

February 10, 2016, Ash Wednesday Joel 2: 12

“Fasting, Weeping, & Mourning”

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The art of the apology -- if you're married, you probably know a thing or two about the art of the apology. Knowing how and when to apologize is important, and not just for married couples. If you've ever been in a serious relationship, if you've ever had a parent or a sibling or a friend, if you've ever worked with other people, or gone to school with fellow humans, then you are likely familiar with the art of the apology.

“I'm sorry.” Nine times out of ten, when you say those words, the person you're addressing can tell whether you really mean them or not. Saying “I'm sorry” at the right time, with the right tone of voice, with the appropriate look on your face, can be super tricky. Have you ever told someone, “I'm sorry,” but you ended up in even bigger trouble because of your insincere apology? My advice? If you're not really feeling it, you're probably better off not even saying it.

Earlier today, I Googled that phrase, “the art of the apology.” There are hundreds of articles about apologizing available for you online, from [Psychology Today](#), [Men's Fitness](#), [Oprah.com](#), and the Harvard Business School, just to name a few. You can go on the internet these days and search *how to apologize to a friend, how to apologize to your mom, to your parents, to a woman, to a girl you like*. You can search *things to say to get your girlfriend to forgive you, how to apologize to your girlfriend after a fight, how to apologize to your girlfriend for cheating, for lying, how to say sorry to a girlfriend if she is angry; how to apologize to your girlfriend and get her back*. The list goes on and on. The internet is full of apology advice – especially, apparently, for boyfriends!

The Bible is full of apology advice, too. How do we say we're sorry to God?

Tonight's Bible reading from the prophet Joel gets at that very question. Joel recorded God's words to his people: "'Yet even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.'" Is that how you apologize to God? How many of you fasted before coming to church tonight? Were any of you weeping as you made your confession earlier? Would you say you're in mourning over your sins?

What is the best way for Christians like us to show remorse, to demonstrate contrition, to express our regret for the things we've done and said that are hurtful to God? Let's talk tonight, for few minutes, about the art of the apology between you and God.

The Old Testament prophet Joel was one of many prophets who encouraged the Israelites to repent, to be truly sorry for their sins. Just like us, those people back then knew when they were breaking God's laws. They knew that God was hurt and upset when they lied, cheated, called each other names, skipped going to church to play golf, or used the Lord's name in vain. They felt guilt over their sin, just as we do.

But here's the thing. When they said, "I'm sorry, God," their words, apparently, were hollow. When they made sacrifices to pay for their sins, they just went through the ritual actions and kept right on sinning. When they apologized, in other words, their hearts weren't in it.

Remember what I said before? If you're not really feeling it, you're probably better off not even saying it. That's what Joel was telling the people back in the day. God's not interested in your empty words, and your meaningless rituals. You've

done a very good job, a very sincere job, of sinning. Now be sincere about apologizing. “Return to me,” the Lord pleaded through the prophet, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

On this Ash Wednesday, we come before the Lord. We need him, don't we? We need God's help. We know that we have offended God, disobeyed God, ignored God, displeased God. You have! I have! We all have! We know that our sins led Jesus to the cross, and that God's Son suffered there in our place. We know that sin affects our families and our marriages. We know that our sin has consequences, and is making a mess of our lives and our world.

All this we know. But are we sorry for our sin?

We read the words of confession. We chanted the Sinner's Prayer. We did the ritual, and we're wearing these ashes. But are we truly sorry?

God does not want our words, if our words are not heartfelt. God is not interested in our rituals, if our rituals do not genuinely express the attitudes and feelings of our hearts.

Our God wants nothing less than our hearts. And God deserves nothing less than our full attention and our sincere sorrow over our sins and misdeeds. After all, God is so good to us, so generous and patient with us! Everything we have, and everything we are, we owe to him! His abundant love, his constant care, and his daily blessings are all undeserved. So when we spurn him, reject him, and choose our own way over his way, we should feel badly. We should be contrite. We should apologize, with 100% sincerity! God deserves nothing less, does he?

This night, and throughout the forty days of this season of Lent, return to the Lord. No excuses. No “if's” and “but's.” No meaningless words. No going through the motions. Return to

the Lord with all your heart. Fast if you have to. Weep and mourn if that's what it takes. But put your heart, child of God, into your worship. Put your heart, disciple of Jesus, into your confession. Put your heart, follower of Christ, into your relationship with God, and you'll be blessed every step of this Lenten journey. Put your heart into your study of the Scriptures, into your prayers and devotions, into your service to others, into your thanksgiving for the Lord's Passion and sacrifice; and you'll be blessed by his forgiving love, by his amazing grace, by the salvation that Jesus finished on Good Friday for you.

The word of God for this Ash Wednesday: "Return now to me," says the Lord, "with all your heart." Amen.