



Week 2: Repentance

Day 1 – Nicodemus: Repentance is a Journey

John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.^[a]”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[c] must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”^[d]

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.^[e] ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[f] ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”^[g]

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that

their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

John 7:50-51

⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus^[4] before, and who was one of them, asked, ⁵¹ “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”

John 19:39-42

³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Understanding the Passage:

Nicodemus is not a star of the Gospels by any means, and yet his encounter with Jesus is significant for us as we journey down the road of sanctification. Here we see a man who belongs to a religious sect of Judaism (the Pharisees) who are extremely literal and rigid in their interpretation of the law. Legalistic doesn't even begin to describe the way of life for a Pharisee. They exhibited very little tolerance for those who practiced Judaism differently. For the Pharisees there is much emphasis on tithing and ritual purity that impacted every aspect of life: how food must be prepared, when one could do work, how work is defined, with whom one could share a meal, with whom one could interact/be in relationship, etc.

Nicodemus is Pharisee. He has dedicated his entire life to practicing religion the “right” way and yet he come to talk with Jesus—possibly the biggest thorn in the collective Pharisee side. Visiting Jesus in the cover of the night signifies that Nicodemus isn't proudly announcing his official meeting with this new Rabbi. This “dark of night” language is a literary tool utilized by the author to clue us in to Nicodemus' spiritual condition—he's still in the dark. But he comes to sit with the Light. This meeting we see Jesus give Nicodemus is a pivotal invitation: be born again by water and the Spirit, believe in me, come into the light and receive salvation. There is so much that is said in this conversation, but we don't get to hear a verbal profession of faith. However, the next time we see Nicodemus he is changed.

A few chapters after their conversation, Pharisees send Temple police to arrest Jesus. In a very public setting (out in the daylight), Nicodemus comes to Christ's defense by reminding his fellow Pharisees of their own laws (7:50-51). We don't hear or see much from Nicodemus after that until one final appearance in John's Gospel. Nicodemus shows up when most of the disciples had fled. Nicodemus comes to give Christ a proper burial with Joseph. He showers Christ's body with extravagance. This very act would have broken many Jewish laws and made him unclean. Someone who once came in the cover of night now makes a very public and open statement about his commitment to Christ (even after his own sect had influence in Christ's crucifixion).

From hiding in the dark to honoring Christ in death, this is a story arch of repentance unlike most conversions written in the Bible. This story of repentance is a journey. We aren't given explicit details, but at some point, Nicodemus accepted the invitation which Christ offered. Nicodemus seems to have slowly loosened his grip on his tightly held beliefs about the law. That conversation about being born again worked on him over time.

Has something like that ever happened to you? A sermon or teaching gets stuck in your mind and you ruminate on it for a while. You have conversations about it. Maybe you seek out more information about it. It challenges you and brings you into a place of analyzing your values, beliefs or actions. Finally, one day something clicks into place and you find yourself in a place that reflects a deeper commitment to Christ. This is a journey of repentance. A journey of sanctification. It's a journey of leaving the old behind and stepping into the new. Sure, you've received the love of Christ into your heart and declared Jesus is Lord, but that's only step one. Christ is calling us to a deeper, fuller interpretation of the law. The law that values human life over rules and regulations (see chapter 8). The law that didn't come to bring condemnation, but of salvation—the law of love.

Discussion Questions:

1. How might you be Pharisaical? (making sure everyone is doing everything right)
2. What is sanctification?
3. How are you participating in the process of being made more into the image of Christ?
4. What areas of your life need to come into the light?

Day 2 - Matthew the Tax Collector: Repentance Can Mean Big Changes

Matthew 9:9-13

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called **Matthew** sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner^[a] in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting^[b] with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Mark 2:13-17

¹³ Jesus^[a] went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴ As he was walking along, he saw **Levi** son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵ And as he sat at dinner^[b] in Levi's^[c] house, many tax collectors^[b] and sinners were also sitting^[d] with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the scribes of^[e] the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat^[f] with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ When Jesus heard

this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Luke 5:27-32

²⁷ After this he went out and saw a tax collector named **Levi**, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” ²⁸ And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

²⁹ Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table^[a] with them. ³⁰ The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” ³¹ Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Understanding the Passage:

This passage in the book of Matthew is situated right in between two healing stories. This section of the book of Matthew is all short accounts of miracles, healings, and Jesus gathering his Disciples. This particular story of Matthew is featured in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in an almost identical way—no extra details, no deep insights, just the facts. Jesus said, “follow me” and Matthew followed him.

