

True Repentance Before the Lord

Text: 1 Samuel 7

Introduction: For our sermons on Sunday mornings, we are working our way through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. Last week we looked at 1 Samuel 6 and asked the question: Who can stand before the Lord?

We were reminded that in chapter 5 of 1 Samuel we saw that the Philistine idol Dagon could not stand before the Lord. In fact, Dagon literally fell over before the ark of the Lord. And when the idol fell over, its hands and head were cut off and left lying on the floor.

We then saw in chapter 6 that the Philistines could not stand before the Lord. They had captured the ark of the Lord in battle against the Israelites. But the ark's presence brought much pain and suffering to the Philistines in the form of tumor and plague. The Philistines eventually realized that they could not stand before the Lord, and they sent the ark back to the people of Israel.

So, we wondered then, if the Philistines cannot stand before the Lord, maybe the Israelites can stand before the Lord. But we quickly saw that not even God's covenant people, the people of Israel, could stand before the Lord. The text says that God "struck some of the men of Bethshemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the Lord" (6:19).

We also saw that we are in the same boat as the Philistines and the Israelites. Because of our sin, we cannot stand before the Lord. The only one who can stand before the Lord is the sinless Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. But through Jesus, and the crediting of His righteousness to our account, we too can stand before the Lord.

But I want us to see this morning that coming to God through Christ begins with repentance. Repentance isn't a very popular word. I've heard too many attempted presentations of the gospel message without a single mention of repentance. But repentance is essential if we are to come to God through Christ.

Our text this morning is about repentance. True repentance. And so, I encourage you, if you haven't already, to go ahead and turn in your Bible to 1 Samuel 7. We do still have copies of the 1 & 2 Samuel Scripture journals if you haven't already gotten one. I encourage you to pick one up as you leave this morning. You can find them at either door.

(Read 1 Samuel 7...Pray)

In the story of 1 Samuel, we come now to the opening verses of chapter 7 where the ark of the Lord is taken to the house of Abinadab in Kiriath-jearim, and entrusted to the care of Eleazar, who is Abinadab's son. We'll hear the name Abinadab later in our study of 1 Samuel. But this is a different Abinadab, and we don't know anything else about him other than what we are told here in the opening verse of 1 Samuel 7. We might assume that because he was chosen for this task of housing the ark, he must have been a Levite. But that's about all we know.

Now, you remember from the end of chapter 6 the reason that the ark is now going to Kiriath-jearim. Just like the Philistines, the people of Israel are afraid of the ark of the Lord. They asked a rhetorical question: "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" (6:20). The implied answer was no one. So, they continued, "And to whom shall he go up away from us?" (6:20). God's people had the same solution to their problems that the Philistines had to theirs: get rid of the ark. So, they sent the ark to Kiriath-jearim.

Now look at verse 2. (Read vs. 2a)

Don't miss that note there. About 20 years passed between the time that the ark was taken to Kiriath-jearim and the events of chapter 7. Which might cause us to wonder what happened during those twenty years. The short answer is that we don't know. The text doesn't tell us. But it seems clear from what follows that during those twenty years, the people of Israel were not following or seeking the Lord. They were doing what was right in their own eyes. Going their own way. Doing their own thing. Without any regard for the Lord and His commands.

But there's a note at the end of verse 2 that marks a change in Israel. The text says, "And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD" (vs. 2b). The CSB says, "Then the whole house of Israel longed for the LORD." The NIV gets at the sense of what happened when it says, "Then all the people of Israel turned back to the LORD."

That's why I say that 1 Samuel 7 is about true repentance before the Lord. That's what repentance is. Turning back to the Lord. You're going one way, away from the Lord. And you turn around and go the other way, toward the Lord. That's true repentance.

So, how can we recognize true repentance before the Lord? 1 Samuel 7 answers that question for us. First, we see that...

I. True repentance requires the whole heart (1 Sam. 7:3-6).

A. Look at what Samuel said to all the house of Israel: "If you are returning to the LORD with ALL your heart" (vs. 3a).

- 1. Now, I've said it before. And I'll say it again this morning. And if the Lord should tarry, I'm sure I'll say it many more times in the future. My preaching professor at Liberty, Dr. Fink, used to say, "All means all, and that's all all means."**
- 2. And that's certainly true here. Samuel says, "If you are returning to the LORD with ALL your heart" (vs. 3a).**
- 3. When I tell my kids, "You have to eat ALL your food before you get dessert, they can testify to you that I mean ALL."**
- 4. My childhood dentist used to have a sign in his office that said, "You don't have to floss ALL your teeth, only the ones you want to keep." The point was clear. If you want to KEEP ALL your teeth, you have to FLOSS ALL your teeth. All means all, and that's all all means.**
- 5. Samuel says, "If you are returning to the LORD with ALL your heart." True repentance requires the whole heart.**
- 6. Now, that goes against our nature, doesn't it? It goes against what we see so very often in the culture around us and even among many who claim the name of Christ. I can continue in my sinful lifestyle of drunkenness, or sexual immorality, or greed, or gossip, or slander, and add a little Jesus, and I'll be okay.**
- 7. But the Word of God tells us that true repentance requires the whole heart.**

