

# HARMONY WITH GOD<sup>1</sup>

## Part 1 of 3

by  
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### REPENTANCE RECONSIDERED: REPENT *AND* BELIEVE?

If someone were to ask you, “What must I do to be saved?” what would you say? Many preachers and lay Christians today would probably say, “Repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Of course, there are plenty of people who would give other, more complicated answers than this one. But we are not concerned with those other answers in this article.

We are, however, concerned with the statement, “Repent and believe.” It is obvious that such a statement lays down *two* conditions for eternal salvation, namely, repentance and faith. The number of people who believe that *both these conditions* must be met is very large indeed.

But those who give this reply should do so with a twinge of conscience. Quite obviously they are not giving the answer which Paul and Silas gave to the Philippian jailer who asked that very question: *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?* (Acts 16:30).<sup>2</sup> Their answer said absolutely nothing about repentance. Instead they gave the famous and simple reply, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved* (Acts 16:31).

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<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, 1985 by Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers.

Of course, people who believe the Bible do not want to be charged with contradicting the Bible. So most of those who insist on repentance as a necessary condition for salvation would claim that they are not *really* contradicting Paul and Silas. Many who deny any contradiction claim that repentance is somehow or other implicit in Acts 16:31. But it is truly difficult to see how such a claim can be demonstrated.

Equally to the point is another hard fact. The Gospel of John, which claims to be written to bring men to faith and eternal life (John 20:30–31), never once even mentions repentance. Still less does it make it a condition for eternal life along with faith. If John had really believed that to be saved one must “repent and believe,” it staggers the mind to consider that he never manages to say so in 21 chapters of his Gospel. By contrast, he says over and over again that one must *believe*.

Once again, supporters of the “repent and believe” doctrine frequently say that repentance is “implicit” in John’s Gospel. But this claim bears all the earmarks of what is called “eisegesis”—the process of reading into a text what one wants to find there, even when it is obviously not there. No interpreter of Scripture should be allowed this privilege unless he can show that in some way the text itself demands an implicit idea that is not directly expressed.

Of course, all texts, whether human or divinely inspired, work on assumptions that are not always directly stated. But this fact does not relieve the interpreter from demonstrating that these assumptions do indeed underlie the text he is considering. And it is nothing less than a monumental task to show, if repentance is truly a condition for eternal life, that the text of the Gospel of John clearly requires us to understand this. Nothing is less probable on its face than the claim that John omits any mention whatever of a fundamental condition for eternal salvation in a book in which he seeks to bring people to that salvation (John 20:30–31).

It is the claim of this article that no such demonstration is possible, either in Acts 16:31, in the Gospel of John, or anywhere

else in the New Testament. The bottom line is that repentance is *not* a condition for eternal life, and that faith alone is the sole condition on which God eternally saves human beings.

### ARGUMENTS FROM SILENCE— AND ALL OF THAT

In *Absolutely Free!*,<sup>3</sup> I stated that the silence of the Gospel of John about repentance was “the death knell for lordship theology.” That statement remains true today.

However, even some who hold to the absolute freeness of grace have raised the objection that this claim is an “argument from silence” and therefore invalid. This, however, is not the case. In the first place, we do not really have here an argument *from* silence, but an argument *about* silence. The issue is: *Why* is John silent about repentance in the Fourth Gospel?

A classic “argument *from* silence” would run like this: “Our historical data for (let us say) the period 1168 BC to 1068 BC is sketchy and incomplete, so Arabia could have been a major regional power during that time.” The argument is worthless, of course. The silence of our historical data tells us nothing about the power status of Arabia during the period described.

The present issue is not comparable, as the following discussion will show.

In the second place, it is important to note that those who might reject the argument about the absence of repentance in John’s Gospel are not claiming *not to know* John’s view of repentance. On the contrary, they are making a *direct claim* about John’s theology!

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<sup>3</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989), 148.

For example, lordship people claim that, *of course*, John held that repentance was necessary to salvation. They usually add that, though he does not mention it explicitly, repentance is there *implicitly*. But the search for “implicit” indicators of repentance in John’s Gospel becomes a hopeless hodgepodge (forgive the expression) of guesses and misguided creativity.

