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Sermon Series: *Called to Lead*, No. 5

In Repentance

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Nehemiah 9:6, 22-37 [NIV]

⁶ You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you...

²² "You gave (our ancestors) kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. ²³ You made their children as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their parents to enter and possess. ²⁴ Their children went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you gave the Canaanites into their hands, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. ²⁵ They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.

²⁶ "But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. ²⁷ So you delivered them into the hands of their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.

²⁸ "But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.

²⁹ "You warned them in order to turn them back to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, of which you said, 'The person who obeys them will live by them.' Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. ³⁰ For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you gave them into the hands of the neighboring peoples. ³¹ But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

³² "Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes – the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. ³⁴ Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. ³⁵ Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

³⁶ "But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. ³⁷ Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

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We're in Nehemiah again today, if you'd care to find that passage which was read earlier: Nehemiah, Chapter 9.

Nehemiah was a Jew, who found himself as cup-bearer, the wine steward, of the king of Persia. He heard that the capital of his native Israel was in shambles and unsecured because of a broken-down city wall, and so, with his king's blessing, Nehemiah undertook the project of rebuilding it.

He moves to Jerusalem and leads those Hebrews still living near the city in accomplishing this – really miraculously – against the odds and the wishes of the surrounding nations.

The Jews there then celebrate the occasion by calling an assembly where the book of the Law – their Scripture – is read, and in that reading, they discover parts of their spiritual history that they, as a people, have neglected – for generations!

For example, Nehemiah 8:17 says the Hebrew people had not celebrated the Feast of Booths since the days of Joshua – that's about 900 years.

This would be something like you and me discovering, after living a lifetime saying we're Christians, that the practice of the Christian faith involves prayer – talking with and listening to God.

All this time, we've been missing this critical component of our faith, you see?

For them, it was at least this feast, and very likely a lot more, that they'd neglected for a long, long time, and so they read what observing the feast involves, and then they did it.

They discovered that they had done something wrong, and they corrected it.

This is repentance.

And then, apparently just a couple days after the close of the Feast of Booths, the people gathered again for the reading of the word of God – the reading of the Law, and that's where we pick up today.

We aren't told who the reader was, but once again, *hearing* God's word *affected* them, and they learned of more ways they had not been faithful to God.

This is just what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Romans, Chapter 7, where he says, "*I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For apart from the Law, I was alive. But when the Law came to me, sin sprang to life.*"

Those Jerusalem Jews were going along thinking they were fine, but suddenly, hearing God's word, they realized they were not meeting God's expectations and needed to correct that.

And they *embraced* that – they realized they'd disappointed God, and they were sorry. And since they wanted to be in right relationship with God, they did what truly sorry people do – they confessed their sins.

They admitted who they'd been and what they'd done.

And they repented, corporately – nationally. They repented.

That's what this prayer is all about.

Now, just as we're not told who read the Law there that day, neither are we told who prayed this prayer, but we know this: whoever did had lots of breath, because it's a long prayer – from the end of verse 5 there through verse 37.

What was read earlier is just a part of it.

But what we find in it is a recitation of God's history with His people, Israel – at least the highest points of it, and the whole thing reads as a confession of God's faithfulness and Israel's faithlessness and then what they'd learned from it. All this that God did for them:

- Verse 6 speaks of God's work of creation.
- Verses 7-8, God's choice of Abraham as leader of His people.
- Verses 9-11, God's bringing His people out of Egyptian slavery.
- Verses 12-21, God's provision for Israel during their time in the wilderness.
- Verses 22-25, God's giving to them their promised land.
- And verses 26-31 cover their life in that land.

And yet, even with all these acts of God's blessing to them, the prayer confesses their own persistent failure to follow God's covenant, and this leads right up to their present circumstances, which the pray-er begins to address in verse 32.

The consistent thread through Israel's history is how God was faithful, even though they were unfaithful.

God had helped them, even though they had not followed His ways – right up until that very day.

God had very obviously and very evidently helped them here – to build their wall and secure their city. And yet still, here they were, ignorant of the greatest parts of His Law – His way. And so still, they were not living in obedience to Him.

It's that realization that led them to this prayer and then, once again, to repentance, correcting the problem and making the commitments and promises to God we read about in the next chapter, Chapter 10.

