



The King's Highway

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When Repentance is Real

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"Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death."—II Corinthians 7:10.

That there is a widespread lack of real repentance ought to be admitted without any preacher's effort to labor the point. In a sense it may be said that repentance has never been popular. Why? Because it is one of the most difficult things in the world. For a man to stand and confess that he has gone astray, that he has done an evil deed which has been hidden from men's eyes, that he has been keeping God out of his life, is the most costly and humiliating thing a man can do.

Granting that it is difficult, it still remains true, that, as Jesus put it, "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." So we would at least know what repentance actually is, and what it essentially means.

I

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

1. 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 the 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. Repentance has its place, but it has also 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

To any list of bad habits with which we mortals are afflicted, certainly someone should nominate the alibi-habit.

So it comes to pass that, whatever our misconduct or failure, we have a convenient back alley of shifted responsibility by which we try to make our escape. Thus Adam laid the blame for his disobedience on "the woman" God had given him. Thus Eve, when she was confronted, passed the blame on to the Tempter. Thus King Saul, big of body but small of soul, shouldered off the responsibility for his failure to destroy all the spoils of victory, and let it fall on "the people" who had urged him, he said, to spare the best for religious sacrifices. And 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 is not real repentance.

4. Once more, repentance is not real when it confesses wrong but takes a defeatist attitude toward ending the grip of the wrong. Who knows how many people there are, both within and without the church, who go through a certain ritual of penitence (so-called) and confession of sin (so-called) without any thought of really giving up their unlovely and ungodly ways? 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 rather the 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 de-

feats 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 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 clear 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 "who 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?

II

Positively speaking, I want to make three statements as to when repentance is real. It is real (1) when it passes beyond grief to God, (2) when it passes beyond sorrow to surrender, and (3) 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." "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.

We were meant for God and God was meant for us. And we have spoiled the pattern, broken the harmony, filled with utter disappointment and pain the heart of the God Who gave us our being and sent His holy Son to redeem us by the costly way of the Cross. When that conviction strikes, it is the hour of real penitence. When that conviction grips us, it will be the end of our haughtiness and the beginning of our humiliation.

Look at the man David. All the splendor of the royal palace cannot hide the scarlet shame he feels in his soul and wears upon his face. Why? He has sinned. "Have mercy upon me,

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