

Lesson 9: Repentance and Forgiveness

*They did prick their hearts with the word,
continually stirring them up
unto repentance.*

Jarom 1:12

THE GIFT OF A REPENTANCE

Repentance is a great gift. Why do we dread it? Could it be that the enemy wants us to dread it, the same way he wants us to avoid praying? We know his counsel to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was to hide their sins. This strategy was clearly passed on to the rest of the human race. Mother asks, "Who ate a piece of the cake I made?" and the little boy solemnly swears he didn't (quickly licking the crumbs from his face!). It seems to be the instinct of the natural man to hide their sins. We are good at rationalizing and we raise up "prophets" whose pop wisdom tells us that "whatsoever a man doeth is no sin." These are the words of Korihor, whom Alma called an anti-Christ. Korihor said that the idea that men should repent was "the effect of a frenzied mind." (see Alma 30)

The so-called "New Atheists" are like Korihor in their current attack on God and religion. They mock God as "the great surveillance camera in the sky"¹ and say that religion warps the conscience and fills us with shame over things that are "perfectly natural." They are right about that. Sin is "perfectly natural." But God, through his Son, has provided a way to be lifted out of the fallen condition of the natural man. He has given us a gift of repentance. Because of the shed blood of the atonement, we can repent of our sins if we have faith in Jesus Christ and humbly confess. Now instead of destroying us and driving a further wedge between us and God, our mortal experience brings us closer to Him and lets us learn valuable lessons. Having repented, we grow and become a better person.

The following is a great word picture of repentance given by a 15-year-old boy named Westin Leavitt in a sacrament meeting talk in Arlington, Virginia:

During a summer break, I worked out West doing hard and dirty work. At the end of a day, my clothes would be filthy, my face and hands would be smudged; I'd have dirt under my fingernails; my entire body would feel grungy and quite sticky. Sometimes I would just collapse on the bed. The grime sort of weighted me down. It affected my attitude and motivation.

As the summer progressed, I learned something important about myself. I found that if I came home, had a shower, and put on clean clothes it created a new me. It was a feeling of being new, fresh and clean.

There is a spiritual version of that feeling. Being in mortality we experience temptations and we are sometimes imperfect in our response. Sometimes we get feeling the spiritual version of smudged, grungy and sticky with dirt under our fingernails. Through the atonement of Jesus Christ, repentance has been made possible. It is the equivalent of a spiritual shower. Repentance gives us the feeling of spiritual cleanliness; a fresh start, spiritual newness.

This is a better way to teach repentance than some of the teachings on the subject that used to make the rounds at Standards Night. A common visual aid was to drive a nail into a board and then pull it out with a hammer, displaying the holes that were left. We were told as youth that while it was true you could repent, thereby pulling the nail out of our

¹ A characterization made by Richard Dawkins, author of "The God Delusion."

boards, the hole would Always Be There². Translation: you will always be marred. Better never to sin in the first place. One particularly ugly variation was to drive several nails through the board and after the “repentance process” was over, turn the board over to reveal a picture of Christ’s face on the other side, now punctured in several places. Repentance was presented as something to be dreaded, like a necessary trip to the emergency room to pull out a splinter embedded beneath a fingernail.

Our leaders loved us and were trying to spare us the pain of serious moral transgression. To warn against this pain is one of the important jobs of prophets and leaders. But the unintended consequence of painting the whole subject of repentance so black is to make us never want to admit that we were the awful ones who drove a nail into Christ’s face. Teaching repentance in the wrong way could imply that a good Latter-day Saint must be *so good* that they would *never need* repentance. That’s all wrong. *Everyone* needs repentance. Such a misunderstanding gives us incentive to spend our energy image polishing and *appearing* to be good. The right way is come to Christ with an open heart, willingly confessing our weakness because we know he will change us and make us truly good if we let his spirit work in us.

