

Admitting You Were Wrong

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
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How do you respond when the Word tells you something that you don't like? What if a way you see the world doesn't fit with how the Word describes the world? How do you respond when you find out that something you've been doing for years and thought was fine is condemned in the Word? It's a difficult question to answer. We'd probably hope that we would adhere to what the Word teaches but our instinct might be to take a second look to see if we can't find a way to make ourselves right; to find the loopholes as it were. Where does that resistance come from? Really think about that. For a lot of us I think it comes from fear and sadness: the fear that if we admit we've been wrong we'll have to deal with all the guilt and the sadness about doing the wrong thing. Then on top of that there is simply the embarrassment: it's far easier to justify your mistakes than to admit they were mistakes in the first place.

So today we are going to wrestle with how to listen to the Word and deal with the fear, sadness and embarrassment of admitting that you were wrong. The Word teaches us about this through the reign of King Josiah. Josiah became king in a time when the Kingdom of Judah had been worshipping idols and other gods for generations. It had been so long since true worship of the Lord had been practiced that they were completely unaware that what they were doing violated the law of the Lord. This is the backdrop for what follows.

One of the first things that Josiah does is to start repair work on the temple. There is no indication that these are major renovations: he is simply doing his duty of making sure that the House of God is kept up. This is routine maintenance. In the process however something extraordinary is discovered:

Then Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD." And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. So Shaphan the scribe went to the king, bringing the king word, saying, "Your servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of those who do the work, who oversee the house of the LORD." Then Shaphan the scribe showed the king, saying, "Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read it before the king.

Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, that he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, Achbor the son of Michaiah, Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king, saying, "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us." (II Kings 22:8-13)

The Book of the Law that they found would be the first five books of the Word, the books that contain all of the religious rules and laws for the Children of Israel. It's pretty

obvious from his reaction that Josiah and the people had violated many of them and had no concept that they had done so. They were in deep, deep trouble.

We don't often go to the Word or to church or just into conversations with other people with the intent of finding major flaws in ourselves. Usually we're just going in to do routine maintenance on ourselves: fix up a minor flaw or two, adjust a habit, and so on. Isn't it the way of things that we're broadsided by the major stuff? It isn't necessarily finding out something completely new either. It might be a truth that you've known for a long time that you suddenly understand in a new way. You discover the truth of what you've always known as it were. It's that moment that hits you right between the eyes and you say, "Oh, this is ME this is talking about!" (cf. II Samuel 12:1-12). It's that insight when you suddenly realize that this particular truth was not given to you so that you could go around judging other people with it, it was given to you so that you could look within yourself and see if you measure up to it (cf. Arcana Coelestia 3603:3).

So what do you do when you realize that you're an offender too? The temptation is to justify yourself: now that I see this evil in myself I understand why other people are doing it and so I'll accept it, both in them and in me. Even if we recognize our guilt we still are tempted to say, "How was I supposed to know? Why should I have to make up for what I didn't intend to do? That way you don't have to deal with the embarrassment of admitting that you've been wrong for so long. Or you can confront it and root it out. This is the dilemma that Josiah faced as King of Israel: ignore the law and continue life as is, or admit his wrongs and face the consequences?

The steps that Josiah took show us what we can and should do. First, he humbled himself before the Lord, tearing his clothes and weeping. He showed his regret for the ways that he and his people had unknowingly slipped from the Lord's commandments. He mourned for the years and generations they had spent not knowing what was true and good (Arcana Coelestia 4763:6). He acknowledged that their actions had set them on a path to destruction. This is the hardest step of the whole process. It means taking a hard look at some of your past actions and disowning them. It means giving up some things that seemed like accomplishments at the time. It means spending time sitting in the embarrassment of thinking that you were wrong and you didn't even know it. It might involve admitting to the people around you that they were right. It will certainly mean apologizing to people for the things you have done. It means the resentment of having to take responsibility for actions that you took in ignorance. All in all a rather unpleasant prospect.