On the other hand, many good people who support the freeness of grace maintain that “repentance” can mean simply a “change of mind.” Therefore, when a person turns from unbelief to faith in Christ, he or she has “repented” because they have changed their minds about Christ and about how people receive eternal salvation. The grace people who hold this “change of mind” view of repentance insist that John really *did* believe repentance to be necessary to eternal life, but simply chose never to state it explicitly. From this perspective, repentance automatically happens when one believes. John knew this, but never said so!

If *my* view of John’s silence is an argument from silence, so is the claim that John did believe repentance necessary for receiving eternal life.

So you can see my point when I say that the argument is really an argument *about* John’s silence. *Why* was he silent on this major biblical theme?

### **An Illustration**

Let me illustrate. Suppose a cardiologist wrote a book called *Significant Treatments for Heart Disease*. (I have recently acquired an interest in cardiology and the Lord has provided me with a good heart doctor.) Let us now suppose that in the course of his lengthy book, this cardiologist referred to angioplasty, cholesterol-reducing drugs, and Dr. Dean Ornish’s plan for reversing heart disease without surgery or drugs. But suppose he referred not even once to heart bypass surgery. Would we not find this surprising?

The absence of any reference to heart bypass surgery in a book on *Significant Treatments for Heart Disease* would literally cry out for explanation. We could, perhaps, conclude that the author was poorly informed and incompetent. But if we knew otherwise, his silence about this widely used medical procedure would carry profound implications. The most obvious explanation for such a silence by a trained professional would be that he held that “heart bypass” surgery was *not significant*, no matter how widely used.

Someone may reply that it is inconceivable that a trained writer could write such a book in the present medical climate. The widespread use of this surgery would virtually compel some reference to it by the author, whether he approved of it or disapproved. Not to mention it would not be a reasonable option. In fact, Ornish’s book *does* mention heart bypass surgery and elaborates on its drawbacks.<sup>4</sup>

This only strengthens my case.

Those who claim that repentance is necessary for salvation (even in the sense of a “change of mind”) have every reason to be uneasy and perplexed about John’s silence. Especially so in the light of our Lord’s command in Luke 24:47 that *repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem* (underline added).

John certainly does not *preach* repentance in his Gospel! You don’t *preach* a truth by being silent about it. One needs only to compare this with how explicit Peter is on this subject in Acts 2:38 and 3:19 (not to mention Paul on Mars Hill, Acts 17:30).

The verb used in Luke 24:47 and translated “preach” is the Greek verb *kēruσσō*, meaning “to proclaim aloud, announce, mention publicly, preach.” If anyone knows how to “preach” a

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<sup>4</sup> See Dr. Dean Ornish’s *Program for Reversing Heart Disease* (New York: Ivy, 1990, 1996).

truth without ever mentioning it by name, please write to me in care of Redención Viva!

### A False Premise

The whole problem we are discussing is due to a false premise. The false premise is this: *repentance is necessary for eternal life.*

No medical professional today would dream of writing a book on *Significant Treatments for Heart Disease* without mentioning bypass surgery precisely because in the context of modern medicine this is a significant treatment in the view of most medical professionals. Only if most medical professionals agreed that bypass surgery was not significant, would it make sense to write a book ignoring it.

In the same way, if no New Testament apostle or prophet held that repentance was necessary for eternal life, then John would have no reason to mention it when telling people how to obtain that life. This explanation—and this only—fits the facts naturally.

This is why I refer to the view that “repentance is necessary for eternal life” as a false premise. This view is in reality a *petitio principii*—that is, a begging of the question. One cannot demonstrate it from Scripture.

Let’s put it this way. If we *started* with the Gospel of John, would we have any reason from the Gospel itself to suppose that repentance was necessary for eternal life? The obvious answer is no.

Why then do we think that John included it implicitly in his Gospel? Because we bring to the Gospel the untested and unprovable assumption that *other* New Testament texts show that repentance *is* necessary. Apart from this false premise, John’s

silence about repentance is both easily explained and extremely natural.

During the course of this article, we will look at virtually every text that might be claimed as proof that repentance is necessary for eternal life. I have also covered much of that ground in chapter 12 of *Absolutely Free!* But let us simply state here what we will be affirming in the following discussions:

No text in the New Testament (not even Acts 11:18) makes *any direct connection* between repentance and *eternal* life. No text does that. Not so much as one!