But what I'd like to focus on today is one phrase that really is the key idea of what this prayer is all about – you find it there in verse 16 – where the pray-er admits, "*Our ancestors were proud and stubborn.*"

They freely confess, "*Those who came before us were proud and stubborn.*"

What does that really mean?

Well, a proud person is one who says, "I am the boss. I know best. I can do this myself and don't have to listen to other people."

And a stubborn or, as some of your translations say, "stiff-necked" person is one who refuses to listen, one who literally will not turn or change.

Israel was a proud and stubborn people, and, as her history shows us, that is a deadly combination of characteristics. When you put them together, you have a person, or in Israel's case a whole nation, doing things *their* way and refusing to even *consider* changing their

mind. And so, there is no easy way to reach them apart from some dramatic or divine event.

This is who the people of God came to be.

They did not start out that way. Abraham was a friend to God. He walked with God. But this is who they came to be.

Proud and stubborn – God *Himself* calls them this over and over again. Yet here they realize it, and they admit it – which is, for anyone, the first step toward redemption and forgiveness.

Realizing and owning our pride and stubbornness is where repentance begins, and this is important because repentance has always been, and is still today, a hallmark of the people of God – or at least it's supposed to be.

Being repentant is one way we are to be different from the world around us.

You see, God wants His people to follow Him *easily* – not to have to be forced or coerced. God wants to lead people, not drive them like cattle, you know?

Now, He will when He has to – because not even pride and stubbornness will keep Him from accomplishing His greater purposes in our world.

But God's first choice is not to force people's obedience.

God *didn't want* to kick Adam and Eve out of the garden.

He *didn't want* to keep the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years.

He *didn't want* Jerusalem destroyed and Israel captured by the Babylonians.

God *doesn't want* hurt and pain and tragedy – and all the consequences those things bring – in our lives.

What God wants is for us to know, from His word, what pleases Him and what doesn't – what's good for us and what isn't. He doesn't hide that. It's right here for us to know.

What God wants is for us to hear that soft voice of His Spirit, such that when He says, "Hey, don't do that," we stop.

Or when He says, "Hey, let's go this way," we don't fight him or argue with Him, but we follow easily and willingly, trusting that, even if we may not understand, God knows what He's doing.

That's living a repentant life – living in an ongoing posture of repentance.

You probably have heard already that the real meaning of the word, "repent" is to stop going in one direction and turn completely around and go in the other.

So, to live a repentant life is to live in such a way that you're always open and ready to change direction according to what God's Spirit and Word are saying. This means that a repentant life is a life that's exactly the opposite of the prideful and stubborn, stiff-necked, resistance that was so often Israel, you see?

The opposite.

If pride says, "I am the boss. I know best. I can do this myself and don't have to listen to someone else," then what's the opposite of that? What's the opposite of pride?

I'd suggest *humility* is a good word, especially since the Bible talks so much about it – about being humble.

Humility is having a low view of one's own importance.

Not that we degrade ourselves – not that we're not intelligent or that we shouldn't take stands or have opinions.

Humility is just seeing ourselves as we really are, especially in relation to God, which means:

We're limited.

We're relatively powerless.

And, we're more ignorant than we are informed.

All of which means we're dependent on God for wisdom and power and perspective.

That's a humble person, and God's people are humble: willing to be taught, ready to listen, open-hearted and open-minded toward God.

Humility, not pride, is a characteristic of a repentant person and life.

And then the other part, the opposite of being stiff-necked. If being stiff-necked is that stubborn unwillingness to listen or turn or change, what's the opposite of that?

Several words come to mind: docile, manageable, malleable, flexible.

I like the word, "pliable."

A stiff-necked person will not turn.

But a pliable person will turn and move and adjust and change direction

Now, again, we're not talking about being blown around with every little breeze that comes along, right?

We're talking about being responsive to God, to His Word, to His truth, to His Spirit.

[Hold up small, narrow board.]

This is stiff. This is stubborn. No matter how hard I push, it won't move – until it breaks.

[Hold up strip of paper, about the size of the board.]

But this is pliable – it bends easily to the will of the one trying to move it.

[Hold up both board and paper.]

These are both made of, essentially, the same stuff.

But the way they're put together – and the way they respond – is different.

Israel had seasons, like this one here, of humility and pliability, where they, as a nation, were a repentant people – where they were able to hear God's word, receive it, and quickly, easily obey it.

