

HOW TO REPENT

2 Corinthians 7:2–16

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We're continuing our series today in 2 Corinthians. Chapter 7, verse 2, is our starting place today. Rather than reading this Scripture in its entirety at the beginning, I'd just simply like for you to have your Bibles open and we'll have continual reference to this passage as we walk through it today. The message today is entitled "How to Repent."

Several years ago, Dr. J. Edwin Orr, the great historian of revivals, was a guest speaker at the church. I shall never forget a sermon that he preached, which he called "The First Word of the Gospel." He asked the question, what is the first word of the gospel? If you were to ask a person, what's the first letter of the alphabet? You would obviously say "A." Why is it the first letter? Because it is the first letter. What's the first word of the gospel? Is it "believe," "confess," "behave"? The first word of the gospel is "repent." If you look at the scriptural passages, you can see how this is borne out. John the Baptist, in Matthew 3:1, came preaching. What was he preaching? The first word out of his mouth is "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus came preaching (Matthew 4:17): "From that time on, Jesus began to preach." What was He saying? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus sent the Twelve out on their first training mission in Mark 6:12. They went out and preached. What was their message? That people should repent. On the Day of Pentecost, when Peter stood up after the pouring of the Spirit and preached—people wanted to know what they should do. What did he reply? "Repent." When Paul sums up his entire life to King Herod Agrippa, in Acts 26:20, and reviews all that he has preached to both Jews and Gentiles, he sums it up in this manner, "I preach that they should repent and turn to God." Repentance is the first step in the Christian life.

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Not only is repentance needed in conversions, repentance is an ongoing process in the Christian experience. There are times in our life as Christians when we also need to repent of that which does not please God and is not good for us.

This is the situation at Corinth, when Paul writes this letter. The Corinthians had been having some practices within their church which they were proud of and not repentant of. There are some who think that these practices were the practices referred to in the first letter to the Corinthians. One person was even living in an incestuous relationship with his father's wife. The church had not acted against that. There are others who think that maybe the situations Paul was addressing in 2 Corinthians had to do with a matter that was dealt with in a lost letter that he wrote them. Whatever the area of sin and problem was in this church, it was so severe that after writing 1 Corinthians, Paul had paid them a visit. That hadn't produced change, so he had sent them a painful letter. That hadn't produced change. Ultimately, he sent to them his coworker, Titus. Then he becomes very concerned about Titus' well-being and he finally comes across the Aegean Sea into Macedonia, north of Corinth, where he waits for Titus to catch up to him and bring him the good news or bad news of the Corinthian response to the correction.

The first verses of our chapter today, verses 2–9, show us how to gain repentance in others. Then the rest of the chapter shows us how we ought to repent ourselves when we are in the wrong.

I. How to get others to a place of repentance. Paul gives us five steps:

A. The first step, when you want to seek another person's repentance or change, is to look within yourself. "Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one" (2 Corinthians 7:2, NIV). Maybe it was that there were persons in the Corinthian church who said that Paul had wronged some, who said, "He's corrupted people with his doctrine of grace. After all, since his teaching of the doctrine of grace, shouldn't we sin that

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grace may abound? He's thrown out all the legalistic rules." Some may have even charged him with financial misdealing, with exploiting them. After all, he was taking an offering for the saints in Jerusalem. Maybe there were critics who said, "He's diverting funds for his own use."

It's a fact, an unfortunate fact, that there are people in leadership positions in the body of Christ in which these allegations are true. They've wronged people. They've corrupted someone. And they have stolen money that was given for other purposes. But if we are going to get change in people's lives—Paul knew this well as an apostle and as a Christian—one's own heart must be clean before God.

Jesus says in Matthew 7:5, "Take the log out of your own eye and then you can take the speck out of somebody else's." Look within yourself.

B. The second step Paul had: Adopt a spirit of noncondemnation. "I do not say this to condemn you" (2 Corinthians 7:3, NIV). There's a difference between correcting someone and condemning them. To condemn them is to put them in their place—why is it that that place is always a bad place? If we want to correct someone, we want to get them to a good place. Where do they really belong? In a place of right relationship with God, a place of right relationship with others. If we want to help people, we cannot do it from a spirit loaded with condemnation. So you might well ask, as you seek change in others, what is your tone of voice?

