

How Not to Repent

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[0:00] Chapter 15, verse 1, we read, And Samuel said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel. Now therefore, listen to the words of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, I have noted that Amalek did what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have.

Do not spare them, but kill both men and women, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey. So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Talim, 200,000 men on foot and 10,000 men of Judah.

And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said to the Canaanites, Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them.

For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt. So the Canaanites departed from among the Amalekites. And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah, as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.

[1:16] And he took Agag, the king of the Amalekites, alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lamb and all that was good and would not utterly destroy them.

All that was despised and worthless, they devoted to destruction. The word of the Lord came to Samuel. I regret that I have met Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.

And Samuel was angry and he cried to the Lord all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, Saul came to Carmel and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Yuga.

And Saul said to him, Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord. And Samuel said, What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear? Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God and the rest we have devoted to destruction.

[2:51] And Samuel said to Saul, Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night. And he said to him, Speak. And Samuel said, Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?

The Lord anointed you king over Israel, and the Lord sent you on a mission and said, Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.

Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord? And Saul said to Samuel, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord.

I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag, the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the loyal God in Gilgal.

And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

[4:15] For rebellion is the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.

Saul said to Samuel, I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.

Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord. And Samuel said to Saul, I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.

As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe and it tore. And Samuel said to him, The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.

And also, the glory of Israel would not lie or have regret, for he is not a man that he should have regret. And he said, I have sinned, I have sinned, yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God.

[5 : 44] So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the Lord. Then in verse 35, And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death.

But Samuel grieved over Saul, and the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel. This is the word of God. I'm just going to do something.

So welcome. Welcome everyone to Watermark. Just really exciting to actually see some of your faces on the screen. Great to see Hui Lin, and Jesse, and Victoria, and Dwight earlier.

Great to see you. I know in this time, Zoom can be difficult to concentrate. It can be difficult to focus. But my prayer is actually, just as Jeremy shared earlier on, that actually we take this season, not as a season to kind of wish your way, but actually to really pursue God, and to really seek to say, God, who is the person, or the people that you're placing on my heart, that I can be praying for in Watermark, that I can be sending a text, that I can be encouraging at this time.

Because we really need to be a community that's helping point each other to Jesus, even in this period. So let me just pray for us as we get into God's word together. Father, I just want to thank you that you are a gracious God.

[7 : 22] Thank you that you're a God who speaks to us. Thank you, the God who knows us. Thank you, the God who has not left us by ourselves, but you're a God who comes to us again and again and again, who calls us back to yourself.

Thank you that you are a kind of God who is not distant, but actually wants deep relationship with us. And I pray this morning, as we hear from your word and we hear about Saul's life and David's life, we pray that God, would you make us people after your own heart?

Would you make us those who really know what it means to follow you? I pray, Lord, particularly for those in this season, whether it's with kids schooling online or whether it's just the holidays coming up and Chinese New Year not being all that we wish it was going to be.

Lord, I pray that whatever the circumstances that we find ourselves in, you'd help us to realign our hearts, place them back to you. And realize that you are enough for us. So we love you. Speak to us, we pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Great. Boris Johnson is the prime minister of the UK.

[8 : 29] I don't think I've ever started a sermon like that before. But he is. But he is. And he's right in the middle of something people are calling Partygate, a scandal that he and his ministers and his office have seemingly broken, potentially, some of the COVID lockdown rules that they created themselves.

And so right in the midst of this, it's a very tense situation for him. And his leadership manifesto, or his leadership mantra, if you like, is never apologize, never explain.

And yet, about just a few weeks ago, Boris Johnson came out to apologize as the heat of anger, public anger, rose.

And here's what he said. He said, I want to apologize because I carry full responsibility for what took place. But nobody told me this was an event that was against the rules.

Now, I don't know about you, and I'm not being political here, but that, to me, doesn't sound like an apology. That's what we call a non-apology.

[9 : 40] You know, it's like, I'm sorry you were offended kind of apology. You know, and in our culture of trial by social media, almost every single day, it seems, there's either some sports personality, a celebrity, a business, which comes out and apologizes in some way to kind of remove the heat of the anger or the circumstances that are around them to just be able to carry on with what they're doing.

It's the, I'm sorry we didn't do as well as we could have kind of answer, which I often wonder, are those actually true apologies or are they non-apologies?

Because it's not just politicians and it's not just celebrities. Actually, each one of us can be masters at some time or another of the non-apology.

And so, this passage that we're looking at today is actually all about a non-apology. You see, we've been, it's actually about and we've titled it How Not to Repent.

