

The Life of Religion: Actual Repentance

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ~ Matthew 4:17

These words, exactly the same words also attributed to John the Baptist before Him, really look and feel pretty threatening. In fact historically they have been used in a *very* threatening way by preachers appealing to their congregations to be born again and saved lest they be cast into everlasting punishment in hell.

Today, however, I invite you to consider the incredibly positive and uplifting aspects of this powerful teaching, which is explained in detail in the revelation for the New Church.

Let’s begin with the very idea of salvation: the Writings clearly say, “Anyone who wishes to be saved must confess his sins and repent” (NJHD #159). Again, this appears very threatening: “If you don’t do this you will be damned.” But the very word, salvation, comes from a Latin root meaning *health* or *well-being*. So another way of saying this is, “Anyone who wishes to be *healthy* must confess his sins and repent,” and of course by this we mean *spiritually* healthy.

But what are sins? According to our doctrine sins are evils, that is, bad or hurtful things done deliberately despite knowing very well they are bad or hurtful. The word, sin, in Greek actually means to miss the mark, to err or make mistakes. And repenting is a word that means turning back, or in other words turning away from those evils or mistakes.

So quite apart from the thought of spending all eternity in heaven or hell (which seems to many like an utterly unjust consequence for the decisions of a few miserable decades in this world), this concept of repentance makes perfect sense in regard to our lives right now on this earth. After all, who can be spiritually healthy or well if he or she is constantly making mistakes, or doing or thinking bad, hurtful things? And how can he or she get healthy without recognizing and acknowledging what’s wrong, that is, without a proper diagnosis and a return to order?

Seen in this way the teaching about repentance is one of pure love and mercy: - you want to be well? – Great! Stop doing and thinking things that are bad for you and hurt you. Don’t worry about all eternity; just do it today, and then, God willing, do it again tomorrow and the next day, until it becomes habitual, at which point the kingdom of heaven will be “at hand:” not looming somewhere off in the future, but as Jesus said, “within you,” right here, right now, and then of course, forever, too, in so far as this effort really defines your character.

The teaching about repentance is really, really simple. The *hard* part is the confession that comes first. Let’s face it, none of us likes to admit or take responsibility for our mistakes; it’s always easier to blame someone else. But if we want to be healthy we have to do it. Then, we read, “Repentance is, after confessing one’s sins and with a humble heart begging for forgiveness, (simply) *to stop doing them, and to lead a new life in accordance with the commandments of charity and faith*” (NJHD #161).

To be clear, of course, many passages in the doctrines include the preliminary states in the explanations of repentance. Our third lesson, for instance (TCR #530), describes 6 specific steps we must take before we can say we’ve really repented. They include: -

1. Self-examination, the observation of what's really going on in our hearts and minds;
2. Recognition that the evils we find there are sins against the Lord;
3. Acknowledgment and ownership of those evils;
4. Confession: the admission of guilt and responsibility before the Lord;
5. Prayer to Him for the help only He can give us; and finally,
6. **The actual change** so that we DO better.

The writings are clear that evils can't be dealt with unless they are seen, and this seeing is in the understanding, not necessarily in outward life. As we read,

“EVILS CANNOT BE REMOVED UNLESS THEY APPEAR. This does not mean that a person is to do evils in order that they may appear, but that he is to examine himself, not his actions only, but also his thoughts, and what he would do if he were not afraid of the laws and disgrace; especially what evils he holds in his spirit to be allowable and does not regard as sins; for these he still commits.

“In order that a person may examine himself *an understanding has been given him*, and this separate from the will, that he may know, understand and acknowledge what is good and what is evil; and also that he may see the quality of his will, or what it is he loves and desires. In order that he may see this his understanding has been furnished with *higher and lower thought*, or interior and exterior thought, to enable him to see from higher or interior thought what his will is doing in the lower or exterior thought. This he sees as a person sees his face in a mirror; and when he sees it and knows what sin is, he is able, if he implores the help of the Lord, not to will it, but to shun it and afterwards to act against it; if not wholeheartedly, still he can exercise constraint upon it by combat, and at length turn away from it and hate it” (DP #278).

Even so, the active part of repentance is not all the thinking and understanding, it is the actual shunning of the evil we discover in that process, so that the Lord can work in us.

Again, we're talking about the life of religion. We're talking about what we DO. Of course we have to think first, but if we're not careful we can get so tied up in knots thinking about the implications or the consequences of our actions, that we never do take decisive action. But here's the wonderful thing that's explained further in our doctrines: DOING for the right reasons over time really does become habitual and really does gradually affect the will so that we learn to love and BE inwardly what we are striving to be. The book, *True Christian Religion*, puts it this way in a logical progression of ideas culminating in “acts of repentance.” We read,

“The communion called the Church consists of all those who have the Church in them; and the Church with a person enters when that person is being regenerated. Every one becomes regenerate as he abstains from the evils of sin and shuns them as he would hosts of infernal spirits whom he sees with fire brands in their hands threatening to attack him and cast him on a burning pile. There are many things which in early life *prepare* a person for the Church, and *introduce* him into it; *but acts of repentance cause the Church to be in him*. Such acts are all those which lead a person not to will, and consequently not to do, those evils which are sins against God” (TCR #510).

