

# THE JOY OF REPENTANCE

By

Curtis Dickinson

It isn't usually thought of as a joyful experience, but as one linked with bitter sorrow and tearful regret. Maybe that's because we don't understand it, or haven't experienced it.

Jesus said "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents." Then He illustrated this joy in the story of the Prodigal Son returning home to his father to be welcomed with a feast and honored with the highest tokens of the family (Luke 15:11-32).

We all have to agree with Paul, that God now "Commands men that they should all everywhere repent" (Acts 17:30). But the impression we have often given is that repentance puts us in a depressing state of guilt and self-accusation resulting in a feeling of worthlessness.

This is the very opposite of repentance. It is true that "Godly sorrow works repentance." But such repentance, Paul says, is "A repentance that brings no regret" (II Cor. 7:10). The salvation which Christ came to bring is the basis of joy, and repentance is basic to that salvation. True repentance brings joy or it isn't repentance.

Repentance is to accept one's worth. It began for the Prodigal Son when he "Came to himself" and realized that he was wasting his life feeding pigs and going hungry when he was the son of a wealthy father and had the potential for a much better life. "In my father's house there is bread enough and to spare," he mused. Repentance began at that point, when he suddenly recaptured his self-esteem.

When Paul preached to the Jews at Antioch of Pisidia, he open to them the great opportunity of receiving the long-awaited promise made to their fathers, the promise of forgiveness, and the life through a resurrection. But they firmly rejected it all. Paul said, "Seeing you...judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Unworthy! It was their own judgment of themselves. They had no ambition to become the kind of people God had in mind, so they held to the old discarded covenant, to their sins and inadequate religion.

We are created for God, to be like God. Any deviation from this pattern is not just sin, it is criminality against our Maker. It changes the order of creation. It shows disrespect for God's purpose in making us as He did. Besides that, it is a rejection of one's self, what he is intended to be and what he can become.

Usually people who repeatedly choose to disobey God come to have a low and degraded image of themselves. If we see ourselves as worthless, we are not likely to seek the close companionship of God. Maybe the Prodigal Son left home because of this sense of worthlessness. How often does a young boy or girl hear such expression as "Don't be so stupid," "Wake up, dummy," "How could you be so dumb?" So the Prodigal Son just took his inheritance and left home, with no respect for self or family. After the money was all gone he was even more convinced that he really was dumb, stupid, and worthless, and planned to say to his father, "I am no more worthy to be called you son." Sorrow, shame and guilt burdened him so he started the long walk home. Yet he had said, "I will

arise and go.” This was only the start, Repentance is change, it is not just making up the mind; it is the action of a full turn-around, all the way back to the father.

It was the long walk. It was the total submission. “Make me one of your hired servants” he said, Repentance says, “I am somebody. I am meant to be somebody of value to God, to my fellow man, to myself. I wasn’t meant to live in a pigpen. I refuse to waste my life. I give it back to my Father to fashion me into His glorious image.”

It was full relief from his sorrow, shame, and guilt, in the arms of his father. More than that, it was the joy of realizing his full worth—more than he had dared dream.

“Bring forth the best robe...not the old worn-out thing he left in the closet, but the new fancy one I bought for myself. And shoes. And a ring. And kill the fatted calf—let us celebrate.”

“No dad, you don’t need to do all that. That’s your prized calf and it’s worth a lot of money.”

“But son, you are worth it.” That is the joy—to turn to God and find out what you are worth! Yes, son. You are worth it!”

Repentance is a re-direction of life. To see that we have sinned and fallen short of God’s purpose brings “godly sorrow.” But that is not repentance. Merely to weep over sin is not repentance. One may say “I’m sorry,” and mean it ever so deeply, then repeat the same thing over and over. Sorrow that does not bring repentance is destructive. Judas was filled with sorrow for having betrayed Christ, but instead of leading him to repent, it led to his suicide.

True godly sorrow is in the fact that we have missed the mark. The joy of repentance is in getting turned around so we can hit the bull’s eye. Thus the sorrow that leads to repentance is constructive and healing.

When the Prodigal Son actually started the walk back home, he was practicing repentance, for repentance means taking steps to leave sin and get back to the order of God. It brings one back into harmony with God, with His purpose for our lives. It is not just restoring the conscience. It is returning to the high and holy estate of the glorious and majestic King, with the purpose of serving Him.

Repentance is not the mere cessation of sin. An atheist may reform and cease from a multitude of sins, yet never repent. Repentance is not negative action. True repentance takes place when one ceases from sin and in the place of sin begins to do the work God has given. There is joy in getting back into harmony with God and following that way which Jesus said leads to eternal life.

Repentance brings joy by the riddance of sin. When the Prodigal Son started out with a pocketful of money, the “riotous living” of wine, women, and song looked good to him. But eventually it became a bore, then a burden, and finally a weight that sapped all his joy, all his peace and all his reason for living.

Of course God already knows how stinking rotten the sinner is. All our thoughts and motives as well as actions are wide open to His eyes. Repentance doesn’t reveal any sins. They are known to God, and probably well known to all those around us, no matter how we may try to conceal them.

What repentance does is put them in the garbage where they belong. It means leaving them in the pigpen. It clears the air. It makes it possible to be open and free. Jesus said that He came to save sinners, all those who admit their guilt and have a true desire to leave sin and live in the freedom and light that God gives.

Repentance is not degrading, but uplifting. It brings the joy of no longer feeling guilty, but feeling good because you are living to please the Father.

Finally, repentance means life. "My son was dead," the father exclaimed, "But is alive again." Not only was the son dead to all that the father wanted for him, and dead in the sense that he was estranged from God, but he was under the sentence of the final death at judgment. While everyone is "dead in trespasses and sins" until he is forgiven through Christ, there is an even worse death awaiting in judgment, when the unredeemed will be burned up in the fire, just as the chaff is destroyed at the end of the harvest (Mt. 3:12).

"Alive again!" Alive to the father's love, purpose and constant fellowship. But more than that, rejoicing in the promise of eternal life.

God is the giver of life. He gives life now, in this world, for our very breath is in His hand. When we come to Him he makes us "new creatures," gives us new direction, new purpose and new hope, with his presence, and His power to make it possible for us to be transformed and to overcome all the obstacles we meet in the transforming process.

But that is nothing compared to the life that is to come. God's order of things include life in a state of immortality. God started out with man as a deathless creature, until sin entered. Repentance means that we have left sin: it is all forgiven because Christ took the punishment for it in His death. In the final order of things God will have man in His image, man undying in God's paradise. And repentance is a big step in getting back into that order.

"In my father's house there is bread enough and to spare...make me as one of your hired servants." In the Father's house there is plenty. We will all be servants, and no one will lack anything for a perfect life of joy. No wonder there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents.

Jesus said that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all nations." It is a message of joy!

.....  
Copyright © Curtis Dickinson. Formatted and Posted by Ken Fortier Ministries.  
Permission is hereby granted by Mrs. Regina Dickinson to reproduce and distribute  
Curtis' articles to as many as possible. This statement is to remain attached to this article  
for permission to be valid. Vol. XXII, Number 11.  
.....