

Laying the Ax to the Root of Sin
Pastor Joe Oakley - GFC – 4/14/24

Last week I preached sermon entitled – Greater Freedom. I told you we were winding down our sermon series called Greater and I asked you to pray with me for direction on our next series.

There was such an overwhelming response to the message on Laying the Ax to the Root – that I felt led to continue preaching on that. So the message on Greater Freedom was the transition message from the series Greater to the series Greater Freedom.

Last week we talked about John 8:36 which says:

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

We saw how there is greater freedom available to all of us. We saw that freedom is great, but staying free is greater! And to experience greater freedom we must lay the ax to the root! Matthew 3:10 says:

The ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

This verse was directed to those walking in legalism rather than in faith, but from it we draw out this principle – when you’re not bearing good fruit, lay the ax to the root! When you’re bearing bad fruit – lay the ax to the root.

We all have areas in our lives where we just try to control our outward behavior by telling ourselves, “No, stop it!” But if we don’t lay the ax to the root, it will just grow back. That’s because many times we just deal with symptoms and outward behaviors without ever dealing with root causes of our problems. So – no matter how hard we try - the problems keep coming back.

In this series, I want us to go deeper into dealing with the roots that need to be axed so we can live in freedom. We find those roots by understanding what Jesus came to earth to accomplish on our behalf. We find that in Luke 4:18-19 when Jesus said-

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

I believe those 6 ministries of Christ show us the six roots we need to lay the ax to in order to live in greater freedom.

Last week I taught that the first root we need to ax is the root of sin. I want to expand and expound on that today as I preach on Laying the Ax to the Root of Sin.

Sin is rooted in self-centeredness and rebellion against God. Isaiah 53:6 says:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

The essence of sin is living like I want rather than how God wants. Living for myself rather than for God. And that includes not wanting to repent of sin. I want to tell you a true story to illustrate this.

In the 1940's Mickey Cohen was the # 1 gangster in L.A. He brought in ½ million \$\$ a day through illegal activities, mainly gambling. Mickey Cohen liked to be seen with famous people. He could be seen in restaurants and nightclubs with stars like Jimmy Durante, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Humphrey Bogart.

Billy Graham's first big crusade was in the 1940's in L.A. It attracted a lot of publicity. Big movie stars of the era like Roy Rogers got saved at these meetings. Mickey Cohen wanted to meet "that guy who is converting all those famous folks."

So, it was arranged for Cohen to attend a private meeting where Billy Graham was preaching to a group of Hollywood people. At the end of the message, Mickey Cohen raised his hand to express interest in learning more about Christianity. Someone was sent to Mickey Cohen's house to do some follow up. They explained the gospel and asked Mickey if he wanted to pray the sinner's prayer. Mickey said sure.

Well, the Christian world was jubilant over the conversion of this notorious gangster. What a trophy. What a testimony. However, their excitement was short-lived because they started noticing Mickey hadn't really changed at all. He was still involved in the same illegal activities.

So, they sent someone out to talk to Mickey about his lifestyle. When confronted about his lack of change, here's what Mickey Cohen said:

"I'm not a bad guy. I always strive for the best. I always try to do things in a professional way. I have my own principles about things. Like when I pull off a heist, it's a bad reflection on me if anybody just standing around gets hurt. I work clean. I was never a person who would take the life of anybody unless it was absolutely a must. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen, and Christian politicians. So what's the matter with being a Christian gangster? You never told me that I had to give up my career. You never told me that I had to give up my friends. If I have to give up all that – if that's Christianity - count me out."

Of course, he was never really in. How do I know? Because there was no change.

He just emotionally responded to a message, but there was no change of behavior because there was no true change of heart. There was no change because there was no repentance.

The only way to deal with sinful rebellion is through repentance. Let's look at **what repentance is not-**

Repentance is not Conviction – this is necessary, but it's not repentance. Conviction is the Holy Spirit pointing out specific things that need to change in your life. It's not condemnation, which is from the enemy and says not that you have done wrong, but that you are wrong and will never change. Condemnation drives you from God. Conviction draws you to God, but it in itself is not repentance.

Repentance is not Sorrow - it's good to be sorry for having done wrong. Godly sorrow leads to repentance, but it's not repentance.

Repentance is not Penance – when you try to do something on your own to pay for a sin.

Repentance is not outward reformation without inner heart change – You see, there's a big difference between turning over a new leaf and turning over your life to Jesus Christ. The trouble with turning over a new leaf is that once you've done it twice, you're right back where you started.

Repentance is more than conviction, sorrow or outward reformation. Repentance means to do an about face – a U turn. Repentance means true change - a change of heart, change of mind, change of attitude, change of lifestyle.

If we go God's way – it results in life and freedom. If we go our way – it results in death and captivity. **We need to be quick to repent or our hearts will harden and the roots of sin will grow ever deeper.**

I know it's popular these days for some hyper-grace teachers to teach that once we repent and come to Jesus for forgiveness, there is no more need for believers to repent. No way! Jesus spoke to 7 churches in the book of Revelation. And He told the believers in 5 of those 7 churches to repent!

We've had people leave this church because they believed that believers do not need to repent. But I'm going to stick with what the Bible teaches no matter what others teach.

And by the way - since the main meaning of the word repent is change, do you really believe that once you've a believer in Christ you have no more changing to do? No way! You have a lifetime of changing to do! And you'll never repent or change until you see the need for change and your inadequacy to change yourself!

Matthew 4:17 says:

From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Jesus came to preach good news to the poor. The poor this is talking about are not the financially poor, but the spiritually poor. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

To be poor in the spirit means that you know you come to God empty handed. You have nothing to offer Him but yourself. You are a beggar crying out for mercy! Many people don't receive the good news because they aren't poor enough! They see themselves as good enough on their own. That was Mickey Cohen's problem!

