

## Waiting for the Light (Part 2): Turning Back Towards Love

by *Pastor Ricky Stephen*

At Christmas we retell the stories of the Grinch and Scrooge, both of which are stories about repentance.

These stories stay popular because in a world increasingly intolerant to mistakes, we want to know that change is possible.

Advent is a time for being reminded to turn back towards love, to repent.

### Fatal Attributions: We are the Problem, and He is the Solution

When my sister was 3, she colored on our freshly painted cupboards. When asked what happened, she blamed my brother who was far too old to have done that.

Laying blame on others, or circumstances, is a very human thing to do.

In contrast, there's a legend that G.K. Chesterton responded to a TIME magazine question "what's wrong with the world" with the following letter:

*"Dear sirs,*

*I am.*

*Sincerely, G. K. Chesterton"*

Human beings made in God's image have incredible dignity, our good or evil do not just affect us—they affect the world.

The shocking flip side of that is: the Bible tells us everyone was waiting for just *one* person to get it right (see Isaiah 11:1-10). And when that person came, everything would change.

Jesus is that person. He is the solution to the problem we are.

### When He Comes, He Cleans Things Up

But the coming of Jesus—God in the flesh—is also coming for judgment (see Isaiah 11:4b).

Some parents can't help but clean a messy room when they see it.

When God fully shows up, He's like that. When He comes, He cleans things up.

John the Baptist, in Matthew 3:1-12, is warning people of the coming of the Messiah which will be a coming judgment.

The image of the winnowing fork comes from agriculture—grain was thrown in the air on windy days so the chaff would blow away and the good kernels would fall.

John's words are read at Advent because we remember not just that Jesus came, but that He is coming again. So, we're invited to prepare for that by repenting.

## Repentance: Saying I'm Sorry

John is remembered more for what he did than what he said. He is John the Baptist.

We don't talk about it much, but baptism—dunking people in water for a religious ritual—was something Jews already did. If you were a gentile, a non-Jew, and wanted to become Jewish, the last part of the ritual could be a baptism.

So, what's John doing baptizing *people who were already Jewish*?

It's like he's saying, we need to start all over again. That's what he means when he tells the Pharisees—don't tell me you've got Abraham as your father, don't tell me you're Jewish. That won't save you. God could make sons from these stones. No, our whole system is broken. We need to start again. With each dunk John was saying: *This. Isn't. Working. We need to start over.*

To repent is just to apologize. Because an apology has three parts: recognition, remorse, and renovation. Admittance of wrongdoing, sincere remorse, and changed behavior.

It is the first part, admitting wrong, that is the greatest hindrance to repentance because of our pride. Even toddlers have trouble apologizing for that reason.

Alan Jacobs in his book *Original Sin: A Cultural History*. Noticed that communities that believed in original sin, that all had fallen short of God's glory by sinning, were often more democratic and egalitarian than societies that believed in fundamental goodness.

Another way of saying 'original sin' is saying that sin is no surprise. Chesterton once said: : "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly."<sup>1</sup> Struggling to apologize and take ourselves lightly is a sign of taking ourselves seriously—which is to say, being proud.

## Turning Back Towards Love

Repentance doesn't just have a how: recognition of wrong, sincere remorse, and changed behavior. It has a three 'whos'.

We need to apologize to God. When we hurt ourselves and others, we hurt God. Psalm 51:4a says "Against you, you only have I sinned."

We need to apologize to others. Even hidden sins affect the world around us, that's part of being human. When we sin, someone needs to hear our 'I'm sorry'.

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<sup>1</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.

We need to apologize to ourselves. God's ways are for our good and His glory. When we transgress Him, we hurt ourselves.

But the problem with all that, is often we can have recognition and remorse without renovation.

Repentance is not primarily a *'turning away'* it is a *'turning towards'*. It is turning back towards love.

What changed the Grinch's heart? In the Jim Carrey version, it is the tenacious pursuit of Cindy Lou Who—inviting him to be a guest of honor.

Repentance shouldn't sound like shame; it is an invitation. Repentance feels like the kisses of a father on the neck of a son who has finally come home. Repentance tastes like Roast Beast for the Grinch; after the first time being invited back to the table.

Advent is the time to remember that Love came chasing after us and He is coming back again. He invites us, now as we wait, to turn back towards Him. Take John's invitation, don't try to change yourself but be changed—let Him throw your life up into His Spirit-wind and blow away all the coarse chaff, to reveal the good He put in you before the beginning of the world.

### **Reflection & Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever been in a situation where something wasn't working, but no one could admit it? What was that like?
2. Read Matthew 3:1-12. What stands out to you about repentance in this passage? What else do you see?
3. What is the biggest blockage for you when you know you should repent?
4. What do you need to apologize for? Who needs your apology most: God, others, or yourself?
5. Who needs a little 'kindness that leads to repentance' in your life?