

# Repentance

Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
Psalm 25  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
Mark 1:14-20

Three pastors went to a convention for ministers and were sharing one room. Once they got checked into their room and unpacked, the first minister suggested, “Let’s confess our favorite sins to one another! I’ll start—my favorite sin is drinking! I get drunk a couple times a week!” The second pastor said, “My favorite sin is sloth! I hate working. In fact, I get all of my sermons off the internet!” The third pastor smiled real big and said, “My favorite sin is gossiping.”

We all have favorite sins, or what we might call “habitual” sins. We tell ourselves that we *hate* our habitual sins, but the fact that they are habitual tells us that we must love them quite a bit! This can be frustrating and confusing for us because we know that we are not supposed to love sin, but rather, repent. Our Scripture readings this weekend remind us of the importance of repentance.

In the first reading, we heard about Jonah’s ministry to the people of Nineveh. At God’s calling, Jonah preached a message of repentance to them. They responded to his message and turned from their lives of sin. In the Gospel reading, we heard a similar message of repentance preached by Jesus, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Most of us think of “repentance” as our being sorry for something we’ve done or feeling bad about our sin. However, the word for “repent” that is used in this Scripture passage is μετανοια<sup>1</sup> in Greek, and it means more than just feeling sorry for something. It means a complete conversion in the innermost part of who we are! In other words, μετανοια calls us to give up our favorite sins! But, of course, that is not an easy thing to do since we *love* our favorite sins! How, then, do we experience μετανοια? First, let’s look at what keeps us from giving up our favorite sins.

## **RATIONALIZATION:**

We are very good at rationalizing our sins. In fact, we’re so good at it that we begin to feel like we are not in need of repentance! Our rationalization can take several forms. We might find ourselves downplaying the negative impact our sins have on our relationship with God and other people. Or, we might tell ourselves that other people’s sins are *far worse* than our sins. Or, we might convince ourselves that the sins we’re currently enjoying aren’t nearly as bad as the ones we *used* to commit.

We can know whether or not we’ve gotten into the habit of rationalizing our sins if 1) we never go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, 2) we can’t think of any sins to bring to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or 3) we find ourselves minimizing our sins during the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

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<sup>1</sup>Pronounced “met-an’-oy-ah.” The other Greek word commonly used in the New Testament for “conversion” is epistrophe, which suggests a more *external* conversion.

### **DISTORTED SELF-IMAGE:**

Another thing that can keep us from giving up our favorite sins is a distorted self-image. There are some people who, due to various circumstances in their lives, have a poor self-image. They don't see how there can be anything worthwhile or good in them. The idea of repentance seems impossible since the voice in their heads tells them that they will never be good anyway.

### **FEAR:**

Fear is also something that can keep us from repentance. It's a common thing for us to fear change, and repentance consists of change. We fear what others will think of us if we become too "holy." We fear not fitting in with coworkers, classmates, family members and friends. We fear that growing closer to Christ will move us away from those we love. We fear what God might ask of us if we become *too* holy. We even fear what life might be like without our favorite sins.

### **LOVE:**

Lastly, we resist giving up our favorite sins because we love them. If our sins were not doing *something* for us—if we did not love them—then they would not be habitual and persistent. This is what makes giving them up so difficult—we love them and don't *want* to give them up! So how in the world are we going to enter into repentance if there are sins that we love and don't want to give up?

I'm convinced that we cannot eliminate our favorite sins by just trying to get rid of them. This is why so many people come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation feeling frustrated. They desire to overcome their sins, but the more they try, the more they seem ensnared by them. The primary goal of repentance for people struggling with habitual sin is not trying to get rid of the sin, but rather, deepening their relationship with God. In this way, μετανοια is not about getting rid of the sins we love, but finding a *new* Love that leaves no room for other loves.

In the Old Testament, we read that our God is a jealous Lover—"You shall not worship any other god, for the LORD is 'the Jealous One'; a jealous God is he" (Exodus 34:14). His love for us does not leave room for other, false lovers. Repentance, getting rid of the false lovers we call our "favorite sins," must always begin with allowing ourselves to be loved by the God who is madly in love with us and letting ourselves fall in love with Him.

Such an approach to overcoming habitual sin requires a lot of patience. On the surface, we might not feel like we're making much progress. In reality, though, a huge spiritual excavation project is underway. On the surface, we might find that for weeks, months, even years there is very little noticeable change to our favorite sins, but then suddenly one day, our sins implode, disappearing into God's love and grace.

This week, let's ask for the grace to fall more deeply in love with God—a love so deep that there is no room for any false lovers!

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:**

- ✚ Read Isaiah 43:1-7 and insert your name into the passage so that it is God's words spoken directly to you. What do God's words of love stir up in your heart?