8. I think about the Apostle Paul's words to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6. He wrote, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

- 9. See, Christians are sinners. But Christians are repentant sinners. Because following Jesus requires true repentance. And true repentance requires the whole heart.**
- 10. You have to decide which way you're going to go. Who you're going to follow. Because you can't have it both ways. You can't follow the idolatrous desires of your heart and follow Jesus at the same time.**
- 11. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).**

B. As we keep reading in 1 Samuel 7, we learn very quickly that the issue in Israel was far more than looking at the ark when you weren't supposed to look at the ark (vs. 3-4).

- 1. Look at verse 3. (Read vs. 3)**
- 2. One commentator points out that Ashtaroth is the plural form of Ashtoreth. Ashtoreth or Astarte was a Canaanite goddess who was (in Canaanite religion) the wife of Baal, who was the storm and fertility god. The plural Ashtaroth probably indicates many images of Astarte. And it is probable that the worship of these deities involved various pagan and immoral practices (Woodhouse, 127).**
- 3. So, when Samuel instructs the Israelites to put away these pagan gods, he indicates to us that over the last twenty years the Israelites had taken on the Canaanite lifestyle. They had learned Canaanite ways.**

4. This same commentator writes, “If those ways were as perverse as we might suppose, perhaps the narrator had good reason to pass over those two decades in a single verse!” (Woodhouse, 127).
 5. You can use your imagination as to the kinds of idolatry and immorality that we might be talking about.
 6. But Samuel’s point is clear. You cannot worship and follow the one true God while at the same time worshiping and following Astarte and Baal. You must turn from the one to follow the other. The Bible word is repent. To turn away.
 7. And we see in verse 4, that’s exactly what they did. (Read vs. 4)
 8. I think about Joshua as he was nearing the end of his life. In Joshua 24:14-15, he says to the people of Israel, “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”
 9. There can be no ambiguity. There can be no waffling. There can be no divided allegiances. To serve the Lord, you must forsake all others.
 10. That’s what we see in verse 4 of 1 Samuel 7. The people of the one true God turned away from their false gods.
- C. But repentance is not just turning AWAY FROM SIN. Repentance is also turning TO GOD.
1. We see that at the end of verse 4 where the text says, “And they served the Lord only” (vs. 4b).
 2. We see more about what that looked like in verses 5-6. (Read vs. 5-6)
 3. The first thing the people did at Mizpah was draw water and pour it out before the Lord (vs. 6a).
 - a. We don’t know exactly why they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. There’s no precedent for anything like this anywhere in the Old Testament.
 - b. One commentator suggests that they were “denying themselves liquids as a symbolic confession that the Lord’s favor was more important to them than life-sustaining water” (Bergen, 107).
4. The second thing the people did at Mizpah was fast (vs. 6b).
 - a. The purpose of their fasting was to express special humiliation and grief for sin.
 - b. This was a tangible act of self-denial that displayed on the outside what was going on inside. The people were turning from their sin and turning back to the Lord.
 5. We also see their confession at Mizpah. They said, “We have sinned against the LORD” (vs. 6c).
 - a. This recognition is essential to any true repentance. Our sin is primarily sin against the LORD.
 - b. I think about David in Psalm 51. We know that he had sinned grievously against Uriah and Bathsheba. He had taken advantage of Bathsheba and got her pregnant. Then to cover it up, he had her husband Uriah killed in battle. His sin against Uriah and Bathsheba was grievous. But still He prayed in verses 3-4 of Psalm 51, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps. 51:3-4a).
 - c. The same is true for you, brothers and sisters. The same is true for me. Yes, our sin affects other people. But our sin is primarily against our holy God.

