



“God, sideways...”
- Part 2
"Horizontal Repentance"

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Church
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- 1 Thess 2:7 - 20 -
7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing [mother] cherishes her own children. 8 So, affectionately

longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. 9 For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. 10 You [are] witnesses, and God [also], how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; 11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father [does] his own children, 12 that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed [it] not [as] the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they [did] from the Judeans, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, 16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up [the measure of] their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. 17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. 18 Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. 19 For what [is] our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? [Is it] not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

Paul, in this letter to the church in Thessalonika, presents a rather detailed birds eye view of a truly faithful lateral exercise of Christianity. One of the glaring negatives of 21st century Christianity is that so often we are guilty of a “lopsided” practice. Faith that is exercised solely vertical...meaning the totality of one’s faith is encompassed wholly on the personal relationship one has with Christ, wherein all communication and consideration in my spiritual walk is centered on me and Jesus. My faith essentially never makes it beyond the edge of my yard. Then there are those who are completely lost on the social and cultural aspects...the community and its civil responsibilities. A collective socialism with a religious façade. This practice has little to no contact with the king nor any of his oft difficult directives or not so socially conscious political positions. So that faith is lateral and out on the street, but at the eternal expense of not knowing the boss whatsoever.

The whole of the Book of Luke, more than any of the other Gospels, goes even further than our text today and presents a sweeping look at Jesus’ teachings on ethics...on the lateral exercise of Christianity. Over half the parables we have from Jesus are unique to Luke. They cover topics like how to steward money, how to approach God in prayer and how we are to see people the world tends to overlook. At the foundation of it all is Jesus and his preaching about the kingdom of God.

Luke’s first chapter ...verses 15 – 17, speaks of how John the Baptist would turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. That he would *"go as forerunner before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn*

the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him."

That passage gives a two-part approach to the lateral exercise of our faith. First, the expected part, that John would turn people back to God. This reflects quite rightly what prophets are supposed to do. But then there is a second component—which is also part of John's call and is what God seeks from people upon that "turning to God." The angel Gabriel had also announced that John would **turn people back to one another** in two key spheres: relationships in the family ("the fathers back to their children") and he would cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly. ("the disobedient to the wisdom of the just").

This Luke scripture expresses a horizontal (human-to-human) direction for repentance, not just a vertical (human-to-God) one. "Turn people back" is repentance. Clearly repentance is not one-dimensional. Both my relationship with God and my relationships with others were in God's mind as John received his calling to prepare a people for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Both of these issues are prioritized throughout scripture and thus must be equally considered. Both reconciliation and relationships were at the very center of what God was getting ready to do through Jesus.

Luke's text...as well as ours here in 1Thessalonians, point us toward a holistic approach to repentance...of moving and living in such a way as to connect hearts, pursue love, and seek others' good. A later text about John the Baptist's teaching and baptism reinforces this goal. When people participated in John's baptism as a response of repentance, he called them forth into a practical and horizontal manifest of their changed lives, not just clinging to an old religious standard that was clearly failing... (Luke 3:8–14) "Therefore produce fruit that **proves your repentance**, and don't begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'"

The crowds in that passage went on to ask him, "**What then should we do?**" John answered them, "The person who has two tunics must share with the person who has none, and the person who has food must do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "**Teacher, what should we do?**" He told them, "Collect no more than you are required to." Then some soldiers also asked him, "**And as for us—what should we do?**" He told them, "Take money from no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your pay."

It's interesting how John's replies there. Because in each case, the application addresses not how I am responding to God but how I am responding to others in everyday situations. Surprisingly, God is not directly mentioned in any of John's answers. The point is, repentance is clearly not only about how I relate to God, but also about how I interact with others.

By turning to God, I am also preparing to turn to others. I am dying to self, and now my heart and direction is toward others as well as to God. God's forgiveness is designed to take me not only to **him**, but to his people. The Lord's Prayer includes the request to "forgive us our sins, **for we also forgive everyone who sins against us**" (11:4).

In that Luke 3 passage we find multiple instances of the Greek verb *poieō*, which means to "make" or "do." The groups were righteously asking how to **apply the repentance** John was calling for in their everyday lives. Remember: John is preparing the way for Jesus to build on this message. Jesus did so in several instances, including Mark 9, saying "*Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me*" and "...*whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung*

around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.” Clearly there was and is blessing for our lateral manifest of faith as well as some serious consequences when we fail to do so.

Jesus also clarified this further in chapter 25 of Matthew, saying:

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ‘for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ‘I [was] naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed [You], or thirsty and give [You] drink? ‘When did we see You a stranger and take [You] in, or naked and clothe [You]? ‘Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ "And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did [it] to one of the least of these My brethren, you did [it] to Me.’ "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: ‘for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ‘I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ "Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ "Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do [it] to one of the least of these, you did not do [it] to Me.’ "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

1 Jn 1:7 – But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

This isn't just a New Testament idea. It is also in the Ten Commandments, whose first group of rules is dedicated to how I relate to God and whose second group is about how I relate to others. Together, these texts make clear the ethical-relational center of how God wants to turn our hearts to him and others when we follow and mirror him.

