

# *Repentance: The Key to Eternal Progression*

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Several years ago I was attending the baptismal service for my daughter Mary. As many of you may know, there are generally a few talks on the topic of baptism that are given at this service. On this particular day, the man assigned to give the talk decided to teach a short lesson to the baptismal candidates rather than give a traditional talk. So he had each eight-year-old child move to the front of the chapel and sit on the front bench as he gave the lesson. He started the lesson by asking the following question to the children: “After you’re baptized, who is it that is there to guide you and comfort you and help you make good decisions?”

A little girl raised her hand and promptly answered: “It’s the Holy Ghost.”

Smiling, the teacher said, “That’s right.” The teacher then asked another question: “And after you are baptized, who is it that is bad and evil and wants you to be miserable for the rest of your life?”

A little boy raised his hand and blurted out: “I know who it is. It’s the IRS!”

As my wife, Theresa, and I have tried to teach our seven children the principles of the gospel, we recognize that sometimes—as in the case of the young man in this story—our lessons haven’t always been completely understood by our children. Those of us raised in the Church

will have attended well over 2,000 meetings in which we have been taught the principles of the gospel before we reach the age of 18. Despite attending all of these meetings, I have found that most of us have difficulty understanding and applying even some of the basic principles of the gospel. That is why today I have decided to talk about the second principle of the gospel, that of repentance. I know many of you have heard talks and had lessons on this topic before, but I hope today we can gain some additional insight into this principle that will help us on our journey to salvation.

## **Why My Interest in Repentance?**

One might wonder why I’m interested in this particular principle of the gospel. There are several reasons.

First, my professional life has been devoted to helping people, groups, and organizations change to become more effective. Although one might not call such changes repentance, I have learned much about how to initiate change in the secular world from what I have learned

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from the sacred. I have also gleaned ideas from my field regarding personal change that I have found helpful in the repentance process.

Second, my son Justin has been serving a mission in Recife, Brazil, for almost two years. His letters home describing the challenges, joys, and sorrows he has experienced as he has helped people in that part of the world repent and change their lives has encouraged me and my family to also try to change our lives to become better disciples of Christ.

Third, my patriarchal blessing explicitly warns me that the power of Satan will be strong in the latter days and that I will be tempted many times. My blessing encourages me to practice repentance all the days of my life. Evidently the Lord knew that I would make many mistakes. Thus I knew that for me to progress in this life I would need to understand and apply the principle of repentance. Fortunately the scriptures give me comfort, telling me that I'm not the only one who will need this principle, for the Apostle John wrote: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

Fourth, I developed a keen interest in the principle of repentance as I served as bishop of the BYU 127th Ward for four years. I worked with many bright, intelligent, and wholesome young people who, despite their upbringing in the Church, had made serious errors in their lives. Moreover, I found that many of them struggled to repent because they lacked a fundamental understanding of the dynamics of repentance.

For these reasons I would like to share some of what I have come to know on the subject of repentance so that you might be alerted to some of the snares that are often encountered in our attempts to repent.

### **What Do We Need to Repent Of?**

The Savior tells us that no unclean thing can enter the kingdom of God (see 3 Nephi 27:19). And what makes us unclean? Breaking

the commandments given to us by our Heavenly Father. President Spencer W. Kimball helps us to understand what those commandments are in his book *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (see pages 39 through 59). President Kimball outlined the following sins of commission that cause us to become unclean:

1. Idolatry, which he defined as worshipping the things of this world
2. Rebellion against the counsel of Church leaders
3. Being traitors, or those who strive to undermine the Church
4. Sabbath breaking
5. Loving money
6. Stealing
7. Being unholy masters, which he defined as treating employees unfairly
8. Improvidence, or failing to provide for one's family
9. Bearing false witness
10. Vulgarity
11. Violating the Word of Wisdom
12. Covenant breaking
13. Hating God
14. Ingratitude
15. Unmercifulness
16. Giving in to anger
17. Violating the law of chastity (President Kimball covered the law of chastity in two chapters in his book.)