No one wants to look back and have to think that they're not such a good parent after all; that the way they treated their friends, in retrospect, broke the golden rule; that what you've done in a relationship really did not help you be more respectful of marriage; that you supported people and ideas that were destructive; that when you thought you were being helpful you were just being controlling; that all those arguments and problems were probably your fault; that when you thought keeping quiet was going to be best it actually let people get away with evil. We could go on. The point is that it's hard to accept past mistakes because of how it changes how we see ourselves.

It would be and is so much easier to just stubbornly insist that you've been right all along and have nothing to apologize for. Avoiding all that guilt and embarrassment is a very powerful motivator. Thankfully the Lord gives us a teaching that can help with some of that. He says, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We

see.’ Therefore your sin remains” (John 9:41). It’s a bit of an odd passage but the point is to say that people who don’t see that they are doing something wrong, who don’t get it, aren’t culpable for their past mistakes. But once someone does have the opportunity to own up to their mistakes they do become culpable for what they do next (Arcana Coelestia 9069). The comfort here is that just because you admit to having been wrong does not mean that now you somehow are a terrible person. You’ll probably regret the things you’ve done but that don’t make you an awful human being. What does that is choosing to continue even after you recognize them as wrong.

As for Josiah, when he was willing to recognize his faults he actually avoided more pain and hurt. Here is how the Lord responded when Josiah inquired what was going to become of them:

...as for the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, in this manner you shall speak to him, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘Concerning the words which you have heard—because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they would become a desolation and a curse, and you tore your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you,’ says the Lord. ‘Surely, therefore, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place.’” (II Kings 22:18-20)

So the result of humbling himself, admitting his mistake, grieving for what he had done, even unknowingly, was that Josiah would not see the coming destruction and would end his life in peace. He was forgiven and would not have to bear guilt beyond that.

This brings home the importance for us of humbling ourselves before the Lord. Had Josiah, in an attempt to avoid the hard work of changing the ingrained idolatry of the nation, ignored the Lord he would have suffered an even worse fate. We too might think that when we justify and ignore our past flaws we are getting out of hard work. Who wants to look back on their past accomplishments and arguments and be robbed of them, as we’ve seen?

Josiah did not overcome this by running away however; he overcame it by confronting it head-on and running through it. His willingness to be humble allowed Josiah to recover from his shame and sadness and get to work. He devoted Himself whole heartedly to restoring the nation to the worship of the Lord. We read,

Now the king sent them to gather all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem to him. The king went up to the house of the Lord with all the men of Judah, and with him all the inhabitants of Jerusalem—the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the house of the Lord.

Then the king stood by a pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people took a stand for the covenant. (II Kings 23:1-3)

There then follows a detailed list of the many things Josiah did to remove idolatry. We might in ourselves forget this step. Once the initial shock of being firmly confronted by the Word wears off and the initial zeal winds down it becomes easy to fall back into old patterns. We need to stand firm in the covenant that we make with the Lord, the agreement to follow His will and not our own.

The purpose of this firm devotion to the Lord's will is not to bring us down. Nor is the purpose of humbling ourselves to self-deprecate. The Lord calls us to join Him in a covenant or agreement because He loves us.

...that a covenant is the Lord's presence in love and charity is clear from the very nature of a covenant. The purpose of any covenant is conjunction, that is to say, its purpose is that people may live together in friendship or in love. (Arcana Coelestia 1038)

So when we enter into a covenant with the Lord the purpose is that we can be with Him in friendship and in love. This is the goal and purpose. If when we are confronted by things we don't like in the teachings of the Word we ignore them because we cannot face them, we miss out on this awesome relationship that we could have with the Lord. Yes, initially there will be some embarrassment, fear, sadness, and so on. But that is nothing compared to the joy of working together with the Lord and having nothing to feel guilty about.