

Repent and Be Baptized

What To Do When You Cannot Undo What's Already Been Done

Acts 2:36-39 (ESV)

36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God had made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" **38** And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

Introduction

There are two reasons this text is right for today. First because we stand on the threshold looking back on one year and forward to another. Second, because we had planned baptism for today.

We are now eight days into the new year. Many people choose to take some time at the end of one year and the beginning of another to stop and reflect on the events of the past year. Some people make resolutions and some do not, but it is wise to pause and thoughtfully consider the activity of God in your life over the previous year. Much can be learned from some deliberate thinking.

The Lord instructs us to "consider your ways"¹ and "ponder the path of your feet."² The Bible promises blessing to those who do this kind of self examination and also warns us that the failure to do so will result in a kind of wandering that will lead one into sin.³ I try to do this at the beginning of each year.

When I recall the events of the previous year, I can usually categorize memorable events into two classes—the things I did well and the things I did not do well. It's easy to know what to do with the things I did well. I give God the glory for them and thank Him for His providential presence of His grace and mercy.

But what am I and what are we to do with the things that we did not do well? How are we to handle the situations in which we failed or faltered? **What are we to do when we cannot undo what has already been done?** Certainly we are to learn from them. But is there anything more? Is remembering and learning from them *all* that we should do?

¹ Prov 6:6; Hag 1:5, 7.

² Prov 4:26.

³ Prov 5:6.

These were the questions that were rolling over in my mind when on the second day of this new year when in my daily Bible reading plan I came to Acts chapter 2 and verse 37 leaped out at me. “*Brothers, what shall we do?*” That is the question I hope to answer this morning.

The Context of the Question

What prompted this question was Peter’s sermon (2:14ff). This took place on the day of Pentecost. This took place 50 days after Passover (which was when Jesus was crucified) and 10 days following His ascension into heaven.

Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit and He had just kept His promise. He poured out His Holy Spirit upon all the disciples and they began “telling the mighty works of God” in many languages (2:4-12). The people were amazed and some mistakenly thought the newfound linguistic aptitude was due to new wine. Peter preached a little sermon to explain that this was actually a fulfillment of prophecy. This was nothing more than God keeping His centuries old promise.

The tragic truth, though, was that this prophecy was fulfilled at incredible cost. The Holy Spirit had only been given because Jesus had purchased that promise. Jesus had purchased the right to pour out the Holy Spirit on His people. He had purchased that right through His own death. God had shown His approval of Jesus’ life by raising Him from the dead, but the tragic truth that cut these listeners to the heart was that *they* were the ones who were responsible for Jesus’ death. *They* had murdered an innocent man. *They* were the ones who had crucified the Messiah. *They* were the ones who had risen up against the very Son of God. *They* had disapproved the One of whom God had mightily and miraculously approved.

Acts 2:37 (ESV)

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Brothers, what shall we do? That question is a desperate question. Can you hear the desperation in their voices? What shall we do? We have crucified the very one whom God sent to save us? We have killed an innocent man! We have done the unthinkable! We have put to death the author of life?⁴

This is something that cannot be undone. They could not go back in time and change this. History is relentlessly unalterable. The nail-prints in the hands of Jesus will never be removed. So they asked the question, “*Brothers, what shall we do?*”

What shall we do when we look back on 2011 (or even the events of your whole life) and the things that we did not do well are brought to mind? What shall we do when we ponder events that cannot be undone no matter how strongly we wish that we could? ***What shall we do when we cannot undo what has already been done?***

Let me offer for your consideration three responses that you, in humble conversation with the Lord Jesus Christ, and prayerful discernment, may be appropriate for any instance that the Holy Spirit might bring to mind. The three responses are 1) to release, 2) to reconcile, 3) to repent (and be

⁴ Acts 3:15.

baptized if you have not been baptized yet as a believer in Jesus). The first one, release, applies to circumstances where another has offended you. The second, reconcile, applies to circumstances where you are the offender and have offended another. And the third, repent, applies when you have offended God.