Because this, we've been looking at the book of Samuel and Samuel has been all about how God turns upside down the way we look at things. Whereas we look at the outward appearance, we look at how religious someone looks, how good someone looks like Eli or Eli's sons on the outside or tall and handsome like Saul is.

[11:00] But God looks at the inside of our hearts. And God has given the people of Israel the king that they wanted to fight their battles.

And he's actually led them just in the last couple of chapters in great victory. And everything has seemed to be going well. But there are signs that not everything is right. Because Saul is a people pleaser.

And he's already sacrificed and gone against the command of God one time because of his fear of the people. And today we're going to look at another incident where we see what's really going on in the heart of Saul.

And so we're going to look in three different sections. We're going to look at breaking God's heart. We're going to look at defending our pride and then turning our hearts in true repentance. Okay? So let's start off with breaking God's heart.

So God and keep looking at the chapter in front of you if you've got your Bible please have it open so you can look through. But God through Samuel comes to Saul and he says this.

[12:08] He says the Lord has sent me to anoint you king over his people. In other words he's saying God has given you Saul a responsibility a stewardship to lead his people God's people they're not your people they're his people but you are to steward them and lead them to flourishing and to lead them towards God.

And then he gives a command he gives a command he says I want you to strike Amalek and I want you to devote them to destruction I want you to wipe them out and leave nothing left.

Now I don't have time to actually in this sermon to go into all the details for that but actually for some of us the idea that God actually commands the death of a group of people can be very disturbing in many ways and I feel a little disturbed in many things and so if you would like to actually talk a little bit more about that after the service we're going to have a breakout room where we're going to have a chance for Q&A; where we can actually go into more detail and talk a little bit about this issue but the main point of this passage is not that because the main point of this passage is what Saul and the people do in response you see how do they respond they respond by destroying everything they think is of little value everything they despise they get rid of and then everything they think is good in their eyes they keep they despise the Lord's command and take for themselves what they want just like Eli's sons a few chapters earlier just like Adam and Eve do right at the beginning of the

Bible story right at the very heart of sin is this idea of despising what God says and taking for yourself what you think is good in your own eyes and God's response isn't just kind of a cold or distant oh I'll leave you to yourself it isn't just an angry response it's not a kind of that's it I've had enough of you get out it says here in verse 11 it says I regret that's literally I'm grieved that I have made Saul king for he's turned back from following me you see this same word of I regret this I'm grieved is actually the same word that comes in in Genesis 6 where out of the wickedness of human beings God promises a flood and it says the Lord was sorry was grieved that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him okay there's another emotional word there grieved him to his heart in the New Testament in Mark 3 it says when Jesus looked at the Pharisees who were treating the vulnerable with utter contempt it says he looked at them with anger grieved at their hardness of heart you see what you see is when God looks at sin if we put it in human terms he has mixed emotions it's always an emotionally painful experience for God because sin breaks God's heart because sin breaks loving relationships with God with each other with ourselves and with creation it breaks everything and it makes him angry and it also grieves him you see self-righteous anger is only filled with anger righteous anger is always an emotion which is filled with sadness so if you want to think about the last time you were angry and you want to decide was it righteous or was it self-righteous kind of angry towards someone just think of did you have any sadness towards the person at the same time because that may give you an indication of where your heart was in that

point because Samuel feels God's heart and it says and Samuel was angry and he cried to the Lord all night do you see discipleship growing like Jesus is not just about growing in our understanding of the Bible it's actually growing to emotionally that your heart gets impacted by the same things that impact

God's heart that your heart when you see your sin when you see other people's sin when you see injustice it breaks your heart for what breaks God's heart that's when you know that your heart is being changed by God to become more after his own heart and that's what the whole of Samuel is about where our hearts are and you see the author now brilliantly contrasts now this heart that Samuel has which is God's heart towards this situation towards the sin of Saul with how Saul himself responds and so here's where we're going to go and move to not just breaking God's heart but actually defending your own heart your own pride and here we're going to look at Saul and just kind of flow through with me in the text where we're going you see what happens in verse 12 it says it was told to Samuel that Saul came to Carmel and behold he set up a monument for himself and then he turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal to meet Samuel now just think about that a monument just think about what he's doing right at the heart of what's going on

[17:36] Samuel is actually seized behind the scenes of what's happening Saul wants to honour and exalt himself in the eyes of the people he's a people pleaser he craves their respect that's why he builds his monument now right at the end of the story the last thing that Saul does that Saul does he says this he says honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel you see what is he doing see he's actually what's changed in his heart nothing's changed for Saul he feels small and insignificant Samuel says you were little in your own eyes in verse 17 but he wants to feel big he wants others to go yeah you're the man he wants to be able to walk into a room and people go there's Saul wow what a guy that's what he wants because what people think about him is what drives his own heart and in the title of a book when people are big God is small and so when he sees Samuel straight after this

Saul shows us how not to repent and how to defend what you have done okay I'm going to go through four tactics that Saul does to still try and keep face and make himself look good even though he's honouring himself rather than honouring God tactic one he plays the innocent that's 13 he goes blessed be you to the Lord I've performed the commandment of the Lord now Samuel knows like what's going on behind the scenes but Saul just wants to look good and religious in front of him Samuel sees through it and he says this he says oh what then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear in other words he's saying I'm hearing one thing from you Saul but my ears are hearing a completely different story and what he's doing he's actually confronting Saul with reality the reality of his sin and when God confronts you with the reality of your sin it's never to condemn you it's always giving you an opportunity to come clean to come into the light to come and find freedom and forgiveness and healing but Saul's face is too important to him so he moves on to tactic two which is a defensiveness and blame shifting so Saul says they have brought them from the

Amalekites for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God and the rest we have devoted to destruction do you see what he's doing he's blame shifting all the responsibility on to the people now he says it's not me it was them and it was good intentions after all it was kind of no one told me the rules I was tired you started it Samuel's not buying it verse 17 he says but the Lord anointed you king over Israel why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord he's saying you're responsible Saul you're the king stop passing the buck playing the victim you know some of us can do that we can blame shift and play the victim but godly people own their sin they don't blame shift and play the victim that's what Samuel's coming to him again but Saul's not having any of it tactic three okay he's gone from just playing innocent he's gone now from blame shifting now he wants to highlight all of his good points he says verse 20

I have obeyed the Lord the voice of the Lord I have gone on the mission of the Lord that the Lord sent me on I have brought Agag the king of Amalek I have devoted the Amalekites to the destruction he's saying look at all the good things that I've done but the people blame shifting again took of the spoil the sheep and the oxen you know this is the kind of the marriage defensiveness of I've done so much for you and you list all the good things you've done so now you're criticizing me for this and Saul's had three chances to repent but instead of owning any of it he's just been defensive the whole way why because of his pride because of that monument that he wants to build

to himself because of his insecurity because none of us want to be exposed do we really for what's really going on down here it's scary you know an apology a true repentance lays you open to being seen as weak and vulnerable to attack you know the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche he said this and I like this quote he said memory says I did that pride replies I could not have done that eventually memory yields do you get what he's saying he's saying actually it's right at heart our pride wants us to be exalted and that's what leads us to defend ourselves so much it's what's going on with Saul's heart and Samuel he sees through the whole thing and he brings down the hammer blow he goes like this he says has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings as sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord behold to obey is better than sacrifice and to listen than the fact of rams rebellion is the sin of divination and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry he's saying what you're doing is idolatry because you have rejected the word of the Lord here's the blow he has also rejected you from being king do you see what he's saying he's saying all your kind of pretended sacrifice you know you can you can say oh

[23 : 26] I've served this I've done all this I've done all this for you God but all of that's a smoke screen for this area this command where he is in disobedience and God says I look with the same disdain on that as I look at witchcraft he says because the heart of rebelling against me is the same and interestingly actually to prove the point the end of Samuel has Saul actually going to visit a witch the witch of Endor which shows where the trajectory of his entire heart is going because he's not willing to repent you know we can serve all we like we can do a ton of great religious things but if actually God is calling us to obey him in some area and we are resisting we are resisting we are resisting God says I don't care about the other stuff I'm looking at where your heart is I'm not looking at the outward you know Jeremy Tam showed me actually this week verse 15 21 30

Saul actually keeps referring to God as the Lord your God Samuel you see it's not his God because he is his own God he's wanting to exalt and honour himself with that monument with his own honour and when you do that there are consequences Samuel says your kingship is over because you wanted to be your own king for your own honour not God's king then you will no longer be God's king for his people and you could hear a pin drop because Saul knows Samuel speaks God's word and so he's gone from trying to play the innocent he's gone from just defending blame shifting to try and focus on all the good things he's doing to then step four tactic for a non-apology to avoid consequences Saul feels the consequences he feels it the place which is most precious to his heart his own honour and out of fear he goes I've sinned for

