

The Meaning of Repentance

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The simplest and most basic principles of the gospel are sometimes those least understood. One of the most fundamental gospel principles is repentance. The mere announcement of the word “repentance” will cause some of you to conclude at the outset that you’ve already “heard it all,” to tune out the speaker, or to allow your mind to wander to your studies, to dating, or simply to day-dream. But I would like to give you a new insight into the principle of repentance and show you how relevant and helpful repentance can become for you. Even though some of you may qualify for or hold a temple recommend, many of you at the moment may fail to comprehend the full meaning of repentance and the great blessings it can bring you.

A Matter of Great Worth

All of us need to understand and appreciate that repentance is the mechanism for personal growth and development. Repentance is so fundamental that the Lord gave a revelation to Oliver Cowdery through the Prophet Joseph Smith in which he said:

Say nothing but repentance unto this generation; keep my commandments, and assist to bring

forth my work, according to my commandments, and you shall be blessed. [D&C 6:9]

The Lord repeated this statement word for word to Hyrum Smith as recorded in Doctrine & Covenants 11:9. Later he gave two other identical revelations on repentance, one revelation following the other, and then concluded with these words:

And now behold, I say unto you, that the thing which will be of the most worth unto you will be to declare repentance unto this people, that you may bring souls unto me, that you may rest with them in the kingdom of my Father. [D&C 15:6, 16:6; emphasis added]

Why would the Lord give two identical revelations—and have them published in the Doctrine and Covenants—one following the other word for word, unless they were

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especially intended to be given not only to them but to all of us?

And now *I must repent*—for there *is* one word that is different, but very important, in each of these revelations. In section 15 the fourth word is “John” and in section 16 the fourth word is “Peter.” The first revelation was addressed to John Whitmer and the second revelation to Peter Whitmer. I feel justified in applying these revelations to all of us because of this repeated instruction. In the first revelation I can place my own name so that it is addressed to me: “Hearken, my servant Theodore!” In the second revelation you can insert your own name to make it apply to you: “Hearken, my servant Bill, or my handmaiden Sue!” Thus these revelations can apply to you and to me to help us understand that the thing of greatest worth to each of us is to declare repentance, not only to others, but to ourselves as well. In fact, the importance of repentance is stressed seventy-one times in the Doctrine and Covenants alone! The Lord is a master teacher and knows the value of repetition in learning. It is time to understand why and how repentance is a matter of such great worth to you in your individual life!

The Meaning of Repentance

Just what *is* repentance? Actually it is easier for me to tell you what repentance is *not* than to tell you what repentance *is*.

My present assignment as a General Authority is to assist the First Presidency. I prepare information for them to use in considering applications to readmit transgressors into the Church and to restore priesthood and/or temple blessings. Many times a bishop will write: “I feel he has suffered enough!” But suffering is not repentance. Suffering comes from *lack* of complete repentance. A stake president will write: “I feel he has been punished enough!” But punishment is not repentance. Punishment *follows* disobedience and *precedes* repentance. A husband will write: “My wife has confessed

everything!” But confession is not repentance. Confession is an admission of guilt that occurs *as* repentance begins. A wife will write: “My husband is filled with remorse!” But remorse is not repentance. Remorse and sorrow continue because a person has *not* yet fully repented. But if suffering, punishment, confession, remorse, and sorrow are not repentance, what *is* repentance?

Repentance in the Old Testament

To answer this question, let us go back to the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the word used for this concept of repentance is “shube:” Let me read a passage from Ezekiel 33:8–11 and insert the word “shube” along with its English translation to help us understand what repentance is:

When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to [shube, or] turn from it; if he do not [shube, or] turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

When a person despairs and says: “There is nothing left for me!” “All hope is gone!” “I can’t be forgiven!” “What purpose is left in life?” “I might as well be dead!” God instructs the “watchman on the tower” to

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked [shube, or] turn from his way and live: [shube, shube!] turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? [Ezekiel 33:8–11]

I know of no kinder, sweeter passage in the Old Testament than those beautiful lines. Can you hear a kind, wise, gentle, loving Father in

