



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## REPENTANCE

John the Baptist prepared for the coming ministry of Jesus by his preaching of repentance and his administration of baptism as a token of repentance. He admonished people to turn from their sinful ways and throw themselves on God's mercy. By repenting they were to open themselves to God, admitting their need for His mercy. Their openness readied them for the coming of the Saviour. It put them into the proper condition to receive God's gift of salvation. Repentance prepared the way of the Lord.

The same pattern operates in our lives. To be open to God, to receive His blessings and His self-revelation, we have to be turned toward Him with a certain receptivity. To be turned toward Him means to be turned away from self and sin. This turning about -- from self to God -- is repentance. It comes at the beginning of Christian life, when God calls us to a life centered upon Him rather than upon ourselves. It also comes regularly in the course of our Christian growth. For as often as we fall, we must turn again to God to receive His forgiveness and the grace to resume our course to Him.

Repentance is terribly hard for us. In our pride, we do not like to admit it when we have done something wrong. We would much rather be perfect and not have to face our failures, especially before God. We often pretend not to see our failures so that we can avoid repenting. Shame for our sins can keep us from repenting, at least for a time. We resist humbling ourselves before God, for this means admitting that we have failed -- again! -- and that once again we require His forgiveness and restoration if we are to go on with Christian life.

In the dynamic of the Christian life there are two kinds of repentance. The first marks the beginning of Christian life. It is the repentance of the Prodigal Son: that fundamental reorientation of life from self to God. This major sort of repentance often comes in the context of some crisis in our

lives, when life as we have lived it becomes intolerable. We are forced to make a change, even if it is such a major change as giving ourselves over to God instead of living entirely out of our own resources. The Prodigal was reduced to satisfying his hunger on the pigs' garbage before he was sufficiently humbled to repent of his sin. When he did come to his senses he perceived how far he had fallen, and that he would be better off with his father even if he could not longer be his son. He finally realized that his sin had destroyed him, that his life was not worth living. Only by turning from it, and committing himself to a life of virtue with his father could he find a new life.

Then his father takes him back, rejoicing and killing the fatted calf, and restores him to his sonship. The Prodigal does not expect this, he dares not even hope for it. He simply sees that his life of sin is no life at all, and is therefore willing to humble himself. The point for us is that the Father so loves us as to take us back, even after such folly as that of the Prodigal. His love abides, and may be trusted. We need not fear the reception we will get when we repent and return. We will not find recrimination and condemnation, but forgiveness and love, however grievous our sins might be. Fear of God's response to us ought not deter us from repentance.

Sometimes there will be occasion for this kind of major repentance later in Christian life. We sometimes fall mightily, and give ourselves up to despair, turning our back on Christian life at least for a time. Sometimes a sexual sin may do this; sometimes a sin which particularly wounds our pride -- as when we commit a sin we have always despised in others, thinking that we are above it. In these cases, some time is bound to elapse between the sin and our repentance -- as the time between the Prodigal's riotous living and his repentance among the swine. That is the time it takes us to learn humility. For as long as we insist on our pride, we will not repent. So long as we insist on living out of our own power and on our own terms we will prefer our wretchedness to the blessings of forgiveness, since the wretchedness is at least in our control. Our pride prevents us from giving ourselves over to God in order to receive His forgiveness. It usually takes us some time after such a fall to find enough humility to repent and seek reconciliation with God. The interim may be a time of depression, of anger (with ourselves as much as anything), of resentment, and of avoidance of prayer or anything which would force us to confront our situation.

This major repentance is not pleasant for a Christian: we would all rather think that we should never need it, having once tasted the goodness of God. Whether or not it is required of us in our Christian lives, we all have need of daily repentance (this is the second kind) for those sins whereby we have offended our Lord and Saviour. There is no qualitative difference between the two kinds: just a matter of degree. This daily repentance is not always daily:

sometimes we let things slide, and our sins pile up for a few days or even weeks. When we do sit down for self-examination, we take stock of our sins, and repent. We turn from them and turn towards God.