I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words because I feared the people and obeyed their voice now please pardon my sin and come back with me you see he admits the issue he's a people pleaser he feared the people and you know people pleasers are always obedient people it's just they obey other people's voices not God's because fear can actually make you apologize but sorry is not enough here because it doesn't turn his heart away from people pleasing because the final thing he says is this he says I've sinned yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel and return with me that I may bow before the Lord your God you see it's all about show on the outward when the inward is about his own honour in front of everybody else I don't know if you can relate to any of that

I can in my own life I don't know how you see those tactics work out for you let me give you a very hypothetical situation so my wife and I we agree that if I'm going to go out in evening times I need to let her know beforehand just in case she needs help with the kids and when my wife confronts me with why I didn't tell her do you know what I do sometimes I say things like I play the innocent I say oh yeah I did tell you I did tell I'm sure I told you and then she says when and I go well work with kind of super busy and I just didn't have the time but she then goes well so how come you had time to watch YouTube or do that other thing that you were doing and I go well listen every other time in the last three weeks I told you and you didn't tell me the last time you went out and so and then she may reply well this is actually serious and so until you change

I I am not going to go out to you with that important meeting that you want me to go to and then suddenly I'm really listening because actually I really want us to be able to go together and then I go I'm sorry I'll try to do better next time but I just need you to come with me this time okay it's really really important do you know that's not an apology that's not an apology and she goes oh how are with God or a family or a spouse without truly owning your sin without excusing the harder your heart becomes until your arteries can be so hard that there's no way back and so actually repentance the call to repent is an opportunity that God brings to us you know I was preparing this

sermon in a cafe and just as I was preparing this part a song came on the radio and it said it's too late to apologize it's too late okay and that's all sorry for my singing but that's all it's too late for him to apologize because he's had so many opportunities but his heart is hard and so there's the question where are the areas of your life your relationship with

[29 : 03] God what is he calling you to do what about with relationships with family with friend with spouses where your defenses where you not apologize instead of taking responsibility you know some of our relationships have real struggles because we're not owning the part that God is calling us to own and God comes to us today and says I want to bring you freedom will you own what I have called you to it is grace that God brings us to so that's Saul that's how he defends his pride and now we can leave it there and then we just go away feeling oh that's a little hard that's a little heavy but you know the book of Samuel actually continues it's an amazingly written book it continues with my third thing we've seen how God breaking God's heart we've seen how Saul defends his pride all the time and how it leads just to actually his own downfall but the third thing is actually how we free our hearts by turning our hearts in true repentance and here we see that in the book of

Samuel there's another king who is also a sinner called King David and his sin actually looks way worse on the surface than Saul's does you know he commits adultery then he murders the husband when he can't cover it up it's actually horrific I mean it's really bad and God's word comes to him again this time through Nathan the prophet saying why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in his sight it's almost exactly what Samuel comes to and says to Saul but instead of defending instead of excusing instead of non-apologies David faces his sin honestly and here's what he says he says I have sinned against the Lord full stop no excuses you know there's going to be consequences for him consequences there's going to be death and civil war Nathan tells him prophet but he just doesn't go hey please honor me he doesn't go like just please forgive me he's not just about removing the consequences he desires to just come clean before

God and you know he writes Psalm 51 which is this confession after this incident with Bathsheba the adultery after Nathan confronts him and here's what he says against you you only God have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight you will not delight in sacrifice you see what Saul was doing you see he you will not be pleased with a bird offering because actually the sacrifices of God are actually a broken spirit they're a broken and contrite heart and that's what God you don't despise he says can you see how the difference is with Saul you see no defensiveness no blame shifting no covering up it's total honesty before a holy God and he knows God looks at the heart and he doesn't despise the honesty he doesn't hold on to his face for it you know there was a New Zealand cricketer called Lou

Vincent who got caught for match fixing it's kind of taking money to lose matches and Jeremy can put up a slide and here's what he said when he got caught and he confessed his sin he started like this wow that is a true apology that's the kind of honesty we need to have in our relationships with God and each other to my wife I need to go hey I forgot to text you because I was more concerned with what I was doing than loving you that is super scary but that is also freeing because I've got nothing to hide any longer I'm totally in the light and that is a place of freedom you see true repentance faces its sin honestly and looks in the heart but secondly the true repentance is also relational notice he says against you God you only have

