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# Rending the Hearts

Joel 2:12-17

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**Text:** Joel 2:12-17

**Topic:** knowing the heart of and having a heart for repentance

**Target:** By showing God's people the breathtaking majesty and mercy of God we aim to lead God's people away from sin and toward God

**Structure:**

- ? The Declaration (Vv.12-13a)
  - "Return to Me"
    - Without hesitation
    - With the whole heart
    - With outward demonstration
    - With inward authenticity
- ? The Motivation (Vv.13b-17)
  - Return to the LORD
    - The reality of His constitution (Vv.12-13b)
    - The relenting of His calamity (v.13c-14a)
    - the results of His compassion (v.14b)
    - The reputation of His character (v.15-17)

**Big Idea:** The Lord engages His half-hearted people in battle so that His people will engage Him in full-hearted allegiance.

## Introduction

On March 16<sup>th</sup> we started a series on biblical revival. The hope through the 5 week series is that we all will increase in passion for God (cf. Ps.63:1-3). And that this newly given passion for God will go public in no less than the following ways:

- ? That thirst will increase for the ministry of the Word
- ? That prayer will spring to the center of both private and corporate life
- ? That God's glories and not material beauty will captivate our hearts
- ? That God's beauty will be our joy
- ? That this new affection will break the spell of enslaving sin
- ? That we will joyfully suffer for our Lord in the circumstances in which He has placed us
- ? And that the fame of God will spread through these changes

We said at the outset of the series that "revival is a season in the life of the church when God causes the normal ministry of the gospel to surge forward with extraordinary spiritual power" (Raymond Ortlund's definition).

The first three messages in this series were crafted to make clear what God can do. To abridge these messages down to a sentence we can say "God accomplishes what human efforts at their best fail to do". And so to the degree that we believe this truth, we will hope in God. And this hope in God will give rise to joy in God. And this joy in God will manifest in prayer to God and perseverance in trial. And all this to the praise of God! That is the silhouette of the first three messages.

Now this week and the following week, Lord willing, we will conclude the series by noticing what we must do. If that is what God can do, then what must we do? A few weeks back I quoted J. I. Packer to assist us in the topic "what we must do". He said, "There are three things to do. First, preach and teach God's truth; second, prepare Christ's way; third, pray for the Spirit's outpouring.

And so today we will be talking about the heart of and a heart for repentance. In other words, we will answer the questions What does biblical repentance look like? and Why is it an attractive thing to do?

These are questions we will be addressing as we focus our attention on Joel 2:12-17 (read and pray)

## A Survey of the Book

The book of Joel develops the theme of the coming day of the Lord. It is a time of awesome judgment upon those who will not honor His glory. But it is also a time of future blessing upon those who have trusted Him in an obedient way. The theme of disaster runs throughout the book. It alludes to locust plagues, famine, raging fires, invading armies, cosmic phenomena. But amid all the great and dreadful warnings we find promises of hope and joy for all who repent and return to Him.

I thought Dr. Piper's outline was as good as any. He says that the book naturally falls into two parts. In 1:1-2:27 we find a description of how God fought against his own people to make them honor him alone. And the second half of the book (cf. 2:28-3:21) we find a description of how God will fight against the nations who refuse to honor him alone. For our purposes today, we will concentrate upon the first of the two themes.

The book starts off with the description of God's judgment upon His people. He sent a plague of locust to devour their land as seen in vv.1:1-12. This devastation was to awaken His people to the fact that they were not pursuing Him with all their hearts. They were to repent and call upon the Lord. And so, in v.13 Joel calls for this repentance. Because God is engaging His half-hearted people in battle, they were to repent.

In chapter two we see Joel doing a similar thing. He begins by delineating in greater detail the judgments of God. A way of describing both the content and the purpose of 2:1-11 would be to use the Washington Post's description of the initial attack upon Baghdad. They said, "The massive US bombing campaign launched against Iraq was a most stunning demonstration of the "shock and awe" strategy that relied on brutal but precise tactics to bring an enemy to its knees".

The B2 Stealth bomber-like pounding as seen in vv.1-11 was to encourage captives to turn from the enemy and run toward the liberator. God's people were to repent and return to the Lord.

Therefore, to know the heart of and have a heart for repentance, let's first look at the declaration of the word of the Lord. After we notice what God is saying, we then will conclude with how we are to respond.

