

# Repentance

Repentance appeared in The Living Pulpit, a journal for preachers in the summer of 2004. In it, I look at the question at what repentance might look like for a middle-class American like myself who benefits from so much injustice.

It is not against human enemies that we have to struggle but against the Sovereignities and the Powers who originate the darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens.  
Eph 6:12

Every *day*, tens of thousands of children die of hunger and easily preventable infectious diseases, yet the countries of the developed world do not spend the insignificant percentage of their resources necessary to prevent these tragedies. Scientific consensus warns of the terrifying dangers of global warming—likely to cost millions of lives and irreparable harm to the environment—yet we refuse to cut our greenhouse gas emissions significantly for fear of reducing profits. An American citizen can work full time, year round and still not raise his or her family out of poverty, yet our local, state, and federal governments refuse to enact living wage laws or craft tax policies that could easily solve the problem.

Repenting my personal sin and separation from God is at least something I know *how* to do. I may find it difficult or painful, I may resist with all my might, but once I recognize any particular sin or sinfulness, it's generally clear what I could do: apologize, make restitution, take steps to avoid repeating the sin, and accept the ever-present forgiveness of God. But we who are affluent and comfortable let the powerful institutions of our society do most of our sinning for us. What does repentance even look like when it's the Sovereignities and Powers that provide me my comfort and affluence? How do I “turn around” toward something different when I benefit from something over which I have little personal control?

I still occasionally shop at Wal-Mart. Everything is available under one roof and things are so cheap. I shop there despite the knowledge that Wal-Mart's low prices come at the expense of sweatshops in China and American personnel paid wages that cannot support their families. Wal-Mart is the largest corporation in the world with yearly profits of \$7 billion on \$220 billion yearly revenue. It is staunchly anti-union and hires at minimum wage or just above. Wal-Mart's aggressive pricing means that in order to remain competitive other retailers must buy from Third World sweatshops and hire personnel at minimum wages, too. In other words, whenever I shop at Wal-Mart, I benefit from the convenience and low prices of corporate sin. It's true that I could

(and probably should) stop buying at Wal-Mart, but even the low prices I might get at Wal-Mart's competitors are tainted. What would repentance look like?

I reap enormous benefits from the unregulated, radical, free-market economic system that not only impoverishes billions of people around the world but also destroys the fragile ecology of our Earth. Like the majority of Americans, I live in a luxury that throughout most of history would have made kings envious. But this luxury comes at the expense of other people everywhere. I don't even know how to disentangle myself from the evil of this system. What would repentance look like?

I have worked for the last twenty years as a physician in the inner city of Washington among the poor of this city's ghettos. Even the dozens of missions, big and small, birthed by our church—clinics, preschools and after-school programs, residential alcohol and drug treatment, subsidized housing, communities for those dying with AIDS, jobs programs, and many more—have been no match for the structural violence of these ghettos: segregation, impoverished public education, a paucity of jobs on which one can support a family, violence, a criminal justice system that imprisons vast numbers of young black men. These many elements of structural violence come from economic, political, and social decisions made by an entire nation over many generations. I benefit and others perish. What would repentance look like?

Millennia ago, the word of God came to Jonah: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Jonah ran away. God was persistent, and Jonah went and preached against Nineveh. "Forty more days and the city will be overturned." Then something quite amazing happened. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. Even the King rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

My goodness! Jonah became a conduit for God's word and an entire country repented. Can we even imagine such a miracle in our day?

In his extensive study of the Powers and Principalities, [\[1\]](#) Walter Wink reminds us that there is a spirituality within every institution, too. There is a "soul" in any country, in any government, in any company, in any structure, and that soul guides the thinking and behavior of that institution. In our secular, individualistic society, the notion of actual spiritual Powers controlling our institutions seems not only primitive but also threatening. We know how to struggle against

human enemies, but how does one fight a Power?

Our refusal to recognize the spiritual realities of institutions leaves us spending our energy against diversionary forces while the real battle rages elsewhere. We attack the President or the CEO or the Board of Directors thinking that they are in control. (Yes, of course, the human leaders of institutions must be directly confronted for they have responsibility, too, but we waste most of our energy if we don't recognize that other Powers are in charge.) When we do not recognize the spirituality in our institutions, we are powerless before them.

What we rarely understand is the authority that repentance gives us before the Principalities and Powers. Most of the institutions that must be transformed—unregulated capitalism, political power, large corporations, the criminal justice system, and many others—benefit me, too. Repentance, therefore, is the necessary first step in withdrawing my power from that with which I struggle.

Repentance is first of all recognition, a hard look at the reality of the sinfulness. When our institutions do our sinning for us, repentance begins with the acknowledgement that I benefit from structures that oppress others. This is not a simple process, for the Powers will respond with all their obfuscatory might and will call upon the Powers of other institutions to confuse us. Most importantly, our repentance will call forth the anger and hurt of other in our community, who also benefit from the same structures. Even my individual, personal repentance calls the community to accountability.

To complicate matters, without the support of one's community, it is difficult to repent for this kind of sin. For most of us, only the community's collective recognition of its collective sin and the community's commitment to maintaining that recognition gives the individual the courage, the discernment, the strength to preserve awareness of one's responsibility for the structural sin in question.

Repentance is not simply the recognition of my complicity; it is also the recognition of the full consequences of my complicity. Repentance often requires education and leads to the need for further education. I must face and keep before me what the structural violence that benefits me does to others.

The power of repentance over structural sin must not be belittled. Such repentance is not just a personal, inward act but a statement to the community. It is, in fact, close to street theater, dramatizing the collective responsibility and calling others to repentance. Repentance is the first step in overcoming structural sin.

My repentance does not change Wal-Mart's hiring and wage practices in itself, but it clears the way for God to speak through me in challenging those practices. It makes a place for something new and makes a call for wider repentance. I cannot simultaneously be an inner-city doctor, an environmental activist, a union organizer, a leader in protests against the worst aspects of free trade, a political candidate. There are too many tentacles to the deep structural sin in which I am involved for me to work actively against all of them. But I can kneel in repentance before God, ask forgiveness for my part, and open my heart to God's call to respond.

It is—perhaps—not too late for our society to don sackcloth and ashes. Repentance is our first step in making way for the Reign of God.

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[1] See, for instance, *Engaging the Powers*.