### **Conclusion**

We ought, therefore, to reexamine our ingrained assumptions about New Testament repentance. I know how hard this is for preachers, teachers and lay people who have long believed and/or taught otherwise. I myself once held the “change of mind” view of repentance and taught it.

But the Scriptures have persuaded me otherwise. So I invite the reader of this article to consider the Scriptures with me and to be open to the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

### **TO REPENT OR NOT TO REPENT: JOHN’S DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE**

In the last section, we considered the fact that John is silent in his Gospel on the subject of repentance. In view of the purpose of the Gospel of John to bring people to eternal life (John 20:30–31), we were constrained to conclude that John did not regard repentance as a condition for eternal salvation.

John is also silent about repentance in his three epistles. This is an interesting fact to which we will return later in this article.

But John is far from totally silent on the subject of repentance. In fact, he refers to it no less than a dozen times in the book of Revelation. It is surprising to realize that John has more references to the subject of repentance than any New Testament writer except Luke!

The author who ranks third in references to repentance is Matthew (8 times). But all other writers trail Luke, John, and Matthew by a considerable distance. Mark has only 4; Paul in all of his thirteen letters only 5; the author of Hebrews 3; and Peter 1. Jude has none.

These counts denote the actual number of occurrences of the Greek noun (*metanoia*) and verb (*metanoēō*) for repentance. Even if we also count *metamellomai* (a less common word for repentance), Matthew only gains 3 uses, Paul 1 and the writer of Hebrews 1. Paul also has 2 uses of *ametameletos* (= “not to be repented of”).

John’s showing here is impressive, considering that all of his references are confined to one book. It seems clear that if we examine the dozen uses in Revelation, we ought to get a fairly definite idea about John’s own doctrine of repentance.

### **Repentance for the Saved in Revelation**

It is striking that we discover eight of John’s twelve references to repentance (all using the Greek verb *metanoēō*) in the letters to the seven churches. There is no good reason to take any of these references to unsaved people, and plenty of reason to refer them to the saved.

For example, in Revelation 3:14–22 our Lord rebukes the church of Laodicea for being spiritually *lukewarm*. Then in 3:19 He states: *As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.* The reference to chastening here recalls the teaching of Hebrews 12:3–11 and clearly shows that the

Laodiceans are the Savior's beloved children whom He desires to correct. They can avoid His chastening if they *repent!*

To the same effect is Revelation 3:3. The Lord has just declared to the Christians of Sardis that *I have not found your works perfect* (Greek = complete) *before God* (3:2). He then commands them to *remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent*. On its face it is plain that these are Christians who have actually labored for the Lord but whose works for Him are not yet complete. They have been overtaken by a spiritual deadness, or lethargy (cf. 3:1), from which they need to arouse themselves. They need to *be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain* (3:2) and *hold [them] fast* (Greek = “guard” or “keep” [them]). However, to do this they need to *repent* of the deadness of their present experience (cf. James 2!), which was threatening the loss of their previous accomplishments for God (cf. 2 John 8).

That this is an experience appropriately applied to true Christians alone, is a fact that will probably only be denied by teachers of lordship salvation! Very obviously, John is not telling these people that what they *really* need to do is to *believe and be saved*. If anyone can find *that* in this text, he is a magician!

Basically the same thing can be said of the remaining references to repentance in the letters to the seven churches. The Christians in Ephesus have *left their first love* (Revelation 2:4). Their original devotion to Christ has died down. So the Lord says to them: *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent* (2:5). The future of the Ephesian church as a witness for her Lord depended on whether the Christians there would *repent* of their cooling devotion to the Son of God and resume their previous vigorous activity for Him.

In the church at Pergamos (Revelation 2:12–17) there were those who held false doctrine that encouraged compromise with

pagan immorality and idolatry (2:14–15). The church is called upon to repent of its toleration for such teaching, and warned that otherwise the Lord will deal with these people Himself (2:16).

Finally, the female teacher in the church at Thyatira, who called herself a prophetess (Revelation 2:20), had been warned to repent of the immoral conduct to which her false teaching led, but she had failed to repent (2:21). For this reason, the woman herself would be disciplined by sickness (2:22; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30), and her followers in the church would experience great tribulation, or trouble, *unless they repent[ed] of their deeds* (2:22). The apostle threatens no one here with hell, but simply with severe discipline.

