

If you want to be prepared for school and for life after school it's important to build a solid foundation in the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. To help children learn the three R's well learning centers, such as Sylvan, have sprung up and flourished all over North America. While building a solid foundation in the three R's can prepare you for school there is another set of R's that prepares us for something much more important, namely Christ's coming. This morning John the Baptist pushes us to prepare for Christ with these three R's: remorse, rearranging, and rejoicing.

There is no better person to prepare us for Christ than John the Baptist, after all he had been sent for that very purpose. The first thing that John encourages us to do in preparing for Christ is to show remorse over our sin. Remorse, or sincere sadness was something lacking in many of the spiritual leaders of John's day. Many of them came out to be baptized by John, but John said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Luke 3:7) John knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees weren't coming to be baptized because they were sorry for their sins. He knew instead that they wanted to be baptized because that was the thing to do if you were a religious person, and keeping up such appearances was a full time job for these leaders.

No, these leaders didn't seriously think that they needed baptism because after all they were Abraham's children! Didn't that mean they had a free ticket to heaven? Weren't they God's chosen people? We too could come to worship with that same attitude couldn't we? We could come to church not because we want to hear God's word, but out of some sense of obligation to family or to tradition. This is what good All-American people do. They go to church. In the process we may even trick ourselves into believing that heaven is ours by virtue of our church attendance. If so, John has some strong words for us, "You brood of vipers!" (Lk 3:7) Deceitful, just like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, that is what we are if we outwardly live the life of a believer without believing.

But what does it exactly mean to show remorse over sin? It doesn't mean to be sad that others are offended by our sins, or sad that we got caught. That's regret, not remorse. To show remorse means to change our mind about sin. It means that we no longer view sin as something that is fun and exciting, or something which can't be helped and isn't that harmful any way. Rather God wants us to think of sin as a personal insult and rebellion against a Holy and loving God. God wants us to think of sin as every failure, regardless of how small, to follow the perfect pattern of living which God laid down for us in His Word. God wants us to think of sin as something that separates the sinner forever from the Lord God and that results in unhappiness in this world and in eternal damnation hereafter in hell. Change your mind about sin! Don't put a rating scale on the sins out there. Every sin is a slap in the face against God. How then should we view our sin? With serious sadness. Therefore when we all join in confessing our sins at the beginning of the service we should not just parrot the words printed out for us in the hymnal or bulletin, but make that confession a sincere confession. As you confess your sins think of how you have brought grief to your heavenly father by your actions, words, and thoughts.

Showing remorse over sin however, is only the first step in preparing for Christ, the next

step is rearranging. "Produce fruits!" That's what John told those who were coming out to be baptized by him. Don't just say you are sorry but show it in the way that you rearrange your life so that you don't fall into that sin again.

How exactly should we rearrange our lives? That depends. When the tax collectors asked John that question he told them that they should no longer take more money than they had been appointed to take. When the soldiers wanted to know how to rearrange their lives John told them not to use their positions to terrorize people or to extort money from them. He encouraged them instead to be content with their pay.

What kind of advice would John give to you regarding the fruit of repentance? Well, if you have a habit of talking about people who bother you to others, it means you stop that behavior, find something positive to say about the person, and look to resolve your differences face to face if possible.. If you get paid by the hour John would have encouraged you not to punch and then sit around and talk for 20 or 30 minutes before working. If you are a student he would have told you not to cheat, but to respect your teachers and classmates. John would have told a couple living together outside of marriage not just to acknowledge that such a life is sinful but to stop living in that sin by moving apart, and not arguing that it's impractical to do so, or that it's OK to live together as long as you are planning on getting married. If you are someone who tends to belittle other people who don't do what you think they should do, you will stop that angry spirit and try to be more understanding of people who have differences with you.

Saying that we are sorry for our sin but refusing to rearrange our life to avoid that sin shows that we really haven't repented and the Apostle John tells us that such a person has no part in Christ. "4 The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him... 6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did... No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him" (1 Jn. 2:4, 6, 3:6). The writer to the Hebrews is just as blunt when he wrote, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (10:26, 27). John the Baptist put it this way in our text. "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Jn. 3:8).

Thinking about the true meaning of repentance is especially important today as many of us are planning on coming forward to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In preparing to receive the Lord's Supper Paul reminds us that it is important that we not only acknowledge that we are sinners but also plan on rearranging our sinful life. If we come forward to receive the sacrament even though we are planning on committing a sin this afternoon we only make a mockery of the forgiveness that is offered, and we receive the sacrament to our detriment, not our benefit. Therefore brothers and sisters, heed John's words and prepare for Christ through remorse and rearranging.

So far we've taken a look at two of the three R's that prepare us for Christ but if we would stop with remorse and rearranging we would be no better off than the other religions of

this world. Every religion tries to get people to feel sorry for the wrong they have done, and encourages them to make the world a better place in which to live. But remorse and rearranging cannot bring us salvation. We can try and try to get rid of sin but we will always fall back into it. Therefore what hope is there for us who want to stand before a God who demands perfection? Even John, whom Jesus called the greatest man (Matt. 11:11), knew that he was unworthy to stand in God's presence. When the people began to wonder whether or not John was the promised Messiah he told them that he wasn't even worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals (Lk. 3:16).

While none of us deserves to stand in God's presence, Jesus, the Messiah came to save us from our sins making it possible to stand before him. You see, when John encouraged us to produce fruits worthy of repentance he was not telling us to produce fruits worthy of forgiveness. Nothing we do can ever earn God's forgiveness. God does not forgive because we are sorry for our sins; he forgives because Jesus died for us. Seeking to rearrange our life so that we don't fall into sin then is simply a joyful, God-made response to that forgiveness.

So what's the third R that prepares us for Christ? Rejoicing. Rejoicing at the forgiveness that Jesus won for us. You see, while God does want us to feel sorry for the sins that we commit he doesn't want us to fall into despair over them. He wants us to know and believe that he has provided a solution. In fact if we think that God could never forgive us for what we have done we are saying that Jesus really didn't do enough to win forgiveness for all people. To say that is to call God a liar and to take glory and honor away from Christ.

Jesus has not only won forgiveness, he has promised to give us the gift of the Holy Spirit. John said that while he baptized with water Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Lk. 3:16). This was not a reference to a baptism different than John's. Paul tells us that just as there is one Lord, there is one baptism (Eph. 4:5). John instead was referring to the day of Pentecost when Jesus would visibly pour out the Holy Spirit on his apostles. Lest we think that we have missed out on that gift, the Bible promises that this same Holy Spirit is poured out on all those who are baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38, 39). And anyone who believes in Jesus can be certain that he has the gift of the Holy Spirit because we can only make such a confession if the Holy Spirit has created faith in our heart (1 Cor. 12:3). How then should we prepare for Christ? With great rejoicing because he is our Saviour from sin.

While parents continue to spend lots of money to ensure that their children are well grounded in reading, writing, and arithmetic nothing can be more important than being well-grounded in the spiritual R's: remorse, rearranging, and rejoicing. Confess your sins daily assuring yourself that Jesus has forgiven them, and that knowledge will move you to rearrange your life so that little by little we all can become more like him who gave his life save ours. Amen.