

“True Repentance”

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

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Text Comment

- v.2 This is a resumption of the appeal already given in 6:11-13. But it also represents the end of a long excursus on Paul’s ministry that interrupted the defense of his conduct at 2:13. He had been talking about the reason for his change in travel plans if you remember, a change that the false teachers had attributed to an unreliable character, and about the pain he had caused the Corinthians by his former letter. But since 2:13 he has been involved in a long digression. It is to Paul’s genius and the Holy Spirit’s goodness that we attribute the fact that in that *digression* Paul has given us some of “the richest treasures of New Testament theology.” [Hughes, 264] Now he returns to his interrupted thought. He wants to be sure that his relationship with the Corinthian believers is fully restored.
- v.5 In 2:12-13 Paul had explained that, concerned for the situation in Corinth, Paul had sent Titus there and, after waiting a reasonable length of time and so anxious for a report, he left Ephesus for Troas, hoping to meet Titus returning. Not finding him in Troas, he crossed the Aegean hoping to find Titus in Macedonia. There were difficulties to be faced in ministry in Macedonia – there were always difficulties in gospel work, no matter where Paul went – and there were still the worries about Corinth. And still no Titus.
- v.7 Titus finally arrived and, to Paul’s immense relief, brought with him a most encouraging report. Paul’s first letter, the letter we know as First Corinthians, had been well received in general, the believers had taken Paul’s rebukes to heart, the Corinthians had expressed their love for and loyalty to Paul, had shown Titus kindly hospitality and their eagerness to see Paul again.
- v.9 No one likes the surgeon’s knife, but the pain is worth it if it cuts out the disease!
- v.12 Paul said something similar in 1 Cor. 4:14ff. where he says that he wrote that letter not to shame them but to restore them to a right relationship with him as their spiritual father (and, of course, by doing so, to a right relationship with God). The simplest interpretation of Paul’s words is to take the “one who did the wrong” as the incestuous man of 1 Cor. 5 and the injured party as the man’s father. We can’t know for sure, but that is more likely an assumption than the many others that have been suggested.
- v.14 As disobedient as the Corinthians had become in certain ways, as unfaithful to their Christian calling, Paul had never lost confidence in their being real Christians. He had said as much to Titus and they had proved Paul right in the way in which they had received Titus. Paul was, for that reason, newly proud of his converts in Corinth.

It is one of the glories of the writing of the Apostle Paul that so often in a paragraph of one of his letters he has provided the definitive summary of some piece of biblical teaching. Over and

again we find what theologians call the *locus classicus* of some biblical subject somewhere in Paul's writing. A *locus classicus* is a passage that has become a standard for the explanation of a word or subject. It is the first place one turns when he wants to explain what the Bible means by a particular word or what it teaches about a particular subject. And there are many such places, the first places to which one turns, in the writings of Paul. We have one of them before us this morning. For this is the *locus classicus* on repentance in the Bible. Do you want to know what repentance is? How it is identified? How it is distinguished from its imitations? Here is where everyone begins.

Now there is nothing here that one cannot find taught elsewhere in the Bible. It is not as if Paul has a *new* view of repentance. Consider, for example, this from Solomon's temple-dedication prayer in 2 Chron. 6:36-38:

“When they sin against you – for there is no one who does not sin – and you become angry with them and give them over to the enemy, who takes them captive to a land far away or near; and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captivity and say, ‘We have sinned, we have done wrong and acted wickedly’; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their captivity where they were taken, and pray toward the land you gave their fathers... then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their pleas, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you.”

You have the same view of repentance there as here in 2 Cor. 7, but see how clearly Paul describes this repentance and shows how it demonstrates itself in a believer's life. I can't tell you the number of times that I have turned to this text in the course of my work as the pastor of this church. Someone has come to me to confess his sin, or someone has been found out in a sin. Sometimes they very much want to know themselves what they can do now, what they must do now. Sometimes they are speaking with me not because they have sought such a conversation but because I have demanded it. They aren't really very interested in hearing what I have to say. But, in either case, I take them to Paul here and show them what a wise person does who has been found out in sin. Repentance mends the damage caused by sin in God's world and here is Paul telling us what true repentance is and what it looks like and how to tell whether you have it or not.

Repentance can be rather easily faked, I have learned, at least in its early stages. One of the reasons for that, a reason Paul suggests himself here, is that there is a kind of sorrow that comes because of sin that looks like the beginnings of repentance but is really not. Sin pays a wage. Sin has consequences. The debts were run up foolishly and now the bills cannot be paid and bankruptcy looms. The two are unmarried but there is a baby on the way, the relationship has turned sour with recrimination, and now looms a very uncertain and difficult future. The words were spoken, there is no taking them back, the damage is done and things will never be the same between you. The lie was told and found out; the theft; the impurity; whatever the sin was, trouble, pain, and sorrow has followed in its wake. And the tears flow and the self-accusation and the emotional pain. That looks like contrition; it looks like conviction of sin; it looks like the beginnings of repentance.

But, it isn't. The sorrow is for consequences not for sin. It is a great sorrow because the consequences are severe. But it is the sorrow that any worldly person might just as well experience if caught in the same unhappy bind that you have been caught in. People can feel profound pain when they mess up their lives by their own sinfulness. You don't have to be a Christian to be miserable when you screw up. We have seen this here, of course: the worldly sorrow that leads to death. Those who weep and gnash their teeth on the judgment day will be very sorrowful, but their sorrow will not be holy and will not lead to repentance. It will be an impressive sorrow but not a godly sorrow. Judas was sorrowful enough over what he had done in betraying the Lord to kill himself. That was an impressive sorrow, but it was not repentance. And so with much sorrow today.

And there are ways to tell. You learn to tell. For example, "But..." is a big word with those whose sorrow is of the worldly, not the godly type. "Yes, I sinned...*but*..." I have often told people that I don't want to hear that word come out of their mouths. But it does, again and again. Yes I shouldn't have lied, or stole, or fornicated, or got so angry, or used such harsh language, or got that divorce, or whatever, *but*... And then follows some mitigation, some excuse, some explanation as to why it was not as bad as it might appear. I did it, but others did it too! That excuse, that defense is so common that it even has a name: the *tu quoque* defense. The Latin words mean "you too." You can't blame me for something if you do it too. Or, if not *tu quoque*, they will say, "Yes, I did it, but it wasn't only my fault, there were others. She shouldn't have provoked me; she was willing too; if he hadn't done that to me I wouldn't have... and so on. Now we are dividing the guilt, parsing the blame as a means of lessening our own responsibility. Or, and this has become extremely popular in our day, when we are so used to litigation and so concerned about our "rights," we admit our fault, but complain of the process by which the fault was discovered or the accusation made or the judgment reached. In this way we deflect attention from our own sin to the sins of others. It is really another form of the *tu quoque* defense.

I used to think that Matthew 7:1 was the most popular verse in the Bible: "Judge not lest ye be judged." But now I wonder if it is Matthew 18:15-17: "if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." I'm not sure that I have witnessed a case of discipline in our presbytery, for example, in which someone has not complained that Matthew 18 was not followed. I have found among many sinners, caught in their sin, sometimes quite vicious sin, an unusual concern to be scrupulously faithful to the dictates of God's word when it comes to the correction of sinners.

In other words, there is a sorrow for sin that has nothing to do with having offended God, nothing really to do with having done what was wrong. In the mind one may well think that this is the source of your sorrow and mental pain, but time will show that you are unhappy only because you were caught, only because the consequences of your sin have proved to be so painful. All of us know the real possibility of this, of course, because we have given way to such worldly sorrow ourselves. No matter that we are Christians, we know very well the temptation to grieve more over consequences than the wrong or its offense to God. We know how often we

mourn for other reasons than that we are looking on the One whom we have pierced (Zech. 12:10). And we know how easily we succumb to the temptation, after we were caught, to say *tu quoque* or to complain about the way we have been treated. How often we have to catch ourselves and realize how little of David's spirit there is in our hearts. "Have mercy upon me, O God. Against you, you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight!"

Now don't mistake me. True repentance *does* begin in sorrow, Paul says that it does here. "Godly sorrow *brings repentance*." As we will see, the sorrow is only the beginning of repentance, but it is an essential beginning. It is only when one grieves over one's sins that he is likely to turn away from them. And to know that one has done wrong, has offended God, has hurt others, has betrayed his or her own commitments as a Christian, this is, this should be sorrow indeed! To desire to be sorrowful for sin is to desire a holy and healthy thing. As our Savior himself said, "Blessed [or happy] are they who mourn." We all need more tears on account of our sin.

Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath thy cross,
To number drop by drop thy blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?

Not so those women, loved
Who with exceeding grief lamented thee;
Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;
Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the sun and moon
Which hid their faces in a starless sky.
A horror of great darkness at broad noon –
I, only I.

Yet give not o'er
But seek thy sheep, true shepherd of the flock;
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
And smite a rock.

[Christina Rossetti]

But, as I said, this sorrow is only the beginning of repentance and Paul makes that clear here. Now, repentance in Paul's teaching is a Christian *grace*. That point is not made explicitly here, but it is important to remember always. There was a Hindu society, years ago, that sought to take everything positive from Christianity without compromising its Hinduism. It took the Westminster Shorter Catechism definition of repentance – "Repentance is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience" – and left out just two words: "in Christ." They were acute enough to realize that the whole of the Christian definition lay in those two words. "They felt that here was

the barb of the hook, and as they had no intention of being caught, they broke it off.” [James Denny, *Studies in Theology*, 130]

But in the Bible, in Christianity, there can be no true repentance that does not come from faith in Christ. There has to be hope of forgiveness *and* a new beginning that pleases God *and* a reason to forsake one’s sins that is more powerful than temptation itself, and Christ gives us those things and only he can give them to us. Faith in Christ comes first, then repentance. And only repentance that is the exercise of faith is true repentance. That much is clear. That sometimes confuses us. Conviction with its sorrow may come before faith in the case of an unbeliever. But conviction by itself is not repentance. True repentance always follows faith and takes its nature and character from it. It is confession to a God whom you know as heavenly father, it is sorrow for the offense you have given to a God who has loved and saved you, it is a turning in the hope of grace to help in time of need.