What I want us to see today is the scriptural picture that presents a truth wherein true repentance...like the love we spoke of last week, is both vertical *and* horizontal. Our lives are to testify **to** and **of** a God who cares about reaching and engaging humanity...*all of humanity*, in a loving Father/child relationship. Jesus, building on John's point that repentance ought to produce fruit, calls us to make things right with those we have sinned against...to take the initiative to repair that which we have damaged by our actions, because without such there is no peace in His body and no unity in His house. The world rejects this idea, so unless we live and portray a different living, then we are just like the world which is the antithesis of all that Jesus taught.

So how does this work? Perhaps one of the clearest examples of a holistic view of repentance is found in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10). It starts with Jesus' welcoming encounter with the hated tax collector. This interaction leads to a changed heart, illustrated in Zacchaeus's declaration of his intent to reverse his wrongs and reconcile with his community. That passage revealed a relational and ethical dimension to a term—**repentance**—again, something that most people have privatized as being solely about themselves and God. The Great Commandment is to "*love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Luke 10:27). This creates a virtuous triangle—God, me, and others—exactly as Luke 1:16–17 and 3:8–14 highlight.

Repentance is a change of orientation: from death to life, from darkness to light. And it has repercussions in every area of a believer's life. It means, *first of all*, turning away from sin and toward God. Not that a believer will never stumble into sin again—at least not until heaven (1 John 1:8). But a believer will count himself dead

to sin and alive to God. He will refuse sin the right to reign. He will not offer his body to sin, but to God as an instrument of righteousness (Rom. 6:11-13). He will orient himself to live in harmony with God's law.

However, the repenting believer does even more. In his or her "turning" away from their old life path to a *new* path, He or she now effectively determines to live in such a way that restores relationships, keeps peace, and gives people around him the sense and smell of Jesus Christ in his life. Whatever was, is no more, and whatever wasn't, now is. He or she determines to join God's work in redeeming the world, caring for the others, and rolling back the effects of the Fall. Therefore, repentance by innate design, must be both vertical and horizontal, God-ward and people-ward.

One again, both these directions—vertical and horizontal—are important, and to neglect either one of them leads to a distortion of the gospel. For example, much of the modern church today tends to neglect the horizontal aspect of repentance, focusing almost solely on the believer's individual relationship with God. Far too often, the modern message is to call people to believe in Christ, repent of sin, and be baptized—but that's about it. And the result is that thousands of people are "won and baptized" in America's biggest churches every year, and yet functionally fail to really change and frankly are often never seen again. There is no change of life, no union with Christ's church, no repentance toward other people, nothing at all of what the Bible describes as "newness of life." They are "won" one minute, and lost the next. (Note Lev 6)

Their lives never cease to be about anyone but themselves and their faith never finds practical outlet beyond a vaporous religious veneer that is abandoned in a moment when they in any way find themselves with their back against the wall. Many others will "hold the line" on this matter for a time, only to eventually come to a situation wherein they reject the lateral aspects of the gospel. They will place their own wills and desires first, will sin against someone in response, and will then in defense hold onto that sin and never confess...never repent...and never make things right with the individual or individuals that were sinned against. They will however, often confess to God, ask for forgiveness, and want from there forward that such is an issue of the past. But is it, if we have rejected the lateral gospel and the horizontal repentance?

Jeremiah 7: 9 – 10... *"Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and burn incense to Baal and all those other new gods of yours, and then come here and stand before me in my Temple and chant, "We are safe!"—only to go right back to all those evils again?"*

Jesus gave a clear and authoritative answer to the scribe who asked Him which one commandment was foremost. Jesus boiled all God's requirements down to supreme, sacrificial love for God, as well as neighbor (Mk 12:28-34). Thus, all our sins can basically be boiled down to a failure in love for God or for neighbor. As we learn to think through the desires, words, and deeds of our hearts we should run everything through the 'love filter.' Does this thing...this behavior...manifest love for God and/or neighbor?

There is a simple and straightforward biblical paradigm for restoring both our vertical fellowship with the Lord and for mending breached horizontal relationships with our fellow man. We can hang the restoration process on three terms, that of confession, repentance, and forgiveness. He's called us to:

1. Confess and forsake known sin. We are to examine our guilt in light of Scripture. Not just capital crimes like murder and adultery, but even sins of the likes of lying, gossip, breaking a vow or promise, rebelling against parents or placing worldly idols over God. Deal with the sin as God's Word reveals. Proverbs 28:13 warns against the coverup of sin, which is man's typical practice, as it desires secrecy and coverup. 1 John 1:9 speaks of confession of sin to God as an ongoing characteristic in the Christian life.

