

HOW TO REPENT

by Ray C. Stedman

Everybody needs to repent. Whenever we hurt someone else, or we ourselves are hurt by our own actions, whenever we break a law, whenever we tell a lie, whenever we steal someone else's property or name, whenever we smear some other person's reputation we need to repent, because repentance means a change of mind, a change of attitude.

This section of Second Corinthians, beginning with Verse 2 of Chapter 7, is a marvelous study on how to do that properly, how to heal and restore instead of making things worse, as many of us do when we try to bring about repentance.

The opening paragraph gives the right approach, the right attitude, if you want to bring about repentance in another. Paul says:

Open your hearts to us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. With all our affliction, I am overjoyed. {2 Cor 7:2-4 RSV}

Notice that positive approach there. The apostle does not attack these people; he does not condemn them; he does not accuse them. He is very careful to do three things with these Corinthians. As you know, this letter was written after they had repented of a problem that Paul had been working on with them for a long time.

He himself had gone to Corinth to try to clear this up, but had only made it worse, seemingly. Then he sent Titus there to see if he could help. While Titus was on his trip, Paul was greatly disturbed, as we will see in a moment, concerning these conditions in Corinth. But now Titus has returned and has given him good news that they have, indeed, changed their minds. There are still some things to work out, and Paul is writing now in that regard.

Notice that he is careful to do three very important things with them.

First, he himself has a clear conscience. He says, "we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one." Obviously he does not mean throughout his whole lifetime, because he had been a persecutor of the church and he had done a lot of wrong things. He means as an apostle there at Corinth he had not injured anyone, or corrupted anyone, or taken advantage of anyone. He wants them to understand this. Undoubtedly there had been some accusations made about him in these regards. He is simply stating now that, as far as his conscience is concerned, it is clear before the Lord that he has not done these things.

You and I, at times, cannot say that. Sometimes we have been wrong ourselves in a broken relationship which we are trying to heal, so we cannot start out on that note. We have to start out admitting that we were wrong. This is where Jesus' words, "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt 7:5 {RSV}) come in. So, unless we start with a clear conscience, there is no use trying to go on. Whatever is wrong has to be cleared up. But in this case Paul could say, "I did not hurt anybody while I was there." It is a wonderful claim on his part.

Then, second, he says, "I do not say this to condemn you." Neither do I condemn you, he says. Instead, he affirms them. Now that is one of the most important things about this matter of helping another person. Oftentimes when we come to try to bring somebody to admit he was wrong about something, we start out with a harsh condemnation. We rip into him, we let him have a piece of our mind. We are telling the truth, we say. And it is the truth, but it is the truth without love. There is no underlying reaffirmation of acceptance.

Paul is very careful here to point out that he loves these people, regardless of how they behave. He says, "I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together." It does not make any difference -- "Live or die, I love you. I am going to be for you and behind you to support you. I am not going to abandon you or write you off, but I have some things to point out to you. They are not meant to wipe you out, however. I'm not condemning you, in that sense."

Then, third, after there has been repentance, he encourages them: "I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. With all our affliction, I am overjoyed." What a marvelous note of encouragement! They have taken a right step now. The matter is not fully settled yet -- Paul has some other things to say later on in the letter to them -- but he reassures them that his pride in them is undiminished, his confidence in them is still strong and supportive, and he encourages them to go further.

That is very important. If you are going to talk to somebody about something that is wrong, start out with something right, that is the point. Encourage him and affirm to him that you love him and that you are coming in that supportive sense.

The apostle goes on to show them how he shared their hurt with them; he identified with them. Verse 5:

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest but we were afflicted at every turn -- fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. {2 Cor 7:5-7 RSV}

This, of course, is a flashback to what we have already looked at in Chapter 2 of this letter. Paul's very reason for writing this letter at all was his distress over these people while he was waiting for Titus to come back with word as to what had happened in Corinth. In Chapter 2 he tells us that he was so restless in his mind and spirit that he could not even wait at Troas for Titus but went into Macedonia to meet him. He finally ran into him there, and learned the good news that things had worked out for the good in Corinth.

We do not know exactly what Paul means when he says, "fighting without and fear within." Perhaps there was some difficulty in Macedonia. He had been imprisoned once in Philippi; perhaps there were enemies there who were making it difficult for him. In any event he was distressed and anxious about Corinth, so there were "fightings without and fears within."

Have you ever experienced that -- circumstances going wrong at the very time you are worried about something else? Life is frequently that way, isn't it? When trouble hits it comes like a flash flood; everything goes wrong. Have you ever been hassled by your circumstances and plagued with inward fears? Well then, you are treading where the saints have trod. You are in an apostolic succession, because that is where Paul was too.