Listening to people talk to kids, it's amazing to hear tones of voice that suggest a condemnatory attitude—"You're in my way. I don't like you." Do we pray for the person we're trying to correct? It's a sure step—if we want change, we need to pray for the person.

Do we get absorbed in self-pity when we want to change somebody else? "I'd be a lot further down the road if you hadn't done me in!" When we take that attitude toward people, we're blaming them for our condition. Condemnation is a natural corollary to self-pity. If we immerse

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ourselves in self-pity, then we have to find somebody to blame for the shape we're in. That makes it impossible for them to change or for us to change. Correction is not given to wipe another person out. It's given to help them find their true place.

C. The third step Paul practices toward the Corinthians: He affirms his commitment to them. We need to affirm our commitment to other people. "I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you" (2 Corinthians 7:3, NIV). There were some nonpleasant things about the Corinthians, but Paul said, "I love you so much that, no matter what—warts and all—I would live with you and I would die with you. I'm committed to you." "He drew a circle that shut me out—rebel, heretic, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win—we drew a circle that took him in."

Affirming his commitment.

D. A fourth thing that Paul did was believe they could and would change. "I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you" (2 Corinthians 7:4, NIV). What a great statement. I have confidence in you, I am proud of you.

Paul could have said things about the Corinthian church like, "What a difficult church that is. It's sure not like the Ephesian church—filled with first love. It's sure not like the Philippian church—the generous-hearted church. That Corinthian church is a problem church!" I've heard colleagues in the ministry talk that way sometimes, "That's a difficult, that's a problem church. That's a burnt-over territory." The burning is in our own mind. The characterization we give to things often determines the reality they will have for us. Paul believed in these Corinthians in spite of all their difficulties. He believed that the power of Jesus Christ in their life was great enough to change them and bring them to maturity.

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A father watched his little daughter at the breakfast table, with a very weak cup of tea, adding spoonfuls of sugar to the tea. After the seventh spoonful of sugar went into the weak tea, he grabbed her hand and stopped her and said, “Don’t you think that will make the tea too sweet?” She said, “No, Daddy. Not if I don’t stir it up!” We are people who need to stir one another up to goodness.

Some people think that faith in other people is a little bit Pollyanna-ish. They may take kind of a cynical attitude of, “They’re not going to change! It’s too late.” Maybe the person won’t change. But our attitude toward the change is fundamental and important. I’m not talking about a faith that is blind and cold and calculating. I think faith really isn’t any good unless it’s based on love. Then, if it flows out of love, it can tolerate an awful lot of things.

Paul tells us that love never fails. It believes all things (1 Corinthians 13:7). If you love people, you can continue believing in them, that good things can happen. That love will then endure all things, hope all things. Love has a way of reaching. We understand the language of love.

I ran across a story this week that was a real charmer. It goes back to earlier this century, when Moody was ministering in Chicago. At that time, he had not become the great evangelist. He simply had his Sunday School in Chicago, which several thousand kids came to. The story is told of his ministry that on a January day, this little boy comes into Sunday School and meets the greeter, and it has been a windy day across the lake. He is frozen. He has very thin, tattered pants on, a very torn coat. A hat that hadn’t kept his ears protected. His ears are red with the cold. He’s just frozen and shaking as he comes in. So the greeter immediately sees how cold the boy is and takes him to a chair and begins rubbing his legs, trying to get some circulation going in his frozen legs. He said, “Where have you come from to come to Sunday School today?” He described an area of town that was two miles away. He had walked through that freezing wind

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for two miles to get to Moody’s Sunday School class. The greeter said, “That’s a long way to walk to Sunday School. There are a lot of churches you could have stopped by instead of coming all the way here. Why did you come to Dwight Moody’s Sunday School?” His response was classic. He said, “Because they know how to love a fella here.”

Faith is a cold thing without love. Love must be the well from which faith draws. And love believes all things.

E. A fifth step that Paul used in gaining the repentance of the Corinthians: He openly shared his emotions. “I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever” (2 Corinthians 7:4–7, NIV).

Notice the flow of emotions. Paul lets the Corinthians know when he’s been down about them. Now he lets them know when he’s been up about them, because Titus has brought the good news.

