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1 Samuel 7:2-6

Twelfth Message

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FINALLY: REPENTANCE!

The topic of our text today is REPENTANCE. Repentance is foundational to our faith. But it is little understood, and seldom talked about, except perhaps when a public figure is caught in some form of immorality. Then the term is bandied about by the self-appointed priests of the news media who have no apparent interest in promoting the restoration that repentance is designed to accomplish. Repentance is equally confusing to many in the church. What does it mean to repent? How does repentance relate to forgiveness and reconciliation? What is the evidence that someone is repentant? How do we cope with repeated failure?

With profound simplicity, our text, 1 Samuel 7:2-6, addresses these questions.

I. Prerequisites to Repentance (1 Sam 7:2-3)

A. Do you have the heart to repent? (7:2)

From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD. (1 Sam 7:2 ESV)

After the Israelites were soundly defeated in battle and the ark was carted off as a Philistine war trophy, the weight of God's glory made its presence felt in several Philistine cities, devastating the population and their idols. Following seven months of torture, the Philistines give glory to God by admitting defeat and sending the ark back to Israel with a "guilt" offering. When citizens of Beth-shemesh saw the ark coming over the horizon, they received it with jubilation. But their joy was short lived. God's wrath broke out like a bomb at a wedding, killing seventy men of the town for violating the sanctity of the ark. Unlike the Philistines, who repented under a heavy hand of God, God's people showed no such contrition and instead sent the ark into cold storage. The ark was back in the land, but there was no reconciliation. Israel had mourned deeply, but not over their sin, which had caused the breach in their relationship, but the heavy blow that the Lord had inflicted upon them *on account* of their sins (6:19). The pain cut so deeply that, like an angry adolescent, Israel refused to come out of her room for some time. Though painful, isolation was easier than having to confront the dark forces residing in the deep recesses of the heart. But God has more patience than we can imagine. With enduring grace he refuses to give up on his people. When faced with an angry heart and an unrepentant spirit, God does not storm around the house demanding respect like a wounded parent. No, he quietly waits. Time and silence are two of the best cards he has in his hand, and he has an inexhaustible supply of both.

Do you think you can outlast God? Israel thought she could. She crossed her arms, stiffened her upper lip, and kept her anger churning for days. The days turned into weeks of stormy silence and the weeks into months and seasons. Israel's festive holidays that once were re-enactments of joy now became stale and perfunctory, if not dreaded. The first year of separation is always the hardest. But what

happens after that? The narrator says that the days multiplied on and on. But we are shocked when we find out just how long: twenty years!

Can reconciliation occur after twenty years? The lengthy time span reminds us of Jacob's twenty-year exile from his family. After stealing Esau's birthright, he was forced to flee to Haran to escape the wrath of his brother, who was plotting to kill him. Banished from home because of his sin, God ambushed the weary fugitive in a dream and promised him a safe return. In spite of the promise, for twenty years Jacob's soul was haunted and tyrannized by fear. He fled Haran in fear of a father-in-law's rage (Gen 31:31) and headed home, terrified because of a brother's revenge (Gen 32:7). The distress so paralyzed him that it took two more angelic encounters to give him enough courage just to make the crossing with his family. Anticipating the worst, he was shell-shocked when "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept" (Gen 33:4). Reconciliation after twenty years! Can it happen again on a national scale?

During the endless days of Israel's spiritual isolation, an unspeakable groaning rose to the surface, uniting the people in a wave of grief. For the first time in 1 Samuel we hear the words "all the house of Israel." Still hurt and perhaps angry after two decades, as one people they longed for their first love with such an ache they could finally cry again. It takes a spiritual hunger to repent. After twenty years of attempting to fill the void with every idol known to man, the heart finally cries out "Enough!" The time is now ripe, for the people of God finally have ears to hear. After decades of silence the prophet speaks.

B. Do you have the will to repent? (v. 3)

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." (1 Sam 7:2-3 ESV)

Bodner observes, "After a long absence, now Samuel resurfaces with a cartload of prophetic conviction."¹ The prophet seizes the moment when Israel's hearts are especially tender to direct their sentiments toward their proper course. If we are genuinely sorrowful and serious about our longing after the Lord, Samuel exhorts us to nail those feelings "down to a life of commitment to God. Repentance provides the hammer and nails."² A bucket of tears is worthless without repentance.

