

JESUS' REPENTANCE FOR YOUR SINS

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Repentance. It's not one of the more endearing Bible words. Mothers name their kids Hope or Joy or Grace, but you'll be hard-pressed to find "Repentance Smith" or William Repentance Owens" on any hospital nursery wristbands. After all, the word conjures up dark images of disheveled men lugging placards up and down the street yelling, "The end is near—repent!"

Perhaps we have such a shallow understanding of the word because we hold such a trivial view of sin. We've given sin an extreme makeover, smothered it with perfume and dressed it in satin and lace. It's almost a beautiful thing these days, celebrated in art, literature and music. Sin has lost its ugliness, its stench. A pop singer belts out the words "Heart-breaker, You're the right kind of sinner to release my inner fantasies." The right kind of sinner. I guess there are wrong kinds of sinners, too. Murderers, child molesters, drug dealers. But not fantasy releasers—their brand of sin gets played on the radio.

Does repentance really deserve such a bad rap? What if there's more to repentance than meets the ear?

How could Christ be baptized with John's "baptism of repentance" if He never had an experience of repentance? And how could a sinless Person experience repentance?

Both the Bible and Ellen White's writings make it clear that Jesus Christ experienced repentance. But it seems almost preposterous to imagine how or why a sinless person could experience repentance.

This does not mean that He experienced sin, for never in thought, word, or deed did He yield to temptation. Peter says of Him, "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22).

But John the Baptist "baptized with a baptism of repentance" (Acts 19:4), and therefore must have baptized Jesus with the only baptism he knew. His baptism implied on the sinless Candidate's part, an experience of repentance. Otherwise, the baptism would have been bogus, and both John and Jesus would be guilty of hypocrisy. That is unthinkable.

How could Christ experience repentance if He had never sinned? We have always assumed that only evil people need to

repent, or can repent. It is shocking to think that good people can repent, and incomprehensible how a perfect person could repent.

Nevertheless, if Christ was “baptized with a baptism of repentance,” clearly He did experience repentance. But the only kind a sinless person could experience is corporate repentance. Thus, Jesus’ repentance is a model and example of the kind He expects of Laodicea. It has special meaning for us who live today because His day of atonement ministry will prepare a people to become like Him in character.

Why Did John Baptize the Sinless Jesus?

Occasionally people such as the thief on the cross cannot for physical reasons be baptized. Was Jesus’ baptism a legalistic provision, a deposit of merit to be drawn on for such emergencies in a substitutionary way? We have often thought so, and the theory goes like this: (a) One must be baptized in order to enter Paradise; (b) the poor thief nailed to a cross cannot be immersed; (c) Jesus’ baptism thus helps him out like a credit transfer in a bank transaction; (d) the appropriate “deposit” is placed to the account of the unbaptized thief, and (e) thus he can be saved. Is this the purpose of Christ’s baptism? Many have thought so, but such legalistic shenanigans are foreign to the spirit of the plan of salvation.

If any valid element lurks in this legalistic concept, the idea leaves us cold. Most people have had opportunity to be immersed, and believers have complied. It may be a comfort to those few who can’t be baptized, but what then could Jesus’ baptism mean to the vast proportion who can be?

Another theory has been that John baptized Jesus to demonstrate the proper physical method of administering the ordinance, a physical example by the Teacher. This too leaves us cold.

Jesus was sincere when He asked John to baptize Him. John was also sincere in refusing. But Jesus explained why He wanted to be baptized. He answered the prophet’s objections, “Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Was Jesus suggesting that He and John should act out a play? The essence of “righteousness” is sincerity and genuineness. Our divine Example could never condone such a performance without the appropriate heart experience. Play-acting could never “fulfill all righteousness.” For Christ to subject Himself to baptism without an experience appropriate to the deed would have been to give an example of

hypocrisy, the last thing Jesus wants from anyone! Never does He want anyone to experience the act of baptism without true repentance.

John the Baptist obviously had not understood the principle of corporate guilt and repentance. Once that truth is recognized, Jesus' baptism begins to make sense.

How Close Jesus Came to Us

Picture yourself the one with nail and hammer in hand to affix Christ to the cross. Hundreds of onlookers are urging you to strike a blow. When Jesus spoke those words from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), He forgave the whole world and you. "That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world, taking in every sinner who should live, until the end of time." Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, p. 222.1.