What Does Offense mean?

What do I mean when I say “offended?” When I use the term offended I mean “sinned against.” I mean when you have wronged another person in a way that is contrary to the ethical commands of Scripture. I mean when you have spiritually wounded someone and hurt their feelings. I do not mean what society means by “offense” today which usually means someone said or did something that is politically incorrect. By “offended” I mean when you have, either intentionally or unintentionally, gone against the clear teaching of Scripture regarding how the children of God are to treat one another. I do not mean offense that comes from speaking the gospel, or any truth of Scripture in love. I do not mean any offense that results from the loving proclamation of the gospel of Jesus.

Release: The Call to Forgive (When you have been offended)

One thing we can do when we think about the things that cannot be undone is to **release**. Release the person who did to you that thing which cannot be undone. In other words, choose to forgive.

As we recall the events of the previous year, possibly the events that most easily come to mind are the ones in which *you have been offended by someone else*. The wounds that linger longest in our memories are those that others, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have inflicted upon us. In these instances, the call of Christ is that we choose to forgive the people who have sinned against us and **release** them from any obligation to repay whatever debt we think they owe us.

The reason we are called to this is because as children of God this is the kind of forgiveness that we ourselves have experienced from God. *Just as God has forgiven us of our sins against Him, He therefore expects that we forgive the sins of others against us!* This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. Since God has forgiven our greater sins against Him, then we should forgive the lesser sins against one another.

The degree of offense the results from sinning against your fellow man is infinitesimally smaller than the degree of offense that results from sinning against the infinitely holy God. And yet through Jesus our infinitely heinous sins against the unimpeachable character of God have been forgiven. Therefore how can we refuse to forgive and continue to hold one another accountable for such small offenses when God Himself has chosen through the shed blood of Jesus to release us from infinite offenses against Him.

Jesus was instructing His disciples when Peter asked an amazing question. Jesus told His disciples, **“If someone sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.”** (Mt 18:15). If the two of you alone cannot get it worked out, then take one or two others with you. Peter hears this and perhaps he thinks about repeat offenders. He then asks Jesus, “How long is this supposed to go on? How many times am I supposed to forgive a person? As many as seven times?” (Mt 18:21) Peter thought he was being generous by saying seven times. He had gone way beyond the stand three strikes and you’re out. He was being incredibly gracious by allowing up to seven offenses. But Jesus’ was even more amazing than Peter’s question. Jesus answered, **“No, Peter, not seven times, but seventy times seven!”** (Mt 18:22).

I do not doubt that Peter was physically stunned by that statement. There was probably several seconds of silence just to allow that truth to hang in front of Peter's and the other disciples faces. Then to help that truth sink in and take root, Jesus told a story.

To illustrate, Jesus then told of a particular servant who owed a king \$100 million. The king called in the servant and told him that it was time to repay the debt. The economy was depressed and the servant did not have the money. So the king ordered him and his wife and his children and all that he owned to be sold in order to pay back at least some of the debt. The servant fell to his knees and begged the king to be merciful and patient with him and he promised to repay everything.

Matthew 18:27 (ESV)

27 *And out of pity for him, the master of that servant **released** him and forgave him the debt.*

The king was moved with pity. Out of a heart filled with compassion, the king **released** the servant from the obligation to repay the debt. Imagine the freedom of not having to repay a \$100 million dollar debt! He **released** him from an infinite debt that he never would have been able to repay.⁵ He was not only released from slavery, but he was released from the obligation to pay back the debt.

He was **released**. He was free. But what did he do with his freedom?

The servant went out from the presence of the king and he bumped into a guy who owed him \$100. He grabbed the man and started choking him and yelled at him, "I demand you pay me what you owe me!" But the economy was depressed and the man did not have the money. The man fell to his knees and he begged him to be merciful and patient with him. But unlike the king, the servant threw the man in prison until he repaid the debt. But of course no one can repay a debt when you are in prison and unable to work.

