

Psychology and Repentance

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I'm happy to be here today to speak of faith in our divine Redeemer. I feel close to him, and the music has enhanced that feeling. I am pleased that so many of you came today. I plan to speak on repentance, and it is good to have so many sinners here to preach to.

As we approach the weighty matters of repentance, let us remember the positive side of our nature as well. To quote President Hinckley:

You are an inspiration, in every sense, and a bright and glowing hope for the future of this work in all the earth. . . .

I hope . . . that . . . there will be in each of your hearts a resolution to live nearer to the limitless self that lies within you. I am not asking for perfection; I am asking for greater effort. . . .

You are . . . of God, each of you, endowed with something of his divinity. . . . You cannot afford to live beneath that portion of divinity. You cannot afford to hide it or to set it aside. ["The Wonderful Thing That Is You and the Wonderful Good You Can Do," Young Women Fireside, 10 November 1985, pp. 1–3]

That is why I speak of repentance today. It is the glorious means provided by our

Heavenly Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, for us to overcome the world that we may ultimately stand before him, pure and noble and deserving of the exaltation he desires to bestow upon us.

While assisting individuals who want to overcome their moral weaknesses, I have noticed problems in how they approach the repentance process. In analyzing these problems, I have found it helpful to organize the elements of repentance under three broad categories.

First is *self-confrontation*. This involves recognizing that a sin has been committed and that repentance is needed. Also, experiencing sorrow or remorse, making confession, and suffering the consequences of having broken the moral law are involved.

The second category concerns *self-control*. This requires forsaking the sin and developing a pattern of self-regulation that is incorporated into a new and morally benevolent lifestyle.

The third category concerns *self-sacrifice*. Under this heading I include restitution and

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reconciling, restoring, forgiving, obeying, and serving.

Today I will focus primarily on the first, *self-confrontation*, and the third, *self-sacrifice*, because these are the two areas in which I have frequently noticed deficiencies in our understanding of repentance and in our ability to implement it. To the extent that we fail to fully apply these two phases, we become vulnerable to moral relapse and to repeating the behaviors we had temporarily forsaken. We seem to do a better job of self-control by forsaking immoral conduct for periods of time while we are under the pressure of the repentance process and feeling the direction of the Lord or of a Church authority.

Self-confrontation seems difficult for many of us. It requires understanding how we avoid the truth about ourselves and what is needed to overcome that avoidance. It is said that we must recognize our errors, feel remorse or sorrow, and make confession; but this creates an immediate threat to our self-image—and by nature we tend to protect ourselves from full disclosure of our faults or, when exposed, to justify or rationalize our misconduct.

Evidences of the fears and conflicts that are provoked by *self-confrontation* arose in a study of sixty BYU students that some of my colleagues and I did with support from the BYU Counseling Center and the BYU Comprehensive Clinic. We found it encouraging that a majority of the students reported abiding by the standards of the gospel. On the other hand, we found among those who had deviated that many avoided the repentance process as outlined in the scriptures and the writings of General Authorities.

Their ways of handling deviations were diverse, such as simply waiting until their feelings of guilt subsided; attempting to convince themselves that what they had done was really not that bad; doing something righteous to balance their account; promising themselves (and God) that they would avoid it the next time;

punishing themselves by calling themselves worthless and feeling bad for one or two days; trying not to think about it; and avoiding spiritual contexts because they felt unclean.

These practices represent defense mechanisms (denial, suppression, and rationalization)—their purpose is to defend self-esteem. The students had defined themselves as righteous, and evidence to the contrary threatened their self-images. To follow the practice of confession and repentance would have required them to acknowledge their unrighteous actions. This reflects the problem of emphasizing an external image so much that honest self-disclosure is avoided (see page 97 of Bergin, A. E., Stinchfield, R. D., Gaskin, T. A., Masters, K. S., Sullivan, C. E., “Religious Lifestyles and Mental Health: An Exploratory Study,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 35 [1988]: 91–98).

It is ironic that we fear disclosing to him who already knows what we have done. We perhaps punish ourselves more by withholding than the Lord would ever do.

This lack of a frank and full confession precludes lasting change because the person fails to fully recognize and confront the sinful conduct. In addressing this problem in *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, President Spencer W. Kimball asserted that the treatment for sin must be commensurate with its seriousness. A Band-Aid is not sufficient for a deep wound. In some cases spiritual surgery is required—this begins with a confession that lays open the spiritual wound so it is exposed to the view of the self, the Lord, and, in the case of serious transgressions, to the Church leader as well. If this is not done, complete repentance is impossible.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated that repentance “is too little understood, too little applied by us all, as if it were merely a word on a bumper sticker.” The Lord requires more of his disciples than “cheap repentance” or “superficial forgiveness.” (See “Repentance,” *Ensign*, November 1991, pp. 30–31).

