

SORRY IS NOT ENOUGH

JULY 28, 1985

II SAMUEL 12:13-19

MARK 1:14-15

A boy was sent by his mother to buy a dozen eggs. On the way home, he stumbled and the eggs fell from his grasp, splattering on the sidewalk. He burst into tears. Passersby gathered and they all felt sorry for him. Then, a woman said, "I'm sorry a dime." A man picked up on that and said, "I'm sorry a quarter." A child chimed in with, "I'm sorry a nickel." Others joined in until the boy had enough change to return to the store for another dozen eggs. Sometimes sorry is not enough. Sorry needs to be acted upon.

In last week's sermon we looked at sin. Sin is difficult for modern church persons to face. We would rather consider ourselves as "nice people." However, salvation--being in right relationship with God--begins with the confession of sin, being sorry for sin. When you honestly look at yourself, admit the sin, confess it to God, God will forgive you your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:10)

We begin with being sorry. The prophet Jeremiah tried desperately to warn his people of coming disaster and of their need to turn back to God, but they wouldn't listen. On one occasion, Jeremiah sorrowfully preached (Jeremiah 8:4-6, 12):

The Lord told me to say to his people: When someone falls down, doesn't he get back up? If someone misses the road, doesn't he turn back? Why then, my people, do you turn away from me without ever turning back? You cling to your idols and refuse to return to me. I listened carefully, but you did not speak the truth. Not one of you has been sorry for his wickedness; not one of you has asked, "What have I done wrong?" Everyone keeps on going his own way, like a horse rushing into battle...My people, were you ashamed because you did these disgusting things? No, you were not ashamed at all; you don't even know how to blush!

Jeremiah believed his people were doomed because they would not feel sorry for their sins. Being sorry is the first step in getting into right relationship with God.

But, sorry is not enough. Living in relationship with God, living happy and productive lives, living your life as God intended it to be lived requires more than being sorry. More than remorse or regret is required. When Jesus began his ministry, he announced his message which is summarized in our gospel lesson today. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

In our Old Testament lesson today, David is more than sorry; he puts sorry into action and repents. David is confronted by the prophet, Nathan, and confesses his sin. He admits he sent Uriah to

his death. He admits his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. David is sorry and confesses, "I have sinned against the Lord." The baby became ill. David repented. For six days David prayed and fasted. In those days, fasting was an expression of sorrow and remorse, an act to reinforce one's repentance. The baby died, but Nathan declared God's forgiveness and Bathsheba's next baby was blessed by God and became King Solomon.

Repentance is not a popular subject these days. I am not preaching popular theology when I preach about sin, being sorry, confession and, the subject today, repentance. You've heard the old story about the painting contractor who watered the paint when he painted the church steeple. He felt that no one would notice because the steeple was so high; but, the next rain washed the paint off the steeple and it ran down the side of the church. A voice thundered out of heaven, "Repaint, you thinner!" Repent means to repaint, to redo. Repent also means to "turn from sin" and "turn to God." Repentance is a fundamental reorientation of the whole person.

Repentance is the act of turning to God, and turning from your past life. This involves changing your life style. I was privileged a few years ago to hear a lecture by Dr. Hobart Mowrer, research professor of psychology at the University of Illinois. He changed his therapeutic method from helping the clients lower their standards so they were more comfortable with their sin, to helping people improve their performances and live up to their conscience. The results have been dramatic. Honest, responsible living improves mental and emotional health. He points out that integration and integrity come from the same root word. There can be no integration within a human being unless he or she aims for a life of integrity.

Jesus also included in the meaning of repentance the necessity of putting relationships with others in order. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus said:

If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God.

A man went to see a professional counselor. He said, "I have something that has bothered me for years. When I was in college, I cheated on my final Greek exam. When I took the test I accidentally omitted one section of translation. Since I usually did fairly well in class, my professor called me at home to see what had happened. I told him I didn't realize I had left the translation out. Since he trusted me he said, 'I'll let you translate that passage to me now over the phone.' I agreed, and got both my Greek New Testament and the English translation. Then I translated the Greek over phone, but actually I was reading from the English. I got an 'A' in the class, but to this day I cannot look that professor in the eye.

I have prayed about it, but nothing seems to change. I feel so guilty."

The counselor realized that sorry was not enough. He said, "The only way to resolve your guilt is for you to telephone that professor and admit your cheating." But the man said, "I just can't do it. What would the professor think of me?" But some time later, after thinking it over, he did call the professor, admitted what he had done, and had a long talk with the professor. Later, all he could say was, "I feel like one hundred pounds have been lifted off my back."

I'm afraid many of us are like the man who wrote the Internal Revenue Service, "I can't sleep at night so I'm enclosing \$100. P.S. If I still can't sleep, you'll get the rest."

Many of you remember Emery Barrette who was with us last year assisting with the Finance Campaign. When Emery was in college, he had a conversion experience and committed his life to Jesus Christ. He then began to feel guilty over his past life and especially felt guilty for the sports equipment he had taken from his high school where he had been a star player on the hockey team. Evidently, pilfering, or should I say, taking souvenirs from the locker room, is a common occurrence! Can you picture the look on the coach's face when, late one evening, he answered his door bell to discover Emery on his doorstep loaded down with school property? Feeling sorry is often not enough for peace of mind and peace with God. Repentance is required. Repentance means "turning from sin" and "turning to God." Repentance often means getting relationships with others in order and repentance often means making restitution.

L. Harold DeWolf, in his book What Americans Should Do About Crime, suggests that our courts consider restitution. Among the Shona-speaking people in Zimbabwe, community life is very close. When someone steals, assaults, or otherwise injures another, the headman works out a plan for restitution to the victim. The offender will give the victim cattle, money or labor. Then a feast is held for the community with the offender and his family providing all or most of the food. At the high point of the feast, the headman will recount to everyone what has been done. Then he will ask the victim, "Are you satisfied?" He will ask the offender and his family, "Are you satisfied?" He will ask all assembled, "Are you satisfied?" After receiving affirmative replies, he will solemnly intone, "Then it is finished." After that the community is whole again, and it would be intolerably ill-mannered for anyone ever to mention the crime again.

Now, let us be perfectly clear. Making restitution does not earn God's forgiveness. Salvation--the experience of being in right relationship with God--is not earned by being sorry, or confessing, or repenting. Salvation is a gift from God. The very fact that you feel sorry, that you feel a need for God, that you want to repent, that you want to work out relationships with others, that you feel a need to make restitution, is the result of God's working in your

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life through the Holy Spirit. God takes the initiative. God forgives you and gives you a new heart and a new spirit. Repentance in the deepest sense of the word is beyond human power, and can only be accomplished by God.

Jesus preached that what we cannot do for ourselves, God has accomplished: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand." Response to Jesus' message is something joyful and new. It brings radical change and renewal which is called repentance--a reorientation of your world view, your behavior, and all your relationships.

Sorry is not enough. Turn your life over to Christ. God even gives you the power to do that act, and then leads you through the process of confession and repentance.