But there's a twist in the story. Some of the king's other servants who had witnessed the king's earlier generosity with the servant also saw him choke the man and throw him in jail because he could not repay the incomparably small debt. So they went and told the king. "King, Sir, you are never going to believe what we just witnessed!" They explained. The king then recalled the servant into his presence and said,

Matthew 18:32-35 (ESV)

32 *'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*

This servant will never get out because he will never be able to repay his debt. As you can see, this issue of **forgiveness is a matter of life and death**. If you, through faith in Jesus, have been released from the infinite debt of the repayment of your sins against God, then you are required to release others from the comparatively insignificant debt of repayment of others' sins against you.

⁵ Jesus said the servant owed then thousand talents. One talent was worth about twenty years worth of wages for a laborer. This servant owed 10,000 talents. Being paid at the rate of a laborer, who had no living expenses to pay, the servant would have to work 200,000 years to pay back this debt! The point is clear. This was a debt that never could have been repaid and yet he was forgiven completely. Amazing!

I know that being sinned against does not feel insignificant in the moment. This is why Jesus breaks in so uncomfortably and presses the truth into our hearts. Sins against the holy character of God are infinitely more sinful than sins against the sinful character of man.

Forgiveness is not optional for the children of God. The disciples of Jesus must forgive just as they have been forgiven.

Matthew 6:14-15 (ESV)

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

If you want your sins against God forgiven, then you must forgive others their sins against you.

Is Anyone In Your Prison of Unforgiveness?

So as you look back over 2011, have you thrown anyone in prison of unforgiveness? Are you still waiting for someone to repay a debt? Does anyone come to mind who has sinned against you that you are not willing to forgive? If you are unwilling to forgive others, then you should not be surprised if one day you hear from the lips of Jesus, “Then neither will I forgive you.”

If in your mind the Holy Spirit has brought the name of someone you have thrown into such a prison, then Jesus would say, “Release them. If you want to enjoy release from the debt of your own sins, then you must release others. Release them into my hands. Leave this Me. I will do what is right. You release them.”

Reconcile: The Call to Reconnect (When you have offended another)

The second thing we can do when we think of things that cannot be undone is to **reconcile**. Other events of the previous year that may come to mind (besides the ones where we have been offended) may be ones in which we have offended someone else.

Matthew 5:23-24 (ESV)

*23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be **reconciled** to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Jesus here places in priority our relationship to one another over the practice of personal worship. This is shocking. If you are in process of worship (i.e. bringing your offering to the altar, that is coming to God) and you remember that a brother **has something against you**, then you are to stop your worship and go and be **reconciled**.

This means that if you even think that you have offended (i.e. sinned against) a brother, then *before going to God you are first to go to your brother* and attempt to be reconciled. We are not given the permission of waiting until so-in-so comes to us, we are first to go to them if we **think they have something against us**. This is incredibly serious.

Often what keeps us from doing this is the uncertainty of the potential outcome. The potential outcome should have nothing to do with whether or not we obey this command. Jesus does not say, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, and if you think it will go well, then leave your gift before the altar and go and be reconciled to your brother.” Whatever you think the outcome may or may not be, should not keep you from being obedient to this command.

It may go well or it may not go well. That is not the point. The point is if you suspect that so-in-so has something against you, then you are to go to them and attempt to be reconciled. Again this is not optional.

When It Did Not Go Well

About a year ago I was invited to speak at an event in another state. The morning I was to return home (to MA) as I was praying and reading my Bible. I asked the Lord, “Is there anything else you want me to do before I leave?” A person came to mind with whom I used to work. The thought occurred to me that this person might have something against me. So I asked the Lord, “Should I make a visit before I leave town?” I sensed the answer was yes. So I stopped by for a visit. It did not go well. Though there was an exterior smile and an outstretched hand, it became painfully clear that I really was not welcome. There was not warmth toward me from the heart. I quietly departed. That was my fourth attempt at trying to reconcile.