A passage of joy such as this becomes all the more so, because of the remembrance of tough times. Notice Paul’s phrase in verse 5, “harassed at every turn.” Why is it that troubles seem to run in a pack? You could manage your problems if they would come to you one at a time. But they have this way of loading up on you all at once. Paul says, “I know what that’s like.” But, he says, “I’m so glad for the comfort you’ve given me now.”

Here is an open sharing of warmth. Our emotions communicate warmth to people. If we don’t reach out with emotions to embrace people, then we really can’t complete the circuit of

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repentance. I think of the difference, for example, of how David treated Absalom and how he broke the circle of repentance, because when Absalom was brought back to the headquarters of Jerusalem, David let him sit in his household for two years, without ever going to him (2 Samuel 14:24). When the prodigal son came back to Father God, the first thing the Father did was put his arms around him and weep and He gave him the best clothes. The Father communicated emotions. There was a healing of the relationship. With David, there was shattering of relationship, because he didn't complete the circuit. He kept his arms at his side when he should have had them around the son whom he loved.

II. What if we need to repent ourselves? The rest of chapter 7 talks about that—four qualities.

A. The first quality: Repentance begins with loving confrontation. Verses 8 and 9 say, “Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us” (NIV). After sending his letter, Paul says he regretted it for while. That's a letter I and some of you have had. When I've sent a letter, I've wished I could take it back. I've learned to sit on letters for a few days. I can write the best letters to correct someone, but I find that if I get it out two days later, I inevitably edit the letter to have a totally different complexion. Paul realized, after he sent the letter, that it was going to hurt, but the good result it was going to produce, ultimately, makes him not sorry he sent it.

As you think about repentance beginning with loving confrontation, you might take a moment to ask—let the Holy Spirit ask you—if there's any area of your life that is in need of repentance. The Holy Spirit has His faithful way of flashing something up on the screen of our mind when

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we raise a question like that. What is it? What are you going to do about it? Our response might be, “I’m not ready to do anything about it right yet.” Or, “I tried to do something about it before, and it doesn’t work,” or, “It’s not my fault. Let the other person do the changing.” Or, “I don’t feel like I want to do anything.” Or the attitude of the Corinthians, “Lord, I repent.”

Someone has said that sin is like cancer. In its early stages, it is very easy to cure and very hard to detect. But in its later stages, it is very easy to detect and very hard to cure. Therefore, repentance in the believer’s life ought to be an ongoing process—that we take care of little things. “If we confess our sins, “John says to Christians, “He’s faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). It’s much easier to be cleansed on a daily basis than on an annual basis.

We must be confronted, either by the Spirit of God or by someone else, when we have done wrong.

B. The second thing about repentance is that true repentance produces godly sorrow (verses 10–11). “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you prove yourselves to be innocent in this matter” (NIV).

Paul makes a contrast here between the sorrow of this world and godly sorrow. The sorrow of this world is basically one that ends in death. Why? Because it’s tied up in self. When confronted, it says, “I got caught! I wish I hadn’t got caught.” Not sorrow that someone else has been hurt or that wrong has been done, but sorrow that one has been found out. That sorrow never produces changes. I’ve known people, I’ve known Christians, that have been in the wrong

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and the fact that they were in the wrong had to finally be drug out from them. And when they were in the wrong, and seeing that the route of escape was cut off, they then said or announced, “I’m sorry. I repent. Please forgive me.” Only to go out later and do the same thing all over again. And again. And again. And several times along the way say, “I’m sorry. I’ve repented.” It was never genuine repentance. It was sorrow because they were found out. And because they were found out, there were certain things they couldn’t do for a period of time. Genuine repentance is one that is marked by seven words that Paul gives them. It’s marked by “earnestness.” The Corinthians dropped their indifference to their moral wrong and took action to deal with the situation. It’s marked by “eagerness.” There is now a desire to get everything straightened out instead of the attitude of “let’s drop it, let’s forget it, let’s sweep it under the rug.” It’s an attitude of “Is there anything more in my life that needs to be pointed out so I can get on with pleasing God and serving Him?”

“Indignation” is a third word that marks true repentance. No longer being complacent about the wrong. No longer being cavalier, “Oh, well. Everybody does it.” Indignation. Alarm. Being fully aware now of the harm that sin brings to our own lives and what it does to relationships.