The early church did indeed have female prophets, as is made plain by Acts 21:9 and 1 Corinthians 11:5. Whether the woman designated as *Jezebel* in Revelation 2:20 was a true prophetess by spiritual gift and now claimed to utter prophecies that God had not given to her, or whether she was not a gifted prophetess at all, it is not possible to say. But that she was also unsaved goes far beyond anything indicated in the text. Even the false teachers, Hymenaeus and Alexander, Paul treats as subject to discipline to purge them from blasphemy (1 Timothy 1:20).<sup>5</sup>

The New Testament plainly recognizes that some false teachers (though not all) are Christians who have gone far astray and will perhaps only be recovered by severe discipline. There is nothing to show that the *Jezebel* of Thyatira (probably not her real name) was not one of these. The statement of her impending punishment strongly suggests that John thought of her as a Christian who had seriously strayed from God. Despite God's longsuffering patience, she had ignored her opportunity to *repent* and now faced His approaching discipline.

In these eight occurrences of the verb “to repent” in the letters to the churches, not so much as one of them suggests the idea of turning from unbelief to faith in God or Christ. In every

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *The Gospel Under Siege*, 2d ed. (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992), 83–84.

case a particular failing of some duration is the object of the repentance that our Lord commands.

The apostle deliberately chooses the words *of some duration*. In every case in Revelation 2 and 3 something has gone wrong with either the attitude or the behavior (or both) of some (or all) of the Christians in these churches. Significantly there is no call to repentance in the letters to the churches at Smyrna (2:8–11) and Philadelphia (3:7–13). The reason is obvious: there is nothing about which these churches need to repent!

This is obviously the reason for the absence of a call to repentance in 1 John. The church, or churches, addressed (perhaps the leaders are chiefly in view) are in excellent spiritual condition (cf. 1 John 2:12–14, 21) and need simply to *remain* (= “abide”) in the truth and in fellowship with their Lord (2:24, 28). The same may be said of the church addressed in 2 John and of Gaius, who is addressed in 3 John.

As John’s use of repentance in Revelation 2 and 3 makes clear, repentance is for those Christians who have in some way gone astray. The issue is not some failing which is immediately addressed by confession (1 John 1:9). The issue is always some prolonged attitude or practice. The same view of repentance is found in Luke 15 that we will address in subsequent sections.

### **Repentance for the Unsaved in Revelation**

There are four uses in Revelation of the Greek verb for repentance (*metanoēō*) which are clearly applied to the unsaved. These are: Revelation 9:20–21 and 16:9, 11. What is remarkable about these uses is that *they too* refer to repentance from long-held sinful attitudes or practices. In no case is there a reference to repentance from *unbelief*.

In Revelation 9:20–21 the list of things not repented of is long: *The rest of mankind . . . did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold,*

*silver, brass, stone, and wood . . . And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.* This is pure and simple an assertion that the unsaved did not repent of *their sins*. And this unrepentance was maintained in the face of the devastating plagues of Revelation 8 and 9, and in particular the plague of Revelation 9:13–19, by which a third of the world’s population is killed (Revelation 9:18)!

In Revelation 16:9, as men are scorched with heat from the fourth bowl judgment, *they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory* (underlining added)! Put another way, they refused to stop blaspheming and withheld the glory that was due to Almighty God (cf. Romans 1:21). In Revelation 16:11, under the fifth bowl judgment, men *blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds* (underlining added).

Clearly there is nothing in these texts about repenting of *unbelief*! In fact, mankind actually *believes* that God is behind these plagues and they refuse to change either their attitude or their ways. For this reason, God’s judgments continue to fall. There is no issue in these texts that pertains directly to eternal salvation. The issue is plainly unrepentant behavior that justifies the *temporal judgments* of God.

In Revelation, therefore, repentance is *always* related to God’s temporal judgments, whether of His own people or the world at large. This is John’s clear doctrine of repentance; he never relates repentance to obtaining eternal life.

## Conclusion

Many very fine grace people have held the view that the apostle John, at least in his Gospel, regarded repentance as a “change of mind” that turned one from unbelief to faith in Christ. However, it is impossible to find such a doctrine of repentance anywhere in John’s writings.