The Hebrew term, *shuv*, is profoundly simple. It has nothing to do with feelings or religious sentiment. Rather, it is a verb of *movement* that means "to return," suggesting both negative and positive actions. Repentance begins with an admission that you are headed in the wrong direction. Following after idols is a dangerous way of life that ultimately leads to destruction and death. If you are truly

repentant, you take heed to the danger signs on the road by turning your car around before you drive over the cliff.

But it's not enough to merely turn away from idols. Repentance also requires setting your course in the right direction toward the Lord. This is the hallmark of Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs that teach addiction cannot be conquered by mere abstinence or self-effort. You have to give yourself unreservedly to a "higher power" in order to fill the void of the addiction. Samuel and the apostles would not be content to leave it that vague. Paul writes, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom 13:14). But we have to credit AA for the seriousness with which they approach repentance. If you ever have the opportunity to attend one of their meetings, you will discover a freedom of confession and an absence of denial that puts the church to shame.

Following the call to repent, Samuel sets forth the three steps that make up authentic repentance.

II. Personal Responsibility of Repentance (1 Sam 7:3)

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

A. The negative aspect of repentance: Putting away idolatry

Samuel exhorts every Israelite to completely rid themselves of every vestige of idolatry. His summons echoes similar calls given by Israel's leaders: Jacob at Shechem (Gen 35:2), Moses at Sinai (Exod 19:5-6), and Joshua at Shechem (Josh 24:14-15; cf. also Deut 12:3; Judg 10:16; 2 Chron 19:3; 33:15). The fact that every generation needs to heed the call is instructive of the ease with which we drift into idolatry. Passivity is the greatest enemy of spiritual growth. As the words of Robert Robinson's hymn affirm, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it/Prone to leave the God I love."

To "put away" our idols means we must rid our lives of anything to which we grant divine capability, those evil things that catch our eyes and penetrate our hearts. You can't serve God when your life is littered with the trash of idolatry. In Israel's day, idolatry found its expression in male and female fertility deities (Baal and Astarte). Worshipers attempted to gain adequate rainfall through cultic prostitution. Sexual immorality was used to arouse the gods to take an interest in their plight. Behind this perversity was the basic belief that humans could play a role in determining the future not by ethics but through lust and manipulation. As Peterson explains, all this was done in the hope

...that the gods can be bribed to throw their weight in our direction. Viewed in this way, North American culture is hardly distinguishable from Canaanite—a great deal of contemporary religion is little more than technology designed to get something from God...We cannot, then, understand Samuel's preaching as a mere campaign for moral decency. This is much deeper, a theological/spiritual repentance that involves abandoning how we get things done, the way in which I determine the outcome with my initiative and action.³

Back in Ashdod, the champion idol of the Philistines had fallen prostrate before the glory of the Lord; while in Israel, God's people were still propping up their idols, mixing their faith with other loy-

alties. Archaeological evidence suggests that in some locations Israel attempted to give the Lord a female consort⁴, as if he needed to be sensually motivated to impart life to his people. What blasphemy! When the Philistines attempted to put Dagon back in his place, God destroyed their idol just as he did the idols of Egypt. But this was not the case in Israel. God had revealed his moral will to his people in the Ten Commandments, therefore the responsibility for cleansing the land of idolatry belonged to his people:

You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place. (Deut 12:3)

God longs for reconciliation, but he never violates our dignity by doing for us what he gives us the responsibility to do. When you came to Christ, Paul says, "you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). Like Israel, we are commanded to put to death "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5).

But it is important to note this act of cleansing goes much deeper than externals; it is essentially a matter of the heart. Your life can appear squeaky-clean, with no outward appearance of idolatry, and you can still be a rampant idol worshipper. An essential ingredient to discipleship (but one that is seldom mentioned in our age of tolerance) is the necessity to cultivate a moral aversion to idolatry. God desires that his people "loathe" and "hate" what he loathes, lest we be destroyed by evil (Deut 7:26). In many of the psalms, the poet meditates on God's holy character, which "hates iniquity" and "abhors" deceit, bloodshed and violence (Pss 5:5-6; 11:5; 119:163) and in so doing cultivates the strongest aversion to evil. Perhaps the ultimate expression is found in Psalm 139, where David expresses his complete hatred and loathing of those who oppose God:

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with complete hatred; they have become my enemies. (Ps 139:21-22)

This sounds harsh to us living in the New Covenant. But, as Bruce Waltke observes, David "has identified himself with God, so that God's enemies are his enemies...Terrien comments: 'The closer the psalmists came to God, the more violently they expressed their aversion for the wicked'... The battle is primarily a battle of spiritual affections and zeal (cf. Ps. 26:5; 31:6).'" With such intense zeal we would expect David's concluding petition to beseech God to judge the wicked. Instead, he asks God to judge his own heart for any vestige of idolatry that would be offensive to him:

**Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts,
and see if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps 139:23-24)**

David humbly admits he is inadequate to fully know himself, to know the depth of his motives or the purity of his heart, so he casts himself upon God to lead him in "the way everlasting." David's humility and zeal set the standard for us in confronting the insidious idolatry that invades our hearts.

