

## WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

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TEXT: 2 Corinthians 7; 9-11

Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of, but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

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Any sinner, any criminal, is sorry after he is caught. But when a cringing, sniveling, whining criminal is brought into court, protesting that he is sorry, and that he will not do it any more, judge and jury are loath to believe him, and insist that the law be allowed to take its course and mete out punishment and justice for him. Most of the crimes of the world, statistics show, are committed by second offenders -- by criminals who were sorry when they were caught, but who went right back to the old crimes after they had served their terms or been released on parole.

Some day, we hope soon, we are going to be confronted by a similar problem on a larger and much more momentous scale. After the last war the war Lords of Europe, particularly of Germany, protested their sorrow, their repentance, and promised not to repeat their sins of ambition. We believed them, and consequently Germany never did feel the horrors of war as did ravaged Belgium, or France, where most of the battles of the war were fought. But as soon as possible, the militarists of Germany were up to the old tricks again. Perhaps we were too revengeful in the Versailles treaty; perhaps we were too negligent about keeping an eye on the old offenders and stopping them when they first began to violate their "parole". Be that as it may, their sorrow lasted only as long as they were in danger of punishment. There was no real regret, no contrition, no godly fear.

What is repentance? So often we label things repentance when they are not at all. We see a man who weeps and mourns for his past sins, who comes to the mourners' bench in a revival meeting and lets himself go in a good emotional cry, and we say he is repentant. Is he? Let's follow him after he leaves the mourner's bench, and see. If he goes right back to the old sins, and then comes again to the church for a good cry, he is not repentant. Repentance is more than merely sorrow, regret, contrition, anxiety, or fear. It is a complete reform, a complete reversal of the way of life. We can tell a true from a sham repentance by the things that follow, by the "fruits meet for repentance."

When crowds of people came to hear the preaching of John the Baptist in the wilderness, he did not say "Go home and be sorry for your sins." He talked to several groups separately, and gave them

a rather specific prescription for a new way of life. To the people, he advised "Let him that hath two coats impart to him that hath none, and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. To the publicans, who were the agents in charge of tax collection, and notoriously corrupt and venial, he said, "Exact no more than that which is appointed you." To the soldiers, who habitually settled all arguments with force, he said, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages."

All too often, in religion, our repentance is not repentance at all, but only the same kind of sorrow which a criminal feels as the coils of the law begin to close about him, and he sees that punishment is inevitable. Many a man and woman has come to the mourners' bench because he FEARED death, because he FEARED to face a God who might be angry and vengeful as he looked over the list of the culprit's sins. Many a man and woman fears hell, in the same way the criminal fears the penitentiary, if not in the same degree. Many a man and woman, having committed sin, finds that the consequences of that sin are closing in on him in the form of disease, or poverty, or loss of social prestige, and through fear and sorrow he begins to repent. But this kind of sorrow is always for SELF. And the true sorrow of repentance is sorrow over OTHERS, sorrow that we have caused needless and heedless suffering -- sorrow that we have offended the God who is our Father and our loving and generous friend -- sorrow over wasted opportunities that can never be recalled.

Before we can approach God in repentance, there are certain preliminary steps that must be taken. It is not as easy as the popular revival preacher or evangelist would have you suppose. You have heard them, from the pulpit, and over the radio, asserting that if you would only believe on the Lord Jesus, and confess his name, you would be saved. I have heard them say that all you had to do was to kneel down right by your radio and give your heart to Christ, and he would come into your heart and save you. The process of salvation, believe me, is not that easy. God has no time, no patience, no sympathy for the man who wants to come to him in sorrow, have a good cry over his past sins and mistakes, be forgiven of them, and then go out clean and fresh and new to do the same old things over again. True repentance means vastly more than that, and no one can come to God or be accepted of God unless he repents.

