in us. In Ephesians 3:16-19, Paul prays for believers to be "strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

What would happen if we thought of forgiveness not simply as something we are supposed to do, but rather as letting Christ dwell in me? As being filled with "all the fullness of God"? God saved me by giving His Son to die for me proving that I am a loved, forgiven, reconciled child of God. Therefore, I love, I forgive, I reconcile. In such a way, God's mercy and forgiveness become a persistent power that pervades all of life.

Forgiveness is not just a moral command; it is a gift that has the power to transform us and the world around us. When we receive God's forgiveness, we are called to share that grace with others. Through forgiveness, we participate in God's mission of reconciliation - restoring relationships and healing the wounds of conflict. May we be empowered by the love of Christ to forgive, reconcile, and live out the grace we have so freely received. To continue your exploration of reconciliation, consider our Small Group curriculum on *Resolving Everyday Conflict*.

