

The Worst Hard Time: God's Return Policy

Joel 2:12-17

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,

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All Sales Are Final

Have you ever had an issue returning an item to the store that you purchased said item from? As far as experiences go, the Customer Service and returns area can really be a mixed bag. Before Amazon, I loathed having to return something. And it seemed that buying me something that needed to be returned was my mom's favorite holiday treat. It was a two-fer for her every December. She bought me a Christmas present and arranged a Christmas errand for me to run. Usually it was clothing. It was almost never the right size. Also, stylistically speaking, it was also almost never the right decade to wear the gifted item. And outside of the big box stores, the return policy was just too unpredictable. And you could bet that whenever you chose to go try to make some sort of return happen, someone else would be in line in front of you attempting to make the most difficult and impossible transaction in the history of the store. It would require several walkie-talkie breaks and even bring in a manager or two to come and muddy the issue.

One of the great things about Amazon is the return policy. Order something and it comes broken? Send it back. Something wasn't the right fit or the right color? Send it back. You thought something would be the bee's knees and instead it left you with a massive case of buyer's remorse? Send it back! Amazon has a great return policy. Print up a little code and then drop off your return without any sort of fancy wrapping at the UPS store and they take it all away. You barely need to show up. And Amazon will take almost everything back. There doesn't seem to be any limit!

Joel chapter 2 introduces us to God's return policy. Except God's policy isn't focused on returning some item of clothing. It is focused in a person's heart and life. That is what God calls us to return to Him. To dig a little deeper into God's return policy, I invite you to read Joel 2:12-17. (read text)

The Center of Attention

Let's be honest, after the first two weeks, Joel was a hard, difficult book. It was full of warning. It challenged us to bring weight and warning to our understanding of the Day of the Lord. But there is a tonal shift in Joel 2:12.

It reminded us that God, in his great love and graciousness, desires that no person ever would perish, would die without having a right relationship with Him. These past two weeks, the tone has leaned heavily into warning and danger. But now God speaks. And when God speaks here it is with a tone of grace.

The destruction that has been warned is not a foregone conclusion if the people show repentance. And in this text today, the focus has changed. God himself and his character are the center of the text's attention. The people and their wrongdoing are sent offstage. The focus has changed.

That is what repentance makes possible for believers. When we repent, when we return to God, it re-establishes the proper focus for our lives. When we consider that we are saved by grace, we place the focus on the Lord Jesus and what He made possible for us. When we wrongly assume that we are saved by something that we did, we become the focus. When we realize that we are also sustained by grace, Christ is our focus. When we wrongly assume that we are sustained by our own actions, we become the focus.

Repentance's first step is returning to God by placing our focus on the Lord Jesus. Repentance here in vv.12-14 begins with the "who" and the "why." Whom are we to return to? The Lord. Start with who. Return to the Lord with all of your heart. That is where God started in Joel 2:12.

Returning to God is the appropriate response to realizing how devastating the God-less life is. And our window of time in which we have to do this is brief. God compels people to return to him "even now." God himself reminds us that people have a brief window of opportunity to respond in the face of the rapidly approaching Day of the Lord. We see God's grace revealed here in a few areas. The first is the source. God himself directly exhorts people to repent and return to Him.

Another glimpse into the grace of God is the fact that God doesn't wait for people to figure it out. God started the conversation. He initiates our repentance, our returning, by His grace.

Just like Joel's audience, we are called to repent, to return to the Lord. And we are to repent in the same manner that God lays out here. Total. Complete repentance.

Repentance begins in our hearts as we honestly and truthfully reflect in our hearts on our sin. And that is a sorrowful, sad reflection. God wants our hearts, primarily. We see in the text that, while there are some traditional outward signs that are appropriate – “fasting, weeping, and mourning” – they are only to accompany these inward reflections and changes of focus. In other words, the “what” of repentance – what we do, what we say – comes AFTER the “who” and the “why.” We return to God because God is gracious enough to receive us and forgive us.

That’s it. God does not require us. We do not complete Him. There is not a thing that God lacks. He possesses divine aseity – he lacks nothing. God isn’t lucky to have us. He isn’t a smitten, lovesick teenager aching for our attention. And yet He still receives us, forgives us, and restores us when we return to Him with all of our hearts. He does this not because we are just that awesome. He receives us because He is gracious.

That is the “who” and the “why” that is established here. And once we realize what is required – whole-hearted repentance and returning, then we get a glimpse into what actions are appropriate and what are not even wanted.