Heaven pleading with you to “shube” or turn back to him, to leave unhappiness, sorrow, regret, and despair behind and now turn back to your Father’s family where you can find happiness, joy, and acceptance among his other children? In the Father’s family, you are surrounded with love and affection. That is the message of the Old Testament, and prophet after prophet writes of “shube,” which is that turning back to the family of the Lord where you can be received with joy and rejoicing. There is an implicit message there that we in the family of Jesus Christ ought never forget. We must receive the former transgressor back into this family with open arms and comfort and bless him for making the change. That is what Isaiah had in mind when he wrote:

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near;

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him [shube, or] return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon [if he will only shube]. [Isaiah 55:6–7]

Throughout the Old Testament, a fundamental theme is forsaking or turning from evil and doing instead that which is noble and good. Not only must we change our ways; we must as well change our very thoughts which control our actions. Repentance is a turning back to God!

Repentance in the New Testament

Let us now turn to the New Testament which was written in Greek. How did those Greek writers translate the word “shube” into Greek and still retain its concept of repentance? They used the word “metaneoio,” which is a compound word of two parts. The first part, “meta,” we use as a prefix in our English vocabulary. When we eat we convert food by a process of metabolism into fat, muscle, and connective tissue. When we see a crawling caterpillar stop, attach itself to a

limb and spin a cocoon, the insect inside its silken case undergoes metamorphosis. It changes its form into a moth or a beautiful butterfly. The prefix “meta,” then, refers to change.

The second part of the word “metaneoio” is subject to various spellings. The letter “n,” for instance, is sometimes transliterated as “pn,” as in the French word “pneu,” meaning an airfilled tire. We also find “pneu” in our word pneumatic, as, for instance, a pneumatic hammer or a pneumatic drill, which are air-driven tools. It is also found in our word pneumonia, which is an air sickness of the lungs. There are several spellings of this root and many meanings attached to this word which can mean air, mind, thought, thinking, or spirit, depending on how it is used.

The Greek usage of words is similar to that of English, as, for example, with the word “spirit.” To a child, spirit might mean a ghost; to you, spirit may mean influence such as team spirit or the spirit of Elijah. But to me—since I was an organic chemist during my university years—or to a pharmacist, spirit simply means ethyl alcohol. In the context where “meta” and “neoio” are used in the New Testament, the word “metaneoio” means a change of mind or thought or thinking so powerful and so strong that it changes our very way of life. I think “metaneoio” is an excellent translation of “shube.” The meaning of both these words is to turn or change from evil to righteousness and God.

But trouble came when Greek was translated into Latin. Only the educated people spoke Greek. When the New Testament was translated into Latin for the use of the common people who spoke that language, an unfortunate choice was made in translation. “Metaneoio” was translated into the word “penitere.” The root “pen” in that word is the same root found in our English words punish, penance, penitent, and repentance. So the beautiful meaning of Hebrew and Greek was changed in Latin to an ugly meaning involving hurting, punishing,

whipping, cutting, mutilating, disfiguring, starving, or even torturing. Small wonder then that most people have come to fear and dread the word repentance which they were taught and now understand to mean repeated or never-ending punishment. People must somehow be made to realize that the true meaning of repentance is that we do not require people to be punished or to punish themselves, but to change their lives so they can escape eternal punishment. If they have this understanding, it will relieve their anxiety and fears and become a welcome and treasured word in our religious vocabulary.

Three Steps of Repentance

Let me read again to you from Ezekiel 33, which outlines three main steps of repentance which include (1) commitment, (2) restitution, and (3) forsaking sin.

If the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity: he shall surely live, he shall not die. [Ezekiel 33:15]

“Restore the Pledge”

Let us analyze these three steps of repentance. The first thing to do is to “restore the pledge,” and this is the most difficult step in the repentance process. But what does the statement “restore the pledge” mean?

To restore the pledge means to renew one’s covenant with the Lord. Forget all excuses and finally recognize fully, exactly, what you have done. Don’t say, “If I hadn’t been so angry,” “If my parents had only been more strict,” “If my bishop had only been more understanding,” “If my teachers had only taught me better,” “If it hadn’t been so dark,” “If I hadn’t been so hungry,” “If the stake president had only helped me to understand,” etc., etc., etc. There are hundreds of such excuses, none of which matter much in the final analysis.

