

**Ephrata Church of the Brethren
Galen Hackman
Demolishing Strongholds
Repentance
Matthew 21:28-32**

Stronghold series...

Why: We have entered a season of spiritual conflict and it has led us to the realization that not all is well within us. This has individual and corporate dimensions.

What does it take to tear down Strongholds?

Four foundation stones: confession, repentance, accountability and restoration.

The Sacred Assembly. See info in bulletin. Make every effort to be here. What will we do? We will allow God to move among us. We will put flesh on the four foundation stones for tearing down strongholds and rebuilding godly patterns. That means there will be time to confess and repent and seek restoration.

What will this combined service look like? Some of you from first service are afraid it will look like second service and some second service people fear it will look first service. There are two things I want to say about this:

First, whenever I hear something like this, I am very disappointed. It is not very mature. If this is an issue for you, it suggests you have a stronghold you need to deal with, and the stronghold has nothing to do with the kind of worship you prefer. There are many ways to worship, and the way you prefer is not better or worse than other ways.

If you are thinking about “us and them” your stronghold relates to how you view the people who are different from you. Your stronghold may very well be an issue of pride and arrogance in which you actually think that your choices and preferences are more mature and more spiritual than other people. You may think that your preferred worship style is better, more godly, more real, than that of the other service.

Or maybe you look askance at the other service because you are comfortable where you are and fear what might happen to you and where God might take you if you stepped out of your comfort zone and expanded your worship experience. Fear and inhibition may also be strongholds in your life.

So if you are worried about mixing it up with the “other” people of our church, that’s a stronghold for you. And you need to deal with it. Maybe, if you took the time to get know some of the “other” people in our church, you’d find out how incredibly wonderful they are.

The second thing I want to say about the Sacred Assembly is that you can rest assured it will not be like the “other service”, no matter which one that is for you. Actually, the Sacred Assembly will not be like either of the types of worship we normally provide on Sunday morning. This is a unique event. We are going to let God guide us. It will not be like anything we have ever done before; and it might never happen again.

With that in mind, let’s look at the topic for today.

Repentance is a misunderstood term. For starters, we live in a world that is not big on remorse or the admission of guilt—we really are not that bad and if we are, it is always someone else’s fault.

In *Jesus Mean and Wild*, author Mark Galli discusses the challenge of repentance in American culture:

I look at myself some days and it's hard to imagine that I am a miserable offender and that there is no health in me [as the Book of Common Prayer suggests]. I go to church. I read my Bible. I help at the homeless shelter once a month. At home, I do the dishes, take out the trash, and don't beat my children. I don't even ground them. Most nights, when I close my day with prayer (see there, regular prayer—another jewel in my crown), I usually have nothing but peccadilloes to confess—a little sloth here, some impatience there.

For others the problem with repentance runs deeper. They have been raised in legalistic environments and carry around a guilt-laden backpack that would bend the knees of a Himalayan Sherpa. And most of the guilt, they realize, is neurotic—not based on any real transgression, but the product of defective discipleship. Years of "Christian nurture" has contorted their souls. So after drinking a glass of wine or failing to say the rosary or breaking one of a thousand other man-made religious taboos, they cannot shake the pangs of miserable guilt. If this is what repentance conjures up, they are right to want nothing of it.

Others still fight not false guilt but spiritual despair. They believe, rightly so, that true religion is about love and grace. But they've heard a rumor that the Lord is a holy God, and they suspect that they just may be miserable sinners. So they spend their days making sure these two combustible ideas never mix—something repentance tries to do—because if they ever did, such people fear that the resulting explosion would blow their faith to smithereens.

Add to this the twentieth-century fascination with self-esteem and a society hooked on affirmation steroids, and it is no wonder that we have created a faith that can hardly pronounce the word.

Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love an Untamable God* (Baker, 2006), pp. 34-35

Galli has it right, repentance brings together two significant and foundational biblical concepts—God is a gracious God, willing to freely forgive, and he is a holy God, expecting godliness from his people.

Repentance brings those two concepts together in our lives whenever it is that we confess our sin by naming it *and* agreeing with God about the nature of it which then leads to a change in life growing out of a heart of godly sorrow.

You may remember that last week I said confession involves both naming your sin and agreeing with God about the nature of your sin. I mentioned that when we agree with God about the nature of our sin, we are beginning to enter into the realm of repentance.

To repent has two shades of meaning, which are not unrelated. The first shade of meaning has to do with feeling and the other with action.

We see both these meanings in Paul's comments to the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 7:9-11

yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly

sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

To repent means to feel sorrow and remorse for some failure on our part. We feel remorse when we come to understand how it is that our failure has disappointed God—how it has grieved his heart.

Of course, this means we are people who know God well enough, and we know him in his fullness, that his heart actually has shaped our hearts. Too often, I fear, even in the church today, the heart of God is not the primary thing that shapes our life together and our understanding of our responsibilities as his people. Therefore, since we do not know God as we should, we do not feel his pain as we ought.