When It Did Go Well

A few weeks ago I had a similar experience. One morning as I was praying, the Lord again brought someone to mind that I thought may have something against me. Later that day I went to that person and explained that I was sorry that something I had communicated had been received the wrong way and pain had resulted. I asked for forgiveness. This time I sensed the handshake was indeed genuine. That time it went well.

What Does Reconcile Mean?

Well, what does reconcile mean? Reconcile, in the context of relationships, means “to restore friendly relations; to coexist in harmony; to make peace.” Jesus said in Matthew 5:9, “*Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called sons of God.*” We are called to pursue peace. We are to go after it. Paul wrote in **Romans 12:18**, “*If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.*”

Reconciliation does not mean complete agreement. Complete agreement about all things is not possible. But in so far as agreement is possible, there can be peaceful coexistence even when there is not complete agreement. Reconciling means agreeing upon the boundary lines. Nations that have completely different world views can live at peace with each other so long as the boundaries are respected. Neighbors who disagree on many things can live side by side so long as the boundaries are known and respected.

We elders do not have complete agreement about every theological issue, but we are agreed upon the primary issues (or first level doctrines such as the authority and truthfulness of Scripture, the humanity and deity of Christ, then necessity of belief in the gospel, and justification by faith) and we have agreed that differences in less important theological issues will not separate us.

The call of Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24 is for us to be proactive in seeking peaceful relations with others. Jesus does not want His followers passively hoping that reconciliation might happen. Jesus wants His followers to pursue, to actively seek, peaceful relationship between themselves.

Psalm 34:14 (ESV)

14 Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. (cf. 1 Peter 3:11)

Romans 14:19 (ESV)

19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

So as you look back over 2011, has the Lord brought anyone to mind who may have something against you? If so, before you lay your head down on the pillow tonight, you need to ask yourself these two questions, “Have I done everything within my power to seek reconciliation and peace with that person? Have I taken every step I know how to take in order to ensure that in so far as it depends upon me we are at peace?” Jesus would say, “This needs to be taken care of immediately because I’m not interested in your worship until you’ve done all you can do to put right whatever is wrong.”

The person may reject your attempts. That does not matter. What matters is what YOU do not what they do or do not do.

Repent & Be Baptized (When you have offended God)

It’s one thing to be sinned against. It’s another to sin against someone else. But what do you do when you have sinned against God? What do you do when you realize that it was your sins that caused Jesus to have to go to cross and to endure the kind of death that He endured? What do you do when you understand that you were an accessory to His death? To the death of an innocent man? And even worse, what do you do when you discover that you were an accessory to the death of God’s own Son?

How would you treat someone who participated in the killing of your only Son? Do you think that you would demand justice or would you give that person a gift? Look closely at how Peter describes the response of God toward those who participated in the killing of His only Son.

Acts 2:36-39 (ESV)

36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God had made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” **38** And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

Peter says, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” What an amazing response! “You killed my Son, but I will give you the gift of my own Holy

Spirit! And this promise is not just for you, it is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself!”

We are far off from the day Peter spoke this promise and yet it is as true today as it was when Peter spoke it. God is calling you to Himself. Do you hear His voice? He is say, “Come to me through faith in My Son Jesus and I will forgive you of your sins and I will give you the greatest gift anyone could ever receive—my own Holy Spirit! I know you messed up in 2011, but repent and I will forgive you. I know you’ve sinned against Me but Jesus has borne your sins. He has taken your punishment so that you can come to Me.

If you will repent (change your thinking about sin—call it sin rather than a mistake or a personality flaw—start walking toward me rather than away from Me) change your mind about Jesus, and start trusting in Him rather than in yourself, then I will forgive all of your sins and welcome you with open arms and fill your soul with My Holy Spirit. I will wash away all the sinful muck that has weighed you down and burdened your life. I will wash you clean on the inside and give you a new spirit. And if you will offer people a idea of what this looks like by being baptized then we will enjoy a new direction and a new relationship.

Release and forgive.

Reconcile and forbear.

Repent and be baptized.

Do all of this through faith in Jesus.