Forget all such self-justification and rationalization. Just kneel down before God and openly and honestly admit that what you did was wrong. Open your heart to your Father and commit yourself completely to him: “Dear Father, what I did was wrong and I recognize that I *have* sinned. I make no excuses, but *with thy help* I promise that I’ll never do that thing again. I *will* straighten out my life, and, if necessary, go to my bishop and seek his help! From now on I pledge that I *will* be obedient! Please help me now to earn thy forgiveness!”

To really commit oneself and *mean* it is the beginning of repentance. Our Savior’s great commitment came in the Garden of Gethsemane as he suffered in agony of spirit and shed great drops of blood in that garden. It was a time of terrible trial for him! You will remember that Jesus asked that the cup might pass from him and that some other way might be found for him. Prior to this experience he had always had ready communication with his Heavenly Father, but now he not only felt, but indeed really was, left all alone. It was as if the heavens over his head were made of brass. He couldn’t get through! So he continued to struggle in prayer and suffered horribly under the strain. It is true that he added these words, “Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). In spite of this pledge to his Heavenly Father, again and yet again he pled with his Father that the cup might pass and that some other path might be found. There was no answer to his request and his soul filled with anguish. But the third time when he said, “Thy will be done,” it was said in a different tone. This time he really *meant* it.

He realized there *was* no other way and he fully committed himself to *do* whatever he had been appointed to do. He was now *willing!* Though it cost him tremendous suffering, he made up his mind and committed himself to *be* obedient in every particular, regardless of cost and suffering. It was *then* that the angels came to minister to him and strengthen him for his

coming ordeal. That commitment made his sacrifice on the cross bearable. Such a similar struggle may cost you agony of mind and soul as well, but it will also make the repentance possible and bearable for you.

One thing we should remember is that the Lord does not punish us for our sins. He simply withholds his blessings and we punish ourselves. The scriptures tell us again and again that the wicked are punished by the wicked. A simple illustration can show how easily that is done. If Mother tells me not to touch a hot stove because it will burn and hurt me, she is only stating the law. If I should forget or deliberately touch that hot stove, I would be burned. I could cry and complain of my hurts, but who would be punishing me? Would it be Mother—or the hot stove? I would be punishing myself. Even after my finger healed, I would have to remember the law, for every time I would touch that hot stove I would be burned, again and again, until I could learn to obey the law. It was and is the law, and justice would have to be done. This illustration, however, disregards the important element of mercy.

Repay Your Debt

The second step in the process of repentance is to “give again that which you have robbed.” In other words, you must restore or pay back that which you have taken. If you have stolen money or goods, it is relatively easy for you to repay—even to repay sizable amounts with time. But what if you have robbed a person of virtue? Is there *anything* you can do, of yourself, to restore virtue? Even if you gave your very life, could that restore virtue? No, but—perish the thought—does that then mean it is useless to attempt restitution by significant good works or that your sin is unforgivable? No! Jesus Christ *can* restore that virtue and he can thus show you mercy. His repayment will satisfy justice and he will make that payment for you *if* you will only repent. True repentance on your part, including a change in

your lifestyle, will enable Jesus, in mercy, to transfer your debt to him. But, as Elder Boyd K. Packer explained in his conference address of 3 April 1977, justice now requires that you repay him. Jesus has power to restore virtue and make your victim absolutely clean and holy. But, as I said, that bargain only transforms the indebtedness you have to your victim into a new indebtedness to Jesus Christ, who paid your ransom. How can you ever repay your Savior such a great price?

This may appear to you to be a new doctrine, but it is reasonable and consistent with the following scripture from Mosiah. I am grateful for the Book of Mormon, which explains how we *can* repay Jesus Christ for his great mercy to us. His sacrifice atoned even for our personal sins and makes mercy available to you and to me. King Benjamin may have explained how repayment is possible.

And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God. [Mosiah 2: 17]

This service to others can include significant good works that could compensate Jesus for his restitution made for us. God’s work and glory is to redeem his children. If we participate in this redemptive service, he pays us in blessings for which we qualify by that service. What this scripture then means is that you can repay Jesus for his mercy to you by being kind, thoughtful, considerate, and helpful to those around you. By such service to others, you can gradually pay back your indebtedness to your Savior. You can put the evil you have done out of your mind by charitable service to others.