One of the most difficult situations I face while walking with members through the process is to realize that they confessed and repented at one time—perhaps as they prepared for a mission or to enter the temple and then, after a period of righteous conduct, relapsed and fell. I have asked myself whether these individuals had truly repented. They seemed sincere and seemed to go through the spiritual steps required for worthiness. Were they overwhelmed later by new circumstances? Were they too weak to persist when the external controls of Church leaders and family were withdrawn? Were they rebelling against authority? Were they playing a social role in order to please others? Were they not truly converted to the inward principles of repentance? Many of these people eventually recognized that their reconciliation with the Lord required a more profound self-examination.

In order to overcome their self-justification and denial of consequences, it was necessary for them to do some self-analysis. As Sigmund Freud said, a major purpose of psychoanalysis is to “help people face unpleasant facts about themselves.” Sometimes they had to follow assignments carefully and thoughtfully to review every detail of what they had done, to face the unpleasant facts about themselves in a profound way, and to understand the ripple effect of their behavior, not only on themselves, but also on their partners, their families, friends, and so forth.

As they went before the Lord in mighty prayer and confessed fully and frankly exactly what they had done, step-by-step, intention by intention, they began to realize more deeply how they had betrayed the Lord who loves them; how they had violated their own ideals as followers of the Savior; and how they had betrayed, in many cases, sacred covenants. This self-examination is like psychotherapy in that the process of spiritual reform requires overcoming defenses and accepting painful self-awareness. It is an exercise in honesty,

guided by the spirit of truth. This is not an easy thing to achieve. It is approached best by confiding deeply in a trusted confidante—sometimes a therapist, sometimes a friend, but ultimately a Church leader and our Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. This process involves suffering, and we have a natural inclination to shrink from it. Like psychotherapy, it requires us to walk in the valley of sorrow and to suffer for a time before we can reorient ourselves. President Spencer W. Kimball reminded us that “if a person hasn’t suffered, he hasn’t repented” (*TSWK*, p. 99). Elder Dallin H. Oaks similarly stated, “The repentant sinner who comes to Christ with a broken heart and a contrite spirit has been through a process of personal pain and suffering for sin” (“Sin and Suffering,” *BYU 1989–90 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1990], p. 149).

Paul, Enos, and Alma the Younger certainly understood that easy and painless sorrow was not a sufficient basis for repentance. Alma said that he was “in the darkest abyss . . . racked with eternal torment” (Mosiah 27:29). “Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell” (Alma 36:13). After three days and three nights of what he called “the most bitter pain and anguish of soul,” he cried out to the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy, and he received “a remission of [his] sins” (Alma 38:8). The Lord has said, “Every man must repent or suffer” (D&C 19:4).

For behold, I, God, have suffered . . . for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

Which suffering caused myself, even God . . . to tremble because of pain. [D&C 19:16–18]

Although our suffering may be intense, if we are repentant it is temporary and merely a taste of the suffering that the Savior endured for us. Suffering reminds us that faith in his

atonement is the key to our release, our rejuvenation, and our redemption.

Such temporary remorseful suffering helps us learn the full nature of our immoral dispositions, and it makes our memory of misdeeds vivid. Having exposed the disease process, cleansing can then occur. When we have been thus washed clean, we are less likely to repeat the error. We learn from such profound experience that recognition, remorse, and confession are all part of a single process requiring the submission of one's way of being and living to the will and grace of the Lord.

In Christ we have a glorious hope that the sun will rise again upon our despair and reveal the glory of our eternal possibilities. Alma put it this way:

There could be nothing so . . . bitter as were my pains. . . . On the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. [Alma 36:21]

It has been my privilege to walk through the valley of sorrows with many individuals as they have faced the enormity of their sins and their effects upon the lives of others. These individuals have been involved in all forms of misconduct.

Consider the person who has betrayed the trust of the Lord and of his girlfriend by pressing for and getting physical pleasure. He is a returned missionary who has been endowed in the temple and made solemn covenants regarding virtue. He is devastated but cannot face reality. He makes excuses. He hides his sin and may even prepare or go through a temple marriage without disclosure. What can be done for people who are afraid, who fear punishment, who worry about rejection by family, or social slights, or Church discipline, and may be accustomed to being honored and admired?

Where would such a person get the extra motivation needed to face the pain of accurate self-assessment? Numerous things can help, but there are three fundamental keys to

change: faith in the Lord, the courage to act, and a feeling of being loved. Even if discipline or rebuke is involved, it is never optimal unless the person being disciplined feels loved by the one disciplining.

