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What is Repentance?

by Catherine Booth

You love him intensely. Probably you are more conscious of you love for him than for any other of you children. Your heart yearns over him, you pray for him, you dream of him, your bowels yearn over him. Why are you not reconciled? Why are you obligated to hold him at arms's length and not have him come in and out, and live with you on the same terms as the affectionate, obedient daughter? "Oh!" you say, "the case is different, I cannot. It is not, I would not, but I cannot". "Before that can possibly be, the boy's feeling must be changed toward me."

"I have done all a father could do, but he will go on in defiance of my will." You say, "As a wise and righteous father I must insist on a change in him. He must confess his sin and ask me to forgive him. Then I should run to meet him and put my arms around his neck!" But there is a "cannot" in the case.

Just so. It is not that God does not love you, sinner, or that the great benevolent heart of God has not, as it were, wept tears of blood over you. It is not that He would not put His loving arms around you this moment if you would only come to His feet, and confess you wrong, and seek His pardon. He cannot. The laws of His universe are against His doing so. He dare not and cannot until there is a change of mind in you. You must repent, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

Well, if repentance be an indispensable condition of salvation, let us try to find out what repentance really is. How full of confusion the world and the Church are upon this subject! Repentance is not merely conviction of sin. If it were, what a different world we should have, for there are tens of thousands in whose hearts God's Spirit has done His work of convincing them of sin. We should be perfectly astounded if we had any conception of the multitude whom God has convicted of sin, as he did Agrippa and Festus. They are convinced of sin, but they go no further. They live this week as they did last. That is not repentance.

Neither is repentance mere sorrow for sin. I have seen people weep bitterly and writhe and struggle, yet hug their idols, and vain as it been to try to shake these from them. If Jesus Christ would have saved them with those idols, they would have had no objection at all. If they could have got through the strait gate with one particular idol, they would have gone through long since, but to part with it is another thing. Some people will weep like your stubborn child when you want him to do something which he does not want to do. He will cry, and when you apply the rod he will cry harder, but he will not yield. When he yields he becomes a penitent, but until he does he is merely convicted sinner.

When God applies the rod of His Spirit, of His providence, and His word, sinners will cry, wince, and whine and make you believe they are praying and want to be saved, but all the while they are holding their necks as stiff as iron. They will not submit. The moment they submit they become true penitents and are saved. There is not mistake more common than for people to suppose they are repentant when they are not. Repentance, therefore, is not mere sorrow for sin. A man may be ever so sorry and all the way down to death be hugging some forbidden thing, as the young ruler hugged his possessions. But that is not repentance. Neither is repentance a promise that you will forsake sin in the future. If it were, there would be many more penitents. There is scarcely a poor drunkard that does not promise, in his own mind, or to his poor wife, or somebody, that he will forsake his cups. There is scarcely any kind of a sinner who does not continually promise that he will one day give up his sin and turn to God, but he does not do it.

What then is repentance? Repentance is simply renouncing sin, turning round from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God. This is giving up sin in your heart, in purpose, in desire; resolving that you will give up every evil thing, and that you will do it now. Of course this involves sorrow; for how will any sane man turn himself round from a given course into another if he does not repent? it implies, also, hatred of the course he formerly took, and from which he turns.

He is like the prodigal who, when he sat in the swine yard amongst the husks and the filth, fully resolved, and at last acted. He went, and that was the test of his repentance. He might have sat resolving and promising till now, if he had lived a

s long, and he would never have got the father's kiss, the father's welcome, if he had not started. Yet, he went, and went to his father honestly and said, "I have sinned" which implied a great deal more in his language then than it does in our n ow. Then comes the proof of his submission, "and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" -put me in a stable, or set me to clean the boots, so that I can be in thy family and have thy smile. That is Jesu s Christ's own beautiful illustration of true repentance. Sub mission is the test of true repentance. My child may be willing to do a hundred and fifty other things, but if he is not willing to submit on the one point of controversy he is a rebel and remains one until he yields.

Here is the difference between a spurious and a real repentance. I am afraid we have had, in our churches thousands w ho had a spurious repentance: they were convinced of sin - they were sorry for it; they wanted to live a better life, to love God in a sort of general way; but they skipped over the real point of controversy with God; they hid it form their pastor, p erhaps, and from the deacons, and from the people who talked with them. Abraham might have been willing to give up e very other thing he possessed, but if he had not been willing to give up Isaac, all else would have been useless. It is you r Isaac that God wants. You have an Isaac, just as the young ruler had his possessions. You have something that you ar e holding on to, that the Holy Spirit says you must let go, and you say, "I can't" Very well, then you must you must stop o utside the Kingdom.

Then another difficulty comes in, and people say, "I have not the power to repent." There is a grand mistake. You have t he power, or God would not command it. You can repent!

You can this moment lift up your eyes to Heaven and say, with the prodigal, "Father, I have sinned, and I renounce my si n." You may not be able to weep. God nowhere requires or commands that. You are able, this very moment, to renounc e sin in purpose and in resolution. Mind you do not confound the renouncing of the sin with the power of saving yourself from it. If you renounce it, Jesus will come and save you from it, like the man with the withered hand whom Jesus intend ed to heal. Where was the power to come from to heal him? From Jesus, the benevolence, the love, that prompted that healing all came from Jesus; but Jesus wanted a condition, and that was the response of the man's will. So He said, "Str etch forth thine hand." If the man had been like some of you he would have said, "what an unreasonable command! You know I cannot do it." Jesus wanted that "I will, Lord" to be inside the man, the response of his will. The moment he said t hat, Jesus supplied strength. He stretched forth his hand and you know what happened.

Stretch out your withered hand, whatever it may be, and say, "I will, Lord." You have the power and mind, you have the obligation, which is universal and immediate. God "now commandeth all men every where to repent" and to believe the g ospel. What a tyrant He must be if He commands that and yet knows you have not the power!

Now, do not say, "I do not feel enough." Do you feel enough to be willing to forsake you sin? That is the point. Any man who does not repent enough to forsake his sin is not a penitent at all. When you repent enough to forsake you sin, that moment your repentance is sincere and you may take hold of Jesus with a firm grasp. Then "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved".