

Isaiah 55:6-7

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[0 : 00] Amen. What is essential for life? I'm talking about the stuff without which we cannot live.

Now, I don't know if some of you there are thinking or mumbling under your breath, Wi-Fi. You know, I know that probably would be the answer some people would give that you can't live without Wi-Fi, but trust me on this, it is possible. It's difficult, but it's possible.

Now, I'm talking about those things that are absolutely essential. Well, we need to breathe. We all need to breathe if we are to live. I'm sure you're with me on this so far. We need to drink liquids, water, whatever it is. Without that, we can't live. It's essential. We need to eat. We can maybe survive for a few days without eating, but there comes a point where without that sustenance, we simply can't live. Life begins to ebb away. These things are essential to life.

And these needs that we all have, the very fact that we all have them, are in some ways great levelers, rich and poor, the great guy and the little guy, all need to breathe, all need to drink, all need to eat.

I wonder if there's anything else, anything else that we could place in that category of absolutely essential. Well, let me suggest something. And this one, you might say, well, yeah, it's important, but essential? I don't know what your thought will be. But let me suggest another essential.

[1 : 41] We all need to repent. Now, what do you think of that as an activity, an action that I'm putting in that category of essentials? Let me explain where I'm coming from in the light of this chapter, Isaiah 55, that we began thinking about last week and we're continuing to focus on this morning.

This chapter, Isaiah 55, begins with a striking and exciting call, invitation that is directed to all. Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. And it goes on. This very vivid and attractive language of invitation directed to all, directed to you. And this call, as we discovered last Sunday morning, is essentially a call to life. Then in verse 3, we have the heart of the matter.

Give ear and come to me that your soul may live. It's an invitation to life. If you really want to live, you need to respond to God's invitation to come to Him and live. But how do we come? The invitation is expressed in picture language, and that's good. It's vivid. It captures our attention. But maybe a difficulty of it is, well, yeah, but how do I actually do that? What actually do I have to do to come to God that I might live? I think verses 6 and 7 provide an answer to that question. We are given, we are provided the way by which we are to come to God. And it is the way of repentance. The key word is found in verse 6. Seek the Lord, and while you may be found, call on Him while He is near. Rather, in verse 7, let the wicked forsake his ways and the evil man his thoughts, let him turn to the Lord.

Lord, I noticed, I hadn't noticed beforehand, to be honest, but I noticed that as we were singing the paraphrase or the arrangement of this passage, the word repent was used by whoever it was who arranged these words in a form that can be sung, and they did well to do so. That is what is being presented here. What is being presented is repentance. That is what we need to do. The way to life, the way to come to God that we might live, is the way of repentance. And repentance is all about turning, and more on that in a moment. This reality that the way to life is by the path of repentance is echoed in a beautiful expression that we find in Acts chapter 11, where in the passage we are presented with a description of the experience of the Gentiles in becoming Christians. And then in Acts chapter 11, they are described as being granted repentance unto life. It's a beautiful expression, repentance unto life.

And that expression captures really what we have here. You have an invitation to life, and then the question is, well, how do I respond to the invitation? Well, what you need to do is you need to repent. That's how you're going to come to God, and that is how as you come to God, you will experience, you will receive this gift of life itself. So let's spend a little time trying to identify some

key elements in repentance that we find in these two verses, verses 6 and 7 of Isaiah 55.

[5 : 30] Before we launch into that exploration, I wonder if some of you, and I don't know, but I wonder if some of you are already maybe just a little disengaged. You kind of feel that this is not for you, you know, the subject matter, repentance, not really for me. And that happens in life quite a lot. We're presented with an opportunity to do something or to consider something, and our response is, well, thanks, but that's not for me. You know, I've always felt that about hill walking. I just don't get it. You know, walking up the top of a hill, then walking back down again. You know, the grand old Duke of York, he's welcome to do it, but I don't get it. Now, don't get me wrong. If you enjoy it, that's fine.

I'm not casting aspersions. If that's your thing, that's brilliant. It's just, it's not for me. You know, it's just not for me. And we, you know, we have that attitude towards lots of things, and that's okay. That's fine. We're different. We have different tastes. We have different dispositions.

I wonder if that is how some people might feel about repentance. It's not for me.

Maybe because you're not a Christian, and you're not planning on becoming one anytime soon.

And so, you say, well, this is obviously about becoming a Christian, and I don't really want to become a Christian, or not yet anyway, so it's not for me. Or maybe because you are a Christian, and you think that repentance is something that you've already done. You know, done that, bought the t-shirt. You know, that's what you do at the beginning. That's not for me. You know, if there are any lost sinners in the audience, well, they can listen carefully, but I'm a believer. I don't need to worry too much about this. You know, it's not for me at this stage in my life.

Well, I've got news for all of you. Repentance is for everybody. It's for you. To say repentance is not for me, would be a bit like saying breathing is not for me. Now, by all means, you can say it, but it doesn't make much sense. You know, we all need to breathe. Well, in the light of the Bible, in the light of the Bible's message, then we can also conclude and affirm with some vigor.

[7 : 57] Repentance is for everything, for everyone. It's for you. It's for me. So, let's turn to the key elements of repentance as found in our text, and I want to suggest three. First of all, what we find in these two verses is what I'm calling a knowledge of self, and then secondly, we find in these two verses a knowledge of God, and then thirdly, we have what I'm describing as a resolve to act.

So, and I'm suggesting that these three things capture certainly in significant measure what repentance is all about. It's about a knowledge of self. It's about a knowledge of God, and these things lead to a resolve to act. And let's start with a knowledge of self, or self-awareness, if you want to call it that. The call to come to God and to life by this way of seeking or calling is directed to the wicked or the evil man. It's very explicit. It's very clear that in these two verses, seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near. And who are these words directed to? Let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts. Now, that may already put an obstacle for some of us. Do you identify with this description of those that the call is directed to?

Are you wicked? You know, I pose that question. You don't need to verbally answer that question, but you know, I pose you the question, are you wicked? You know, how do you respond? Do you say, well, I don't know about wicked. You know, I'm not perfect, but wicked, that sounds a bit much.

Are you an evil man? Are you an evil woman? Again, I imagine there's certain reaction to that suggestion, even though posed in the form of a question. And I'll be frank, I struggle to identify with this vocabulary. I just do instinctively struggle with that description. Wicked, evil, you know, it just doesn't sit comfortably with me. The wicked, there are other people. The evil man is somebody else. You know, an evil man is somebody like Larry Nassar. I'm sure you've seen in the news the doctor of the U.S. gymnastics team, guilty of molesting at the last count. Well over 200 young girls who were entrusted to his care. And we say, well, now there is an evil man. There is a wicked man. You know, and we tend to think, certainly I tend to think, well, I'm the guy on the other side of the divide between good and evil. The guy who wished that the father of the three victims who flung himself at Nassar in the courtroom on Friday had managed to land a blow. I don't know if you saw that clip. It was very powerful. You know, there's been weeks of testimony. The victims themselves have given testimony, some very powerful testimony there. But then on Friday, I think it was the father of one of three of the victims, was given the opportunity to give testimony. And in a moment of anger, he threw himself at Larry Nassar with a view to landing him a blow, and he failed to do so.

[11 : 35] You know, I'm the kind of guy thinking, well, I wish he had. You know, I'm being honest. You know, one blow. Because there's an evil man. There's a wicked man. Of course, we're the good guys. We're not one of them. That's the way we tend to view ourselves. Well, I can certainly

speak for myself.

I think the problem is that we all struggle with this matter of self-awareness. Who am I, and what am I really like? I wonder, do you remember the first time you listened to a recording of your voice? I would imagine in some circumstance, most of us will have heard a recording of our voice.

Can you remember the first time that happened? I wonder, what's your response? Certainly, what my response was, well, that's not my voice. You know, it just doesn't sound like what I think my voice sounds like. Now, there's reasons for that to do with sound projection and all the rest of it. But, you know, you say, well, that's not me. Is that what I sound like? And it's, whoa. And I think we're similarly afflicted with respect to our spiritual condition. We lack self-awareness. We imagine ourselves to be different to what we are.

It was Burns Night ten days ago or so, and I'm reminded of these words of the bard, Oh, that God the gift would give us to see ourselves as others see us. But there's a greater or more necessary gift. Oh, that God the gift would give us to see ourselves as God sees us.

[13:13] But he has given us that gift, that mirror to see ourselves as we really are. It's called the Bible. It's called God's Word. And in the Bible, God provides us with an accurate, if somewhat bleak, diagnosis of our spiritual condition. We are sinners. We are rebels. We are wicked. And we are evil.

There's no one righteous. No, not one. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You're not Larry Nassar, thank God, but you are a sinner.

Your thoughts are evil. If we focus on thoughts, who can claim not guilty? If we analyze or just for a moment sit down and consider some of the thoughts that go through our mind, are not many of them evil? Are not many of them selfish? Are not many of them cruel and unkind? Is that not the reality?

Let's focus on the words used by Isaiah to describe men and women, to describe you and me. The word translated wicked, though it has a very harsh sense to it, to our ears, and it is a strong word. I'm not trying to minimize that. But the word wicked carries the principal sense of guilty. We are guilty before God. We fall short of His exacting standards. The word translated evil man or evil woman carries the sense of one who goes astray or finds it impossible to remain on God's path. And that would be everybody.

That would be you. That would be me. Our way is crooked and our thoughts often are evil. And if we are going to repent, and we've already identified as repentance as the way to life, repentance unto life, if we are going to repent, we need to know ourselves. We need to know and acknowledge that we are sinners.

[15:28] We need a measure of that self-awareness. Because in the absence of it, then we will see no need, no purpose in repenting. Well, that's the first thing. The second thing is a knowledge of God.

What you need, what we all need if we are to repent, is a bit of theology. In other words, theology scares us. And we say, oh, I don't know much about theology. But theology is just knowledge of God, truths concerning God. And in our text, in these two verses, we discover truths concerning God that we need to grasp if we are to repent. We are told what God is like, and we are told about how God acts.

What is God like? Well, let's read what it says there in verse 7, where it contemplates what will happen when we do turn to God. We are told, let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him.

God is a merciful God. This is true of him. This describes his character. He is a God of mercy. He is a gracious God. He is a loving God. If we just turn one page back in our Bibles to Isaiah 54 and read from verse 7, we have described for us something of that mercy and the nature of it.

[16:53] Isaiah 54, verse 7, For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. Everlasting kindness, compassion, great mercy. This is who God is. God is merciful. And how does a merciful God act? Well, he acts in accordance with his mercy, which is what the pardoning is all about. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him and to our God, for he will freely pardon. Why does God pardon? Because he's merciful. He is entirely consistent between his character and his actions. He is a merciful God, and because he is a merciful God, he freely pardons sinners like you and me. But he doesn't just pardon. We're told he freely pardons. That expression is translated in other versions,

perhaps more helpfully, as he will abundantly pardon. The expression is literally rendered, he multiplies pardon. And I think this language speaks both of God's disposition and of his capacity. He has the desire to pardon. He delights in mercy. He enjoys forgiving, but also he is able to pardon. You know, sometimes we may have a measure of disposition. We may wish to do something, but we don't have the capacity to do it. But in the case of God, he has both the desire, the disposition to pardon, but also the power and the capacity to do so. Listen to the prophet Micah in chapter 7 of that prophecy in verse 18.

Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. We hear an echo of this truth in the New Testament in the words of John in his first letter and in the first chapter and in verse 9. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Repentance requires and is driven by a grasp in some measure of the mercy of God. Listen to how the Shorter Catechism describes repentance. So, the Shorter Catechism, for those who are from outwith our tradition, is just a little book with questions and answers that explain some of the truths of the faith. And one of the questions is this, what is repentance unto life? They use that language that we find in Acts chapter 11. What is repentance unto life? And the answer is as follows.

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, a knowledge of self, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience. But I'm focusing in on this little expression, somewhat antiquated language, apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.

I love that word, apprehension, grasp, grip. You know, for there to be repentance, the sinner needs to see something of the mercy of God. There needs to be some recognition, some hope that here is a God who is willing to forgive. A God who is merciful. And so when I turn to him in repentance, he will forgive me because he is a merciful God. An apprehension, a grasp, a glimmer, if only a glimmer of the mercy of God in Christ.

[21 : 14] It's been expressed in this way. Repentance is rooted in faith. Faith in God's willingness to accept and forgive us. And where do we most clearly see God's willingness to accept and forgive us? Where do we witness most powerfully the abundant mercy of God? Well, we do so in the person of Jesus. We see the love and mercy of the Father in the sending of His Son. He sent Jesus on a mercy mission to save us. For God so loved the world, He sent His one and only Son. We see the love and mercy of Jesus as Jesus hands Himself over to death and hangs on that accursed cross, dying in our place, bearing the punishment that we deserve, driven by His deep love, His everlasting kindness towards sinners. If we are to repent, we need to grasp, at least in some measure, the reality of God's mercy and His delightful disposition to forgive or pardon.

this grasp of God's mercy is an integral and necessary element of repentance. One writer, a man who goes by the magnificent name of Archibald Alexander Hodge, captures what we're trying to say with these words, a sense of the amazing goodness of God to us in the gift of His Son is the most powerful means of bringing the soul to genuine repentance for sin. We sometimes think it's the other way. We think that the biggest driver for repentance is a sense of how awful and terrible our sin is. Now, that is necessary. We need to have a sense of our sin. But I think it's true that the most powerful driver is the mercy of God. It's the love of God that draws us. Sin drives us to Christ, but Jesus draws us to Himself, and His drawing power is greater than the driving power of being conscious of, of conviction of sin, though the two, of course, go together and both have a part to play. So, we need a knowledge of self. We need a knowledge of God, but we also need, and we close with this, a resolve to act. Now, let me suppose that you are resolved to repent of your sins. What do you do? Well, the key verb that we've already identified a few moments ago, the key verb is to turn. We need to turn from, and we need to turn to. We turn from. That's what the forsaking is all about there in verse 7. Let the wicked forsake his ways and the evil man his thoughts. We need to turn from our wicked ways. We need to turn from our evil thoughts, and we need to turn to. That's what the seeking and the calling is all about. Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call on Him while He is near.

We just think about these two verbs, to seek and to call. The idea of seek there in verse 6, it's not in the sense of a treasure hunt, where you're, you know, looking for a treasure that you may or may not find, but rather that the sense of the word to seek here is the sense of directing your steps to

God. You need to seek Him out. We sometimes speak in those terms, you know, seek out this person. You know what He is, but you need to seek Him out. That's what we're being encouraged to do. But how do you seek Him out? Well, you seek Him out by calling to Him. You just need to call out to God. I love that Isaiah here uses this word, call out. I love that he doesn't say pray. Now, I have no objection to prayer, but if it said pray, I wonder if some folk would say, well, I don't know how to pray.

That's religious stuff. I don't know anything about praying and about all that stuff. You know, I don't know about that. But we all know how to call out. A newborn baby knows how to call out. A newborn baby is an expert in calling out. It doesn't need to be taught how to call out. And that's all you need to do. You need to call out. Call out to God. When you're in need of one kind or another, you call out to a friend. You call the AA when your car breaks down. You call 999 in an emergency. You can do that.

It's not difficult. It's not complicated. And that's what you need to do. If you're going to repent, you need to call out to God. And when you call out to God, what are you asking for?

[26 : 12] Well, you're asking for what you need and what He has promised to give. Mercy and pardon. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. That's something you can do. You can say that. You can direct those words to God. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And we all need to cry out to God with these words. All of us. If you've been a believer for 50 years, it is still necessary for you to cry out to God.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. It's necessary for you day by day to repent of your sins, to turn from them and turn to your Savior. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. How are you to do this? What should characterize this turning to God? Well, let me just notice one or two things that we can draw out from the text and we'll close with these. It's important that you do so with a sense of urgency. Verse 6 is very clear. Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call on Him while He is near. Implicit in these words is a recognition that there is a window of opportunity for sinners to cry out to God. And it is a window that will in God's time close. We don't know when that will be. But now is the time. Now is the day of opportunity. But that day will come to a close. And so there ought to be, and I would urge upon you, a sense of the urgency of the matter. This is not something to be postponed for a more convenient season for another day. Seek the Lord while He may be found. It is an amazing truth. It is amazing opportunity that He is near, that He can be found. Well, avail yourself of that while that opportunity is presented to you. Urgency ought to mark our repentance. But there also is, I think, a place for confidence. You know, we've already read how the promise is clear. He will freely pardon.

Any other call for help that you can make in life is always subject to a measure of uncertainty. You know, I break down whatever in my car and I call the AA and who knows, like, they're meant to come in 45 minutes. But, you know, if it's busy or if it's in the middle of winter, they might take a couple of hours. You know, there's always a measure of uncertainty. Maybe they'll come and say, well, no, we can't help you. That happened to me once. I was a classic kind of, you know, lowlander, though I'm not a lowlander, but I was driving like a lowlander in the highlands and I was reversing into a passing place up on the west coast and my car, one of my wheels went into the ditch. You know, schoolboy error of the tourists in the highlands. Okay, so I couldn't get out. It was really well stuck. So, I call the, you know, the recovery people and they come and they say, oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. In your policy, it says very clearly that we can only help if all four wheels are on the road. Well, I hadn't read that bit. Well, apparently, you might want to be aware of that. That's at least in my policy. Now, in the event, they relented and said, okay, we'll help you. That was nice of them. But there's always an element of uncertainty when we call out for help in this life. People let us down. You know, people sometimes don't have the resources to help. They may want to, but they can't. But when it comes to this matter of calling out to God in repentance, you can be sure that He will freely pardon. And also call out, even as you call out, may there be an element of gratefulness in your call. You see, the very fact that you've been brought to a point where you have a clearer view of yourself and a clearer sense of who God is and of His willingness to pardon you, that already is a gift of God. Call out grateful that He is inviting you to call, that He will respond, that He will freely pardon. And may your gratitude also find expression in that resolve and desire for a new obedience, a new obedience. What will happen when you do that? Well, God will freely pardon you, a pardon that will grant full forgiveness, secure renewed fellowship, and result in a life of fruitfulness. All that is on the table for you if you call out to God. You know, in life, it is important to

focus on the main things. We can be so easily distracted by what is peripheral in life and ignore what is crucial. The Super Bowl is on tonight. How many people knew that? Super Bowl's on tonight. I thought I would draw in our American friends with a reference to the Super Bowl. A bit late because I've just about finished the sermon, so if I only draw you in now, not much has been achieved.

But nonetheless, the Super Bowl is on this evening, or in the early hours of tomorrow morning, I suspect, in UK time. Why did I mention that? Well, my point is this. What is it that most captures the attention of many, clearly not of all, but what most captures the attention of many at the Super Bowl? Well, one of the things that captures the attention of many are the commercials. It's a huge thing. They're, you know, Oscar productions, the commercials that are broadcast not only at halftime, but every five minutes, it seems to me, throughout the broadcast. And people are just fascinated what will be the big commercials this year at the Super Bowl. Or some people are just wondering who's the big star going to be who's going to sing at halftime? You know, will it be Beyonce or Rihanna or whoever? I don't know who it is this year. But people are captivated by these things. Sometimes, even to the extent of forgetting about the game. And you know, that can happen in life. It can happen in your life. You can be so captivated by the trivial and the peripheral that you forget about the main event. And repentance unto life is the main event. This is what God wishes for you. This is what God invites you to, to life. And the way to life is the way of repentance. We need mercy. We see mercy in the person of Jesus. We call out for mercy. And we get mercy. That is the glorious truth that we find here in the Scriptures that God presents to us this morning.

[33 : 23] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that You are an inviting God, that You invite us to Yourself that we might live. And we pray that You would help us to call out to You in the way that You have presented and the way that You encourage us to do so. And we pray that we would all know what it is to address ourselves to You with these simple words, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And as we do, so to experience that free and full pardon that You have promised and that You grant to all who cry out and call out to You. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.