But the wonderful thing, as he points out here, is that God understands that: "God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus." The one thing that helps us bear these burdens, these pressures, is to remember that God knows about them. They are not accidents. God put us there, and he is carefully adjusting the temperature of the water so that though we may be in hot water it is not going to get too hot. This is his promise: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted above that which you are able to bear," (1 Cor 10:13 {RSV}). Now do not misread that. It is not, "above that which you think you are able to bear." God knows how much you can bear better than you do. He is the God who comforts the discouraged.

My wife was telling me this week about how she has had a burden of concern in prayer for a certain individual who is not in this area. She had been praying for him all week and the burden just seemed to get heavier, until it reached a point where it seemed she could hardly bear it. Then the phone rang, and this man was calling to tell her something about an experience he had with the Lord that encouraged her tremendously. So we have just had the experience that God is this kind of a God. He is the "God who comforts the discouraged, the downcast." Paul said that is what happened: "Titus came and we got the good news."

Now, in Verses 8-11, we come to the heart of this matter of repentance. This is a wonderful analysis of the actual process of bringing someone to repentance. Notice how it starts, with some very loving confrontation:

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it), for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. {2 Cor 7:8 RSV}

This is a reference to what the scholars call Paul's "severe letter." (We have made reference to that earlier in these studies.) We do not know exactly what letter it is. Some think it is the first letter to the Corinthians. Others, including myself, think it is a letter that we no longer have. In any case it was a very severe letter, and in it the apostle said some very straightforward, faithful things to these people. He knew it would hurt them when he wrote it, and he says that when he sent it he was distressed. In fact, if you refer back to Chapter 2, Verse 4, you will see what he says about writing that letter:

For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. {2 Cor 2:4 RSV}

This is what we would call a loving admonition. How human the apostle is! After he mailed it he had second thoughts about having written it. He said, "I don't regret it now, but I did regret it. After I wrote it I wondered if I should have said it."

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever mailed a letter like that? You knew it would cause pain and you wondered if it was not too much or could ever be repaired. Paul felt that way. He had second thoughts. He sometimes wished he had not written it, but sometimes he was glad he did. He knew it would hurt, but he knew that the grief and the hurt were necessary.

You do not love somebody by not telling him the truth. We often times let people go on and on and on because we say we love them too much to hurt them, but I do not know anything more self-deceptive than that statement. It is true that we do not want to hurt someone, but do you know who that someone is? It is us. We do not want to hurt ourselves. We know that if we say these things to this individual he is going to get angry at us and that will hurt us and that is what we are avoiding. When we say, "Well, I just love him too much to hurt him," we are really kidding ourselves and saying we do not want to hurt ourselves.

When you love somebody and tell him the truth in a loving, affirmative way, you enable him to see that you really love him. If you are willing to risk his friendship in order to tell him the truth, you must really love him. That is usually the message that comes through even though he may not admit it at first.

I can remember something I did as a freshman in college. It was a kind of flamboyant, out-of-line action in which I was simply trying to get some attention. Everybody either laughed or sneered at it, but only one person loved me enough to come and tell me it was wrong. He took me aside and said, "What did you do a thing like that for? You knew that was wrong. I hate to see you act that way." That cemented a friendship with that man that has continued to this day. I knew that he loved me because he told me that, and I have had a high regard for him ever since.

This is what Paul does. He faithfully confronts these people with what is wrong, and that is the beginning of repentance.

Then he brings out a second thing in Verses 9-10:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. {2 Cor 7:9-10 RSV}

Whenever somebody accuses you of not being right, whenever somebody tells you the truth about yourself, it hurts. It can produce one of two reactions, what Paul calls either "godly grief," or "worldly grief." Grief is a word for "hurt," here. We all feel hurt, but the question, of course, is: "Is it godly hurt, or is it worldly hurt?"

Here is the difference, as the apostle points out:

Godly grief is the pain of suddenly becoming aware of something about yourself that has been hidden to you. That something wrong about yourself that you have not been able to see always creates a sense of anger, perhaps, of defensiveness, of injury, and oftentimes of tears. It is the moment of self-awareness. It is what we call a "moment of truth."

Have you ever had that happen to you? You were tooling along, thinking you were doing OK, when somebody came along and told you something about yourself. Even as he said the words there was a stab in your heart that said, "That's right, isn't it?" You may be defensive, you may argue, you may fight back, you may strike back, but deep inside you know that is true. It hurts, but if it is godly hurt it leads to repentance. It makes you change. You alter your behavior.

Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons {cf, Matt 21:28-31}. He said to the first one, "Go and work in the field." The boy answered, "I will not." But later he repented; he changed his mind and did go. Then the father said to the other son, "Go and work in the field." The boy said, "All right, sir, I'm going," but he did not go. Jesus asked the question, "Which of those two boys repented and did the will of his father?" The answer, of course, is the first one.

Repentance is an action that you take. Some people think that if you feel sorry for what you have done that is repentance. No, it is not. The feeling sorry is the hurt, but if it is right hurt it leads to a change of action, which is repentance. That is where the repenting comes in. Repentance means to turn around. As Isaiah put it:

**"let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts:
and let him return unto the Lord, ...
and ... he will abundantly pardon." (Isa 55:7 {RSV})**

That is repentance, and that, in turn, Paul says, leads on to freedom, "salvation," he calls it. He is not talking about salvation from sin. These people were already Christians. He is talking about salvation from self, a sense of freedom, of deliverance.

I well remember how, many years ago, when I was a young Christian, I had a great struggle in my life with touchiness, sensitivity to people. I had such a poor self-image that I was dependent upon the way people thought about me for my feelings about myself. Consequently, if they did not always say nice things and treat me well, etc., I was very hurt and upset. You could cause me to go into a morass of self-pity for days merely by making an offhand remark about me that cut me down. That is called touchiness.

I had my moment of truth one day when I was talking with a Christian about another matter, but in the conversation she said something that struck like an arrow into my heart. She said, "I've learned that sensitivity is nothing but selfishness." I did not like that. I wrestled with it. I did not want to admit it, but I knew it was true. I knew that what I really wanted was to be the center of attention and have everybody watching out and ministering to me and taking care of me.

After awhile I had been hurt so much, so long, that I was sick and tired of it, and I decided that I would act on that basis. It was one thing to say that, but another thing to actually do it when the moment came. The next time somebody hurt me, however, I decided to act on the basis of what I had learned, and say, "That's not his fault. He didn't intend that. It is I who am feeling it. I'm taking it wrong." I did this, and after several such experiences I suddenly began to feel a marvelous sense of freedom. The tiger was off my back, and I was free to enjoy things much more than I ever had before. I will never forget the sense of deliverance, of liberation that came when I acknowledged the truth that somebody had even unwittingly said to me.

Now that is what Paul is talking about. Godly grief acknowledges the truth, changes its behavior, and that in turn leads to a sense of freedom and deliverance, which is what he has in view.

Worldly grief is quite different. Again, it starts with hurt, but it is a mixture of anger and self-pity. It makes

you either want to run and hide and lick your wounds, or fight and strike back and get revenge.

Somebody told me this last week of a married woman who was asked, "In your many years of marriage, did you ever consider divorce?" She said, "No. Homicide, perhaps, but never divorce." There are times when we all feel like this.

In fact, I believe that oft times many of these shocking stories in the newspapers today are a direct result of this process. Somebody has been hurt by hearing the truth, bluntly or even perhaps lovingly spoken. He will not listen, he will not receive it, but will retaliate with anger and revenge, even to the degree of fathers killing their own children, their wives, and themselves. These are the results of these confrontations. What a profound psychology is found in the Scriptures!

The result of worldly grief, of course, of that kind of reaction, is that there is no repentance. There may be a temporary change until the tumult dies down, but no real change, no sense of being wrong, rather a defensiveness instead, the result of which is death. That is what we are seeing in many of these cases. If it is not actual, physical death, it means further bondage, further imprisonment to ourselves, further restriction.

Paul now goes on to describe even more fully what godly grief is like, and what effects it produces. Verse 11:

For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter. {2 Cor 7:11 RSV}

There are some clear-cut indications of whether your hurt is a godly grief or a worldly grief. How do you react? Well, in the case of these Corinthians, they reacted first with a reversal of their behavior. How "earnestly," Paul says, they wanted to be free from this to face the whole problem in their lives; how "eager" they were to be completely clear and to clean up all areas of wrongdoing.

When he says, "what eagerness to clear yourselves," he does not mean vindicate or justify themselves. He means they had an eagerness on their part to get the whole thing out. Oftentimes when people are hurt like this, even though they may admit that they are wrong, their response, if it is worldly grief, is, "Well, let's drop the matter. I don't want to talk about it any more. I've admitted it was wrong. Now let's forget it."

But not here. These people are saying to Paul, "Tell us the whole story. Is there anything you haven't mentioned? We want to be clear on this. We want the whole thing out."

Furthermore, there is an anger at their own stupidity and failure. "What indignation," Paul says. How upset they were that they had ever fallen into such tactics.