It is crucial when we are into self-confrontation that our courage be encouraged. We need someone we can cry out to in pain, remorse, and full emotional expression. But such exposure of the tender and vulnerable aspects of ourselves does not usually occur unless trust exists. The sinner needs the confidence of knowing that the listener is not there to hurt but to hear, to understand, to console, and to resonate to our sense of guilt and despair.

President Howard W. Hunter has encouraged us to bear each other's burdens. He said:

*To those who have transgressed or been offended, we say, come back. To those who are hurt and struggling and afraid, we say, let us stand with you and dry your tears. ["President Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church," *Ensign*, July 1994, p. 5]*

Surely the Good Shepherd will also hear our pleas and know of our suffering. We must never think that we are unworthy to approach him in prayer. To him we can pour out everything if we know he loves us beyond measure and gave himself for us. I recall the little song I learned as a child in Protestant Sunday School: "Jesus loves me, this I know / For the Bible tells me so." I hope that each person here knows this—that the Lord loves you. With confidence in that love, you can bare your soul to him, knowing that his tender care will prevail and that he will help you face the difficult steps that must be taken as you become a better person.

Then, if we persist in doing his will, his healing endows us with a newness of life. He said:

Learn of me, and listen to my words; walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me. [D&C 19:23]

Many individuals have come to terms with their own defects and have succeeded in experiencing the joy of forgiveness, the exalting feeling of being reconciled with the Lord. I rejoice with these individuals because they have faced themselves. Some, knowing that they would be disciplined by the Church, even excommunicated, have said boldly, "I will do whatever it requires to be reconciled with the Lord and to be on good terms with the Church once again and to be free from the affliction that my own actions have caused." Others have said, "If it is necessary for me to be dismissed from the university, then I will accept it." They have chosen the course of righteousness and have dropped out for a period of time while repentance became complete. I have been happy to see other individuals involved in same-sex attractions and opposite-sex addictions overcome their problems. They have married, had families, and now for many years have lived fruitful lives within the framework the Lord has set. Some have overcome severe temptations that were complicated by disturbances within their families and their childhood development. They have gone through therapy that has helped reduce the intensity of their motives to do the wrong thing, and as a result they have become not only clean but mentally healthy. Their efforts have been blessed. They have been healed!

I recall a person who was in despair because she could not seem to stop patterns of relating that continually got her into morally compromising situations. She had tried hard to repent and to achieve self-understanding. I learned that she had seen many therapists, but none had helped sufficiently. As we talked, I realized that she was suffering from complex emotional conflicts. If such emotional conflicts are untreated or not properly diagnosed and

skillfully treated, they can repeatedly undermine efforts to change. This can cause relapses in efforts to repent.

I explained to my friend that her problem was complex and that her reports showed her previous counseling was inadequate for her case. We then arranged for therapy with a person skilled in treating her type of problem. A few months later she appeared at my office aglow with optimism. She was working hard and succeeding in unraveling the strands of emotional dysfunction that had impaired her ability to gain self-control. She is on the way to a more fulfilling life because her self-understanding and her knowledge of the gospel are no longer clouded by the pathology of the past. Counseling can be very helpful if the technique is correct, the counselor is skilled, and the method is in harmony with gospel principles. But, as Elder Richard Scott has pointed out, after all we can do, it is the Lord who heals us and blesses us to go forward in a new way of life (see "To Be Healed," *Ensign*, May 1994, pp. 7-9).

Another problem is that some of us engage in overrepentance. Such individuals feel perpetually guilty about things that were not their fault or about very minor matters. They imagine they have sinned when they haven't, or they anticipate that they will sin in the future. Such obsessional preoccupations and depressing self-criticism is not in keeping with the spirit of the gospel. Such individuals need to liberate themselves from their agenda of self-punishment.

Elder Oaks has stated that

one of Satan's most potent techniques of discouragement is to deny the power of the atonement by persuading a sinner that God cannot or will not forgive him or her. . . . We should teach the discouraged that part of the process of repentance is to let go of our sins, to yield them up to God and follow his example by forgiving ourselves as he forgave us.

[*Sins, Crimes and Atonement*, address to CES Religious Educators, 7 February 1992, p. 12]

I once interviewed a young woman who believed she had grossly sinned. She had done some things that were not right though they were not grossly deviant. She had corrected them and lived a good life for several years. The passage of time is a good test of repentance; nevertheless, she continued to feel guilty for the past. In the midst of our interview I felt inspired to tell her that I believed the Lord had forgiven her. That moment of inspiration was felt by her as well, and she felt completely relieved from her sense of guilt. It was a miracle of forgiveness. Others in the ward remarked later about what a changed person she was, though they knew nothing about our interview. A light had turned on in her, and it did not go out again. She became a joyful individual because she was truly free from guilt and she knew that the Lord loved her.

