

Nehemiah 9:38-10:39 A model of repentance

IF you move in Christian circles there is a word that you will hear quite often – the word repent.

Jesus uses it

*Mark 1: ¹⁴After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God: ¹⁵“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. **Repent** and believe the good news!”*

The apostles use it

*Paul Acts 17: ³⁰“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now **commands all people everywhere to repent**, ³¹because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”*

Peter Acts 2: ³⁷When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

*³⁸Peter replied, “**Repent** and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Repentance is a key idea – not an idea, a key attitude and action – for both those who are not yet believers in Jesus but are hearing Jesus’ words and working out what it will mean for them to trust Him

And for those who are already believers, for the continuing Christian life is one of repentance and faith, daily dying to ourselves to live by faith in Jesus, or, in Jesus words, daily denying ourselves and taking up our cross to follow Him.

Luke 9: ²³Then he said to them all, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.

Christian or not yet a Christian we may have some kind of definition in our heads of repentance

Perhaps like the one you heard in the children’s talk

That repentance is changing our minds so we can change our direction

Changing our minds about who is in charge of our lives,

Saying Jesus is in charge – He’s the boss, not me, so that we live each day doing what the Lord Jesus says.

But a definition is not the same as an example

I can give you a definition of cricket – here’s one from the Cambridge dictionary

a sport in which two teams of eleven players try to score runs (= points) by hitting a small, hard ball with a bat, and running between two sets of small wooden posts:

But until you’ve seen Steve Smith ducking a bouncer, or Carey taking a catch off the bowling of Starc and the hapless batter trudging back to the stand, or the duel between a spinner like Nathan Lyon and a middle order batsman, you’ve not got much idea of what cricket is.

To understand repentance we need an example, a model of repentance, and that is what God has given us in Nehemiah 8-10 – an example in the returned exiles turning back to the LORD of what repentance looks like in practice.

Today we are going to focus on one element of repentance in chapter 10, but to get the full repentance picture let me recap what has happened in the earlier chapters

First in chapter 8 you had conviction of sin by the word of God, by the reading and explaining of the written word

Nehemiah 8:⁸ They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. ⁹ Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.

The assembled people heard the law, the torah given through Moses, as it was, the word of the living God to them

And hearing what God said was required in His covenant, His relationship, with their people Israel they saw that they and their forebears had fallen well short of whole hearted loyalty and obedience to the Lord

And they wept at their failure to love God, and the judgements that failure had brought upon them as a people

And note again what Clinton said.

They were convicted of their sin against their Creator and their King by the reading and explanation of the written word

They needed no other experience, no fresh revelation, no sign

They were convicted by the word

And that is still true of our repentance.

Repentance normally starts with the conviction that we have sinned against our Creator God, the conviction that comes through the Word of God, read, preached, or even remembered from childhood, for it is only from God's word, and especially the gospel word that speaks of Jesus' coming and death and rising, that we learn from God that we have wronged Him by our ignoring, disobeying and rejecting Him, and that such sin means we will face the judgement on sin revealed in His word, placed us in a position of eternal peril.

Even if we are already troubled by what we have done, by the way we have wronged others, it is from God's word that we learn that such a failure to love others as we should is first and above all sin against God.

Repentance involves first of all the conviction that we have wronged, sinned against, God, a conviction that comes through God's word.

Then in chapter 9 following that conviction there was confession, confession to God

They stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.

*Nehemiah 9:² Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and **confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.***

They confessed to God a history of rebellion in which they shared

9:³³ You are righteous concerning all that has happened to us, because you have acted faithfully, while we have acted wickedly.

³⁴ Our kings, leaders, priests, and ancestors did not obey your law

*or listen to your commands
and warnings you gave them.*

And it was to God. “You”, they say, addressing God personally

Sin is not just failing to live up to an abstract, impersonal, standard, it is wronging the living God who gives us our lives and this good world by refusing to listen to and honour Him by believing and doing what He says

You cannot deal with personal wrong impersonally.

Confession of sin to God acknowledges that God is living, personal, and has a right as our Creator to expect our thanks and praise, our trust and obedience

Believers in Jesus especially know that, for taught by the Lord Jesus and the Spirit we call God Father. We have no doubt our God is personal and repentance involves dealing with Him personally. That is why we sometimes find it hard, for there is shame in wronging one who has loved us, a shame that makes us reluctant to face them.