Affection, or “longing.” How wonderful it is to have our feelings return to us when we have been cleansed by the Lord. When we’ve gone through the *catharsis* of cleansing.

“Concern,” or zeal. “I’m ready now to get on living for Christ.” And “justice,” or punishment. The idea is one of self-discipline.

Yes, repentance begins with loving confrontation and produces godly sorrow. And thirdly...

C. Repentance brings a renewed awareness of who we are.

“Even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.

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By all this, we are encouraged” (2 Corinthians 7:12–13, NIV). In other words, Paul’s saying there was wrong at Corinth and the letter was for the benefit of the person who did the wrong and for the benefit of the one who did the wrong. But that wasn’t the sole reason for the letter. It was because, “As long as you tolerated the wrong, you really weren’t yourselves and who God called you to be. But now you’re different. When you tolerated this sin, you forgot who you were.” Psalm 73:21–22 says it well, “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant. I was like a beast towards thee.” But, oh, what a difference when we come to God and come to ourselves! There’s a renewed awareness of who we are.

D. Fourthly, repentance brings a restoration of fellowship.

“In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. I am glad I can have complete confidence in you” (2 Corinthians 7:13–16, NIV). Restoration of fellowship has occurred because of repentance.

Where do we need fellowship to be restored in our lives? Is it between us and the Lord? Is it in the church? Is it among friends? Is it at work? Is it at home? True repentance ultimately brings things to full circle and circuit. Fellowship is restored. Maybe the fellowship needing to be restored is in our home.

A little boy attended Sunday School class three weeks in a row. On the fourth week, the teacher asked him, “Wouldn’t you like to go to heaven someday?” He said, “I’m not sure. I don’t know what heaven is like.” The teacher shot up a prayer real quick: “Lord, help me tell this little boy

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what heaven is like.” She came up with a good one. ‘Heaven is just like home.’” And he said, “No way am I going to go there if it’s like my home!” But there ought to be in our own family and home life some kind of analogy transferable to heaven. Home ought to give us a concept of what heaven is like. Restoration of fellowship within families.

We do this by making positive changes in our life, by coming under obedience to the Lord and what He calls us to.

Once there was a little boy who was strongly disciplined by his mother. They lived in a very rural, isolated area with a little mountain in the background, and a forest. The boy went far enough away from the house where he knew his mother couldn’t get to him after correcting him. He yelled back at her, from a safe distance, “I hate you!” And back to him, came the words from the woods and the hill, “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” The boy got scared at the words that he was hearing out in the woods. He ran to his mother and said, “Mom! There’s a mean man out there saying ‘I hate you! I hate you!’” His mother said, “Just a minute, son. She took him back to the hill and said, “Shout as loud as you can into the woods ‘I love you.’” So he shouted, “I love you!” And back came the echo, “I love you! I love you! I love you!” His mother said to him “Life treats you the way you treat life. Life is an echo.”

Our own repentant hearts bring back repentance to us. Our own gift of love to others brings back love to us. And the Lord’s saying to us, “I love you!” Which brings back to Him our response of love.

Closing Prayer

Gracious Father, we thank You for this morning that we have to be together—in Your presence and with one another. How precious this time of fellowship and nurturing is. We think today, Lord, especially of those who have people in their life who they would love to see changed and

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love to see repent of the wrong that has been done. Father, may these principles become principles of life to each of us today. Maybe we've given up on somebody. Lord, thank You that You don't ever give up. Help us to have Your enduring attitude to look at that person or persons in our life who need Your help, Your grace, Your change. And help us to continue to go on loving and caring for them and relating to them in a way that would leave a witness for You and bring change. And, Lord, in areas of our own life where we need Your hand of intervention and need to have our own spirits cleansed, Father, we pray that we'll not simply brush aside what the Spirit or others may be saying to us about godliness in our life. But that we'll receive that as a loving confrontation from You, knowing that is the way You have of arresting us, turning our attention on what needs to take place, and then bringing us, Lord, to the mark of sincere repentance in our life, so that we can discover anew who we really are and restore fellowship where it has been broken. We think, Lord, of You—who grew and increased in favor with God and with man (Luke 2:52). That's our desire, Lord—to do that in our own hearts and lives. We thank You that Your presence is here. Bless every heart, we pray. Renew us by the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.