

Bruce Rooke on repenting and then receiving mercy

Good morning. And welcome...to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Sounds crazy right? Just now, I thought, "I bought a ticket to a *Live Free!* Conference and ended up in The Kingdom of Heaven!"

Yet Jesus says in Luke that, with Christ, "The Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst."

Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to discovering treasure or finding a pearl of great price. I believe that by the end of this event, you'll feel that same way about your freedom experience.

Our Lord also says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a big mustard tree where every bird can find a safe home. Look around. Look at these birds around you! This is the mustard tree.

Which means that, if this is the Kingdom of Heaven, then I get to play the role of 1st century disciple and announce: "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!*"

Repent.

It's amazing how every time the announcement of the Kingdom of Heaven is made, it's preceded by the call to repent. *The one always follows the other.*

Which should tell us how important repentance is to being set free. It's the *first* thing, the doorway to every good thing God has for you.

Now, I have to admit I haven't always been a natural repenter. It didn't come easily for me, and as a Protestant for most of my life, I justified myself with the belief that, if Jesus was God, he knew all my sins anyway and he'd already died for them, so repentance was kind of unnecessary. In fact, the only times I *would* find myself on my knees, truly repenting, were for really big sins.

By now, unfortunately, the page in my Bible for Psalm 51 (David's prayer of Repentance) has been worn thin from use. For the sake of time, I'll just share one of the stories about how I learned about my need for mercy.

In August, 2007, my wife, Julia, and I celebrated 25 years of marriage. We were raising a family, and active in our church; I was teaching Adult Sunday School; singing in the praise band; in an accountability group. You know those snow globes, the ones with the perfect little village tucked in the pine trees, the snow softly falling down? That's what our life looked like.

And then I dropped the snow globe.

In December of that year, I had a massive heart attack while doing yoga, of all things. And instead of marveling at all the miracles that happened to keep me alive, I listened to the insistent whispers of The Great Liar: "*Man, you had a heart attack doing yoga! Life is obviously not fair. And you certainly can't count on the future anymore, so stop holding back. Go eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow you could very well die.*"

And off I went. I left my wife and family and for almost three years. I lived in New York City as a pridefully successful advertising executive, having an affair, and drinking myself to sleep every night. I willingly fell deeper and deeper into sin. I was worse than an unbeliever. I was a believer who could look at the cross and say, "I know you're the Truth, the Way, and the Life, but I don't need you."

Sin completely changed the way I thought and reasoned ... or didn't reason. In fact, in the midst of all this, I actually told my beautiful, tortured wife that she was standing in the way of me saving the "other woman" for Christ.

Still my wife desperately prayed—and God pursued. He had to pursue, because I wasn't coming home by myself. Think about it. The prodigal son only came home because he was a lousy gambler. And *my* luck was still on a roll.

Fortunately, God listened to Julia's prayers and not mine. To fast forward two years, through a series of many more miracles, I found myself two months away from a divorce, on my knees at the altar of an old Methodist Church, on the last night of an *Emmaus Walk* (the ecumenical version of *Cursillo*.) I had gone there as a last grand gesture to my wife to show her how big-hearted I was and how much I wanted to save the marriage, but, in reality, I was angry and didn't want to be there at all.

God kept holding up a mirror throughout the retreat and showing me the ugly monster that I had become, yet all the while putting this image next to the image of the man that I could be in Christ. And he was opening my eyes to see the difference.

So there I was, on the very last night, little hope left, alone at the altar and crying out to God: “Lord, please take all this garbage away from me; take this garbage away from me.”

I was repenting from what soul I had left, unknowingly echoing the words of David after his big sin with Bathsheba, when he wrote in Psalm 51: “Create in me a clean heart, oh Lord.”

And then I heard God’s voice as clear as day: “*Trust the promise I have for you.*” At that moment, everything lifted: the demons were given eviction notice, and I was filled with a new sense of peace and purpose and direction.

God had forgiven me. And my wife would soon follow.

So, there you have it. Another wonderful testimony with a happy ending, thanks be to God, and thanks be to repentance.

But wait a sec.

If repentance leads to such great things, why was it so hard for me to repent? I made the first step, but then it took several more years before I could truly experience the joy of repentance. I came home, but I was edgy, defensive, holding back intimacy and love from my wife, feeling rejected by the church and by God.

I think it was because I thought guilt and shame and humiliation was the only door prize for Repentance.

And my pride would have none of that.

And yet, in the parable of the Lost Coin, Jesus promises us that, “There is more rejoicing in Heaven *over one sinner who repents* than over ninety-nine with no need for repentance.”

Rejoicing. Not judgement. Not humiliation.

Like I said, it was a few years yet that I encountered the love of Jesus through the Divine Mercy image while on a pilgrimage to Poland. There, I really surrendered to the forgiveness of God. The words on that image, “Jesus, I trust in you!” became real to me, and echoed God’s word for me in that first moment of turning back when he said, “Trust in the promise I have for you.” What promise? The promise of mercy. The promise that my life could be redeemed. The promise that he would love and accept me and not hold my confessed sins against me.

In order for me to repent, and trust in the Lord’s forgiveness, I had to change the way I saw myself and instead see me the way that God sees me when I turn back to him: not as *The Fallen*, but as *The Redeemed*. His reaction is always that of the prodigal’s Father; he hears his son’s repentance and jumps right to the big hug and the steak dinner.

God loves a good meal with those he sets free. Which reminds me of Revelation 3:20:

“I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

To continue quoting from Psalm 51, God loves to enter our contrite hearts and “give us back the joy of his salvation.”

Repentance is the hinge on which that door swings, so don’t let it get rusty—ask the Lord to put on your heart what you need to repent for. Then make sure you respond with humility, give all your pride, guilt, shame, and self-condemnation up to him. Dinner with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven awaits!