Likewise, when Jesus asked for baptism, He genuinely identified Himself with sinners. If Adam represents the entire human race, Jesus became the "last Adam," taking upon Himself the guilt of humanity's sin (see 1 Corinthians 15:45). Not that He sinned, but He felt how the guilty sinner feels. He put Himself fully in our place. He put His arms around us as He knelt down beside us, dripping wet on the banks of the Jordan, asking His Father to let Him be the Lamb of God. His submission to baptism indicates that "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquities of us all." His baptism therefore becomes an injection of healing repentance for sin into the body of humanity. Peter says that His identity with our sins was deep, not superficial, for He "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24).

Christ did not bear our sins as a man carries a bag on his back. In His own "body" in His soul, in His nervous system, in His conscience, He bore the crushing weight of our guilt. So close did He come to us that He felt as if our sins were His own. His agony in Gethsemane and on Calvary was real.

Ellen White describes Christ's deep heartfelt repentance for us in these perceptive comments:

"After Christ had taken the necessary steps in repentance, conversion, and faith in behalf of the human race, He went to John to be baptized of him in Jordan" (*General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, page 36).

"John had heard of the sinless character and spotless purity of Christ. . . . [He] could not understand why the only sinless one upon

the earth should ask for an ordinance implying guilt, virtually confessing, by the symbol of baptism, pollution to be washed away.”

“Christ came not confessing His own sins; but guilt was imputed to him as the sinner’s substitute. He came not to repent on His own account; but in behalf of the sinner. . . . As their substitute, He takes upon Him their sins, numbering Himself with the transgressors, taking the steps the sinner is required to take; and doing the work the sinner must do” (*Review and Herald*, January 21, 1873).

There is profound truth here:

(a) Though sinless, Christ did in His own soul experience repentance.

(b) His baptism shows that He knows how “every repenting sinner” feels. In our self-righteousness we cannot feel such sympathy with “every repenting sinner.” That’s a major reason why we win so few souls! Only a Perfect Person can experience a perfect and complete repentance such as that. But we can become partakers of the divine nature.

(c) His taking “the steps the sinner is required to take” underscores His identity with us. We cannot in truth “behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world” without experiencing union with Him. Thus it is vital to “behold” Jesus. Lukewarm impenitence stems from either not seeing Him clearly or from rejecting Him. A closer look at “the Lamb of God” enables us to identify our deep sin that needs to be taken away.

Jesus in His ministry had extraordinary power to win human hearts. Why? In His pre-baptism “repentance, conversion, and faith in behalf of the human race,” He learned “what was in man,” for He “had no need that anyone should testify of man” (John 2:25). Thus He learned to speak as “no man ever spoke” (John 7:46). Only through these experiences could He break the spell of the world’s enchantment and say to whom He would, “Follow Me,” passing by no human as worthless, inspiring with hope the “roughest and most unpromising.” “To such a one, discouraged, sick, tempted, fallen, Jesus would speak words of tenderest pity, words that were needed and could be understood” (*Ministry of Healing*, page 26). We can begin to see that we ourselves can never know such drawing power with people until we partake of the kind of repentance that Christ experienced in our behalf.

Jesus’ perfect compassion for every human soul stemmed from His perfect repentance in her behalf. He becomes the second Adam,

partaking of the body, becoming one with us, accepting us without shame, “in all things . . . made like His brethren” (Hebrews 2:17).

In our role as a caring church we recognize our need of this genuine, unfailing Christ-like love. But we can preach about it a thousand years and never get beyond the window-dressing that psychological techniques can offer, except through the mature faith that will characterize Laodicea’s final repentance. Such faith appreciates His character, seen more clearly through repentant eyes. His repentance represents a vital aspect of Immanuel’s sinless character.

Through union with Him by faith we become part of the corporate body of humanity in Him. It is gross selfishness to want to appropriate Christ, yet refuse to appropriate His love to sinners? How can we receive Him and not receive that love which is “in Him”?

Truly we have infinitely more reason to feel close to sinners than did our sinless Lord, for we ourselves are sinners; but our human pride holds us back from the warm empathy that Christ felt. How to experience this closeness is the purpose of true repentance.