Although these sins are what we call sins of commission—that is, they are based on particular actions—James wrote about what are called sins of omission. In James 4:17 he told us, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." Furthermore, the Lord tells us in D&C 58:27 that we should be "anxiously engaged in a good cause" and use our free will to "bring to pass much righteousness." Thus we can also sin by merely doing nothing.

Why does our Father in Heaven give us all these commandments? Because He wants us to have joy in this life and in the world to come.

He wants us to understand that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). However, He also knew that we, being imperfect creatures, would sin, and thus we would need a Savior to atone for our sins. Because our Father in Heaven “cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31), we would all be lost without the principle of repentance and the Savior’s Atonement, which makes us clean again and reconciles us to God.

Before continuing, I would like each of us to think about what sin or sins may be hindering our progress on the path to eternal life. Try to identify one or two things that you feel you need to either start doing or stop doing. Write them down if that would be helpful.

Now that you and I have some idea concerning what we need to work on, let us now focus on the steps we must follow to fully repent. From my days in Primary, I still remember what are called the four Rs of repentance. They are:

1. Recognition. We must recognize what we have done wrong.

2. Remorse. We must feel godly sorrow for our mistakes. This sorrow should lead us to confess our sins to those we have injured and, in serious cases, confess to our bishop.

3. Restitution. We must try to restore what has been lost as a result of our transgressions. This is why murder or violations of the law of chastity are difficult to repent of, since full restitution is difficult, if not impossible.

4. Resolve. We must resolve never to commit the sin again.

Although these steps might seem quite simple, actually following them is not that easy. I would like to describe six common mistakes that make it difficult for us to fully repent.

*Mistake Number 1: Relying on friends or the media to help determine the difference between right and wrong.* Today there is much misinformation about what is right and wrong. If one watches television, movies, or other media, the message

is that those who live clean and virtuous lives are out of step with the times; lying to gain advantage is what “smart” people do; and violence is an acceptable way to solve our problems. These views are no different from what Korihor, the anti-Christ, preached in Alma 30 when he argued that “every man prospered according to his genius, and . . . every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). Because of such teachings, the Lord reminds us that there are those who will call evil good and good evil in the latter days. Moreover, our friends and associates may have adopted many of the views and ways of the world. They may influence us to rationalize our sinful behaviors by saying, “Everybody does it,” and hence they are not reliable sources.

To recognize sin we must not rely on the world but rely on our living prophet, President Hinckley; the scriptures; and our ecclesiastical leaders to show us the way. And we also should rely on the Spirit. While counseling young people in my role as bishop, some of them expressed surprise that their conduct was considered sinful. However, I would ask them: “What did the Spirit tell you while you were doing those things?” Invariably they would answer that they felt uncomfortable and that they could feel that something was wrong. Thus we can also rely on the Holy Ghost to help us discern truth from error.

*Mistake Number 2: Failing to confess properly.* Some people believe that they can change their lives by merely “working it out on their own.” This is a serious mistake. Confession is important for four reasons.

First, the Lord requires that we confess. In D&C 58:43 we are told, “By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them.”

Second, confession provides individuals the opportunity to unburden themselves from sin, thus providing them with some catharsis.

Third, as we acknowledge our sins to those we've injured, we are motivated to move to the next stages of repentance by forsaking our sins and attempting to restore what has been lost as the result of our transgressions.

Fourth, by making our sins known to the proper people, those individuals can help us to change our lives.

One reason, I believe, that the Lord requires confession to the bishop in cases of serious sin is that the bishop can become part of the person's support system to change as the bishop objectively helps the person determine what is needed for repentance. All of the research on individual change indicates that a strong support system is necessary to achieve permanent change. We generally fail to repent when we try to change by ourselves or cover our sins in secrecy. I believe that is also why the Church encourages young people to share their problems, even their serious ones, with their parents. Although many of you may think, "I could never tell this to my bishop or my parents. They wouldn't understand," my own experience has shown that these fears are generally unfounded. Bishops and parents love you unconditionally. They want to help you. They've made mistakes, too, and will understand. Don't walk the path of repentance alone, if you truly want to change your life. Sometimes you might not know if you should confess a particular sin to a bishop. My rule of thumb is: When in doubt, visit with the bishop, for he will help you.