ENOS REPENTS

One of the most beautiful passages about the repentance process is the little book of Enos in the Book of Mormon. What brought Enos to repentance was not the fear of punishment, but a soul-hunger for the things he had “often” heard his father speak about eternal life and the “joy of the saints.”

We want our youth, even all members of the church, to hunger for the clean, just washed freshness that comes from the shower of Christ’s grace in their lives. Of course, it is possible to sin greatly and have to repent deeply. Alma speaks of being “racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins.” (Alma 36:12) But he also says that he had “rebelled against God.”

Most of us are not knowingly rebellious against God. We are regular weak human beings who get the grime and sweat of daily life on our souls and look forward to the refreshment of prayer and the sacrament³ to feel the sweet cleansing power of the atonement. We are looking to the Lord to show us those areas of our lives that need improvement and greater consecration to Him. If we are being rebellious and *do not yet realize it*, we pray for God to “work in us, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13) Repentance is not something we need to avoid or be ashamed of. It is something to be deeply grateful for.

YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN YOU

Thirteen times in the Doctrine & Covenants the Lord says, “Your sins are forgiven you.” He says it to the prophet Joseph, to Emma, to several of the early brethren, and to the church as a whole. In many other places the words are slightly different but the generosity of the Lord in forgiving his children is the same. For example: “I, the Lord, forgive sins, and am merciful unto those who confess their sins with humble hearts.” (D&C 61:2) Section 62 explains that Jesus Christ is our “advocate, who knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted.” An advocate is someone who is on our side, who is patient and generous and freely forgives those who are trying to serve him. When we confess with humble hearts we meet the conditions required and we are willingly forgiven.

The Lord is not a harsh principal waiting to slap our hands with a ruler for any infraction of the rules. He is not “scary” though he is just and sometimes justice must be stern, as

² “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Jeremiah 31:34 “And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.” Hebrews 10:17 “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.” D&C 58:42 Do you believe him?

³ See Vignette: My Experience with the Sacrament

when Joseph Smith gave Martin Harris the first manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon. Sometimes if a sister has had a harsh parent in her life, it is hard for her to imagine the loving kindness of the Lord. God's love is the kind of love that wants the best for us and will help us to be better. He will walk with us through all the growing experiences of our lives and teach us through all our mistakes. Section 62 ends with the words, "Behold, the kingdom is yours. And behold, and lo, I am with the faithful always. Even so. Amen."

MACRO OR MICRO REPENTANCE

One sister in our group wrote the following after her study of the scriptures on repentance: "I think I now have a new language of repentance. Up to this time I have tried to repent of my unrighteous *actions* (or omissions). In doing this I have found myself repenting of the same or similar actions again and again. What is really necessary is for me to look behind the actions to the attitudes or traits of character that need changing. Instead of repenting of yelling at my husband (over and over) I can pray to repent of impatience and plead for a calmness of spirit and an increase of understanding. I can repent of the cause not just the symptom. When I am in my garden weeding I am obsessively careful to get the roots when I pull out a weed. I hope this practice can take root in my spiritual life."

She wisely realized that repentance is a growth process that will change us at a very fundamental level if we will keep our hearts open and soft and stay close to the Lord in prayer. As we read in D&C 66:3, the Lord will show us through his spirit what those things are that need to be "fixed." "Repent, therefore, of those things which are not pleasing in my sight, saith the Lord, for the Lord will show them unto you."⁴

ME?... A SINNER?

I've never forgotten a visiting teaching lesson years ago, during which a lovely active Latter-day Saint woman explained to me that she had just come to realize for the first time in her life that repentance was something for her. She had always thought it was for those "sinners" who had something to tell the bishop. She explained that she now thought of it as keeping the glass clean through which the light of heaven must come. She now used repentance to clean the glass daily and never let a "film" build up that weakened the light.

We will not take advantage of the gift of repentance if we do not realize we have need of it. The following is an inventory of personal repentance devised and used daily by a Christian gentleman in the 1700's⁵. He used this "checklist" daily in his prayers.