Let us point out a Biblical example -- the little man Zacchaeus, who climbed into a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he passed by. Zacchaeus was a publican, one of the men appointed under a vicious Roman system, to gather the taxes. The system worked like this: The government at Rome decided how much should be collected, and turned over the job of collection to certain rich Romans, who paid the stipulated sum outright into the Roman treasury. These Romans, in turn, hired native residents of the provinces to do the actual work of collection. Each was given his quota. Anything the Roman tax-gatherer could collect above the amount which he had paid into the treasury for the right to collect taxes, was his to keep. Anything the publican, or native tax-gatherer, could graft, or extort, or collect above his quota and embezzle from his Roman superior, was regarded as legitimate, if not highly ethical profit. Zacchaeus had become a rich man through the operation of this system, which defrauded the people, the Roman overseers, and the Roman state all at once.

According to the formula, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved," all Zacchaeus had to do was to believe and to confess that Jesus was the Christ, and then go home to enjoy his wealth. But Zacchaeus knew the old Mosaic law, and it rose up in his mind to condemn him when the spirit and presence of Jesus impelled him to repentance. The law of Moses ( Leviticus 6:1-7, and Exodus 22:1-7 ) required that when a man had caused a loss to his brother or his neighbor, or when he had gained unlawfully at the expense of his neighbor, his first step was to be ~~RESTORATION~~, or RESTITUTION, not only of the principal, but of one fifth more. After this restitution had been made, AND NOT TILL THEN, was he to bring his trespass offering to the Lord, and seek forgiveness. And so, when Zacchaeus was moved to repentance, he went further than the law demanded. He first gave half his goods to the poor; then he set about to restore what he had taken by bribery or false accusation or extortion, FOUR FOLD. It probably left Zacchaeus a poor man, but that was the only way he could get right with God - to get right with his brethren first.

Jesus reiterated this teaching in his sermon on the mount, when he said "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." There can be no acceptance with God while old sins are still unrepented of, while old offenses are still unreconciled. Coming to God and saying you are sorry is not very convincing, unless you have also gone to the people who have been harmed by your sin or your neglect, and told them of your sorrow, and your resolve to do better. There can be no salvation without forgiveness, and God cannot forgive those things which we have failed to ask our brethren to forgive in us.

In the light of these thoughts, it is extremely doubtful whether there is any such thing as "death-bed repentance." There may be fear, and sorrow, and genuine concern, as we face the immediate prospect of death, and perhaps a wrathful judgment. But it is a worldly sorrow, a sorrow for self, a sorrow that at last we are caught in a trap from which there is no escape. A truly repentant man would have used his allotted lifetime in righting his sins, in making restitution to those he had injured or robbed or defrauded -- not enjoyed the fruits of his sinning until death stared him in the face, and ONLY THEN beginning to be sorry. A man who has cheated all his life, or who has slandered, or lied, or hated, or lusted, with no thought of sorrow for those he has been harming, can scarcely be truly repentant in the last sixty seconds before he draws his last breath. Neither can he be saved simply by confessing Christ, or by having faith in him. Those who come to Christ, or to God, must first make all things right with their brethren -- must bring forth fruits meet for repentance. No faith, no confession, no baptism, no rite of the church can save an unrepentant man. No sorrow, or fear, or regret, or anxiety, or contrition can save a man, unless there be a godly sorrow which leadeth to repentance which as Paul says, is "not to be repented of." And repentance born of fear is always "repented of" as soon as the fear is removed.

One of the big reasons why there are so few real, genuine, dynamically powerful Christians today, is that so few of those who are called Christians have truly repented, and being unrepentant,

they cannot even approach God. They may even come faithfully week after week to lay their gift upon the altar, but that gift is not accepted, and God is not found, because they have neglected to go first and make restitution to the brother whom they have wronged. Today's churches are full of people who have simply sorrowed for sin, confessed Christ, and gone home to live on the fruits of past sinning. They have never made a complete surrender --never made a complete reformation of their lives --never laid the axe at the ROOT of the tree, but only lopped off a few insignificant top branches so that it couldn't grow quite so fast.

Let us examine ourselves. If we have dealt with any man unjustly, or caused him loss, or suffering, or sorrow, the first step in repentance is a frank recognition of that sin. The second step in repentance is restitution and reconciliation between us and the one we have wronged. With these two steps completed, we may then approach God, have faith in him, confess Christ as our Savior, receive baptism in his name, and enter upon the Christian life in serenity, in peace, in confidence that we are accepted of him who some day will require every man to give an accounting for every one of his unreconciled, unforgiven sins.