Others see confession as the only step in repentance. They believe if they merely confess to the bishop that they will be forgiven. What they fail to realize is that all of the steps in the repentance process are important. Furthermore, they fail to realize that it is the Lord who forgives, not the bishop. Although ecclesiastical leaders determine disciplinary action and serve as common judges in Israel, ultimately the Lord will determine whether we are worthy of His atoning sacrifice.

The example of Enos from the Book of Mormon is a good illustration of how we each must receive inspiration regarding our standing with the Lord. Enos prayed all day and into the night to finally get an answer as to whether he was forgiven.

*Mistake Number 3: Feeling bad about being caught but not feeling godly sorrow for sin.* The remorse for sin that we must feel should be heartfelt in order to motivate us to change. Unfortunately, those who have fallen into sin over long periods of time often become, as it says in the scriptures, "past feeling" and have lost the Spirit. President Ezra Taft Benson described the importance of feeling remorse this way:

*Godly sorrow is a gift of the Spirit. It is a deep realization that our actions have offended our Father and our God. It is the sharp and keen awareness that our behavior caused the Savior, He who knew no sin, even the greatest of all, to endure agony and suffering. Our sins caused Him to bleed at every pore. This very real mental and spiritual anguish is what the scriptures refer to as having "a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (D&C 20:37). Such a spirit is the absolute prerequisite for true repentance. [TETB, 72]*

It is important to remember, however, that Satan's counterfeit of godly sorrow is discouragement and feelings of worthlessness. Satan would have you believe that there is no hope for you, so why resist? I found that many of my ward members would get so discouraged and feel so badly that they were impeded in their path to repentance. As a bishop I came to realize that good people make bad mistakes. That does not make them bad people. To repent we must feel godly sorrow and recognize our errors. But at the same time we should recognize that we are children of our Heavenly Father who are here on earth to succeed, not to fail. He loves us in

spite of our shortcomings and will help us on our path to perfection.

*Mistake Number 4: Restitution is not just saying you're sorry.* As I think back to the times when my children would fight with one another, Theresa and I would often try to make peace by requiring the children to tell each other they were sorry for what they had done. Unfortunately, a few minutes later they would often start fighting again, and again we would tell them to tell their brother or sister they were sorry. For some reason just saying "sorry" didn't seem to change their behavior very well. As I think about it now, a better solution would be to tell my children that they needed to not only say "I'm sorry" but to repair the harm they had done. For example, if they had taken one of their sibling's toys without asking, they might have to give their sibling one of their favorite toys to play with. If they had said something unkind, they might need to write a letter describing all the good qualities of the person they offended. By requiring such acts of restitution, they might think twice before fighting. Restitution is not easy. It requires thought and hard work.

*Mistake Number 5: Believing only improvement is important.* Some people on the road to repentance feel that it is important to just continue to improve over time and that mistakes now and then are deemed acceptable by the Lord. Improvement is important, for President Benson has said: "Most repentance does not involve sensational or dramatic changes, but rather is a step by step, steady and consistent movement toward godliness" (*TETB*, 71). However, at some point in time the Lord does expect us to completely forsake our sins and achieve perfection. He encourages us, "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Thus He would not be entirely pleased if we merely improved from paying only 2 percent of our income in tithing to paying 9 percent by the end of our lives. Nine percent is still not a full

tithe. Similarly, a pattern of living the Word of Wisdom for several months and then falling back would not be considered true repentance. Moreover, when we repeat a sin after trying to repent, the Lord tells us that "the former sins return" (D&C 82:7). It is as though we didn't repent the first time. Thus, improvement is important and we should feel good about our progress, but perfection needs to be the goal.