Matthew, sometimes called Levi, worked as a Tax collector. It’s possible the name change signified his conversion, but that’s not definitive. Tax collectors worked for Rome and were not the most popular of citizens. They were especially despised by the religious. Matthew could have been what was called a tax farmer, working for Herrod Antipas. But because he was situated in Capernaum, his role was more like a customs agent taxing goods headed to nearby trade routes. It was not uncommon for tax collectors to raise the tax in order to line their own pockets as well. Matthew was a man of job security, wealth and a really bad reputation. Unlike the other disciples who left fishing jobs, Matthew left behind his lavish lifestyle, a steady flow of income and power in order to follow Jesus. But Matthew also left behind a lifestyle that preyed on others for personal gain and his allegiance to Rome. This is a radical act of repentance, seemingly without hesitation.

What would cause such a person to leave their comfortable way of life and all the benefits of colluding with Rome? He left all of that to hit the road with some random Rabbi who hadn’t even been properly educated. The text doesn’t give us insight into the motivation for making such a costly choice. What it does offer us is a moment of self-reflection.

Would I leave my secure career to commit my whole life to following Christ? Would I risk losing my power and position knowing I’d never be able to get that job back? Would I be willing to say goodbye to my way of life as I know it? What would hold me back from giving it all up in order to walk with, eat with, and learn from Jesus? Would I hesitate when the invitation was given? Would I make space on my calendar for such activities?

We aren’t privy to the thought process behind Matthew’s decision because that’s of no matter to the author. The point is that he chose to follow Jesus. He accepted the invitation and that’s what Matthew, Mark and Luke are telling us here.

Discussion Questions:

1. What in my life is keeping me from following Jesus each and every day?
2. Where might my heart be allied with power, position, or wealth?
3. How might those things keep me from making a split decision of repentance like Matthew?
4. What is Jesus inviting you to do in this season of your life?
5. Look to Christ's response to the Pharisees. Do I count myself among the righteous or among the sinners? Am I still in need of the Great Physician?
6. Who are the "tax collectors" around you that Christ is calling you to eat with, befriend, and show kindness?

Day 3 – Nathaniel: From Skepticism to Faith

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you,^[a] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Understanding the Passage:

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This might be one of the most relatable statements in the New Testament. Many of us have thought this about other cities or towns in no uncertain terms. It's understandable that Nathanael would question what he was just told. Phillip was claiming to have found the Messiah who people had been talking about for generations! The one who was written about in the sacred scrolls. The one who was to save Israel. Philip was making quite a lofty claim. It's understandable that Nathanael's response was skeptical and even doubtful. One might be tempted to interpret this phrase as doubt, but instead it will point us to a very faithful act—repentance.

Nathanael changes his mind after seeing and experiencing the Christ himself. In just a few verses we see Nathanael move from skepticism to full belief. His act of changing his mind, of repentance, came from seeing and experiencing.

Sometimes an experience brings us to a place of repentance. Have you ever been there? You held one belief (little or big) and then you received new information through an experience, and it changed the way you believed and acted from that moment on.

A wise seminary professor once said, “sometimes your theology informs your praxis and other times your praxis informs your theology.” This passage shows us we need both beliefs and experiences throughout our Christian journey. We learn about God from Scripture, Sunday School, sermons, etc. That information gets into us and shapes our beliefs and/or supports our existing beliefs. But then a new experience comes our way that doesn’t quite fit into our belief system. It may be something unlike anything else you’ve experienced or even heard of and you find yourself in a moment like Nathanael, “that’s not really what’s going on, right? I heard nothing good can come from there or them or that source.” But then we see. We experience. We encounter the power and love of God in a new way and it changes us. It challenges our tightly held beliefs. Sometimes our faith is grown a bit, and sometimes it completely turned on its head (Jesus had a way of doing that). Sometimes certain ideologies are thrown out all together and something new and beautiful is formed. (That’s the way of the kingdom, right, death and resurrection?)