The declaration of the Word of the Lord is seen in vv.12-13a.

## The Declaration

“Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments”.

The people must act swiftly. The door of leniency is closing before them. Mercy is still held out...but thunderous judgment awaits those who do not receive it. This is the 11<sup>th</sup> hour for God's people. In vv.1-11 we sense that God's patience is nearing the end. In v.11 we read, “The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the Lord is great and very awesome; who can endure it”?

The absence of serious repentance brings the presence of severe judgment. The people of Israel will be overtaken by God's army if they do not obey what He is calling them to do. What is this declaration?

## Return to Me

Return to Me. Return to Me. The Warrior of the Universe is telling His people to “Return to Me”. They had drifted away from the Lord through half-hearted loyalty. They had wandered away in order to find something or someone more satisfying. In their eyes, the Lord looked less appealing than He did in the past. From their standpoint He had lost attractiveness and significance. Therefore, they strayed from the truth and went after lies and lusts.

Like we read in Hosea the people were wanting something other than the Lord. Their love affair was not with God. They had become spiritual prostitutes aching for passing pleasure.

C.S. Lewis observed this behavior and put it like this: “We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased”.

The shocking thing about this declaration is that the Lord still wants them back. And notice also that He does not want them back for their employment or their output. He does not tell them to return to their work or their responsibilities. He does not say to return to their books and commentaries. He does not tell them to return to their code of ethics or their constitution. NO! He says, “Return to Me”. God wants His people to come to Himself. God engages His half-hearted people in battle so that His people will engage Him in full-hearted allegiance. The frightening vv. of 1-11 have a design in mind. Their aim is to awaken His careless, casual, carnal people so that they will come home.

So what does “Return to Me” require? What does repentance, in other words, look like?

### **Without hesitation**

The first thing we can say about repentance is that it needs to be done without hesitation. We get that from the words in v.12 “Yet even now”. There is still hope. There is still time. But when repentance is needed, we must not loiter. We must act urgently and decisively. When we hear from the Bible that God is saying “return to Me” we will dally to destruction if we do not respond now. Today, this hour, this minute. Return to the LORD.

### **With the whole heart**

Another characteristic of repentance can be gleaned from the words “with all your heart”. Half-hearted repentance is like fried ice. It simply does not make sense. It doesn’t exist. Listen to Jeremiah as he describes this phenomenon. “Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart but in pretense declares the Lord” (cf. Jer.3:10). It is an utter sham when we say we are turning from our sins and coming back to the Lord while all along “hiding the cookie of sin behind our back”. God is not senile. God is not hard of hearing. There is nothing in all the universe so public and bare as our hearts are to the eyes of the Lord. When He

tells us to return to Him with the whole heart He is saying that their mustn't be pleats in our hearts in which we try to slip sin to hide it from God. It is like saying, "I want God...but God is not enough. I need this and God. Beloved, the marks of true repentance are before us. Let us return to God with a whole heart.

### **With outward demonstration**

As we continue to comb through this verse we notice another characteristic of repentance. How does God want us to demonstrate a return to Him with a whole heart? To exhibit a heart returning to the Lord the Bible talks about "...fasting, weeping and with mourning". Genuine repentance springs from the inner most part of the soul. It cannot be contained. It will show itself. It will demonstrate itself in changed behavior. Like the sinful women in Luke 7. Her heart was broken over her sin and captivated by the beauty of Jesus. "Standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment". Her heart was too full of desire for Jesus to do nothing. Genuine repentance is not just a feeling sorry. Genuine repentance is not merely changing one's mind about a subject. It is a turning round, a complete adjustment of the basic motivation and direction of one's life. It moves toward not merely a principle or even a precept. It pursues a person; Jesus Christ the Lord.

And if there is anything that would weigh down the pursuit of the Lord, repentance will trim it off. That is the sense of the word "fasting". Genuine repentance not only is moved to express itself through tears but also it shows itself in noticeable changes. Without taking the time to talk on fasting per se, let's simply say that a mark of repentance based upon this text is action to rid ourselves of anything that weighs us down and makes whole-hearted obedience to Christ more difficult.

What does "coming to the Lord" involve? It is without hesitation, it is with the whole heart, it has outward demonstrations and lastly it is with inward authenticity.