- d. So, when we sin, yes, we should go to the person or persons we have sinned against. The Scripture is clear about that. But we should always remember that our sin is primarily against God. And we must confess our sin to Him. Because it's only when we confess our sin to God that we can truly receive His forgiveness.
6. You'll also notice the last sentence of verse 6: "And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah."
- a. Samuel had called Israel back to the Lord and prayed for them. That isn't what we typically think of when we think of judging, but it's what is intended here regarding Samuel's role in Israel's repentance.
 - b. John Woodhouse notes, "This statement draws our attention to the contrast between Eli's failed leadership and, at this point, Samuel's effective leadership. Eli 'judged' Israel for forty years, and at the end of it, all the glory had departed from Israel (1 Samuel 4:18, 22). At Mizpah Samuel had 'judged' Israel, and the glory had returned. They were God's people again" (Woodhouse, 130).

Samuel made it very clear to God's people that true repentance requires the whole heart. We also see in 1 Samuel 7 that...

II. True repentance turns the hand of God (1 Samuel 7:7-11).

- A. And when I say that true repentance turns the hand of God, I mean that it turns the hand of God away from judgment and discipline and toward salvation and blessing.
- 1. Kids and teenagers, do you know that your parents do not WANT to discipline you? They WANT to bless you. But when you go your own way. And you do your own thing, your parents are left with no choice but to discipline you. To not discipline you would actually be disobedient to God. And the truth is that them disciplining you is actually a means of blessing. It may not FEEL like a blessing. But it's a blessing.

- 2. The same is true in our relationship with God. The Bible says that "the Lord disciplines the one he loves" (Heb. 12:6).
- 3. Over the last few chapters, we've been seeing the disciplining hand of God in the lives of His people.
- 4. But now, that is getting ready to change. And why is it going to change? Because the hearts of God's people have changed. They're no longer going their own way. They're no longer doing their own thing. The discipline has had its intended effect in their lives.
- 5. I can tell you that I am by no means a perfect father. But I can also tell you that I want nothing more for my children than for them to know and follow the Lord. And for me to train them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord requires that sometimes I discipline them. But the goal isn't discipline. The goal is godliness.
- 6. And now that God's people have returned to the Lord in 1 Samuel 7, the hand of the Lord is no longer heavy against them.

B. We see this reality in another faceoff between the Israelites and the Philistines.

- 1. In the first faceoff in chapter 4, the Philistines won, and 4,000 Israelite men were killed on the field of battle (4:2).
- 2. In the second faceoff, the Israelites thought they could manipulate God into helping them by bringing the ark of the Lord into their camp. Instead, the Philistines routed Israelites, killed 30,000 Israelite soldiers, and captured the ark of God.
- 3. But things are different now even though the Philistines don't yet realize it.
- 4. Verse 7 says, "Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel." You can imagine their confidence. We've got this. We've defeated them before. We'll do it again. No problem!

5. **And the Israelites had a healthy fear of the Philistines. The rest of verse 7 says, “And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.” Understandably so.**
6. **But there’s something different this time about how the Israelites prepare for battle against the Philistines. Rather than looking to the ark as some kind of good luck charm, they turn to the Lord in sincerity. Look at verse 8. (Read vs. 8)**
 - a. **That is markedly different from what they said back in chapter 4 when they brought the ark into their camp. Then they said, “Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that IT may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies” (4:3).**
 - b. **But here they say, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that HE may save us from the hand of the Philistines” (vs. 8).**
 - c. **In chapter 4, the Israelites did not refer to the Lord as OUR GOD. They referred to the ark as IT. But here in chapter 7, they’re not relying upon a box made with wood. They’re relying upon the ONE TRUE GOD.**
7. **And look at what Samuel does in verse 9. (Read vs. 9)**
 - a. **Samuel offered a sacrifice to the Lord to atone for the people’s sins.**
 - b. **Did you know that this is the only way that sinners can be forgiven by God and restored to a right relationship with Him? The Bible says that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22).**
 - c. **But in His great mercy, God has made a way for us to be forgiven of our sin. It was symbolized in the Old Testament by sacrificial animals. But the once-for-all sacrifice for sin is the sinless Son of God, the Lamb of God, who through His sacrificial death on the cross, takes away the sin of the world.**

- d. **I love what Richard Phillips writes in his commentary: “The message of Samuel’s sacrifice, and the message of the entire Bible, is twofold: no sinner may come before God’s holiness without atoning blood, but also any sinner may come through the precious blood of Christ” (Phillips, 125-126).**

8. **The Bible says... (Read vs. 10-11)**

- a. **Do you see the stark difference between what happened in chapter 4 when the Philistines came against the Israelites and what happens here in chapter 7?**
- b. **It’s the difference between defeat and victory. It’s the difference between death and life. It’s the difference between no glory and glory. It’s the difference between God’s absence and God’s presence. It’s the difference between judgment and salvation. It’s the difference between discipline and blessing. It’s the difference between idolatry and worship. It’s the difference between sin and repentance.**
- c. **The explanation we were given for the people of Israel’s defeat in chapter 4 was the mighty hand of God. And the explanation we are given for the people of Israel’s victory in chapter 7 is the mighty hand of God. There’s no other explanation.**

True repentance turns the hand of God. And finally...