Should we not then confess to those we have wronged and seek restoration? God blesses openness and honesty with our sin and admonishes us that this is the obedient practice of ‘one another’s’ in the Body, as seen in James (Jas 5:16). Indeed we should confess to the One whom sin offends most. That’s why David “acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide...” (Ps 32:5). When I fail to confess and repent, I have created a wall between myself and God, as well as myself and the individual I have sinned against. When that happens...I have broken the chain of communication and relationship with both. Ps 66:18 says “If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”

2. Ask forgiveness and be reconciled to anyone you have wronged. In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus places a high premium on reconciliation (seemingly higher than man does) and teaches that our vertical relationship with Him is affected by our horizontal relationship with our neighbor. And further, if we refuse to forgive others, it is indicative of the very real possibility of having never experienced forgiveness from the Lord (Matt 6:14-15).

3. Make restitution. God spoke to Moses of restitution in man’s confession/repentance (Numb 5:6-7). “Speak to the children of Israel: ‘When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the LORD, and that person is guilty, ‘then he shall confess the sin which he has committed. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full, plus one-fifth of it, and give [it] to the one he has wronged.’” And though it is part of the Mosaic Covenant, we find it repeated in the New Testament as an abiding principle that is binding on believers (cf. Philemon 19; Lk 19:8).

4. Don’t procrastinate in clearing your wounded conscience. Paul said he did his best to always maintain a blameless conscience before God and man (Acts 24:26). This action is crucial, as some people put off dealing with their guilt, thinking their conscience will clear itself in time. It won’t, and trust me, *you don’t want it to!* We don’t want to play the Pharaoh and have God confirm our hardened hearts! Procrastination allows the thoughts and feelings surrounding guilt to fester. That, in turn, generates depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems. Emotions, thoughts, and feelings stemming from the initial guilt may persist long after the offense is forgotten, often spilling over to other areas of our lives. That’s why people often don’t feel right and are not sure why. But if you keep pushing down the guilt that your conscience is pointing towards, you may break this gift of conscience and silence it altogether. Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind in Titus 1:15. Guilt and shame are real, and the only provision is the good news of the Gospel and Christ’s atoning death.

5. Educate your conscience. According to 1 Corinthians 8:7, a weak, easily grieved conscience results from a lack of spiritual knowledge. If it is too easily wounded, don’t violate it; to do so is to train yourself to override conviction, and that will lead to overriding true conviction about real sin. Moreover, violating the conscience is a sin in itself (v12, cf Rom 14:23). Instead, immerse your conscience in God’s Word so it can begin to function with reliable data.

An important aspect of educating the conscience is teaching it to focus on the right object—**divinely revealed truth**. If the conscience looks only to personal feelings, it can accuse *or excuse* us wrongfully. We’re certainly not to order our lives according to our feelings, for a conscience fixed on feelings becomes unreliable. The conscience must be persuaded by the unbending principles of the Word of God, not our feelings.

Further, conscience errs when the mind focuses wholly on our faltering in sin and ignores the triumphs of God’s grace in us. True Christians experience both realities. Conscience must be allowed to weigh the fruit of the Spirit in our lives as well as the remnants of our sinful flesh. It must see our faith as well as our failings. Otherwise, the conscience will become *overly accusing* or *overtly excusing* and prone to unwholesome doubts about our standing before God. We must subject our conscience to the truth of God and the teaching of

Scripture, not fickle feelings that lie to us. As we do that, the conscience will be more clearly focused and better able to give us reliable feedback. A trustworthy conscience becomes a powerful aid to spiritual growth and stability.

God always welcomes the repentant individual into a reconciled and restored fellowship. “*Blessed be God because He has not rejected my prayer or removed His steadfast love from me*” (Ps 66:20). He promises pardon! God doesn’t have a bad memory; however, He chooses, by the act of His sovereign will, to not hold man’s sin against him, when proper provision has been made. And upon confession, repentance and seeking our forgiveness, **we** are to restore that person to fellowship and to our own hearts, just a God does! And Scripture connects the two; that to withhold forgiveness to fellow sinners who have legitimately confessed and repented is to be disobedient, possibly even showing he himself (herself) has never been born-again and forgiven by the Father (Matt 6:12, 14; Mk 11:25).

However, we cannot force the process when it comes to the horizontal plane of human forgiveness. If a brother/sister withholds confession and repentance, we’re helplessly dependent on the Holy Spirit to do what we cannot. Paul says, “If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom 12:18). Unfortunately, it’s not always possible. We do all we can do to see people reconciled to God and neighbor.

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3)

“If he repents...” Those three words make a huge difference to our understanding of the horizontal dimension of forgiveness. The first word makes it a conditional clause. The second word puts the responsibility on the offending party. The third word spells out the terms of the condition: **repentance**, a turning away from sin. These three factors can help us understand the nature of forgiveness at the horizontal level.