### **With inward authenticity**

This may be a characteristic that you might think could go without saying (particularly in light of what we've talked about thus far). But the Lord apparently thinks differently. V.13 rounds out how the Lord describes what coming back to Him entails. It reads, "rend your hearts and not your garments". In the Old Testament we notice that when people were griev-

ing over a loss they would wear sackcloth and rip their garments. This would demonstrate their sadness over the death of a loved one, over personal or national disaster or over sin.

This verse is telling God's people that our repentance must not concern itself with performance. When we set our hearts to come back to the Lord, we are not interested in what other people may see. The point of repentance is not to renew our reputation in the sight of God's people. Not garments but the heart we are to rip.

From inside out, we are to change the way we think about a certain person or place. We are to change what we want in the midst of difficulty. We must change the direction of our lives to return to the LORD. This is inward authenticity. This is what the Lord requires. This is true repentance.

### Recap

What we have seen thus far are some characteristics of repentance. Repentance is coming to the Lord. It is marked by urgency, sincerity and a visible change in one's life. This text sketches out what true repentance looks like. But this text is carrying out more than simply telling us about repentance. We see God's agenda for threatening His people. Don't forget that this passage follows vv.1-11. He is a fighter telling them that horrible things will occur should they not repent. The point of His thunder is to awaken His people. *The Lord engages His half-hearted people in battle in order that His people will engage Him in full-hearted allegiance.* Make no mistake about it. He is a roaring warrior! But He is more than just a roaring warrior. And that is the point of the rest of our passage for this morning.

If this is the heart of repentance how, then, can we have a heart for repentance? We shift now from the Declaration of the word of the Lord to The Motivation from the word of the Lord.

## The Motivation

Look back at your Bibles and follow along with me as I read the text again. (read the text and highlight the significance of the word "for" in v.13b).

Did you notice the change in speakers? In v.12 we see that the Lord declares. Now we notice that Joel is speaking. And he is saying the same thing. The Lord said, “Return to Me”. Joel says, “Return to the Lord”. And now Joel gives reasons or incentives for carrying out genuine repentance. That is what the little word “for” in v.13 signifies. He lists for the reader reasons for returning to the Lord. And he does this so that the reader and listener will be motivated to carry out repentance.

All I want to do with the remaining part of the message is to press upon your hearts the unmatched, unbelievable, irresistible, mouth-watering, overwhelming reasons for all of us to “return to the Lord” with all our hearts. Let’s get started.

### The reality of His constitution

(V.13b)

When one reads Joel 1:1-2:11, one gets the sense that the Lord is an unrivaled warrior from whom we need to shy away and tremble. His power and holiness and justice are to shake us. But now, v.13 shows us his constitution or His nature. He is not a mere brute in the heavens ready to squash sinners. He is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”. Joel in this verse is quoting Ex.34:6. What we find there is the Lord revealing His glory to Moses through these words. He is a God of mercy and justice. We cannot reduce the Lord to one or the other. But Joel is unveiling the thought that God’s basic disposition is one of mercy. He leans toward those who are broken and contrite; whose hearts yearn for Him; whose thoughts reveal that without the Lord we are doomed.

This is an incentive. This is what Joel is wanting from His listeners. In effect, he is saying to flee from the wrath of God into the love of God. This is the first reason to motivate true repentance. Hard hearts get softer, cold hearts get warmer, overwhelmed hearts get peace when we gaze upon the grace and glory of Jesus Christ.

### The relenting of His calamity

The second reason to motivate the heart into true repentance is seen in the latter part of v.13 and into the first part of v.14. Returning to the Lord makes a difference. The Lord will not let true repentance go unnoticed. He is moved by the moving of our hearts. When we become receptive to Him He becomes “receptive” to us. James worded this reality like this; “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you”. As the Lord grants grace to repent He relents from His discipline and justice. He moves to-

ward the penitent with mercy instead of His terror and power reserved for the impenitent.

The motivation for repentance seen in this point is clear. Repentance with all its pain and all its change is worth it. Oh, beloved, let us repent and return to the LORD.

## The results of His compassion

In the last part of v.14 we come to the next motivator for true repentance. It's akin to the one we just looked at but a bit different. The viewpoint Joel takes with this one is on the results of His compassion. The last reason for repentance had to do with the Lord relenting from His wrath. This one has to do with the consequences of His compassion. Notice how Joel words this. "leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God". If you look back at 2:3 you will witness the results of sin and judgment. What sin leaves behind you can read in 2:3. What God's compassion leaves behind is to motivate us toward genuine repentance.