But chapter 9 wasn’t just a confession of sin.

The people were convicted of sin because they believed the word they were hearing was the word of God, and that same word also revealed the LORD to them in the record of His words and His dealings with Israel. It revealed the LORD to be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness

Their confession was also a confession of faith in God as He had revealed Himself to be.

*9:17 ... But you are a forgiving God,
gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in faithful love,
and you did not abandon them.*

*9:31 However, in your abundant compassion,
you did not destroy them or abandon them,
for you are a gracious and compassionate God.*

Repentance is inseparable from faith in God and His promises in His word.

For you to turn in repentance to the almighty, you must trust that He is merciful – as Andy said, that His mercy is more

Even if you were convicted of your wrong, even if you were convicted of His might and know you could never escape Him, you would keep running from the holy God in terror, [you would say to the mountains fall on us and hide us from the wrath of the Lamb] futile as you know it to be, unless you were convinced by God He would be merciful.

And for believers it is only a conviction of His love that can overcome our shame in failing and wronging His love, His great love that draws us to Him in repentance.

And that is what the gospel brings, when God opens our eyes to the truth of the gospel that Christ came into the world to save sinners, not to condemn them.

The gospel that calls us to repent assures us we will be welcomed when we turn around and turn back to our Creator who sent Jesus into the world.

This is what repentance looks like

Chapter 8 Conviction of sin by the word of God

Chapter 9 Confession of sin to the living God

And chapter 10 A commitment to change, to change from that point on to live by God's word.

It is with this commitment our passage is concerned, and we take up the story at 9:38 where

As a consequence of their recognition of their sin and turning to God for mercy they make a commitment to a binding agreement.

9:38 In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement in writing on a sealed document containing the names of our leaders, Levites, and priests.

This is not a deal to make and keep God merciful. He is merciful. This is a response to the mercy God has shown in all His dealings with Israel, and especially now in bringing them back to Jerusalem. It is not the cause of grace, but the fruit of the grace God has shown them in His steadfast love.

And we see how serious and firm a commitment this agreement is.

Putting it in writing means you have a permanent record

Affixing your seal to it means your commitment is considered and public

So if you are a leader you can be always held accountable to this agreement – by yourself and others

But it is not just the leaders.

Nehemiah 10:28 The rest of the people—the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants, along with their wives, sons, and daughters, everyone who is able to understand and who has separated themselves from the surrounding peoples to obey the law of God—²⁹join with their noble brothers and commit themselves with a sworn oath to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances, and statutes of the LORD our Lord.

All the people commit themselves with a sworn oath v. 29 – literally enter in a curse and an oath – they recognize that failing to keep their word should and will bring God's judgement upon them

And what is it that they commit to?

As a result of their conviction and confession all the people commit *'to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances and statutes of the LORD our Lord.'*

And they follow this all encompassing commitment with some specific concrete commitments vv. 30-39 to do with marriage, the sabbath, the worship of God in the temple.

Let's pause to think of the structure and content of this commitment which embodies their repentance.

There is First, the general commitment *'to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances and statutes of the LORD our Lord.'*

They commit to do everything God has commanded them. This is the foundational commitment on which the rest of their lives, in all the varying circumstances of their lives, will be built.

They are saying the LORD is their Lord, their ruler, and so in every area of life they will do what He instructs, they will live by His word.

Confessing the LORD is Lord and committing to express that in living by His word is the heart of genuine repentance, and the foundation of a right relationship with God.

Since the coming of Jesus that confession has focused on confessing Jesus is Lord, for the Lord Jesus is the Son of God sent into the world by the Father. He is God with us, one with the Father, doing the Father's will and speaking the Father's words. He is the one the Father wills all honour and obey, and you cannot honour God without honouring His Son as the One the Father declares Him to be by His resurrection – the Lord with all authority on heaven and earth.