Through this very human moment Nathanael teaches us something very important. We can find the love of God in the strangest of places: the farmer’s market, a funeral, a conflict with a co-worker, the house a few streets over with that red/blue election sign in the yard. May we never hold onto our beliefs so tightly that we miss what the Holy Spirit is revealing to us. May we be changed by the one who requires us to change our minds, to self-reflect, to learn more about our Creator. Repentance means growth and maturity of our faith. May we be like Nathanael and move from skepticism to experiencing the love of Christ to following him with all that we are.

Discussion Questions:

1. Read this Scripture passage outloud and imagine yourself in Nathanael’s shoes. Do you identify with him here? Why or why not?
2. Write about a time in your life that your beliefs were changed by a new experience.
3. What, if any, apprehension do you have about this form of repentance?
4. When was the last time your beliefs have been challenged? Perhaps you had judged a type of person and actually found beauty there. Or perhaps you decided to spend money more intentionally after learning about harmful manufacturing practices. Perhaps you decided to devote more of your time to something when your eyes were opened by something new.

Day 4 – Paul: Spiritual Whiplash

Acts 9:3-9

³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see

nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Acts 9:13-19

¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul^[a] and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters^[a] at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.^[b] ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Galatians 1:11-16

¹¹ For I want you to know, brothers and sisters,^[a] that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me,^[b] so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being,

Understanding the Passage:

This Saul-to-Paul story contains one of the most unexpected opportunities for repentance in Scripture. What a plot twist, that Jesus meant what he said! Christ died for all—even the bad guys. Saul is a Pharisaic Jew who is actively persecuting the early Christian church. He is on his way to capture Christians who are following The Way (the way of Jesus) when he encounters the Truth, the Life and the Way.

There is some scholarly dispute about what we are witnessing in the Road to Damascus experience. There has been a long-held belief that this is a story of Paul’s conversion. That has since been challenged by other scholars who understand this to be Paul receiving a calling to ministry. There is support for both. Either way this is an intense situation, which leads to repentance. In a mere 18 verses, we see a man bloodthirsty for Christians’

transition to a becoming a minister of the Gospel of Christ. So not only has this man turned from his wicked ways, but he has accepted Christ as Lord and gone to work for him fulltime. Scriptural whiplash. (Note that Christ doesn't throw one away after repenting. He sets you to work!)

What's interesting about pre-conversion Saul is that he is fully convinced that his persecution of Christians is the *right* thing to do. He believes these people, who are following the Way, are blasphemous and it's only right for them to be put to death for such offenses. He believes this is his duty as a devout Pharisee. He had his mind made up. He held firmly to the rigid interpretation of the law. It seems as if he worked himself into a place where, really, the only one who could change his mind was God. After Saul became Paul, the same energy that he put into persecuting Christians now is pointed toward proclaiming the Gospel and expanding the Kingdom.

Paul had his heels dug in. He wasn't letting go of his beliefs. It literally took an act of God to reach him. (Thank God he did!) Have you ever found yourself with your heels dug in, holding tightly to something that is causing harm and destruction? Holding on to something that we know is "right" with full certainty, but values ideologies over human lives? Holding onto a lifestyle that is slowly killing you? We need not wait for the big lightning bolt/blinding kind of moment. Because of Paul's conversion we now have a whole community of people (the church) who desire to show us the better ways of God's grace. Because Saul was converted, we now know that repentance is an option for us. Repentance says, "I don't want to live like this anymore" or "I thought it was the best at the time, but I was wrong." Repentance is a gift and an invitation to a new life, a new way, The Way! This is good news for all, even if it gives us a little spiritual whiplash occasionally.