1. Humility or Pride? Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt snubbed and ignored? Let me repent by considering the grace of Jesus Christ until I sense a decreasing disdain for others (since I too sin) and a decreasing pain over criticism (since I should not value human approval over God's approval and love). In light of his grace I can let go of the need to keep up a good image. It is too great a burden and not necessary. I should think about the grace of Christ until I experience grateful, restful joy.
2. Love or Indifference? Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by criticizing (in my mind) someone else? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed and indifferent and inattentive to people? Let me repent by considering the forgiveness freely offered to me through Christ's atonement until there is no coldness or unkindness (as I think of the sacrificial love of Christ for me) and no impatience (as I think of his patience with me) and no indifference. I will consider his love for me until I can show warmth and affection.

⁴ See Vignette- The Lord Showed Me

⁵ from a letter by George Whitefield to John Wesley written January 9, 1738.

3. Courage or Anxiety? Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Let me repent by considering the courageous love shown by my Savior for me until there is no cowardly avoidance of hard things (since Jesus faced evil for me) and no anxious behavior (since the atonement proves that God cares and watches over me). It takes pride to be anxious. I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. I will consider the help he freely gives me until I experience calm thoughtfulness and willing boldness.

THE GREAT CONDITION

One important element of how to repent is forgiveness. We cannot receive forgiveness of our own sins until we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. This is the lesson of the parable of the unjust servant found in Matthew 18: 23-35. Jesus ends it by saying, "O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?" The unjust servant showed neither gratitude to the lord for his mercy, nor humility in his own situation. In demanding payment from his fellow servant, he denies him forgiveness and shows his lack of understanding of the principle involved.

Imagine locks in a canal: by forgiving others, we open closed gates and are lifted to higher ground. It is especially difficult, but essential, to forgive those close to us. Christ said he will not accept prayers for forgiveness "if one has aught against his brother" It is easy to forgive the masses—but it is harder to be willing to forgive your brother, mother, sister, father, for their sins against us. They are such *concrete* sins—specific injustices, blows to tender parts of our identity. But refusal to forgive our family members damns our progress. "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." (Matt. 7:2) God cannot pour out the blessings of mercy and healing on us if we cannot forgive our family members. He is not bound by time, and he can go with us through prayer, back to the time when we were children, suffering from another's sinful nature. He can heal the deep hurts we have carried for years.

Repentance is why we are allotted time on earth. Mindlessly taking the sacrament or saying, "forgivemeofmymanysinsandweaknesses"⁶ is not really repenting. Repentance is not the same as being sorry either. Many are sorry they are enmeshed in sin but they keep sinning and keep being sorry. True repentance is turning away from sin and turning in real faith and godly sorrow towards God so he can change us. Repentance should be the centerpiece of our prayers. It is there we build a relationship with God, noting our inadequacies and his strengths, seeking his power and grace, which will be sufficient to enable us to overcome. Repentance is accessing the atonement. Repentance is realizing what the Savior did for us and shedding tears as we realize how great his love was. Repentance is receiving the Savior's love and then being willing to forgive those who trespass against us. Repentance is standing in the refreshing shower of Christ's grace and feeling clean and whole again.

A hard heart can't repent. A soft heart is an honest heart, willing to let the spirit "prick" us with the pin of conviction, letting the air out of our pride that puffs us up so easily. Little surges of pride, harsh words, a judgmental thought, a determination to have our own way—these creep in unconsciously. We can continually repent of sins, but eventually there should come a realization that we need fundamentally changed hearts. We realize that our own heart is insufficient in its ability to love as we should and forgive as we should. That is a good stage. All significant spiritual progress comes out of our broken-ness. Repentance is change. It is no wonder that the Lord told us to "say nothing but repentance to this generation." (D&C 6:9) If we are repenting, then we are succeeding in "coming unto Christ."

⁶ See Vignette- The 6th R of Repentance