The view that repentance is sometimes a virtual synonym for saving faith is without any evidence in John's five New Testament books. In the following sections I hope to show that this concept of repentance cannot be found anywhere in the New Testament. Instead, the doctrine of repentance as found in Revelation is in fact the teaching of all the New Testament authors.

### **THE NINETY-NINE RIGHTEOUS SHEEP: REPENTANCE IN LUKE 15:1–10**

Just as 1 Corinthians 13 is the classic New Testament chapter on love, and Hebrews 11 is the classic chapter on the life of faith, just so Luke 15 is the classic chapter on repentance. The three parables that it contains are familiar and much loved. They are, of course, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Son.

It is a great irony, however, that these three stories are very often misread and misunderstood. This irony is even greater in view of the fact that the text of Luke gives us a clear and unmistakable clue to their meaning. In this section we shall consider the first two of these stories as they are found in Luke 15:1–10. In the following section, we will look at the Parable of the Lost Son, while in the one after that we will consider this son's self-righteous older brother.

#### **The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

Luke 15, verses 1–3, introduce the three parables. There we see the Pharisees and scribes complaining that our Lord Jesus *receives sinners and eats with them* (v 2). They are scandalized by the fact that He accepts them into table fellowship with Himself. This no self-respecting Pharisee would condescend to do. In response to their criticism, Jesus proceeds to tell these stories, beginning with the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

It is clear on the face of this story that the shepherd of this parable owns all one hundred sheep. This is plain in the words,

*What man of you, having a hundred sheep* (15:4) and from the words *my sheep* in verse 6. As was frequent in Palestine, especially in the southern region called the Negeb (= “the dry”), this shepherd was grazing his flock in territory described as *the wilderness*. This sparsely inhabited region contained sufficient vegetation to sustain sheep as their shepherd led them from grazing place to grazing place. Thus, in the parable, the shepherd is feeding his sheep when he notices that one of them has wandered away from his flock.

Upon making this discovery, he leaves the ninety-nine *in the wilderness* in order to *go after the one which is lost* (15:4). From the perspective of a Middle Eastern shepherd, this can hardly mean anything other than that he felt the flock was reasonably safe and would stay together.

After recovering the lost sheep, he places it lovingly *on his shoulders* (15:5) and brings it back to the flock. When the day’s grazing is over and *he comes home* (15:6), he has a party to which he invites *his friends and neighbors* (15:6) so they can share his joy in having *found my sheep which was lost* (15:6). That this “party” parallels the celebrations staged in the next two parables, goes without saying.

Our Lord’s application of this story is crystal clear: *I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just [Greek, *dikaios* = righteous] persons who need no repentance” (15:7; underlining added). The underlined words are the key to this parable. The ninety-nine sheep represent people who are “righteous” and who therefore do not need to repent. This is what the text plainly states.*

But this is not how it is interpreted by many who read and/ or teach it. Instead, the *ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance* are transformed into “ninety-nine unrighteous persons who only think they need no repentance!” That this manifestly contradicts the text and turns it upside down is so clear that this rereading of our Lord’s words is self-refuting.

Plainly stated, the Parable of the Lost Sheep is not about eternal salvation at all. It is about a Christian who wanders away from God's flock and pursues the pathway of sin. His restoration to fellowship with his Savior and Shepherd, as well as to fellowship with the Lord's people, who have not wandered away, requires repentance. When such a recovery of a straying believer occurs, it fills the Great Shepherd with joy and heaven itself rejoices with Him. And so, of course, should God's people as well (a point to be addressed in the story about the brother of the Prodigal Son: Luke 15:25–32).

After more than 40 years of ministering to the group of believers who now gather at Victor Street Bible Chapel, I am thankful that the Lord has allowed me to see this parable fulfilled repeatedly. Time after time, the loving Shepherd has found and restored various ones of God's straying sheep to the flock.

### **The Parable of the Lost Coin**

Our Lord's second parable in Luke 15 reinforces as well as complements the first. If the Shepherd Himself is concerned for any of His sheep that stray, so also the Christian Church should be. As has often been suggested, the woman in this parable is very naturally taken as representing the Church itself.<sup>6</sup>

Once again, it is obvious that the woman of the parable is the person to whom the ten coins belong. One of them becomes lost (15:8), but just as clearly the other nine do not! The story assumes that the woman knows exactly where they are. She is looking for the one lost coin, not the other nine.