Discussion Questions:

1. Read the passages and decide for yourself; is this a conversion story or is this a calling story? (Hint: there is no wrong answer.)
2. Where could you be spending your energy for good instead of correcting others and making sure they are doing things the "right way?"
3. How have you viewed repentance in the past? Have you gained new insights about it?
4. In your opinion, who is the Saul of today? Who seems unreachable in their mission of destruction? Write about it. Make it a point to pray for them to be led to repentance this week.

Day 5 - Soldier at the cross: Repentance is Available to Anyone at Any Time

Matthew 27:50-56

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and^[e] went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

⁵⁵ Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph,^[i] and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

Mark 15:33-41

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land^[h] until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^[i] ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he^[i] breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"^[k]

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Luke 23:47

⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."^[a]

Understanding the Passage:

Here we find Jesus in his darkest hour. There are few people left at the cross: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Salome and the centurion soldier who gives the last fatal wound to Christ's body. This Roman soldier had no relationship to Christ. As far as we know he had not heard any of Christ's teachings. He had not experienced the miracles, the healings, the casting out of demons. Christ was no one to him except a criminal that he was to execute. It was easy to commit such heinous acts against him. Crucifixion was his job. There was no mercy, no compassion—only cruelty. Modern readers might want to find some inkling of kindness and so we read into the act of placing a wine-soaked sponge on the tip of the spear, but even that is an act of mockery. Every Roman soldier carried a small sponge with them for personal hygiene. The use of that sponge was an act of disrespect. The scene is bleak. Christ breathes his last breath and gives up his spirit. The sky turns dark, the earthquakes and fractures, tombs roll open, and the veil is torn in the Temple. After all of that, one final strange and unlikely event occurs. The Roman soldier who participated in the torture, ridicule, crucifixion and delivered the final fatal wound, makes a profession of faith. Luke's account says, "He praised God" and believed Christ's innocence. We might wonder how one makes such a huge leap from violence to faith. But for those of us who love Jesus, we know that no one could stand so close to our loving Savior in that powerfully holy and self-sacrificial moment and NOT profess Jesus is Lord.

What can we learn from this scene that is so very painful to imagine? What does the story of this soldier who is an expert at torture and execution have to teach us?

Repentance can happen at any time for anyone.

Matthew's mention of this soldier's profession is significant. This Roman soldier was not a Jew but, in fact, he was a Gentile. We could call it foreshadowing. But really, it's a blatant statement that Jesus did indeed come first to the Jews and then for the Gentiles. Here is Christ, lifeless, bringing life and salvation to someone who is arguably the last one to deserve it. Repentance can happen any time for anyone. It doesn't matter what you've done in life. It doesn't matter what "team" you're on. It doesn't matter where you come from or what you do for a living. Jesus always gives us the option to repent. The opportunities are endless.

How does one move from torture, cruelty, and murder to fully acknowledging the presence of God? How do we move from a self-centered and security-seeking lifestyle? How can we lay down our idols and let Jesus reprioritize the values in our lives? How do we turn away from sin in any form? We repent.

We return to the cross. We return to our Jesus. We receive his mercy, grace and love afresh and we let that change us. We can repent anytime anywhere. Repentance is for us all.

Discussion Questions:

1. Read the Scripture passages aloud. What stands out to you as you think about repentance?
2. Why is it significant that a Roman soldier makes a profession of faith?
3. Where do you need repentance? Perhaps it's a big change in life or it's a small shift. Write it down.
4. How has your understanding of repentance changed this week?

Video Questions:

1. What is your understanding of repentance? Has it changed as you've grown in your faith? How?
2. Why is repentance so important?
3. Share and discuss an example of repentance (either from your life or someone else's) that had an impact on you.
4. Are there other examples of repentance in the Bible that you know of? Discuss.
5. Which of the characters from the week's daily readings do you find more interesting?
6. With whom do you identify from this week's readings?
7. Name an instance in your life that could have been made much better had you been quick to repent. Discuss.
8. Discuss the differences between conversion and repentance.