

What Is Repentance?



Session 1



Matthew 3:1-12

Session Objective






What is repentance and why is it important? In this session, participants will discover the meaning of repentance and explore the ways that sin permeates everyone's life.

Faith Statement Question 87. What is repentance unto life?

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it to God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

—The Shorter Catechism, 7.087

Session Overview

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Enhancements

Family Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Read Matthew 3: 1–12 and reflect on John’s call to repentance.

- When have you felt the need to repent?
- What did you do in order to repent?
- How did you feel afterward?
- Has the same behavior or attitude reappeared in your life? If so, how have you dealt with it? If not, how do you believe repentance helped you?

Spend time in prayer for your participants, for yourself, and for those whose forgiveness you may still seek.



Understanding the Scripture

The prophet Isaiah told the people that before the Messiah appeared there would be someone whose job would be to “prepare the way.” This is why we meet John first. In Mark’s and John’s Gospels, John appears on the scene before Jesus. In a slightly different way, we also meet him first in Luke’s Gospel, as we’re told about his parents and the role he will play. In Matthew’s Gospel, we are specifically told that John is the one Isaiah talked about. He is the voice in the wilderness calling for people to prepare the way of the Lord. And the way for people to prepare is through repentance and baptism.

What is repentance? It means to turn around and go in a different direction. It is more than asking forgiveness—although that is part of it. It includes changing what we do, what we say, and how we act so that we are going down a different path that leads us closer to God. John’s baptism was a prophetic act in which the people were “washing away” their sins. The idea was that through baptism they were cleansed (forgiven) of their sins. John takes it one step further. He calls the people to repent as well. We can ask for forgiveness and continue in the same bad behaviors. John calls the people to turn away from those actions that lead them away from God, so they will be prepared in their hearts and souls for the Messiah. This is why repentance is still an important part of our spiritual lives. When we turn away from those behaviors that lead us away from God, we are also preparing the way of the Lord.



Understanding the Faith Statement

Today's faith statement comes from the Shorter Catechism, which is part of our *Book of Confessions*. The Shorter Catechism is called one of the Westminster documents because it comes to us from the Westminster Assembly created to help the Protestant Church in England decide the direction it would take. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms were picked up by the Church of Scotland and were formative in the life of the Presbyterian Church in the American colonies. The Shorter Catechism was written to educate children. The questions are grouped around God, Christ, the Christian life, the Ten Commandments, the sacraments, and the Lord's Prayer. Question 87 is one of the concluding questions in the section on the Ten Commandments. Questions 82–91 discuss the fact that we cannot keep the Commandments all the time, and how through faith in Jesus Christ we are forgiven and saved. Question 87 explains how repentance is the way we turn to this new life in Christ. When we genuinely acknowledge our sins and accept God's forgiveness through Christ, we can enter into this new life and follow the path that has been prepared for us.



Teaching Today's Question

Teenagers have experienced those moments when someone was made to apologize to them or they to someone else, with no intent of actually changing actions or attitudes. They know that confession can be superficial and appears to be a relic from earlier times. While they hear about being better and doing better, very little is shared about actual repentance. Today's session will help them understand not only what repentance is, but also how it is important in our relationships with God and one another.



Enter

Option A: Move to the Left

- Bandanas or strips of cloth

As participants arrive, have them team up into pairs. Have them stand back-to-back. Loosely tie them to each other by the ankles. Once they are all set, tell them the goal is to walk across the room, but they can move only to the left. On your mark, they will begin. After several minutes, stop the play and explore the following questions:



- What made this difficult to accomplish? (They were actually moving against each other.)
- Who wanted to just give up and why?
- Have you ever tried to do the right thing and it seemed like you could never quite do it? How did it make you feel?
- Sin is like being tied back-to-back with each going an opposite direction. No matter how we try, we just can't seem to move. What do you think we should do then? Should we just give up? Try harder? What?
- In order for each of you to move to the other side of the room by only going left, what would have to happen in order for it to be accomplished? (They would have to choose whose left, or they would have had to be set free from the bandanas.)
- How do you think repentance can help us move away from sin and toward God?

Option B: Have You Ever . . .