So let's consider some examples and illustrations. Suppose you've had an argument with someone and you feel you've been misunderstood, patronized, insulted, or in some way misinformed. On reflection later you realize that you may have come across harshly or jumped to some conclusions of your own, but by golly, the other person is still wrong. What should you do?

Well, the teaching is that before you can do any good you have to recognize, acknowledge and confess your sins – to the Lord if no one else –, pray a little, and then start over. In this case what you need to do is simply apologize and try not to let your ego get in the way again. The temptation, of course, will be to explain yourself, to make some excuse, or to add a big “BUT,” reminding the other person of *his or her* fault. Don't do it. Just own your own stuff and watch the Lord flow in with His goodness.

Or suppose you've lied or taken advantage of someone unfairly. But the circumstances were compelling and you had what seemed like a greater good in mind at the time. Still, on reflection you realize that what you did was wrong. What should you do?

It's real simple: just go back and tell the truth, perhaps even the truth about your own misguided thoughts or feelings. No excuses; no partial responsibility; no explanations – *unless you are asked*; just own your own stuff and watch what the Lord can do with that sphere of unconditional humility.

But suppose the person you offended is no longer living or accessible in this world? What then? Well, the critical thing is to learn from your mistake and not do it again, but in some cases it may be possible to atone for that sin by helping someone else, or following up on something you should have done and didn't. I know a man, for instance, who lied about reading a book – a terribly long and boring book – for credit in high school. The teacher is long gone but the book remains to be read – and must be read if the man is ever going to fully repent.

These two illustrations may seem trivial compared to other evils requiring our repentance. For example, what about adultery, or profanity, or theft, or slander (which is form of murder)? What about various forms of abuse or persecution of those less fortunate or less intelligent or powerful than we are? What about the loves of self and the world that drive our desire to control others? We may not think of ourselves as particularly guilty of these evils, but on more careful reflection in the context of how these things are expounded in the Writings, we may find quite a bit to work with. And then we face the daunting question, “But what can we actually do about it?”

In many of these cases it would be almost impossible to correct your mistake. People move on. They do their best to compensate if they've been hurt, and going back to make amends quite possibly could make matters worse, not better. So what can you do? How can you really repent?

Well, one thing made famous in the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous is what is sometimes called “paying it forward.” Just as you can take a bad experience that you have *suffered* and use what you've learned to help others deal with *their* suffering, so you can take your experience of doing, saying, thinking or craving things that are bad and use what you've learned from that experience to help other people. In AA this is step 12: “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these [other] steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” As you hear what is written about this please bear two

things in mind: first, it applies to any evil, not just alcoholism, so we're taking the liberty of substituting the word, sufferer, for the word, alcoholic; and second, every step in this process is known to have been taken to a large extent from the doctrines of the New Church, so it should sound very familiar. Note also the joyfulness of this aspect of repentance. We read,

“The joy of living is the theme of AA’s Twelfth Step, and action is its key word. Here we turn outward toward our fellow sufferers who are still in distress. Here we experience the kind of giving that asks no rewards. Here we begin to practice all Twelve Steps of the program in our daily lives *so that we and those about us can experience emotional sobriety.*”¹

This is almost exactly how the Writings describe heavenly happiness (HH #268, 399). But again, how can we do this without being patronizing and obnoxious toward others? Alcoholism is fairly easy to spot, but secret evils that affect our daily lives can be much more deceptive. We know we can't judge anyone else's spiritual states, no matter how offensive we find the behavior, so what can we do? The answer is in the last sentence of the quotation: just practice the principles of repentance yourself. Set an example. Tell the truth – not about others but about yourself. Be humble. Be vulnerable. Admit your own mistakes and share – when you get a chance – what you may have learned from them. Misery loves company, but more importantly, it wants help, and help often comes from those who understand that particular misery personally.

The book, *Heaven and Hell*, is particularly encouraging about repentance – and again, observe the flow of logic here; we read,

“That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe, is now clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If a person accustoms himself so to think, *and from so doing establishes a habit of so thinking*, he is gradually conjoined to heaven; and so far as he is conjoined to heaven the higher regions of his mind are opened; and so far as these are opened he sees whatever is dishonest and unjust, and so far as he sees these evils they can be dispersed, for no evil can be dispersed until it is seen. Into this state a person is able to enter because of his freedom, for is not any one able from his freedom so to think? And when he has made a beginning, the Lord performs all the good deeds with him, and causes him not only to see the evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them. This is meant by the Lord’s words, ‘My yoke is easy and My burden is light.’ Matt. Xi. 30” (HH #533).

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew 5:17-26*
Children’s talk about taking responsibility

Psalms 51:1-13
True Christian Religion #530

¹ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, by AA World Services, Inc, NY, © 1952, page 106, Italics added