There is a wonderful example of this in the 73rd Psalm, where the psalmist suddenly realizes that all his complaints before God are really a problem of his own blindness. He says,

**When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
I was stupid and ignorant,
I was like a beast toward thee. {Psa 73:21-22 RSV}**

Have you ever felt that way toward God? We blame God and accuse him, but later we see the truth and we realize how foolish we have been. That is a mark of godly grief.

The third one is a carefulness for the future. "What alarm" that they will not do this again. "What longing," what a yearning to have their behavior right; and "what zeal" and what self-discipline is awakened here. Paul calls it "punishment." It means self-discipline. How determined they are that they are not going to let themselves get into this kind of a state again. At every point, he says, you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter.

In contrast, with those who are suffering from worldly grief there is this unwillingness to face the whole matter. They are the people who want you to drop it, and if you do not forgive them immediately they get upset and angry. They say, "I confessed that. What's the matter? Why don't you forgive me?" They oftentimes end up actually putting the blame on other people. They say, "You made me do that. If you hadn't been like this, I wouldn't have done it."

That betrays a worldly grief that has no repentance in it. In First John we read, "If we confess our sin ... we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous," {1 Jn 1:9a, 2:1b RSV}. When we stop justifying ourselves, he stands up and begins to justify us. But if we do not confess our sin, if we justify it, then we are left on our own before him to whom all things are open and naked, and he sees us exactly as we are.

The final section here describes the joy of recovery, what happens when there is godly grief that leads to repentance, and hurt that has accomplished something with us. The first thing, a renewed awareness of who we really are, is in Verses 12-13:

So although I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong, nor on account of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your zeal for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted. {2 Cor 7:12-13a RSV}

That may be a little difficult to understand, but what he is saying is, "The real reason I wrote was not to straighten out this problem." (He did write for that purpose, but that is not the only reason, nor even the greatest reason.) He is implying:

"The reason you got into this condition where you let this kind of a matter go unjudged in your midst was because you forgot who you were. You forgot that you are sons of God, children of light, that you have understanding of life that others do not have; and that you have power to act that others do not possess.

"I wrote to you to show you who you are, that in your heart, basically, is an obedience of commitment to the Lord himself, because I knew that when you saw that again your whole behavior would change. That is what has happened and that is what I rejoice in, therefore, I am comforted," Paul says.

So that is the first thing. They began to recover a sense of their own identity, and Paul helped them to recover that.

Then the second thing is a vindication of Paul's previous confidence in them. Verses 13-14:

And besides our own comfort we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his mind has been set at rest by you all. For if I have expressed to him some pride in you, I was not put to shame; but just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting before Titus has proved true. {2 Cor 7:13b-14 RSV}

All that Paul had felt about them and had even said about them to Titus, while the trouble was still going on, was vindicated by their action. That is one of the joyful things about repentance -- it enables people to have confidence again in what they had always felt about you. When you treat it in this godly, scriptural way, it renews that sense of confidence -- not only in Paul, but also in Titus. This is the third point: it awakened the respect of others, for he says (Verse 15):

And his heart goes out all the more to you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, and the fear and trembling with which you received him. {2 Cor 7:15 RSV}

Titus was impressed by the Corinthians in their repentance. Their blindness did not impress him, but their change of heart did.

A few weeks ago I happened to be with a group of men, discussing some very significant matters involving human relationships. I became aware that one of those men was judging another from a spirit of self-righteousness, not facing the possibility of his own involvement in the same kind of sin, but being harsh

and somewhat condemnatory.

In the midst of that group, as delicately as I could, as lovingly as I could, I nevertheless pointed out to him what I felt was behind his harsh accusation. I could see the hurt it caused. His face blanched, he became silent, and he did not say anything for a little while. After a bit he interrupted, looked me right in the eye, and said, "Ray, I want to thank you for those personal remarks you made to me. You were right."

My esteem for that man went up like a skyrocket. I had always admired him and felt him to be a godly man, but I was tremendously impressed with the godliness of a man who in those circumstances could openly and publicly say, "Yes, you're right. I had a wrong attitude."

That is what happens when we handle these accusations that have truth in them in a godly way. Instead of fighting back and getting angry and defensive and retaliating, we acknowledge it and change our behavior. This leads to increased respect on every side.

Then the fourth thing is the increased joy that it gives. Paul closes this account with:

I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you. {2 Cor 7:16 RSV}

The end of all God's dealings with us is that it increases our joy, it increases everybody's joy. That is the purpose for which the Spirit of God is at work in these kinds of matters.

I hope this lesson has practical effects in your life and mine, so that we learn how to handle these truthful accusations. If an accusation is untruthful we can, of course, quietly and without rancor point out what is wrong. There is nothing wrong with that. But where there is truth behind it, then godly grief, godly hurt leads to repentance, and that leads in turn to liberty and freedom.

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