III. **True repentance results in peace with God and man (1 Samuel 7:12-17).**

- A. **After Israel’s defeat over the Philistines, Samuel established a memorial that would serve as a reminder going forward of God’s hand of protection on His people (vs. 12).**

1. **Look at verse 12. (Read vs. 12)**

2. There are several things that we should note about this memorial stone.
 3. First, in erecting a memorial stone, Samuel was following the example of Joshua. You'll remember that when God brought Joshua and the Israelites through the Jordan River on dry ground, Joshua built a memorial of stones to serve as a reminder of God's hand of protection on His people (Josh. 4).
 4. The second thing to note is the name Ebenezer. If you look back at chapter 4 verse 1, you'll see that Ebenezer was the location of Israel's defeat twenty years earlier at the hand of the Philistines. Now, Samuel raises a stone that he calls Ebenezer to commemorate their victory over the Philistines. This is fascinating because the name Ebenezer means "stone of help." At "stone of help" in chapter 4, Israel had not been helped because of their sin and rebellion against God. But now, because of their repentance and seeking the Lord, Israel has received God's help.
 5. You'll also notice that Samuel says, "Til now the Lord has helped us" (vs. 12b). The point is clear. This is not the first time that Israel has experienced God's help. It is but the latest example of God's hand of providence and protection upon His people. And for that, Samuel gives thanks.
- B. And we see that because of the Lord's help, His people enjoyed a period of peace with their enemies (vs. 13-14).**
1. Look at verses 13-14. (Read vs. 13-14)
 2. We're going to see the Philistines again in the coming chapters of 1 Samuel. This period of peace did not last forever.
 3. But as we come to the end of chapter 7, the Philistines are no longer a cause of fear in Israel. All that was taken from Israel by the Philistines has been restored. God's people could rest under His hand of protection.
- C. Again, we read that Samuel judged Israel (vs. 15-17).**
1. Look at verses 15-17. (Read vs. 15-17)
 2. As we said before, Samuel's judging of Israel was his spiritual leadership over the nation. He called God's people to know and follow the Lord. To continually flee from idolatry and worship only the one true God. He offered sacrifices for their sins and administered justice among God's people as necessary. The point is that Samuel's job was to lead Israel in righteousness before the Lord.
 3. We see a lot of bad leaders in the Bible. God's people often had some pretty rotten leaders. But Samuel was the kind of leader that God's people needed. They didn't need some great military hero. God could handle Israel's enemies without anyone's help. They didn't need some political genius with management expertise. What they needed was a leader who would bring them back to God. They needed a leader who would lead them in righteousness. As one commentator writes, "They needed a Samuel. And God gave them Samuel!" (Woodhouse, 135).
 4. And Goshen family, as the people of God, Samuel points us to the leader we need as well. Not a military hero. Not a political genius. But a servant. He is the one sent by God to bring us back to God, to intercede for us, and to lead us in righteousness. Brothers and sisters, Samuel points us to Jesus.
 5. Like many who have gone before us, we find ourselves at a difficult time in American history. Yesterday evening, there was an assassination attempt on former president and current presidential candidate Donald Trump. The news cycle over the last couple of weeks has been dominated by questions concerning the current president's fitness to serve due to cognitive decline. I don't know what is going to happen between now and November. But I can tell you that my hope is not in Donald Trump or Joe Biden. My hope is not in the Republican Party or the Democrat Party or any other party. Though I love this country and am proud to be an American, my ultimate hope is not in the United States of America.

6. My hope is in Christ. Till now the Lord has helped me. And I am confident that no matter what may happen in this life, He will continue to be with me and sustain me until the day when He returns and the difficulties of life in this world are no more.

Conclusion: Listen to the words of the great hymn by Robert Robinson, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;
hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.*

Sometimes people change the words from Ebenezer to something else because too many Christians don't know their Bibles and don't know what the song is talking about when it talks about raising my Ebenezer. It comes from 1 Samuel 7.

For Christians, our Ebenezer is Christ. Our help comes from the Lord. Our greatest problem is sin. Not the sin of the world out there. But the sin in our own hearts. But God has helped us. He has given us His Son. He raised up His Son on the cross to die to pay for our sin. As our substitute. Jesus died in our place.

And our response is to come to Him in true repentance and faith.