In his book We Are Still Married, Garrison Keillor wrote a hilariously subversive essay called "The Current Crisis in Remorse." It's written by a fictitious social worker who was once employed as a "professional remorse officer" in the Department of Human Services. Because America cares very little for the pain of regret, the poor guy didn't even get an office—just a desk across from the elevator and a phone that he had to share with the director of the Nephew Program in Family Counseling. "Morale in remorse has never been lower," he complains. "We in remorse are a radical minority within the social-work community. We believe that not every wrong in our society is the result of complex factors such as poor early-learning environment and resultative dissocialized communication. Some wrong is the result of badness. We believe that some people act like jerks. ... They do bad things. They should feel sorry for what they did and stop it."

Garrison Keillor, *We Are Still Married: Stories and Letters*
(Penguin, 1990)

Keillor gets it right too. Feeling sorry for what you did and stopping it is repentance.

Here the parable of Jesus that I read at the beginning of the sermon, is illustrative. In this story, which person repented? Of course, the one who first refused to do his father's bidding but then thought the better of it, and went ahead and did it. That's the point. God is a God of repentance. He welcomes our admission of guilt and welcomes our changed hearts, and when that happens, he remembers our sin no more.

Now we have been dealing with strongholds: Spiritual strongholds. We described strongholds as the places in our lives and in our families and in our institutions where Satan has been able to develop a foothold and from that foothold, he harasses us. The fact that he has such a foothold in our lives gives him the false idea that he has a right to us, to our families and to our churches. Of course he does not, but since when did he care about that!

Biblical repentance is feeling sorry about your sin, but it is also turning away from it. In this way, there is a very practical aspect to repentance. It was not enough for the son in our parable to feel regret over what he said to his father; he also had to turn around and go do what his father asked of him.

We are dealing with strongholds. One thing about strongholds is that they are often, well, strong. Strongholds are not simply little slips in judgment or errors of behavior when you are tired and vulnerable. Strongholds are often those things that you know are wrong, but you just can't break free from them. They are deeply ingrained.

You've fallen, felt sorry, apologized to God and promised to never do it again, a dozen—a million—times. But here you are again. You just cannot shake free. This thing—whatever it is—this behavior, attitude, opinion—is deeply rooted and seem to have control over you.

Those are the things this series is really designed to address. Because when it comes to strongholds, simply confessing and apologizing is not enough. We need to lay siege to the stronghold, tenaciously and relentlessly. We need repentance, accountability and serious work on restoration, before we are totally free.

So repentance is feeling remorse; but it is also the action of turning away.

Turning away involves asking hard questions and making hard choices.

The first really hard question relates to Jesus. Is he your first love? Have you submitted to his authority in your life? If you look at the context of the parable that I read this morning you will notice that it, along with the two successive parables, were spoken because people were questioning Jesus' authority.

Notice the question in Matthew 21:21. *By what authority are you doing these things?* What things? Jesus had just rode into Jerusalem claiming to be king (the Triumphal Entry of Palm Sunday), had just cleansed the temple and cursed a barren fig tree.

By what authority are you doing these things?

The people of Jesus' day had the same struggle we do today. We struggle to submit to the authority of Jesus in our lives. We like to claim we follow him and we even read what he taught, but because it is too hard, we try to explain it away, rather than simply obeying it.

One of the hallmarks of the Brethren movement at its beginning was a simply and radical obedience to the teachings of Jesus. And they did this, even if they were weird or counter-cultural. The early Brethren may not have always got it right in practice; but in their hearts, they wanted one thing and one thing only: they wanted to live with Jesus as their first love.

As you wrestle with the question of Jesus and your submission to him, he will likely be asking you do make some hard choices. These choices are primary if you are going to break through the strongholds of your life.

What should you do differently so that you are not placed in positions where the stronghold is enforced and empowered. Are there people you should not see, places you should not go, thoughts you should not dwell on, food you should not eat, material you should not read, ...

What decision do you need to make today?

And of course when you turn away from one thing, you of necessity turn toward another. This will really be the topic of Restoration in two weeks. What do you put in your life in place of the stuff that used to be there, to ensure that the stronghold is not again erected to a place of power.

But for now, let's just say that to find freedom from your stronghold, you will need to tenaciously and relentlessly lay siege to it, but you will also need to tenaciously and relentlessly seek God.

Of course, you cannot do this in your own strength. You need Jesus. You need the power of the Holy Spirit. When is the last time you experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in your life? If you are going to be victorious over the strongholds of your world, you will need to rely on strength beyond your own.

This week Brian Nissley came to me with a testimony of his struggle with a stronghold that had generational roots in his family. I've asked him to share it with you.

Testimony

Before I end, I want to call your attention to the insert in bulletin—the marked Demolishing Strongholds—Repentance. Like last week, I encourage you to use this insert...

Prayer