

Life exam

In a culture that finds repentance unintelligible, impractical, or unnecessary, we are called to witness to its intelligibility, beauty, and importance.

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This academic semester we've been teaching a course at Yale College titled Life Worth Living. Like other observers of contemporary higher education, we have noted that American colleges and universities have let consideration of great questions about the meaning of life fade out of their curricula. If students want to ask these questions, they must do so outside of the classroom. (Some Christian colleges, but not all, may be an exception to this trend.) These developments in higher education echo a movement in American culture at large. We have become increasingly dedicated to and adept at identifying and deploying the *means* to achieve our ends, but we get uncomfortable and disoriented if we are forced to ask about the *ends* of our lives—their goals and meaning. Life Worth Living is part of an initiative to revive and strengthen critical discussion about what, for Christians, is the most important question of our lives: What is a life worth living?

Over the course of the semester we are engaging with certain core texts and the lives of key founding figures from six highly influential traditions: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, utilitarianism, and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. We encourage students to treat these traditions not as objects of mere historical curiosity but as living visions of what makes life worth living. We ask the students to regard these texts as making claims on their lives and then to wrestle with those claims.

We assigned the Gospel of Luke for the class session introducing a Christian vision of a life worth living. The class discussion focused in great part on questions of repentance and forgiveness. (It is always interesting to see what strikes students who have never read the Gospel before.) Are you really supposed to forgive someone over and over again as long as they say, “I repent” (Luke 17:3-4)? Does God really forgive like that? Isn’t that just license to sin and sin and repent at the last minute with no consequences? What would it take for repentance to be genuine?

Toward the end of the session we posed a question that we ask for each of the traditions: How would your life have to change if this tradition were right about what makes life worth living? This question always elicits a few seconds of silence. In this case, a student who is not a Christian raised his hand.

We have been talking a lot about repentance, he said. It seemed to him that he would have to take repentance seriously if the Christian vision of what makes life worth living were right. But as he thought about it, he decided that repentance would be supremely difficult. It would require looking at himself, his past and present deeds and attitudes, with clear sight and issuing judgments of condemnation on some, probably many, of them. More than that: it would require really turning away from them. What pain that would cause!

There are modulated echoes here of Nietzsche’s aphorism: “‘I did that’ says my memory: ‘I couldn’t have done that’—says my pride, and stands its ground. Finally, memory gives in” (*Beyond Good and Evil*). Perhaps an equally common approach is to say, “I did that, but that is not so bad after all.” The student had been educated by his cultural milieu not to focus on weaknesses and mistakes in introspection but to identify and develop his strengths with his eyes firmly fixed on the future. Repentance would require a radically different approach to himself.

His comments raise big questions for Christians today. Christians live in the same culture—one that trains us to look to ourselves and our pasts primarily to identify the strengths that we should develop or promote, to figure out the little things about ourselves that we would like to adjust, to find excuses, or perhaps to seek therapeutic healing. Recognizing, naming, and wrestling with our failings—not just as imperfections or slip-ups but as culpable shortcomings and transgressions or even a misdirection of our whole life—that act is hard to imagine and harder still to practice.

If we are after a life worth living, however, repentance over having led an “unworthy” life or done unworthy things is unavoidable. That’s why repentance is a key element of an appropriate response to God’s work in Jesus Christ. Mark summarizes Jesus’ early preaching: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). In a culture that finds repentance unintelligible, impractical, or unnecessary, we are called to witness to its intelligibility, beauty, and importance. And that witness begins with our own repentance.

Our student was right. Repentance is difficult. It is painful. But the extent of our willingness to take upon ourselves the pain of repentance is a measure of our determination to live a life worth living.