- 2 large bowls, container of pebbles or marbles

Before the group arrives, pour the pebbles or marbles into one of the bowls. Have the participants gather around the bowl. Explain that they will be playing a game called "Have You Ever . . ." You will ask a question and if they have done that action, they will hand you a pebble or marble. Collect their pebbles in the other bowl.

Have You Ever . . . Questions

- Have you ever told a lie?
- Have you ever cheated at a game?
- Have you ever hurt someone's feelings?
- Have you ever gossiped about someone?
- Have you ever hit someone?
- Have you ever kept quiet when someone was being bullied?
- Have you ever turned the other way when someone was being hurt?
- Have you ever broken a promise?
- Have you ever avoided someone because you felt embarrassed to be seen with him or her?

Explore the following questions:



- Did anyone in the group not hand over a pebble/marble? What does that tell us about ourselves?
- What should we do to try not to make mistakes?
- Why is it important to try to be better?
- We make many mistakes—we sin all the time—and if we can't remember them all, does that mean we can't be forgiven? Why or why not?



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead the participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, "What is repentance?" Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question or use the following questions to guide the discussion:



- When you hear the word *repentance*, what do you think of?
- Have you ever said you were sorry but did not mean it? Do you think that counts as repentance? Why or why not?
- Have you ever said you were sorry and really meant it? What makes that repentance?
- If God forgives us our sins, why would we need repentance?
- How does repentance help us prepare ourselves to know God better?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

Merciful God, when we hear John the Baptist's warning that we need to get our acts together, we cannot disagree. We know that we have sinned and that our efforts to control it only result in more sin. So all we can do is tell the truth: only your Son, our Savior, can wash away what we have done and what we have left undone. We are lost without your mercy. Amen.

Option B: The Big Ten

Newsprint, marker, copies of "Our Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1a)

Invite the participants to name the Ten Commandments and write them on the newsprint as they are named. Make sure all Ten Commandments are written down. Distribute copies of "Our Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1a). Have a participant read the statement out loud and then ask the group to rewrite it in language that makes sense to them. Invite them to write their statement on the bottom of the resource.

Explore the following questions:

- If repentance means turning away from sin, where do we start?
- What do you think we would have to do in order to start this new life?
- How does knowing the Ten Commandments help us follow this new path in Christ?
- Does repentance mean we have to be perfect?
- How does following Christ help us in our attempts to turn away from sin?

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Bible Study

Copies of "Västerås Method" (Web Resource 1b), pens

Distribute copies of "Västerås Method" (Web Resource 1b) and pens. Go through the instructions on the page with the participants. Invite a participant to read the Scripture on the page out loud. Then have the group complete the exercise on the page. After they have finished, have them share what they marked. Start with the stars, then the smiley faces, and then the exclamation points. Finish the exercise with their questions and encourage them to share the insights, answers, or further questions that come to light.

The Västerås Method (pronounced "Vesteros") was developed in Sweden as a simple way to encourage reflection, discussion, and sharing.

Explore any of the following questions that have not been discussed:



- What does it mean to repent? (It means to turn around and go in a different direction.)
- John says he baptizes with water for repentance. How do you think John's baptism is symbolic of repentance?
- What do you think is the difference between baptism of water and baptism of the Holy Spirit?
- How could a baptism of water help us prepare to be baptized by the Holy Spirit?
- How does repentance play a role in the preparation?

Option B: What Is Sin?



Bibles, paper, pens

Distribute Bibles, paper, and pens to the participants. Invite someone to read Matthew 3:1–12 out loud. Share the following information with the group:

- Sin is anything we do that separates us from God.
- It involves breaking the commandments of God and breaking ourselves as well.
- Sin distorts the image of God in our lives.
- Our relationships with God, others, creation, and even our own souls are all hurt and distorted through sin.
- Sometimes this hurt is caused by things we do, and sometimes by the things we leave undone.

Assign one of the following passages to each participant. Have them read their passages and on the paper write what they see as the sinful action (or actions) in the story and why. Invite them to read their passages and responses to each other.

