

## UNIT 14

+

**SEEK THE LORD,**

---

**ALL YOU HUMBLE**

---

**OF THE EARTH**

---

# “I Turn My Feet Back to Your Decrees”

by Matt Capps

When Martin Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation by nailing his ninety-five theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in Germany, it was no coincidence that the very first thesis focused on repentance. For Luther, repentance was so central to the Christian life that this famous document began by arguing that “the entire life of believers be a life of repentance.”<sup>1</sup> This may sound odd to our modern sensibilities. In fact, it’s not a stretch to argue that the doctrine of repentance has fallen on hard times in our day because it presupposes there is something wrong with us. In our therapeutic culture, this can come across as demeaning. No one wants to admit something is wrong with them, right? *Who has the right to tell me I need to change? Who has the right to tell me I don’t measure up? And repentance is needed for all of life? Come on, Luther. Isn’t that a little excessive?*

We all like to justify ourselves, in every part of our being. As the father of three small children, I am reminded of this often. When confronting a child’s

wrongdoing, I always notice how quickly their inner lawyer is revealed in their arguments. One common response is: “It wasn’t my fault! He started it!” We all are excellent at pointing out the faults of others, aren’t we? Another response is: “I didn’t do anything wrong!” We love to redefine right and wrong according to our own benefit. It’s fascinating how the actions of a child reflect how controversial repentance is from an early age. Things don’t change much as we grow older; our self-justification just becomes more advanced. This is common among all humanity. You see, the way the world typically deals with sin is blame-shifting or redefinition. However, God calls His children to deal with sin by repentance.

## DEFINING REPENTANCE

Repentance is more than remorse over being caught. Repentance is deeper than regret for the consequences of sin. Repentance begins with sorrow over breaking God’s heart. But repentance doesn’t end there. Repentance is turning

from sin and returning to God with a desire to follow His commands. Mark Dever put it well when he said:

What is repentance? It is turning from the sins you love to the holy God you're called to love. It is admitting that you're not God. It is beginning to value Jesus more than your immediate pleasure. It is giving up those things the Bible calls sin and leaving them to follow Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

When one examines Scripture, repentance is always the first step to renewal and revival. The good news is God always initiates this renewal with a manifest call for repentance among His people. In this sense, all of God's warnings that precede final judgment are acts of mercy and grace. However, we must not presume upon His grace. Even in His long-suffering, God is also just. The Old Testament makes it clear: When people ignore God's warnings and proceed in their sin despite His summons, it always ends in judgment. Therefore, true repentance is marked by perseverance in obedience. To put it another way, sin forsaken is one of the best pieces of evidence for true repentance.

Sin forsaken is one  
of the best pieces  
of evidence for  
true repentance.

### REPENTANCE IN SANCTIFICATION

Now, you may be thinking, But even in my best efforts, I am not able to walk in perfect obedience! This is why Luther declared that all of life should be marked by repentance. Even from the beginning, an infant in the faith must first understand that repentance is required to understand our need for grace. As time goes on and one matures in faith, it becomes clear that the closer you get to our Holy God, the more you realize how much you need to repent. The brighter the light, the more visible the imperfections. In this way, we understand that the fruitful Christian life isn't a sinless life but a repentant life. The Christian who has stopped repenting is a Christian who has stopped growing. After all, Jesus exhorted people to produce fruit that comes from repentance (Matt. 3:8).

The fruitful Christian life isn't a sinless life  
but a repentant life.

Growing in repentance is the fruit of faithfulness.  
And faithfulness is proven through  
persevering in repentance.

### THE GOSPEL IS FOR SINNERS

The gospel is such good news for sinners like you and me. Jesus came not for the healthy but for those who knew they were sick, to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:31-32). As Christians, we know that Jesus died as the atoning sacrifice for our sin so that we could be forgiven (Luke 24:46-47). Because Jesus is the only person who has ever lived a perfectly righteous life, He is the only One who can make a satisfactory sacrifice to appease the justice of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the grounds of our repentance. And it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). This is good news for the entirety of our lives! Why? We can be open and honest when we repent of our sin because the Scriptures promise that our sins will be wiped out and remembered by God no more. Moreover, we are promised that when we repent, we will be refreshed by the Lord (Acts 3:19-20).

Now we see that repentance is not just the door of entry into the Christian life. Repentance is the way we go further up and deeper into our walk with God. At the end of his life, the puritan theologian

John Newton was recorded as saying, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."<sup>3</sup> You see, like Newton, we must understand that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. Repentance recognizes that we are so sinful that we need God's grace. Faith believes that we are so loved that Christ came to show us grace. And it's because of God's grace in Christ that we can approach the throne of grace with boldness to receive mercy and find grace (Heb. 4:16). Therefore, growing in repentance is the fruit of faithfulness. And faithfulness is proven through persevering in repentance.