Confessing Jesus is Lord, our Lord, is the beginning and heart of genuine repentance. If you are not yet a believer this is the repentance the gospel calls for, for with that confession we repudiate the lie all our race has been committed to from Adam on. From Adam on we have been committed to thinking our understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, can compete with our Creator's, and so we can be our own lords, live ignoring Him and disobeying Him, can live independent of God in His world. It is a lie our race perseveres in, despite the death it brings to us and the destruction it brings to the planet entrusted to our care.

Repentance that comes through believing the gospel says no. Jesus, the Son of God, is Lord. I am not. He is my Lord, and life is found in trusting and obeying Him.

That is the repentance that starts the Christian life.

And it is how we continue in the Christian life, for the Christian life, the life of a disciple of Jesus, is to live committed to doing all that our Lord, Jesus, has commanded us.

This is the foundational commitment the Lord Jesus calls for when he tells His disciples that making others His disciples involves teaching them to do all that He has commanded us.

Matt. 28: ¹⁸ Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Repentance. What does it look like? Conviction of sin, confession to God, and a commitment – to live life under the rule, by the word, of our Lord

But what we see in verse 30-39 here is that foundational, general commitment *'to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances and statutes of the LORD our Lord.'* needs to find expression in specific, concrete commitments that embody our general commitment in our daily living, in our relationship with our neighbours, in how we use our time and money.

That was true for the returned exiles, and it is true for believers in Jesus. Our commitment to do what Jesus has taught must find expression in concrete, specific, commitments to do what He says in the circumstances of our lives – in our marriages, our work, our study, our conversation

So let's look at the returned exiles concrete commitments - their commitment not to do certain things – like not giving their daughters in marriage to the surrounding peoples or trade on the Sabbath, and to do certain things – the sustaining of worship in the temple, for in this too the returned exiles can be a model for us

And to help us see how they can be a model for us let's ask this question:

– Why, in the light of all God commands – and there are a lot commands in the God's law, the first five books of the bible, why in their circumstances have they emphasized these as the concrete expression of their commitment to live all of life with the LORD as their Lord.

Let's think about what they commit themselves to not do and to do.

Firstly, these particular commitments are all applications of God's law. They don't invent from their own imagination what they think God will be pleased with. They learn it from His revealed word.

And so, for example, instruction about leaving the land uncultivated is found in Lev. 26:1-7, about cancelling debts in Deuteronomy 15:1-2, about tithing – giving a tenth of the produce to the Levites and the Levites giving a tenth to the priests – in Numbers 18:21-32.

A life of repentance is not doing what you think God should be pleased with, but doing what He says He is pleased with – doing what He commands. It's not shown by putting Christian stickers on your car, but by obeying the road rules. It is not shown by pursuing religious experiences, but by loving your neighbour; not shown by doing religious works like penance or the sacrifice of the Mass, but believing the gospel.

But secondly, as circumstances change over time, sometimes obedience to the Lord's commands involves thoughtful application in your present of the command of God gave centuries before.

We see two examples of that here.

Take the prohibition on intermarriage. In Deuteronomy 7 God had forbidden Israel to intermarry with the nations who inhabited Canaan at the time of Joshua's conquest, forbidden them to do that because

Deuteronomy 7: ³You must not intermarry with them, and you must not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴because they will turn your sons away from me to worship other gods. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will swiftly destroy you.

That danger remained, and so the returned exiles adapted that instruction to their circumstances by committing themselves not to intermarry with the surrounding peoples – who were no longer the tribes who were in Canaan at the time of the conquest.

Second example, the provision of money for the service of the temple v. 32, the giving of an eighth of an ounce of silver, literally one-third of a shekel.

At the time of the Exodus God had commanded that when a census was taken every Israelite man was to pay a half a shekel which was to be used for the service of the tent of meeting [Exodus 30:11-16]. The exiles no longer had a tent of meeting, but a temple; and they were no longer in a place to conduct a census – that was the right of the government, in their case the Persian king.

Exodus 30: ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses: ¹²“When you take a census of the Israelites to register them, each of the men must pay a ransom for his life to the Lord as they are registered. Then no plague will come on them as they are registered. ¹³Everyone who is registered must pay half a shekel according to the sanctuary shekel (twenty gerahs to the shekel). This half shekel is a contribution to the Lord.

