



# The King's Highway

Mrs. Thomas Morgan

## An Advocate of Scriptural Holiness

“And an highway shall be there and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness.”

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### WHEN REPENTANCE IS REAL

By Dr. Paul S. Rees

“Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (II Cor. 7:10).

Thirty years ago Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman, speaking out of his world-wide experience as a Christian minister and leader, declared that he “was perfectly amazed to see how little is said about repentance.” He then went on to say that in his library he could find “only five or six sermons on repentance.” Two of them were by Moody, two by Finney, and two by Jonathan Edwards.

Today, three decades later, one wonders if the theme “Repentance” is any more common. If it were more common, if we had more courageous speaking out on the matter, if we would give ourselves to more healthy and candid discussion of so important a topic, then perhaps the thing itself—the repentance that gets us somewhere—would not be so rare.

It is commonly our practice to divide people into two groups: those who are penitent and those who are impenitent, those who have a care about their sins and those who have not. But will you observe that this is not St. Paul's grouping in the passage before us? He is not now addressing himself to the careless and impenitent; not at all. He is talking to people all of whom, he assumes, are exercised about the guilt-feelings that possess them, all of whom are concerned about getting release from their distress. Some, he declares, are going to miss a complete cure; others are going to find it. The difference is that in one case the repentance is not real, adequate, Christian; in the other case it is.

We begin, then, by looking at some things which do not constitute, in the Christian sense, a real repentance.

Repentance is not real when it consists only of a sense of shame. Some of you are in “sorrow,” says Paul, but there the matter ends. You are not getting through it into the joy of forgiveness and freedom. You are not breaking out into the light.

When our conscience gets after us and the convicting Spirit of God begins to show up the unworthy and mischievous deeds that stain the record, it is not possible, I suppose, for us to be too deeply ashamed of ourselves. At the same time it is possible for us to be ashamed in the wrong way. We may develop a fixation of self-reproach — a complex in which all the ideas and emotions connected with our failure turn in exclusively upon ourselves. To the suggestion that there is deliverance from our past and hope for the future, we are deaf. We brood guiltily, and keep on brooding, until, like some whipped dog, we are afraid to look anyone in the face.

Is that Christian repentance? I assure you it is not. That sort of passive, persistent self-accusing is more likely to land us in a mental hospital or a suicide's grave than in the open, welcoming arms of Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Remorse has its place, but it also has its peril. Instead of being constructive, it can turn out to be utterly destructive. It may lead us, as it did Judas Iscariot, into darkness and death.

Again, repentance is not real when it is concerned only or chiefly with fear of consequences. This, along with the mere sense of shame, comes under the head of what St. Paul calls “the sorrow of the world.”

Look at that man behind the bars. Yesterday he was hard as nails. Now, if you talk to him, you can probably see a tear in his eye. Is he sincerely penitent? Not necessarily. He may be subdued and sorry, not because he is a criminal, but only because he is caught.

Look at that youth, wretched as perdition itself, for the moment thoroughly despising himself. Why? Does he have any intelligent and morally constructive shame over the drunkenness from which his abused body is just recovering? Not necessarily. He may only feel sorry for himself that he has to take the inevitable “pay-off” in such a bitter fashion. Not the disgrace of his sin but merely the temporary discomfort of it is what now disturbs him.

Look at this fellow lying unhappily on a hospital bed. His body, if the truth must be told, is foul with a disease that has caught up with him because of his unclean living. He may be regretful only because the law of sowing and reaping has overtaken him and he is gathering in his diseased and rotting body the harvest of his folly. That is not repentance.

Repentance is not real when it is conscious of guilt but tries to put the blame somewhere else. This too is what the apostle would call “worldly” rather than “godly” sorrow.

Thus, today, there are persons who are bitter and censorious toward this or that circumstance because, according to their claim, it has trapped them into failure. They blame individuals, it may be, or society as a whole, or their heredity, or even the church. Yet their cynical passing of the buck is but a mask to hide the shame that boils inside of them. This, whatever else it may be, is not real repentance.

Once more, repentance is not real when it confesses wrong but takes a defeatist attitude toward ending the grip of the wrong. Life, for such persons, is a ceaseless cycle of failure and the confession thereof. What comfort they get out of this process is not the comfort of victory and deliverance. It is false comfort, and I beg for a hearing on this, of feeling that failure is all they can ever expect.

Church people, I am convinced, have been led astray at this point. Our very liturgies and

confessionals, whatever may have been the intention of the fathers who drew them up, have a tendency to console us in our defeats and reconcile us to our unconquered habits. It is possible to go to church every Sunday and, figuratively speaking, wallow in a soft ooze of confession and then, having derived a certain consolation from it, to go right out and pick up our sinning where we left off—if indeed, in God's sight, we have left it off at all.

That, I claim, is not what St. Paul was talking about in his description of true repentance. He says there is a repentance “not to be repented of.” Goodspeed translates it, “a repentance that leaves no regrets.” It results in a clearing up of things. It leaves us different—spiritually renewed and energized for a transformed life. It agrees with the word of Scripture which tells us that “whoso confesseth and forsaketh (his sins) shall find mercy.” Repentance, we must see, is not rationalized failure. It is the gateway to a new and successful kind of living. What is it then on the positive side?

Positively speaking, I want to make three statements as to when repentance is real. It is real, first, when it passes beyond grief to God, secondly, when it passes beyond sorrow to surrender, and thirdly, when it passes beyond failure to faith.

To begin with, repentance becomes, in the Christian sense, effective when it goes beyond the feeling of grief and truly faces up to God. Paul elsewhere speaks of the gospel which he preached as consisting of “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” The faith-emphasis can wait for a moment. “Repentance toward God!” That, I believe, is what the apostle means in our text by “godly sorrow.” The sense of shame is there, to be sure but it concerns itself with something more than the emotion we feel, or the consequences we face for our wrong doing: it concerns itself with the staggering fact, which has finally broken upon us, that we are what we are and where we are because we have left God out of our lives.

Repentance, to be real, must pass “beyond failure to faith.” We now return to the reminder Paul gives us in a passage from Acts 20:21. The apostle sums up his gospel in a double statement: “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here, so to speak, are the two sides of the shield of salvation. One is as necessary as the other. There can be no true repentance without trust in Christ. There can be no saving faith in Christ which does not include repentance.

For all who are now oppressed with a sense of guilt and shame, for all who are aware of the hurt that your wilfulness and unrighteousness have brought to the heart of God, for all who are ready to make this an hour of great decision on which your whole

(Continued on Page 5)