True repentance lays the ax to the root of sin. True change requires repentance. Without repentance you won't change and if you haven't changed, you haven't repented. Repentance lays the ax to the root of sin and self-righteousness.

Jesus dealt with these types of self-righteous people all the time. Here's what He said to them in Mark 2:17

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.

Remember- repentance is not just feeling bad for what you did. It is a change of mind that leads to a change of heart and a change of lifestyle. The key word is change. **You don't repent and stay the same! You don't come to Jesus and go away the same!**

So, what does God use to bring about repentance?

The message of the cross

Jesus said in John 12:32 (Amplified Version)

When I am lifted up from the earth [on the cross], I will draw and attract all people to Myself.

The cross is proof of the depth of God's love for us to save us from our sin.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin.

John 16:8 says:

When He comes, He will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.

The preaching of the cross and conviction of sin leads to sorrow. And sorrow leads to repentance. But not just any kind of sorrow. We find this in 2 Corinthians 7:10

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

You can tell the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow by their results. Godly sorrow lays the ax to the root, but worldly sorrow does not. Godly sorrow leads to repentance and change, but worldly sorrow leads to death – emotional, spiritual death and sometimes even physical death.

There are biblical examples of godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. For instance, both Judas and Peter betrayed Jesus. They were both sorrowful for what they did.

But Judas had a worldly sorrow that leads to death and he hanged himself. Peter had a godly sorrow that led to repentance that led to him reconnecting with Jesus. He laid the ax to the root of sorrow. **Worldly sorrow drives you away from God, but godly sorrow draws you closer to God!**

True repentance leads to true change. **Don't deceive yourself into thinking you've repented because you confessed your sin.** Many people confess their sins fully intending to sin again. And they do not change because they have not repented. And they have not repented because they have no godly sorrow for sin. Godly sorrow leads to true repentance which results in life change. You don't repent and stay the same!

Don't confuse just being sorry with true repentance. Being sorry means feeling sorrow or regret. Repentance on the other hand is the action or process of repenting -especially for misdeeds or moral shortcomings. Did you notice repentance involves ACTION? It's more than just a feeling of regret. Repentance isn't just guilt. It's a change of mind and behavior.

We can be sorry for the consequences of our actions, but not change our heart, our thoughts or our behavior. This only results in regret without repentance. Only godly sorrow leads us to repentance.

Also – the goodness of God leads us to repentance.

In fact, all of these other things that draw us to repentance are evidence of God's goodness, kindness, mercy and love. Romans 2:4 says:

Do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's goodness leads you toward repentance?

The Good News Translation says:

Surely you know that God is kind, because He is trying to lead you to repent.

I like that because it shows that God's goodness leads us to repentance AND it shows us that the fact that God wants us to repent is evidence of His goodness to us.

Goodness is God's kindness to us in regard to our past sin. He has been good to us because He has not judged us yet though we deserve it.

Tolerance is God's kindness to us in regard to our present sin. Every day we fall short of His glory, yet He holds back His judgment against us.

Patience is God's kindness to us in regard to our future sin. He knows that we will sin in the future, yet He holds back His judgment.

People often think of God's patience and tolerance as weakness. They say things like "If there is a God in heaven, let Him strike me dead!" When it doesn't happen, they will say, "See, I told you there was no God." Men misinterpret God's patience and longsuffering as His approval, and they refuse to repent.

By the way, are you waiting for God to drive you to repentance? He doesn't work like that; God leads you to repentance. God draws you to repentance. And I pray He draws you to Himself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who stood up to the Nazi's and was killed in a concentration camp in 1945. He knew what it meant to count the cost and he wrote about in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Most people don't like to talk about the cost of following Christ. They just want to reap the benefits.

Bonhoeffer talked about the concept of cheap grace – which offers salvation without repentance and discipleship without cost.

Too many people want a no-cost Christianity.

They want cut-rate commitment.

They want a bargain-basement belief.

They want a thrift-store theology.

They want a marked-down Messiah.

They want to pay the absolutely lowest rock-bottom clearance-rack price.

If that describes you, you are not truly following Christ with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Please understand.

There is no forgiveness without repentance!

There is no salvation without surrender!

There is no discipleship without commitment!

There is no following Christ without taking up your cross!

So how do we lay the ax to the root of sin?
Through repentance!
And how do we change through repentance?

First of all – **if you are not convicted of sin, pray that the Holy Spirit will convict you and give you godly sorrow for your sin.**

Accept responsibility for your sin

Proverbs 28:13 says:

People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy.

Confess your sin

1 John 1:8-9 says:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Turn from sin and self to God - Not just from sin, but to God.

Hebrews 6:1 says:

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from works that lead to death, and of faith toward God.

Once we turn to God in repentance, we still have changing to do. Salvation changes our heart, our inner man, our spirit. But, we still have the same body and same soul – mind, will and emotions. Our will needs to be submitted to God, our emotions need to come under the control of the spirit, and our minds need to be renewed.

This means we must live a lifestyle of repentance. We must continually turn from sin and self to God. We must lay the ax to the root of sin through repentance. That's how we experience greater freedom!

Way too many people want a little touch up work when Jesus wants to give us a complete renovation.

Way too many people want a little tune up when Jesus wants to give us a complete overhaul.

Way too many people want to put on a little spiritual makeup, but Jesus wants to give us a complete spiritual makeover.

Way too many people want a little relief, but Jesus wants to give us greater freedom!!! And you can experience that in Jesus' name!