But seeing that Exodus 30 taught that the service of the priests should be supported by the giving of the people, they imposed on themselves a yearly temple tax. They obeyed God's word by applying it differently in their different circumstances.

In the same way, sometimes a commitment to live doing all that Jesus has commanded means the word of Jesus has to be thoughtfully applied in the community of God's people to our new circumstances.

One example. Jesus taught His followers that 'if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two'. Matt. 5:41 In Jesus' day Roman soldiers could conscript civilians to carry their luggage for a part of their march. That is not the case today, but the Lord Jesus is looking for the generosity that turns compulsion into willing service, that seeks to do good even to those who we might identify as oppressors.

Part of living a life of repentance is thoughtfully engaging with God's word, really thinking about what it says about how we should live, so that we keep living by Jesus' teaching in the new circumstances of our lives.

Thirdly, these particular commitments show a determination to live as God's holy people. The returned exiles do that by specifically addressing present and known temptations that were a feature of their life as a minority living amongst an unsympathetic and at times hostile majority, temptations to find their security, prosperity and identity in the world and not in the LORD.

Three examples of their determination to remain God's holy people

Again, Intermarriage. Intermarriage with the surrounding peoples was a constant and continuing temptation for the returned exiles, addressed in Ezra 9-10, Nehemiah, and later Malachi [2:10-12]

But the temptation didn't arise because the young were mixing in high school or university and falling in love or unable to control themselves

Marrying with the surrounding people is much more about security and prosperity, developing alliances with the more populous and powerful surrounding peoples, tapping into networks for trade and protection

But as you heard God had warned the Israelites in the law that such intermarriage would lead to unfaithfulness, and their history had demonstrated the truth of that [Neh 13:26, Ps. 106:34-35]

So this commitment is not about preserving racial purity, but spiritual purity. They will not do something that might appear to make their life more secure and easier because they know it will compromise their loyalty to the LORD as the only God, their gracious, saving King

Then there is the Sabbath.

God had given the sabbath as a sign to Israel that they were His holy people. Exodus 31:12-17 [Ezk. 20:12-17]

Exodus 31: ¹² The Lord said to Moses, ¹³ "Tell the Israelites: You must observe my Sabbaths, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, so that you will know that I am the Lord who consecrates you. ... ⁶ The Israelites must observe the Sabbath, celebrating it throughout their generations as a permanent covenant. ¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the Israelites,

But the Sabbath was always challenging to keep and it separated them from their neighbours, who saw everyday as a day to make money. The temptation was to accommodate themselves to their neighbours and their commercial practices – to not offend them or be different to them. And joining them by trading on the Sabbath would also save them the cost of not working when every day mattered, like at harvest time, and gave them more opportunities to make money.

Committing specifically to the Sabbath is saying we are determined to be the Lord's holy people, to nurture amongst us an explicit reliance on the Lord to provide for us by living His way. It is saying our security and prosperity is not found by imitating those who don't know God, but in trusting the Lord and using time His way.

Thirdly, the focus in 32-39 on sustaining temple worship. This goes right to the heart of their distinctiveness. They were to live holy lives because God dwelt amongst them under the sign of the temple, and the means of sustaining that presence was the worship God had commanded – the sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament made by the priesthood the LORD had given.

Committing themselves to provide for both the activity and the personnel of the temple, costly as it was, was saying we have our identity, our security, our possession of the land, from being the LORD's people – and we are determined to continue as the LORD's people, worshipping Him alone in the way He has commanded us to worship Him.

These particular commitments show a determination to be the holy people their holy God has called them to be by directly addressing things in their environment that would compromise that holiness – intermarriage, sabbath trading, neglect of the temple

Brothers and sisters, as you heard from 2 Corinthians 6 our God who dwells amongst us by His Spirit, also expects believers in Jesus to live holy lives that are different from those around us who do not know God, different because we do His will.

[2 Cor. 6:16-7:1 So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.]

Nehemiah 10 challenges us to think about where we are being tempted or pressured to live like those around us who do not know God's word, and as part of our life of repentance to specifically, concretely, commit ourselves to continue to do what God wills.