As you begin to repay your debt through service to your family, neighbors, and friends, the painful elements of your sin will gradually fade from your mind. They will no longer fill your soul with anxiety and concern, nor will you be plagued by worries over previous

transgressions. Instead of being filled with vain regrets over past deeds which are already done, events you are powerless to change, you will now be so busy doing good deeds for others that you will not have a desire to sin or disobey, nor to recall past sin or disobedience. You will be helpful and considerate of everyone you meet. You will develop a loving personality and be accepted and appreciated by your associates. But as long as you dwell on sin or evil and refuse to forgive yourself, you will be subject to return again to that sin. If you turn from your problems and sins and put them behind you in both thought and action, you can concentrate on good and positive things. You will thus become fully engaged in good causes. Sin will no longer be such a temptation for you.

Jesus himself said of those who attain his presence in the celestial kingdom that he would put his sheep on his right hand, but place the goats to his left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger; and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. [Matthew 25:34–46; emphasis added]

In service to others you can repay your Savior for his mercies and blessings unto you and repay him at least in part for his atonement for you. Jesus can and will lift all burdens from your soul if you will only “shube,” or turn from sin back to God.

It stands to reason that the more serious the sin, the longer it takes to complete the repayment. If you work at repayment daily over the years, even very great sins you may have committed can eventually be repaid and you can then stand blameless before your Savior. Remember that Church leaders can forgive you for your sins against the Church, but final forgiveness for sin has to come from the Great Judge on the day of reckoning when each of us must give an account of our lives.

It takes time for repentance to be final. An injury to the soul is similar to an injury to the body. Just as it takes time for a wound in the body to heal, so it also takes time for a wound of the soul to heal. The deeper the cut in the body, the longer it takes to heal, and if broken bones are involved, that healing process is extended. If I cut myself, for example, the wound will gradually heal and scab over. But

as it heals, it begins to itch, and if I scratch at the itching scab it will take longer to heal, for the wound will open up again. But there is a greater danger. Because of the bacteria on my fingers as I scratch the scab, the wound may become infected and I can poison the wound and can lose that part of my body and eventually even my life!

Allow injuries to follow their prescribed healing course or, if serious, see a doctor for skilled help. So it is with injuries to the soul. Allow the injury to follow its prescribed healing course without scratching it through vain regrets. If it is serious, go to your bishop and get skilled help. It may hurt as he disinfects the wound and sews the flesh together, but it will heal properly that way. Don't hurry or force it, but be patient with yourself and with your thoughts. Be active with positive and righteous thoughts and deeds. Then the wound will heal properly and you will become happy and productive again.

Forsake Your Sins

Now we come to the third step of repentance which is to "walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity." In other words, we must forsake our sins, one by one, and *never* repeat them. When we do this in sincerity and with honesty of heart, the Lord has said through his prophets:

To Ezekiel:

None [not even one] of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live. [Ezekiel 33: 16]

To Isaiah:

I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins. [Isaiah 43:25]

To Joseph Smith:

Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more. [D&C 58:42]

But how do we know if a man or a woman has repented of his or sins? The Lord has even answered that question:

By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them. [D&C 58:43]

Naturally, that confession which precedes repentance should be to a bishop or stake president who has authority to forgive sins. Confessions to others, particularly confessions repeated again and again in open meetings, as is sometimes done, only demean both the confessor and the hearer. But the final step of repentance in forsaking sin means that you do not repeat that transgression again.

How grateful we should be for a kind, wise, loving Savior who will help us overcome our faults, our mistakes, our sins. He understands us and is sympathetic to the fact that we must face temptations. He is also merciful and has provided a way so that we *can* apply these principles of repentance in our lives and thus escape the bondage of pain, sorrow, suffering, and despair that comes from disobedience, either conscious or unconscious. After all is said and done, we *are* his sons and his daughters and he loves each of us dearly. For those who understand its true meaning, repentance becomes a beautiful word and a marvelous refuge. I testify that our Savior lives and loves us. This is my personal witness, in the holy name of Jesus Christ. Amen.