B. The positive aspect of repentance: Setting one's heart firmly on the Lord

Genuine repentance means not only turning away from idolatry but also turning towards the Lord and being diligent to cultivate a

relationship with him. The command to “direct” (“prepare, make firm”) your heart on the Lord comes from the Hebrew root *kun*, which has the idea of firmness, lasting stability, durability and permanence. When God is the subject, whatever he establishes stands firm and cannot be moved:

**The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty;
The LORD has clothed and girded Himself with strength;
Indeed, the world is firmly *established*, it will not be moved.
Your throne is *established* from of old;
You are from everlasting. (Ps 93:1-2)**

Therefore if we long for any permanent legacy, we must establish our hearts firmly on the Lord and serve him alone, unlike the “double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (Jas 1:8). This was Jesus’ response when the devil tempted him with all the kingdoms of the world if he would but worship him. Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only’” (Luke 4:8).

But how can we serve God alone when it seems our hearts are so easily deceived and run after other loyalties? So often we find our hearts stirred with great hopes of new beginnings, but after repeated failures we quickly give in to discouragement and despair. The good news for sinners is that, following Israel’s exile, God promised to gather his people from the nations, to cleanse them from all their idolatry and write his laws on their hearts by his Spirit, so that they would be able to love God with a wholehearted obedience:

And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God. (Ezek 11:19-20)

Our responsibility in the age of the New Covenant is to feed the Spirit by submitting ourselves to the rigorous discipline of regularly hearing and meditating on God’s Word. John Stott writes, “The Word of God is the Spirit’s sword. The Spirit without the Word is weaponless; the Word without the Spirit is powerless.”⁶ The Spirit takes the light of God’s word and penetrates our hearts to expose the evil hidden there. Then it leads us to mourn, loathe and forsake our sins, transforming our affections to love Christ and Christ alone. As we submit to the leading of the Spirit, and appropriate its power in obedience, our hearts become “steadfast” in the Lord. Like the psalmist, we find ourselves internally strengthened with the might of the Lord (2 Chron 27:6), fearless in the face of bad news (Ps 112:7), and able to joyfully sing his praises, even in the midst of adversity (Ps 57:7).

C. The Promise of repentance: Divine victory

Samuel explains that if Israel will repent, then her enemies will no longer be of any concern, for God will deliver her from the power of the oppressive Philistines. So often we reverse the order. Let us first take care of all our difficulties and pressing emergencies, then we will consider a life of worship and devotion to God. The trouble is, the difficulties never end. Therefore we must never confuse the human and divine roles in repentance.

III. The Surprising Ease of Repentance (1 Sam 7:4)

So the people of Israel (lit. “sons of Israel”) put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.

The Israelites finally did it! They put away the male and female deities and gave their hearts fully to serve the Lord. In that moment

of decision “the house of Israel” is suddenly transformed into the “sons of Israel,” the people of God. The text is so terse and brief it leaves us with the impression of how ridiculously simple it was for God’s people to take control of their lives and be responsible to rid themselves of idolatry once they were willing to obey. Finally free, joyous elation fills the air. But it is tinged with sorrow. Looking back at all the needless wreckage and wretched pain her passivity caused, one can’t help but wonder why Israel waited so long to confront the idols in her midst. How long must we wait? How many lives must we hurt? O Lord, give us the courage to address our idolatry!

Now that Israel has finally repented, the nation is ready to publicly acknowledge her sin and recommit her life to the Lord.

IV. Public Expression of Repentance and Renewal (1 Sam 7:5-6d)

Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, “We have sinned against the LORD.”