The blessing instead of the curse will be enjoyed for all those who will return to the Lord. And notice what the blessing brings. God's blessings are not mainly to ease the troubled heart of the penitent. It is to produce worship. That is the sense of v.14. The grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God are materials for worship. What he is saying with this description is that the one who repents and returns to the Lord will receive a blessing which will awaken worship. The penitent through the Lord's blessing will once again enjoy rich and robust worship. He, in other words, will be transformed into a worshipper who worships God in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn.4).

## The reputation of His character

If enjoying his abounding grace and enjoying his change in battle plans and enjoying his blessing leading to worship; if all of that doesn't motivate you for soul-satisfying, God-glorifying repentance then perhaps the last reason will.

Vv.15-17 show how to follow through with repentance. There is rapidity and clarity throughout his commands. Like a machine gun Joel fires off imperatives calling for a solemn assembly. This part of the paragraph shows how personal repentance is to be amplified into congregational repentance.

What this passage is talking about is not mainly on hush-hush changes. He is telling the people to live among each other with humility and earnestness.

Regarding humility, one can see that “saving face” is far from Christian virtue. We see that the leadership in v.17 is to weep and pray. Tears running down the cheeks of the Chapel elders is the sense of this passage. We see also that there is no isolation among the people. Our little ones see us weeping and praying and confessing and pleading with our great and gracious God. To model for our children a Joel-like repentance will require the breath of the Spirit. Weeping publicly for God is the result of urgency and humility.

Regarding earnestness, one can see that “blowing the trumpet” suggests an intensity not unlike preparing for war. With the passage alluding to honeymooners, one gets the impression that suspending natural pleasures in order to seek the Lord earnestly is in order. That earthly concerns must not override heavenly concerns is a point made in this passage. With humility and earnestness, the private repentance we’ve looked at in this passage is to give rise to this kind of corporate repentance and passion. This is a description of how to follow through with personal and public repentance.

But through all this description let us not lose sight of what he is talking about. Joel has left the most powerful incentive for personal and public repentance to the last. Can you see it?

Let’s read what the weeping leaders are to pray. You find this in the mid-section of v.17. “Spare your people O lord and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God”?”

The fire one senses in the heart when the reputation of God is at stake is the main motivator for a Christian. In God-neglecting churches the people look and sound quite similar to the world. The divorce rate is about the same, the addictions look similar, out-of-wedlock pregnancies are not too terribly different. And so, when the world looks on to a church where God has disappeared, they say, “Where is their God”? They don’t see the power of the gospel. They see hypocrisy. And the conclusion they draw is “God is irrelevant or non-existent”.

You can feel now can't you the enormous motivator embedded here at the end of this paragraph? God's reputation matters! He has tethered His Fame tightly upon the destiny of His people. When our hearts grow cold and our behavior mirrors the world, the world says bad things about our glorious God. Does that not make you want to sand up and rip your heart and return to the Lord? Do you want people blaspheming your God? Then stop with your indifference toward God. And return to Him with your whole heart. You will find Him altogether gracious and compassionate; you will find Him life-transforming. You will find that His reputation will be preserved and promoted in and through your heart...if you are rending your hearts.

## Conclusion

Concluding this message is simple; for much of the applications have been marked out. But the question which hangs over each of us now is will the applications be set in motion or merely observed? Will we examine our hearts to see areas we are not giving over to the Lord? Will we stop the nervous chatter of our souls in order to listen to the thoughts and intentions of our heart? When we see trinkets we treasure more than God, what will we do? When we notice that we spend more time reading about God rather than communing with Him, will we return to Him? When we observe half-hearted worship will we conclude that we have drifted from Him? When we tremble not at words in the Bible describing the wrath of God, will we repent of hardness? When we haven't wept over the distance between us and the Lord for years, will we rend our hearts? When we observe our Sunday behavior is distinctly different from our Monday behavior, will cry out in confession and repentance? When we see that we've been more concern with our own reputation than God's, will we humbly come back to Him?

You know the answer to all those questions if you've followed the flow of the passage this morning. We are drawn on by His glory. If you see the warrior of v.11 thundering down upon sin, you will be serious over your sin. If you see the sweet, satisfying, engaging view of God in v.13-14, you will leave your sin. If you see the ultimate value is God's reputation joined to your life, you will repent.

“Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart”.