The first step must be to recognize our corporate involvement with the sin of the whole world. Although we were not physically present at the events of Calvary two thousand years ago, “in Adam” the whole human race was there. So surely are we in Adam’s sin.

Suppose that we had no Saviour. If any of us were left to develop to the full the evil latent in our own soul, if we were tempted to the ultimate as others have been tempted, we would surely duplicate their sin if given enough time and opportunity—that is, if there were no Saviour to save us from ourselves.

Suppose Hitler had lived as long as Methuselah. None of us dares to say, “I could never do what others have done!”

The apostle John says it is only when we confess a sin that we can experience Christ’s “faithful” forgiveness and cleansing from it (1 John 1:9). But to confess a sin without sensing its reality becomes lip-service, perilously close to hypocrisy. Skin-deep repentance brings skin-deep love, skin-deep devotion.

A Jewish concentration camp survivor of the Holocaust discovered this truth in an usual way. Yehiel Dinur walked into the Nuremburg court in 1961, prepared to testify against Nazi butcher Adolf Eichmann. But when he saw Eichmann in his humbled status, Dinur suddenly began to cry, then fell to the floor. It was not hatred or fear that overcame him. He suddenly realized that Eichmann was not

the superman that the inmates feared; he was an ordinary man. Says Dinur: "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he!" Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes" told the story on TV. He summed it up: "Eichmann is in all of us."

Jesus teaches the principle that we must realize we have been forgiven much before we can learn to "love much." Mary Magdalene was "forgiven . . . much" because she had been possessed by "seven devils" (see Luke 7:47; 8:2). Must we also go into devil possession, to "love much" after being forgiven? No, there is a better way: realize that we would be possessed by seven devils if it were not for the grace of a Saviour!

When Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20) he meant that he identified himself with Christ. In the same way we identify ourselves with Christ's repentance in behalf of the human race. The footsteps of Christ are a path to corporate repentance.

In the light of Christ's cross the true dimensions of our sin begin to take shape out of the fog. Note how an inspired comment discloses our ultimate sin, for which we can "individually repent":

"In the day of final judgment, every lost soul will understand the nature of his own rejection of truth. The cross will be presented, and its real bearing will be seen. . . . Before the vision of Calvary with its mysterious Victim, sinners will stand condemned. . . . Human apostasy will appear in its heinous character" (*The Desire of Ages*, page 58).

"We are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified. . . . Unless we individually repent toward. . . our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the world has rejected, we shall lie under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God. . . . Jews and Gentiles, kings, governors, ministers, priests, and people—all classes and sects who reveal the same spirit of envy, hatred, prejudice, and unbelief, manifested by those who put to death the Son of God—would act the same part, were the opportunity granted, as did the Jews and people of the time of Christ. They would be partakers of the same spirit that demanded the death of the Son of God" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, page 38).

Let us note:

(a) Even “ministers” and church members share the guilt of crucifying Christ. Apart from the grace of God manifested through personal repentance, “every sinner” shares it.

(b) Without this grace, “every sinner” would repeat the sin of Christ’s murderers if given enough time and opportunity.

(c) The sin of Calvary is an out-cropping of human alienation from God of which we are not aware, except by enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. At Calvary, all the masks came off.

(d) In a real sense we were all at Calvary, not through preexistence or pre-incarnation, but through corporate identity “in Adam.” Adam shares that guilt with us today.

(e) The “righteous” in their own eyes, including “ministers” and “priests” of “all . . . sects,” must of course include our own denomination, except for the grace of repentance.

The lesson of history is that the little acorn of our “carnal mind” needs only enough time and opportunity to grow into the full oak of the sin of Calvary. But he who receives “the mind of Christ” will necessarily have also the repentance of Christ, and the love of Christ. Therefore, the closer he comes to Christ, the more he will identify with every sinner on earth through corporate repentance.

The apostle Paul first articulated this brilliant idea. When we recognize it, we begin to feel that we too are “debtor both to Greeks, and to barbarians” (Romans 1:14). Since we become organically joined to Christ in faith, His concerns become ours, just as the concerns of one organ of the body become the concerns of all the other members of the body. Each believing member of the body longs to fulfill the intent of the Head, just as a violinist’s fingers “long” to perform skillfully the intent of the violinist’s mind. The miracle of miracles takes place in the heart and life of the one who believes the gospel: he begins to love as Christ loves.