And that is the part of repentance that Paul most emphasizes here: the turning away from sin to righteousness, and a turning that is determined, heart-felt, even violent.

There was no *tu quoque* in the Corinthians’ response to Paul’s rebukes. They knew they had done wrong. There were those there in the church in Corinth who would have wanted them to complain about Paul’s process. After all, in 1 Cor. 5 he excommunicated the man from a distance, without confirming all the facts in person, and, what is worse, *he didn’t follow Matthew 18!* But the Corinthians, including that man himself, would have nothing of that. They knew what they had done was wrong and that there were a number of things that were wrong and needed to be repented of. And they were determined to put those things right, not only to do what was right but to be seen to be doing what was right; to leave no doubt in anyone’s mind that they were taking revenge on their sins and were turning away from them in obedience to the Lord’s apostle. They wanted the passion of their repentance to be obviously deeper than the passion of their former sinning. The turning, the change in behavior, was consistent with the deep sorrow for their sin.

Look out for trouble ahead when repentance is not of this type. I have seen men caught in terrible crimes who weep and accuse themselves, but very soon are sharing out the blame with others, providing excuses for themselves, complaining about how they have been treated. My experience is that you can usually count on the sin to reappear in such cases, as it did, very sadly and destructively, recently in the life of a man who was years ago a ministerial member of our Presbytery.

But, when the repentance, the turning, is as vigorous and single-minded and unqualified as what Paul describes, a person’s life changes and the future will not likely repeat the past!

Now, is this text only for those who have been caught in some public sin? Is Paul’s description of repentance only for those whose sins are of a graver nature? No, repentance is the stuff of daily Christian life. Just as we never get over believing in Christ, so we never get past repentance.

As Tertullian, the 3rd century church father, says, at the very end of his treatise *On Repentance* [xii]: “For, sinner as I am of every [kind], [I was] born for nothing save repentance.” Rutherford put it in his own inimitable way: “Break off a sin or a piece of sin each day.” No doubt it took some time for those Corinthian believers to break off all the sins that Paul had exposed, but they set to it. You know very well that you have sins to break off. Set to it. Stop only when you have no more sins to break off and every Christian knows when *that* day will come. If there remains sin, there should remain repentance and Paul’s kind of repentance, the really enthusiastic kind.

Asahel Nettleton, the early American evangelist, gives an account of a Mr. Davenport who, in the days of revival in the mid-18th century, did a great deal of damage to healthy churches by using his charismatic personality to draw people away from them, accusing their ministers – godly men all – of being unconverted, and so on. Churches were shattered as large numbers of people left to form separate assemblies under the influence of this man. Well, after some time, some wise ministers were able to break through and make Mr. Davenport realize the error of his ways. And then, says Nettleton, this good man went from place to place, everywhere he had been before, to every church that he had harmed, and apologized for what he had done, publicly repented of his sins, apologized to the ministers whose reputations he had damaged, and sought to put the churches he had split back together again. Now, that is the kind of repentance Paul is talking about and that kind of repentance, practiced daily and constantly, will change a life profoundly over time.

Everyone can see the genuineness of that repentance and everyone can measure its happy effect. A real sorrow leading to a real turning, a turning that won’t take “no” for an answer!

Do you want a simple plan for a holy and fruitful life as a Christian in this world? Well, make repentance your daily work and your comrade in life. Make Paul’s kind of repentance something you do every day. Make an enthusiasm for repentance, the sorrow of it, the Christian faith of it, and the turning of it, characteristic of your life. Do that and I guarantee you, you will go further and accomplish more than now you imagine is possible. Jesus Christ can be our example in many things, but not in repentance, because he had no sin to turn from. So make the Corinthians your example. We find these folk near to ourselves. As they are near in their sinning, let them be near in their repenting also.

Augustine made repentance so much the practice, the daily business of his life, that when he lay dying, he had the penitential psalms written on the wall above his bed so that he could pray them as he closed out his life. The world had its own business in those days. The barbarians were besieging Hippo as Augustine came to the end of his days. But, above an interest in that, more important than that to Augustine was presenting God and Christ a holy life. Repentance is the way to do that; the only way; but only the genuine type of repentance will do it.

The very first of Luther’s *95 Theses*, the publication of which began the Protestant Reformation, reads:

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Let us all renew our determination to be faithful Christians in this most important way.