There is a lot there, and you know the specific circumstances of your life, but let me give you some examples

It may be to respect the authority of your parents when the world is pressuring you to reject all authority external to yourself

Or it could be to say that sex is only for marriage between a man and a woman, so you won't move in with your girlfriend or boyfriend before marriage.

Or perhaps you will prioritize using your time not to pursue your own interests, but to love Jesus' people – which is the sign that we are His

Or using our money and gifts to support what sustains our common life as Jesus' people – that is our meeting together to hear God's word and to encourage each other to love and good works. Sustaining our gathering by supporting those whom God has gifted to teach the word, supporting the training of those who will teach God's word, serving to make our meeting work.

And because the pressure of the world to conform us to its priorities and beliefs is both seductive and unrelenting, it is worth re-visiting the way we use our time, our money, our bodies, our words, our lives to see if we are expressing our commitment to live as Jesus' disciples in concrete obedience to His word.

The Christian life can't be set and forget, for we can all drift, we can all get ensnared in the cares of this world, the delight in riches, the desire for other things

And a distinctive, holy life does cost, just as it cost the returned exiles whether it was refusing to trade on the Sabbath or giving of their substance to sustain the worship of the temple.

And that is a reminder, fourthly, that a life of repentance that expresses itself in concrete obedience in daily life requires a living faith, just as that obedience expresses faith, and in its practice sustains faith.

The returned exiles needed to trust that the LORD could and would provide for them, that He was their security and prosperity.

To live the distinctive life that does all the Lord Jesus commands we need to keep hearing the gospel and believing it, to trust that Jesus is the living Lord with all authority. More, that He has loved us and saved us, and that salvation is found in no one else, and that the life of repentance and faith He calls us to is the means He has given us to bring us to the fulfilment of all that He has promised us – resurrection to life in the new heaven and earth.

Nehemiah 8-10 – an example of repentance – conviction of sin by the word, confession to the living and merciful God, commitment to live trusting and obeying God's word.

In many ways this picture of the repentant returnees prepares us for the high point of the book of Nehemiah in chapter 12, the joyous dedication of the wall that climaxes with the people rejoicing in the temple – God's people, living under God's rule through His word, in God's place in His presence.

But it is just a picture, a foreshadowing of the fulfilment of God's purposes in the salvation Christ brings.

For the returned exiles are an in-between people.

They live in between the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy of the return from exile after the 70 years of captivity and the fulfilment of the heart of Jeremiah's prophecy – the beginning of the new covenant when God would write His law on His people's hearts and all would know Him because all their sins were forgiven.

Jeremiah 31: ³³ "Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days"—the Lord's declaration. "I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will one teach his neighbour or his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them"—this is the Lord's declaration. "For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin.

That is yet to come, and so at the end of Nehemiah, pointing us to that day, we read of the failure of the returned community in all these commitments.

They neglect the temple, failing to provide for the support of those who minister in it [13:4-13].

They work and trade on the sabbath [13:15-22]

They resume intermarriage with the surrounding peoples. [13:23-25]

It is a reminder that Christian repentance is not just turning over a new leaf, it is the expression of a new heart, a new birth of the Spirit the Lord Jesus gives to all who believe in Him.

If we are only relying on ourselves our commitment to live trusting and obeying the Lord Jesus will fail.

But the Lord Jesus does give that new heart to all His people, all who repent and believe the gospel.

Believers can and must live the life of repentance and faith, and it is that life which grows and perseveres as followers of Jesus, that comes at last to rejoice in God's presence in the new heaven and earth

So – believer, learn from Nehemiah how to nurture that life in you.

Keep coming under the teaching of God's word

Keep consciously living before God, coming to Him in confession, relying on His promises

And Keep committing to particular, concrete obedience to His word

What you, in the real circumstances of your life, won't do and will do, to conform your life to the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Go home and think – how does Jesus teach me to express my commitment to do all that He has taught me in my marriage, in my relationship with my boyfriend or girlfriend, in my ambition, in the way I talk to my parents or my children, in the way I handle my anger, or my desire, in the way I drive, in my interactions in the congregation – and as God reveals that to you through His Word commit to do it by His help

Live the life of daily repentance and faith and be the holy people the Lord Jesus has saved us to be