**The Courage to Repent**

Based on [Luke 18:9-14](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk18.9-14)

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One of my son’s favourite series of fantasy novels contains a character who suffered a curse as a baby, making her a “shield of misfortune to other people”. This meant that she would suffer the pain of others for them. An attendant characteristic of this character is that, at the age of a toddler, she had the wisdom and insight of a sage. The idea that the author was expressing is that suffering begets wisdom.

Suffering develops wisdom, not always but in the right sort of character. And though we do not wish to cause anyone to suffer; it is wisdom to know that someone who never suffers, or who escapes necessary suffering is and will remain a fool his entire life. But the one who takes up his cross will find wisdom, and in this life, contentment and peace, and in the next eternal life.

In the gospel lesson, there is a particular kind of suffering that is more precious to God than all of the tithes, prayers, fastings, and good works of men. That suffering is repentance.

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed1 thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

CS Lewis once quipped that “Repentance is no fun at all”. It isn’t. For the christian, Repentance is facing the reality that you deserve to go to hell, that based on your thoughts, words and deeds, you belong with Satan and his angels in the lake of fire. Someone who ignores this will either fall into the excesses of legalism or despair.

We considered last week how repentance is a virtue, and it is a type of courage. Courage is a virtue, a good thing, a characteristic that you find in people you admire and something you would prefer to have yourself. A lack of courage is called cowardice, and that is someone who acknowledges their fears and refuses to act.

Cowardice is not the only sign of a lack of courage. There is also foolishness or recklessness. A coward sees his fears and gives into them; but a reckless person fails to assess his fears...confront them, ruminate over them. So a reckless person takes foolish risks, not because they have great courage, but because they lack a sense of fear.

The courageous person neither runs from his fears, nor ignores them, but faces them, considers them, counts the costs, assesses his own strengths, weaknesses and abilities, and regardless of the suffering that will be involved...does the right thing--knowing full well it will be no fun at all.

Repentance is no fun at all. Someone who faces their sin but does not seek forgiveness, lacks repentance---just as a coward lacks courage. Judas faced his sin but did not seek forgiveness, he ran to his conspirators to try and erase his guilt, but he did not run to Jesus. Someone who lacks a sense of their own sin, or fails to assess it rightly is reckless. So the pharisee in today’s gospel recklessly approaches the holy altar of God, boasting of his own righteousness but fails to consider his own unworthiness to stand in the presence of the living God.

But the tax collector is not reckless in the presence of the living God. He stands far off...realizing his unholiness; he didn’t even lift up his eyes to heaven...recognizing his unworthiness; he beat his breast...acknowledging his own fault. In a word, his unworthiness doesn’t keep him from seeking God; he has the courage to approach God, but he is wise enough to know he doesn’t deserve equality with God. He faces his sin, and seeks salvation.

Peter, when he sinned against Jesus followed him from a distance, as he was led away to be tried. As he is confronted and accused of being Jesus disciple he denied it three times. But he was within eyeshot of Jesus, so that at the third denial Jesus makes eye contact, Peter sees him seeing him, and he wept. He faced the one he’d wronged and he was given the gift of repentance.

And our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was without sin; had a type of sinless fear and sinless reluctance to go to the cross. His reluctance didn’t cause him to avoid it; nor did he rush to it, despite his eagerness for it to be finished. Instead, the night in which he was betrayed, he approached his Father in prayer, asking that this cup be taken from him, but also willing to face whatever his Father has prepared for him.

Christian friends; this is how we are to approach God in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We do not despair in our sin and so stay away from the communion of saints; neither do we recklessly invade the sacrament as though we are worthy in ourselves to receive it. Open communion is a sin against repentance. Rather we humble ourselves, looking at our sins in the mirror and earnestly seek forgiveness from the God of all comfort and grace.

Repentance is no fun at all, but to God it is the most precious thing you have. God is not pleased with the blood of bulls and goats. He had no regard for the offering of Cain. But he is pleased when you have the courage to face your sins, suffer yourself to be convicted by them, acknowledge the punishment they deserve, and yet approach him with fear and with faith that he will forgive them for the sake of Jesus Christ, saying “God be merciful to me...a sinner.”

1Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, wea have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2Through him we have also obtained access by faithb into this grace in which we stand, and wec rejoiced in hope of the glory of God. 3Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.