I sinned and done what is evil in your sight you see this is the difference between remorse and repentance you see remorse grieves and feel bad that it got caught repentance grieves the relational damage of sin and seeks to change remorse sees sin of breaking a rule letting yourself down repentance knows sin isn't breaking a rule it's breaking a relationship David is more concerned about grieving God himself than just failing to be a good Christian you see it's relational but here's the thing about the relationship repentance is fueled not just by out of relational fear it's actually fueled by relational joy you see later on he goes restore to me the joy of my salvation you see every time you and I are like Saul are defensive blame shifting dishonest self justifying all those kind of things it's because we're afraid we're afraid that the monument we've built to ourselves is going to topple our sense of self respect our sense of self honor a sense of shame may be trampled them and that statue may be toppled and we'll be condemned or judged or shamed in our eyes and everyone else's eyes you see actually defensiveness is simply a fruit of people pleasing it's a fruit of insecurity pleasing ourselves and pleasing other people with looking good in front of them but the gospel the gospel says the joy of our salvation is this that when we were still sinners

[35 : 07] Christ died for us you are fully known right at the messiest core of your heart and yet you're fully loved do you remember Adam and Eve when they were naked in the garden from their shame and their sin and they sought to cover themselves up but you know what happens God comes to them he exposes them with a question he confronts them with their sin and then he does what they could not do for themselves he makes coverings for them of animal skin to cover their shame you see Christ on the cross was stripped naked he was shamed humiliated and condemned though his heart was fully pleasing to God so that we might come into this relationship with God and know his voice not everybody else's but his voice which says you are my precious you are precious and honoured in my sight and I love you you know Alan told me about his high school principal

I think it was called Reverend Howard who was so loved by all the boys in his school because they knew how much Reverend Howard loved them he really cared about them individually and very practically so if he ever scolded any of the boys Alan told me that 18 year old boys would break down in tears before him not from the scolding but because they had hurt and disappointed the one they knew who loved them so much they were afraid of displeasing him but it wasn't a crippling fear it was a fear of breaking this treasured relationship that they had you see that's how repentance works with God it's Christ's love for you the joy of your salvation of knowing him that is the fuel that is the fuel that will make your heart desire to look good in his eyes more than other people's eyes or your own eyes it's that that when you are confronted by others when you're criticized or confronted by God or even by your own thoughts that gives you the security to listen well to be brutally honest it's that that makes you afraid not of other people finding out about your sin but afraid of justifying your sin because you know it breaks

God's heart and you know his deep love for you and you don't want that and it's that desire to come back into that restored relationship to enjoy God again in communion with him that is meant to lead us and move us towards God and towards change you know it says in 2 Corinthians it says worldly sorrow leads to death the non-apology leads to death but godly sorrow which is from the heart leads to life and here the final thing that repentance does repentance is brutally honest repentance is relational but it's out of relational joy and repentance moves towards change you see what David says he says restore to me the joy of my salvation uphold me with a willing spirit then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you he's saying repentance is a direction change it's not just saying sorry it's actually turning from you turning to

God and saying I want to come to you with my life I want this relationship restored with you and out of that will flow behavioural change over time Saul had a pattern of people pleasing I recently realised that I'm the same in certain areas when I'm criticised when someone says something negative about me or I fear someone will I can be defensive just ask my wife and as I identified this one symptom of my heart condition in my life I realised something I realised that God has actually applied the gospel into a whole load of areas in my life and brought real change in areas of my life but in this one area I was still desperately insecure I still had my monument of pride still there and I saw others as I look around who are more secure in God enjoying the gospel and humbly accept criticism and are able to just be brutally honest without any defensiveness

I've started praying God would you change me in this area would you change me and started dwelling on and thanking God for the security and the love that I have in him I don't need the approval of others I don't need to look good on the outside because what God thinks about me is way more important and do you know what happens over time I begin to hate behaving like that when I start finding the defensiveness coming out of me I go oh no I don't want that any longer because I see it actually enslaves me to other people's opinions and I've gone from justifying it to wanting to please God in this area and over time as I see just I'm learning slowly that when those opportunities arrive to be defensive and I find it coming out of my mouth I'm learning how to hold my tongue and reflect on what the other person is saying I'm learning when to give reasons for my behavior and when actually just to hold off and just to listen and you know it's a process sometimes two step forward one step back but here's the thing the gospel for each one of us is so freeing if we allow it to be applied right into the direct areas of our hearts that it calls each one of us wherever you are in your relationships with

[40 : 57] God or with others to stop making excuses to stop fearing about what's the impact it's going to make on your face or your own honor because actually in Christ there is a far greater honor that you have and you and I will not enjoy that until we come and come back to God in true repentance honestly relationally but realizing that is the place of freedom and hope for all of us