Recognizing that healthy self-confrontation lays the basis for effective self-control and willing self-sacrifice, let us now examine the specific role of self-sacrifice.

In this third aspect of repentance we become truly allied with the Savior. Prematurely concluding repentance in a self-satisfied feeling of having confessed and forsaken our sins prevents us from solidifying our personal reform and limits our capacity to develop a truly Christian life-style. Self-sacrifice depicts the broad range of elements in the repentance process that are necessary to make repentance complete. This is not only a matter of restitution in the sense of returning a stolen item, but also of extending the necessary effort to alter the fabric of relationships, the negative consequences, or mistrust and broken covenants that need to be corrected. We often shrink from the effort required to make these corrections, but such self-sacrificing effort is an essential part of redeeming the situation. The Savior has said: “Ye shall offer for a sacrifice

unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Nephi 9:20). This obligation is fulfilled in part by self-confrontation and self-control because we suffer in humility and we give up needs, habits, or indulgences as we forsake sinful ways. But self-sacrifice is not completed until we reconcile, restore, forgive, obey, and serve in love.

To reconcile and restore requires an analysis of our relationships—the harm, alienation, bad examples, and so forth that we have participated in. Like the analysis of self, this analysis of the social consequences of our actions requires the courage to face unpleasant facts about our conduct and unpleasant feelings people may have toward us. Making contact with some of the individuals one was involved with in the past is not always wise, but often a great deal can be done to correct the past relationships. If they have been partners with us in sin, we must help them reform their lives by taking appropriate steps. Assignments can be given and reports made. If they suffer innocently due to our actions or bad example, we must make personal contact and help make up for losses of faith, friendship, position, or possessions. What was broken should be fixed. What was lost should be restored.

One young man donated to a victim reparation fund. Another met with family members to make amends for afflictions produced by her abuse of one family member. Another has written letters to persons offended and others influenced by his bad example. Another contacted his home stake president to explain how he had lied to him before his mission, and a reconciliation followed. I’ve been pleased with the reports I’ve received from family members, friends, and associates, who have been encouraged by the healing effect of an individual who has sincerely attempted to make restitution. This requires going back and making amends in a way that is more profound than simply saying, “I’m sorry.” Where there are amends that cannot be made personally, individuals

have the opportunity to compensate for the past by serving others in a profound and extensive way.

All of these are efforts to alter the negative effects of actions that tend to ripple through the lives of people affected by our deviations from the Lord's standards of conduct. Sometimes we do not realize how widespread the effects of our actions become—including our impact upon clerks, employers, police, insurance agents, parents, church leaders, extended families, siblings, and peers.

We also need to sacrifice our inclination to judge others who have sinned. As we are forgiven, we must forgive: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). As we feel loved by and reconciled with the Lord, we also must love and reconcile with those who may have harmed us.

Finally, we are asked to take up the cross of Jesus and walk in a new life. Our spiritual capabilities are fully restored as we keep the commandments that define a Christian Latter-day Saint lifestyle and as we serve the needs of others. This may be via formal callings such as home or visiting Teacher or missionary, or it may be through informal sustaining of others in times of special need. And we may help others in the larger community and in world service. Some have assisted others in Deseret Industries, schools for the handicapped, the Food and Care Coalition, crisis lines, and the BYUSA community service programs. All such efforts help to anchor personal reform in a new pattern of faithful and fruitful living. This needs to be done for a lifetime, with service built into one's lifestyle. Individual and community service of various kinds can help a person develop empathy for the needs and suffering of others and also develop a great desire to avoid doing any of the things that cause

harm to the social fabric, to the love and trust of the Lord, to the Church, and to the family. When the new pattern is well established, sinful indulgences and negative actions become so foreign as to be unthinkable. Virtue then garnishes our thoughts, and our confidence becomes strong in the presence of the Spirit of the Lord (see D&C 121:45). Reform is completed, and relapse is prevented. The heart is changed mightily (see Alma 5:12–14).

I hope you feel close to the Lord today, as I do. I ask you to recognize that the themes of repentance—*self-confrontation*, *self-control*, and *self-sacrifice*—are all undergirded and overarched by faith in the example, teachings, commandments, and atonement of Jesus Christ. Please remember again the words of President Hinckley: "You are [the offspring] of God, each of you, endowed with something of his divinity. . . . You cannot afford to live beneath that portion of divinity."

And remember the words of the Savior himself:

Behold, I have come unto the world to bring redemption unto the world . . . , to save the world from sin.

Therefore, whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will I receive, for of such is the kingdom of God. Behold, for such I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved. [3 Nephi 9:21–22]

Let us then, brothers and sisters, make our repentance complete so that when we come unto him we are worthy to be saved by his loving sacrifice. I know that he lives and that he is near, perhaps nearer than we think. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.