The sad truth is, though, that those seasons were few and far between. Typically, they were in response to times of great hardship and suffering, because that's when God could gain their attention – when they were hurting so badly that they had no other choice but to listen to Him.

Now, still, that was God's grace to them, you see? God did not just let them go. Even in their resistance, God did, or He allowed, whatever it took to bring them to repentance.

As C. S. Lewis writes, sometimes pain really is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world – not because God enjoys it when we hurt, but because we're so proud and stubborn, it's the only way He can get our attention.

That was God's grace to His people, Israel.

And that's God's grace in Jesus today.

The grace of Jesus Christ is *not* grace that keeps us from having to repent of our sins.

The grace of Jesus is what gives us the *opportunity* to repent and then to live in a *repentant posture* before God – to have a living, ongoing relationship of listening to God and responding to Him:

- listening and adjusting,

- listening and shifting the way we think, the things we do, and the priorities we set.

That's a life of repentance.

You know, the truth is, our lives are defined by how we understand repentance.

Is it a burden to be borne – something we just have to do?

Or is it a gift to be celebrated – this fact that we can, amazingly, find and then walk in the same direction as God?

I don't know about you, but for me, I've found repentance to be a burden *only when I've been in active rebellion against God* – when I know very well what God wants me to do, but I simply don't want to do it.

In those times, I haven't even wanted to hear God's word, and I'd get upset at preachers and Scripture passages that speak of repentance.

And yet once I would relent and repent – once the change of direction was made, I'd see how much better life was on the other side of it. I felt the relief of being in agreement with God, and I wondered why I didn't trust Him sooner.

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 7:10: "*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.*"

Repentance – choosing to walk with God instead of against Him – leads to salvation and leaves no regret. It never does.

And Christians are called to be examples of this before our world: ongoing humility and pliability toward God – examples of repentance as a lifestyle.

We simply have to be, if the world will ever see Christ in us, because without repentance, it's impossible to walk joyfully and peacefully with God.

That's why *belief*, on its own, is never enough.

These days, you hear a lot more around the Church about *belief* than you do about *repentance*.

But relationship with Christ is not just "believe." It's "repent and believe," according to Jesus, to Paul, to Peter.

You can't just believe and walk with Christ without repentance, because it's impossible to walk hand in hand with someone who's heading in the opposite direction as you are.

It's repentance that turns us around, initially, with Jesus, and then it's a repentant heart that *keeps* us walking with Him – in His direction.

That's the sort of life that witnesses of Christ to our world. When they ask, "Why do you do as you do? Why do you live as you live?" we say, "Jesus Christ is not just

my God—He is my Lord. I trust that He’s smarter than me, and so I learn His word, and I listen for His voice, and I do as He says and I go where He leads.”

That is the posture of repentance.

May I ask, do you live there?

I’d imagine there are people here today who are just fine with the idea of believing in Jesus but have really never gotten serious about this concept of repentance—of turning and actually following Jesus.

And that’s because you want it both ways: you want Jesus, but you want to live the way *you* want to live.

But that’s just not the way it works.

Maybe you know this very well—you know Christ is calling you to repentance in some area of your life, but you hesitate because it’s going to cost you something: maybe a friendship, a habit, a job, maybe your pride, maybe your reputation before the world.

If Christ is calling you to repentance, but you’re resisting, may I say to you, you’re in a dangerous place—and you can’t stay there forever.

It’s impossible for anyone to stay connected to Jesus and be walking away from Him, in the opposite direction as Him, at the same time.

So please, stop playing that game.

Follow the example of these ancient Jews: admit your pride and stubbornness, and give them up—and instead choose humility and pliability toward God.

Choose repentance—a life of hearing and turning, putting your hand in Christ’s and walking with Him in His direction.

Prayer:

God, thank You for the grace that You give us in the opportunity for repentance—to realize that You want our best, to read Your word, to hear Your Spirit’s voice, and to walk with You in life.

Call us to Yourself, Lord, and help us to lead our broken world in living repentant lives before You.

Closing Song: *Christ Be My Leader*

Benediction:

May the Spirit of Christ reveal and then break up any *pride* and *stubbornness* in us, and then fill our hearts with humility and pliability, such that we would join those Jews of Nehemiah’s day in welcoming His word and doing as He says quickly and joyfully.

May we live repentant lives that lead others—that lead the world—to repentance before God.