Why Christ’s Yoke Is “Easy,” And His Burden “Light”

This experience resolves a thousand painful battles with temptation. Through corporate union with Christ, we genuinely feel we possess nothing by our own right. All our struggles with materialism, love of the world, obsession with money and things, sensuality, self-indulgence, are transcended at last by the new compulsion of this liberating oneness of mind with Christ. Paul’s “debtor” idea initiates this new love for others.

To make this very practical, we can ask: How did Christ love sinners? If He were to come into our churches today, we might be scandalized. He “recognized no distinction of nationality, or rank or creed.” He would “break down every wall of partition.” In His example, “there is no caste, [but] a religion by which Jew and Gentile, free and bond, are linked in a common brotherhood, equal before God. No question of policy influenced His movements. He made no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. . . . He passed by no human being as worthless, but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul. . . . Every neglect or insult shown by men to their fellow men, only made Him more conscious of their need of His divine-human sympathy. He sought to inspire with hope the roughest and most unpromising” (*The Ministry of Healing*, pages 25, 26).

Repentance produces this practical love in human hearts. No longer need we be helpless to reach others whose evil deeds we do not understand, and pride ourselves in not having committed. The gap is bridged that insulates us from them.

Christ can exercise no healing ministry through those who are frozen in an unfeeling impenitence. Since Jesus did no sin yet He knew repentance, we too can feel a genuine compassion in behalf of others whose sins we have not personally committed, because now we realize that our supposed goodness was only a lack of “opportunity” or a lack of temptation of equal intensity. Forthwith our work for them comes alive, and our efforts become effective.

Of others in trouble we genuinely feel, “There but for the grace of God am I.” They immediately sense the reality of our identity with them in the same way that sinners sensed Christ’s identity with them. They will begin to hear in our voices the echo of His voice.

Why Only a Perfect Person Can Experience a Perfect Repentance

The more Christlike a person is, the greater are his temptations, and the greater is his repentance. Thus Christ is the perfect Example of corporate repentance. Never before in world history and never since has a human offered to the Father such an offering of contrition for human sin. Because of His perfect innocence and sinlessness, only Christ could feel perfectly the weight of all human guilt.

Here is a beautiful expression of this truth: “Man had separated himself at such a distance from God by transgression of His law, that he could not humiliate himself before God proportionate to his

grievous sin. The Son of God could fully understand the aggravating sins of the transgressor, and His sinless character He alone could make acceptable atonement for man in suffering the agonizing sense of His Father's displeasure. The sorrow and anguish of the Son of God for the sins of the world were proportionate to His divine excellence and purity, as well as to the magnitude of the offense" (*Selected Messages*, Book One, pages 283, 284).

God is happy because He knows that He will have a people who are "without fault before the throne of God" (Revelation 14:5). Therefore, though sinners by nature, they will at last approach Christ's perfect example of repentance.

"At every advance step in Christian experience our repentance will deepen. It is to those whom the Lord has forgiven, to those whom He acknowledges as His people, He says, 'Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight' Ezekiel 36:31" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 160, 161).

Ellen White recognized the far-reaching implications of such an experience.

"As we see souls out of Christ, we are to put ourselves in their place, and in their behalf feel repentance before God, resting not until we bring them to repentance. If we do everything we can for them, and yet they do not repent, the sin lies at their door; but we are still to feel sorrow of heart because of their condition, showing them how to repent, and trying to lead them step by step to Jesus Christ" (MS 82, 1901; *Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, page 960).

In an area of Scotland, there was once a tower called the "Tower of Repentance." An English baronet, walking near the castle, saw a shepherd boy lying upon the ground, reading attentively. "What are you reading, lad?" "The Bible, sir." "The Bible, indeed!" laughed the gentleman: then you must be wiser than the parson. Can you tell me the way to heaven?" "Yes, sir, I can," replied the boy, in no way embarrassed by the mocking tone of the other; "you must go by way of yonder tower."

However faint a reflection, our repentance in behalf of others must be based on Christ's "repentance. . . in behalf of the human race." It would be impossible for any of us to feel such concern and sorrow in behalf of others, had He not felt it first in our behalf.

If "we love because He first loved us," we repent because He first repented in our "behalf." He is our Teacher.