

THE PROCESSES OF REPENTANCE

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SCRIPTURE: Book of Mormon, Mosiah 11:136-141.

He that will not hear my voice, the same shall ye not receive into my church, for him I will not receive at the last day: Therefore I say unto you, Go; and whosoever transgresseth against me, him shall ye judge according to the sins which he has committed; And if he confess his sins before thee and men, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him ye shall forgive, and I will forgive him also; Yea, and as often as my people repent, will I forgive them their trespasses against me. And ye shall also forgive one another your trespasses; for verily I say unto you, He that forgiveth not his neighbor's trespasses, when he says that he repents, the same hath brought himself under condemnation. Now I say unto you, Go; and whosoever will not repent of his sins, the same shall not be numbered among my people.

The Lord is longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Are you the same person you were yesterday? If you are, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Sometime in the last twenty-four hours you should have learned something new; you should have discarded some old habit, or old method, or old opinion, or old attitude, in favor of a new, better, more efficient, or more moral one. If you are the same person you were yesterday, you need to repent. There is no growth or progress without change, and there is no change without repentance. All growth consist in discarding the old, the worn-out, the useless, the harmful, and adding the new, the fresh, the better, the improved.

And may we digress for a moment to suggest this idea. Almost universally we think of repentance in terms of what others need to do. Let us make no mistake about it; let us not try to invent alibis or to evade the issue. None of us can in good conscience say "You need to repent," before he first says, "I need to repent." Let none of us attempt to excuse himself by saying, "I am as good as my neighbors," or even by saying "I am better than my neighbors." Let none of us attempt to excuse himself by saying that he is making some improvement, and will some day come out all right. We must every one of us frankly face the fact that we are not only imperfect creatures who need constant improvement, but that in our own strength we cannot make the improvement necessary to fit us for God's kingdom. The natural man is not simply an imperfect man who will some day perfect himself. He is an enemy to God; he is in rebellion against God; and the beginning of his improvement is the laying down of his arms, and a surrender to God in humble repentance.

Repentance grows out of faith, and out of the vision of God which faith brings us. Possibly Isaiah thought that he was a pretty good man, as most men go, but when he saw God in vision the contrast between God and himself was too much for him, and he was constrained to declare, "I am a man of unclean lips." Not only does a realization of God's perfection cause us to recognize our own sin, but his love for us is a powerful incentive for us to return that love, and to cease the rebellion and disobedience which bring grief and suffering not only to Him who loves us, but to others He loves, who are grieved and harmed by our sin.

The atonement is likewise an incentive to repentance. It demonstrates as does no other aspect to the Christian faith, God's love for his children, and the depth of his concern over their sin and the consequences of that sin. A man who has any understanding of the atonement, and any sense of gratitude, cannot continue in sin without

acquiring added guilt because of his continued stubborn rebellion. Furthermore, one who continues in sin and rebellion can reap none of the benefits of the atonement; for as we have seen in a previous sermon, Christ's atonement can save from sin and death only those who will exercise faith and accept it, through repentance, change of loyalty, and change of character.

Repentance is more than intellectual assent. There is not a person listening to me who did not do yesterday something which he knew was wrong. You may be ever so willing to admit that it was wrong, but you will do the same thing again today, and tomorrow, and day after tomorrow, excusing yourself with the thought that a man is entitled to a few mistakes and some fun out of life. Repentance is more than merely admitting that some of the things you do are unwise or foolish. It is more than merely quitting the doing of unwise or foolish things, and then sitting neutral on the sidelines, doing nothing. A man who is in rebellion against God has not made himself right with God when he lays down his weapons and quits fighting against God. He is not the man he ought to be until he has enlisted on God's side, and turned his weapons to support and defend the cause of right. There are millions of people in the world today who think they are pretty good people -- people with whom God could find very little if any fault -- who have simply ceased to be evil. But they have never learned to do well. They have quit fighting against God, but they have never enlisted on his side and begun to fight FOR him. Self-satisfied, neutral people with no particular faults or sins or bad habits, need to repent too. They have not truly repented until they have fully enlisted on God's side in the battle between good and evil. There are no neutrals in the battle between good and evil. You cannot stand on the sidelines. You must be actively enlisted on one side or the other.

Repentance is more than sorrow for being caught in sin; it is even more than sorrow for having committed sin. A man who is sorry for having been caught will only plan his sin more carefully next time so as not to be caught. It is possible for one's supposed sorrow for sin to stem from the fear of being caught or found out. He may be sorry and ashamed of himself, but altogether too proud to humble himself to the point of confessing his sin and asking forgiveness of those he has wronged or injured. Godly sorrow for sin, Paul says in II Corinthians 7:10, "worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of, but the sorrow of the world worketh death." Godly sorrow is the kind of sorrow which demands humility, restitution, the seeking of forgiveness, and a changed life. Sorrow at being caught leads to no repentance, no change, no growth, no progress, no change of allegiance or loyalty; and the end of that course can be only death.

Repentance is not a single act or a single event, or a single experience, but a lifetime process. We don't repent of everything today, and waken tomorrow morning to find that our repentance is complete, and that we are new creatures. We may be new in the sense that our allegiance has been shifted to God, and that the direction of our life has been changed. But reversing direction when we first discover that we are on the wrong road does not bring us immediately to our destination. We must often slowly and painfully retrace our steps by the way we have come, until we find the right road -- the right path. Then we must not be content merely to sit down in the road. A road is to be travelled, not sat upon. Having set our feet in the strait and narrow way, we must walk that way; we must go on to perfection. Human life cannot be static; for as we become aware of one fault, the changed viewpoint which admission of that fault gives us makes it possible to see other obvious faults which the blindness of our sin had caused us to overlook before, and we go on to perfection. "The path of the just is as a shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

Repentance is not confined to one small area of life; it involves the whole person. If, for example, I am accustomed to using profanity, repentance does not consist simply in stopping my profanity, but rather in changing the total attitude and purpose of my life so that profanity no longer fits into the picture. Repentance involves not only acts, but my thoughts, my purposes, my methods, my attitudes, my emotions, and my

allegiances. Changing my actions in some particular without changing my allegiance and my purpose and my thoughts would be worse than foolish. It is not the outward incidentals of my life which need to be changed, but I -- the whole person.

There are four steps in repentance: first, godly sorrow for sin, or a realization of what our sin is doing to others and to the God who loves us and them. Second, a frank admission of guilt, without excuses or alibis or apologies. You are not really repentant as long as you are comparing yourself to other imperfect men and women, and thinking up good and plausible excuses as to why you continue to do wrong. Until I am willing to admit that I, I myself, through my most grievous fault, of my own free will and rebellious human nature have deliberately done that which offends God and harms my fellow-man, I cannot be truly repentant.

Having come to the point of this confession, the third step in repentance is a "ceasing to do evil" -- or a complete divorcing of one's self from the old ways of sin. And then comes the fourth step, without which repentance cannot be complete -- the "learning to do well," the filling of the waste places of your life with good, the building of safeguards which will protect you from the desire and the habit of sinning in the future.

Repentance brings God's forgiveness. We cannot expect God to forgive us and restore us to his full fellowship while we are still rebellious and disobedient, or while we are simply impassive, careless, lukewarm, unconcerned. We cannot expect God to forgive us while we still cling to the seeming advantages and rewards of our sinning. But if we forsake our sins and do them no more; if we give up our attitudes of rebellion, and if we enlist and enter actively and energetically into the battle against evil, there is forgiveness for sin already committed, and strength and courage and power are given to help us overcome future temptation.

Another prerequisite of forgiveness is our forgiveness of others. Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." He also told the parable of the unforgiving debtor who refused to forgive a small debt, though he had been forgiven a vastly larger debt to further illustrate and emphasize the principle that one of the most unforgivable sins is to be unforgiving towards those who have sinned against us, who have asked our forgiveness, and manifested a proper spirit of repentance by trying to make amends. In this connection it is interesting to compare the teaching of Jesus about forgiveness as recorded by Matthew, and as given by Luke. In Matthew's account, Jesus commanded Peter to forgive until seventy times seven. Luke's account adds a significant and sensible condition: "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in one day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him. (Luke 17:3,4)

This suggests that we often have a part to play in the repentance of others. Frequently it happens in the relationships of imperfect human beings that when one who has offended us humbles himself and comes seeking our forgiveness, we become haughty and superior and refuse that forgiveness. We nurse grudges; we withhold our friendship. When this happens, it often drives one who was truly repentant to regret and renounce his repentance, and to turn again to the sin that everyone seemingly expects of him. We have a part to play in the repentance of others. We repent not only as individuals, but as groups, for only as the one sinned against repents of his hard feelings against the one who has injured him can there be true repentance on the part of the one who has given offense. Only as we forgive the offender can he be taken back into fellowship with us; and only as we forgive others can we ask God to forgive us and take us back into his fellowship.

Repentance is difficult and costly. The processes of repentance may well continue throughout a lifetime, as each sin repented of brings into clearer focus some other

fault, some other failing, some other need of further repentance. Repentance means that we must completely humble ourselves -- and sometimes completely humiliate ourselves, confessing that we were wrong, making costly restitution, and offering our apologies even when we have reason to expect that they may be spurned and forgiveness refused. Yes, repentance is difficult and costly. But it is more costly not to repent. One of the basic needs of human life is that we be able to respect ourselves. When we have done wrong, and know we have done wrong, we hate ourselves. We may put on a very big and bold and loud front to prove that we think we are all right; we may swagger through life with a chip on our shoulders; we may embark on a witch hunt or specialize in ferreting out the mistakes and sins and crimes of others, but still we subconsciously hate ourselves. We have no respect for ourselves. We cannot trust ourselves to come to God in the time of emergency to ask him for what we need, because our better nature insists on reminding us that we are in rebellion against him.

He who will come down in the depths of humility and confess and repent his sin -- he who will be honest with himself as well as with his fellow man -- can find peace of mind. He can ask for, seek, and find the forgiveness of God. He can unite his divided personality; he can respect himself. He can go on to perfection. He makes some progress each day as he walks in the strait and narrow way that leads to life eternal, guided by that light which shineth brighter and brighter until the perfect day.