Stopping and Refocusing

Yes, we are to fast. We are to stop eating, to stop everything and focus on the sustaining grace of God. That is declaring a fast and calling a sacred assembly. It is stopping all of the activities of our lives, even the most important ones, to repent and focus on God’s holiness. But remember that we don’t begin with the “what.” Fasting is a “what” activity that stems from “who” and “why.” God doesn’t receive us because we fast. We fast because God received us in His grace.

Yes, we are to weep. To weep is to shed tears, to express grief or anguish. Weeping reveals a depth of intensity. One may weep out of despair, sadness, and sorrow.

The priests are called to weep between the porch and the altar. According to a description written by LeVite Camp, *“The porch and altar references the layout of the ancient Temple. The porch was at the front of the sanctuary. Beyond the porch was the entrance into the Holy Place. The porch opened outward into the Inner Court which contained the large altar.”*

The place between porch and altar was the place where the priests made intercession on behalf of the people of God who remained in the outer court, just beyond the walls.” The priests are to weep in the area in which they performed their service, their sacrificial acts of worship.

The porch represents the flesh; the outer court of worship, whereas the altar represents the spirit, the place of sacrifice, the place of giving up and re-dedicating one’s life back to God. It’s time to weep between the porch and the altar until the Spirit of the Lord is poured out on us. It is time to be broken and repentant in our hearts, the very core of who we are and then allow that sense of sorrow to direct our actions.

We are to fast, weep, and mourn. But did you see what is not appropriate? Going through the motions, those actions, those things we put on display. Here it is the tearing of clothing. This was an Old Testament custom. But it is not the desired response. God wants our hearts to be torn, not our clothing. He wants us to return to him in repentance. What good are actions without purpose or meaning? What good is our “what” without any real connection to the “who” or the “why?”

It is why answers to important questions about faith have to start with heart and not with hands. “Why do you consider yourself a Christian?” The only answer that satisfies is a heart answer based on “who” and “why.” “Well, because I was baptized.” Baptism is wonderful. It is a beautiful sign of faith and trust and belief in God after a person has repented and returned to God through salvation in Christ. But baptism is still a “what.” And if all you have is a “what” basis for your claim of being a Christian, you don’t have enough. You need to know who God is and understand why you need him.

Actions without meaning are unwanted. Customary actions may impress others, but God is more concerned with more significant things. He wants your heart to return to him in repentance.

Return

Joel speaks of return in the context of imminent disaster. The first chapter of Joel indicates something is looming on the horizon, which Joel attributes to calamity brought about by “the day of the Lord.” Something big is going to happen. It is a call to both give attention and to act. We are called to get ourselves in order quickly.

This is the work of return. This is the work of repentance. Repentance enables us to let go of those things that get in the way of our relationship with God. It is about sorting through all the “stuff” that we have in our lives and making godly, biblical decisions about what should stay and what should go. This is why some people “give up” things for lent or even for life. It is why others take on new practices, build new habits, or focus on things in a new way.

But more than just “giving something up,” Joel 2 calls us to consider what exactly we need to return to God. Our hearts. Our lives. All of who we are. And there is good news concerning God’s return policy. You’ve already been paid for. Jesus died on the cross for your sins. Repent, return and be received and forgiven.

Return to God with all of your heart because God is gracious and will receive you. Period. No qualifying statements. No delimiters. No disqualifications. Highlight or underline or type it out if you need to just to get it into your head and heart. Return to God with all of your heart because God is gracious and will receive you. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter what you’ve said. It doesn’t matter how for how long you’ve been doing or saying whatever it is. Today, right now, despite whatever baggage you have, you can return to God.

Joel teaches us that the reason we repent is because we know who God is, and what he stands for. We don’t have a God who is far off and who has hidden himself. We have the LORD, the merciful and gracious God, who is slow to anger and abounding/overflowing with steadfast love. God is gracious and because of His grace, God will receive even sinners like us.

That’s God’s great and gracious return policy.

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

What was the last item you had to return? Do you like to make returns?

What are the Customer Service sections of stores like? What sorts of things do you feel or think when you are in line to return something?

What are some actions that people think will get them into heaven? (I will go to heaven because I went to church...etc.)

What does Joel 2 say about the actions that accompany repentance and returning to the Lord?

While salvation is a personal decision, here in Joel 2 there is an emphasis on communal or group or even nation-wide repentance. What sorts of actions do groups of people need to seek God's forgiveness for?

Describe further the contrast between outward and inward in Joel 2:12-17.

God is immutable – this means he doesn't change. God possesses divine aseity – this means God needs nothing. There is great comfort for people in these statements. What do you think that comfort is?