*Mistake Number 6: Not forgiving ourselves.* Although many of us are quite willing to forgive those who have transgressed against us, we often find it difficult to forgive ourselves. Satan would have us believe that the stains of sin are permanent. However, if the Lord is willing to forgive, we should forgive also, for the Lord tells us in the Doctrine and Covenants: "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (D&C 64:10). I believe that the phrase "all men" includes ourselves. Although we should be vigilant in not returning to our unrighteous ways, we should forgive ourselves, we should move on with our lives, and, as does the Lord, we should remember those sins no more.

### **The Key to Repentance: A Change of Heart**

Following the four Rs of repentance can help us to change our behavior, but the Lord also wants us to experience a change in our hearts. When I was a new bishop on campus, I was told that bishops often help ward members avoid sin and repent by giving them various rules to follow. For example, if someone had a problem with the Word of Wisdom, the bishop might tell him to not frequent places where he had had this problem. If a sister was having problems with the law of chastity, she should be advised to set a curfew for herself. Unfortunately, in my experience, these rules didn't always help to change their behavior. As I thought about why the rules weren't working very well, it

became clear to me that the individuals had not had a change of heart. If their hearts had been changed, their behavior would have changed as well. Mosiah described the process that the people listening to King Benjamin went through as they experienced a “mighty change in [their] hearts” (Alma 5:14):

*And they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth. And they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. . . .*

*And it came to pass that after they had spoken these words the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ. [Mosiah 4:2–3]*

Mosiah went on to say that because of this mighty change in the people’s hearts, they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

What a great blessing it would be to have no desire to do evil but to always want to do what is right! To repent, we must strive to achieve this change. It often takes much fasting and prayer so that we can truly change our hearts and overcome our sins.

Once we have changed our hearts and our actions, we then can be cleansed from our sins as we partake of the sacrament. If we have truly repented, our sins are washed away as we renew our baptismal covenant. Isaiah told us, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). However, if we partake of the sacrament with no intention of repenting of our sins, the Apostle Paul tells us that we will be eating and drinking damnation to our souls (see 1 Corinthians 11:29). This does not mean we need to be perfect

people to take the sacrament. If that were the case, there would be no need for the ordinance. But if we are striving to repent, we can then use the sacrament to aid us in the repentance process.

### **The Blessings of Repentance**

In closing, I would like to briefly discuss the blessings of repentance. Previously I read a scripture from Mosiah that described the joy and peace of conscience that the people felt when they repented. Wouldn’t we all like to feel the joy and peace of conscience that they felt? After he had repented, Alma the Younger marveled that his joy was as exceeding as was his pain, and there was “nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy” (Alma 36:21). Repentance also brings with it feelings of gratitude for our Savior, his atoning sacrifice, and the plan of salvation.

Some of these feelings of joy and gratitude connected with repentance are expressed in a letter one of my ward members sent to me several years ago. He wrote the following:

*I feel much better about myself and my future. I’ve got a couple [of] low-paying job offers, and tomorrow I’ve got two more interviews. I’m going to take one so that I can have some money coming in. Thanks again for the blessing. It’s very helpful and comforting to have one. It had been such a long time. I think I’ve finally got those problems licked. That is not to say I’m going to drop my guard, but I’m going to maintain it and my worthiness even more and at all costs. More than anything, I want to get back to the temple soon. Now that I’ve put those wrong behaviors behind me, I find myself desiring to follow our Heavenly Father’s commandments to the utmost. I also feel grateful for being forgiven for my sins, and that makes me want to serve my Father in Heaven.*

This letter describes a young man whose soul is now full of hope, where before it was filled only with despair.

Finally, repentance provides us with an opportunity to commune with the divine. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord tells us that “every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me . . . , shall see my face and know that I am” (D&C 93:1). And the Lord gives the following promise to those who repent and keep his commandments: “If a

man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23). What a wonderful promise! It is my prayer that we will use the great principle of repentance so that our Father’s Spirit will abide with us always as we walk the path to eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.