In North America we take great pride in our independent spirit. We celebrate the freedom of the individual. Though that has many positive aspects, it is fraught with danger when is not balanced with corporate responsibility. Idolatry is not a private matter. While our news media debates the issue of whether a politician’s private life affects his ability to serve in public office, there is no debate in Scripture. Not only is idolatry degrading, divisive and deadly, it has the potential to destroy entire communities. In Joshua’s day, when Achan coveted and took some of the spoil that belonged to the Lord, the whole nation suffered defeat. Because the idolatry of one affects us all, repentance is never a private matter. Though it begins in the heart of the individual, it is sealed publicly. This dual aspect of repentance is illustrated in Psalm 4. David commands the apostate among his leaders to repent, first by meeting with God privately on their beds, then to come forward and offer sacrifices to seal their repentance publicly:

**Tremble and do not sin;
when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.
Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the LORD. (Ps 4:4-5 TNIV)**

The New Testament follows suit with its public rite of initiation in water baptism and its ongoing renewal of confession and trust in the rite of communion.

A. The place of renewal

Samuel summons Israel to a national day of prayer, confession and renewal before the Lord. The chosen site of the convocation was Mizpah, about seven and half miles north of Jerusalem. Mizpah is derived from a root meaning “to watch attentively,” most likely because of its strategic location as a military outpost or observatory (“watchtower”) high upon Israel’s central ridge. In Judges it became the rallying point for the tribes to hear the Levites’ grievance against Gibeah that launched the horrible massacre of the tribe of Benjamin. Samuel’s godly leadership will seek to cleanse it of its vile memories and rededicate it as the center of Israel’s spiritual renewal. “Watching” will now take on new significance as the nation eagerly “watches” for the Lord’s return and their renewal.

B. The rites of renewal

Once they gather at Mizpah, Samuel promises to intercede in prayer for the people, acting as their advocate to God. There has been no mention of prayer in 1 Samuel since the days of Hannah. The silence is telling. By contrast, Samuel bears all the marks of his mother and is known by his life of prayer (see 1 Sam 7:8-9; 8:6; 12:17-19, 23; 15:11). For such a spirit, the psalmist places him alongside Moses in the hall of fame of prayer:

**Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called upon his name.
They called to the LORD, and he answered them. (Ps 99:6)**

While Samuel is interceding in prayer, the people publicly confess their sins, taking full responsibility for the disruption of the covenant. True repentance means you don't care who knows about your sin. This doesn't mean we should air out all our dirty laundry, like the media is so prone to do. But we do have to name the sin, be it adultery, slander, pre-marital sex, stealing, etc. The New Testament holds to the same standard. James may have had this text in mind when he wrote: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (Jas 5:18).

To demonstrate the contrition of their hearts, the people pour out water before the Lord and begin a fast. The pouring out of water is unattested in Israel, but taken together with fasting, I suspect Samuel is training the nation in the ways of his mother. When Hannah was oppressed with grief, she could not eat or drink. Instead, she took all her pain and bitterness and made it liquid in tears, pouring it out before the Lord. In like manner, the pouring out of water symbolizes a complete confession, with nothing held back. Like Hannah, Israel expresses her absolute dependence on the mercy of God for healing. And fasting demonstrates the value they placed on a restored relationship. Fokkelman comments, "Food is not necessary on a day in which one acknowledges the nourishing properties of a restored covenant."⁷

This humbling act of purification is authentic worship. It is a radical renunciation of the corrupt leadership of Eli and his sons, who fattened themselves unto judgment by robbing God and the people. Jeremiah picks up the metaphor as exemplary and offers it to Israel following the destruction of Israel's temple:

**Arise, cry out in the night,
as the watches of the night begin;
pour out your heart like water
in the presence of the Lord. (Lam 2:19)**

V. Repentance, the Distinguishing Mark of Samuel's Ministry (1 Sam 7:6e)

Thus Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah. (v. 6e)

This summary statement by the narrator shows that this was typical of the way Samuel exercised his leadership over the Israelites. Instead of a ministry characterized by charismatic acts of strength, with no moral fiber, like Israel's earlier judges, Samuel's ministry was characterized by faithfulness to God's word and prayer. That divine combination is what led God's people to repentance and purity of heart. It was a long time coming! May God grant our community such a renewal.

God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5:18, 20)

1 Keith Bodner, 1 Samuel, *A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 65.

2 Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 50.

3 Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 51.

4 Robert D. Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 106.

5 Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: An Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming), 748.

6 Timothy Dudley-Smith, ed., *Authentic Christianity, From the Writings of John Stott* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 76.

7 J. P. Fokkelman, Vow and Desire, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 4 vols. (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 299.

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