Genesis 3:8–13; Genesis 11:1–9; Genesis 27:18–27; Exodus 2:11–15; Exodus 32:1–4; 1 Samuel 28:7–18; 2 Samuel 11:1–5, 14–15; 1 Kings 11:1–4; 1 Kings 21:1–10; Esther 3:1–6; Jonah 1:1–10

Explore the following questions:



- Was there anything similar in the actions shared? If so, why do you think that is?
- What do you think caused the people to sin?
- Do you think the people started out intending to sin? What happened?
- What do these stories tell us about the way sin works in our lives?
- Do you think sin can ever be avoided? Why or why not?



Express

Option A: Film Clip—*The Goonies*

The Goonies (1985, PG), media player

Preview the following scenes from *The Goonies*: 52:26–48 and 58:08—59:03.

Ask the participants if they have seen the movie. If not, share the following information:

A group of kids embark on a wild adventure to save their community after finding a pirate treasure map. This adventure includes a run-in with some wanted criminals. In the scenes we are watching, one of the kids (Chunk) has been captured by the criminals who demand he “tell the truth” or else!

Watch the clip together before discussing the following questions:



- If repentance is more than just rattling off a list of wrongdoing, do you think this is an example of true repentance? Why or why not?
- What do you think would have to happen for Chunk to truly repent of what he’s done wrong?
- Who is the only one who can judge whether someone is repentant?
- Can you think of a time when you told someone you were sorry just because it’s what they wanted to hear? Did it change anything and if so, what?
- Why is more needed than that?
- How do threats or coercion derail true repentance?

Option B: Who’s the Judge?

Newsprint, markers

Divide the newsprint page into three equal sections. Have the participants name three famous judges from one of the competition shows on TV (e.g., Simon Cowell, Jennifer Lopez, Usher, etc.). Write a name in each of the sections. Invite the group to share why they think these people were chosen to be judges and write the responses on the newsprint under each corresponding name. Explore the following questions:



- Do you think the things we listed make these people really qualified to judge others? Why or why not?
- Was there ever a time when you disagreed with their rulings?
- Why did you disagree?
- Where do we see “judges” in our lives?
- Who is the harshest judge in your life?
- According to John, who should be the judge of our lives?
- Why is it so tempting to be our own judge?
- How can that lead to more judgment and more sin?
- Is it easier to believe that you are a sinner or that you are forgiven by God?
- If we do not earn God’s forgiveness—it’s freely given to us—then why should we ask for forgiveness and try to follow God’s path for us?

Option C: Personal Prayer of Confession



Newsprint, marker, paper, pens, candle (*optional*), music player (*optional*)

Before the session begins, write the following question on newsprint:
Is it your pride, your need for control, your fear, or something else that keeps running your spiritual life into a ditch?

Write the following statement on newsprint and display it where the group can see it: “Though they work for war, may they live for peace.” Explain that this line comes from a prayer for those serving in the military. Discuss whether your students think it is possible to serve in the military and still strive to be a peacemaker. Ask: How does this apply to other people as well? Help your students draw their own conclusions.

Distribute paper and pens to the group. Say something like:

Confession is simply telling the truth. When we confess, we not only list our sins, but we also tell the truth about our addiction to sin. We sin because we are like cars with wheels out of alignment and easily run into a ditch. It doesn’t matter how hard we try to steer away from it; we will always sin.

Invite participants to write a prayer of confession that does not just list their most recent sins, but also depicts their addiction to the things that alienate them from God. Have them reflect on the question on the newsprint as they write. You may choose to light a candle and/or play soft music in the background. Spend time exploring how this prayer is different from how we usually ask for forgiveness.



Exit

Option A: Corporate Prayer of Confession

- Copies of “A Prayer of Confession” (Web Resource 1c)

Have participants discuss why a corporate prayer of confession (a prayer we say together) is important in our faith. Distribute copies of “A Prayer of Confession” (Web Resource 1c) and invite the group to join together in the prayer as your closing prayer.

Option B: Human Sculpture

Have the participants gather into groups of two or three. Explain that one member of the group will be the clay. Have the others in the group position that person into a shape or position they think represents repentance. Have the groups explain why they chose to sculpt the person that way. Close with the following prayer:

Closing Prayer

Forgive us, Lord. Forgive us for the mistakes we have made, for the sins we have committed. Forgive us for the ways in which we have followed other paths instead of you. Help us to listen for your voice and to follow you. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the six sessions in this course that families can use after each session. Provide each family with a copy of this Web Resource.