Repentance depends upon our knowledge of the love of God and faith in His mercy. It is not just turning away **from** sin but turning **to** God. So God's love for us must have a certain reality for us, not just as an idea in the head, but as a true experience in the heart. Otherwise there would be nothing to replace our desire for sin in our hearts. There would be nothing which could tame the forbidden lusts of the heart. We would be truly wretched: we would hate our sins, and yet be helpless before them. In Christ God has given us an alternative, a life delivered from the tyranny of sin. Repentance is the doorway to that life.

Repentance requires of us first of all an acknowledgement of our sin and our responsibility for it. We repent of that which we know is evil and for which we are responsible. So long as we excuse our sins on the grounds either that we are not responsible for them or that they are not really sinful, we will not repent. We will retain their burden, even as we deny that they are burdensome. This is more tempting than it sounds: if we deny that we are sinners, we can claim that we are righteous, and that is good for the ego. The downside is that the illusion takes a lot of effort to sustain and is impossible to maintain if we have any regard for the facts.

Having acknowledged our sin, the next step is to be sorry for it. We renounce it, bemoaning our stupidity or malice in committing it. We are sorry for it not just because it offends our self-image of righteousness, but because it offends God. So we apologize not just to ourselves ("I wish I hadn't done that -- it makes me look terrible to A--- and B---, and I have trouble thinking I am as good as I really am."), but also to God ("I'm sorry to have offended Your love and forgiving mercy to me -- as I have done in spite of all Your goodness to me over the years.") Our sorrow is conditioned by our acceptance of God's love. We are sorry because we know He loves us and we have failed His love. We have betrayed it by not living up to it. This is the real basis for our sorrow for our sin.

The next step in our repentance is the desire to live without the sin. We must turn from our sin, and that means renouncing the desire as well as the object of our sin. Sometimes we are willing to give up the one but not the other. It is like letting someone else have the last piece of cake, but nursing our desire for it, thinking how much we would have enjoyed it. Though we gave up the cake, we are still preoccupied with wanting it. Our sinful desires work the same way. We think that we cannot live without them, that we will lose our identity. Or we may not think it possible to give up the desires, they being so much a part of us. But if we are to repent, we must make the commitment to giving them up. On faith, we assert

that a full, happy life is possible without the sin. We may not know how this is possible. But we must make the commitment anyway, and trust to God's grace for its fulfillment.

Having turned from our sin, the old sinful desires must be replaced by a desire for God. We cannot leave a vacuum: it will soon be filled by the old desires returned in force. To abide in our repentance we must love God. We must desire to live out that love in a life of holiness, a life without sin. This love will be the basis for our faithfulness in amendment of life, which should follow on our repentance. Unless there is some vital love, something that matters to us, then repentance will be at best short-lived. We need the foundation of loving God in a real and personal way, to give us a desire greater than the desire for sin.

The love of God forms the context for all our repentance. The love of the Prodigal Son's father is our example: we can trust God's forgiving love, however often or grievously we have sinned. His love which abides for us in spite of all we have done to offend it. As we experience His love for us in forgiveness, we are assured that repentance is worthwhile. His love draws us on. At the same time, our love for God (returning His love for us) enables us to repent. It gives us the strength we need to turn from our sin, desiring God more than sin. The relationship which we have with God, being disrupted by our sin, matters to us more than the pride which would keep us from repentance. If it does not matter more, then we will die in our sin.

Repentance is essential to Christian life. It goes naturally with regular self-examination: a time (preferably daily) when we take stock of our Christian successes and failures. We thank God for His grace in the successes and repent of the failures. Most of us must repent often. It is humiliating to need to do so: we would rather that we were so virtuous that repentance would be unneeded. When it is, however, there is still much to be gained in Christian growth. We learn humility; there is no repentance otherwise. It is humbling to return to God for the umpteenth time confessing our anger, or impatience, or lust, or whatever. Our pride would have us conquering such temptations long since.

As we learn humility, we also learn to love God. Our love is a love which depends entirely upon Him. Our sin is so often the result of depending upon ourselves rather than grace. Then our repentance is a commitment to live in His power since our own is so inadequate to the task. We learn to love Him as His trusting children. We love not out of our virtue, but out of trust in His love for us. We learn that we cannot and do not earn His love, that it is simply given out of His fulness. Then we become Christians indeed, saved by God and not ourselves, free to love with all our being, and to live entirely in His service.