In order to find it, however, she must *light a lamp* and use a broom to *sweep the house* (15:8). It is evident that the place where she lives is both dark and dirty, and that she believes the lost coin may be found in some dark nook or cranny where there might be

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<sup>6</sup> Luke directs both parts of his two-volume work (Luke–Acts) to the same man, Theophilus. Luke–Acts is a book for the Church.

considerable dirt or trash. The parable thus admirably fits the reality that the Christian Church lives in a world which contains more than enough spiritual darkness and moral filth (cf. 2 Peter 1:19, *as a light that shines in a dark place*).

Born again Christians do indeed go astray in this world of darkness and filth, but they still retain their identity and value to God just as a lost coin is still valuable no matter how much trash it is buried under. The Church is responsible to recognize, as did the woman in the parable, that the straying Christian still has enormous value and needs to be returned to the company of other believers so that his value and theirs may be properly utilized for God. A Christian church is always “richer” when a straying Christian returns to the fold.

The recovery of such a Christian is a source of joy to the Church and to its heavenly “friends and neighbors,” the angels of God (15:9–10). That the angels are intimately concerned with what happens in the Christian church, passages like Ephesians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 11:10; Hebrews 1:14; 12:22–23 and other texts, clearly indicate. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 11:10 in particular implies that the angels observe Christian practices and activities (cf. also Luke 24:6–7). Employing the imagery of the Lord’s parable, we might say that whenever the Church gathers, the angels are “invited” and in fact attend as unseen guests! So whenever the Church gathers and rejoices over a backslidden believer who has been recovered, it does so *in the presence of the angels* who are there to share that joy (15:10)!

### Conclusion

There is nothing at all in either parable about eternal salvation. In fact, Luke 15 as a whole is a celebration of one of the most joyous experiences that a Christian congregation can have—the recovery for God, and for the congregation, of one of God’s precious sheep and valued coins. May the Lord grant this joy repeatedly in grace churches all over the world!

The misreading of the parables of Luke 15 as though they applied to the salvation of sinners is very unfortunate. To be sure, it is wonderfully joyful when an unsaved sinner gets saved. That joy too has come many, many times to Victor Street Bible Chapel. But that is not the joy described in these parables about repentance. To be saved, all the unsaved person needs to do is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31)!

### **LOST SON, NOT LOST SONSHIP: REPENTANCE IN LUKE 15:11–24**

Luke 15 is the classic New Testament chapter on repentance. Here, if anywhere, we should meet the fundamental teaching on New Testament repentance. As we saw in Luke 15:1–10, in the previous section, the first two parables of the chapter—The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin—very clearly refer to the repentance of a born again person who has wandered away from God’s flock and has become *lost* in the sense of being out of touch with the Lord and His people.

#### **A Son before He Repented**

But if this is evident in the first two parables, it is even more evident in the third parable, The Prodigal Son. Indeed the very title by which the church knows this parable declares the parable’s clear intent. This is the story of a son who has wandered away from his father! The New Testament does not disclose any sense in which we may regard unregenerate people as “sons of God.” It follows, therefore, that the reference is to a Christian who has gone astray, just as the lost sheep and the lost coin have exactly the same reference.

It is notable that even in the far country where the Prodigal squanders his resources, he is fully conscious of his sonship. We are told: *But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and am*

*no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants*" (Luke 15:17–19; emphasis added). Are these the words of an unsaved person? Hardly.

Even after squandering the resources that his father had placed in his hands, the Prodigal is still fully aware that he is his father's son. He is also aware of the lofty privilege of being a son, but he now feels that his conduct makes him unworthy of such a status. He intends to tell his father to reduce him to the level of a hired servant, not because he is not a son, but because he feels *no longer worthy to be called your son*. We hear an echo of these words in the lovely statement of 1 John 3:1, *Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God!* The Prodigal feels he has fallen far below the privilege of being called a child or son of his father.

The repentant Prodigal now goes back home and is welcomed unconditionally by his father who *ran and fell on his neck and kissed him* (15:20). The son's confession is genuine but he underestimates the fullness of his father's forgiving grace. So he not only says, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight*, but he also adds, *and am no longer worthy to be called your son* (15:21).

The father brushes such an idea aside, however, and he says, *Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet* (15:23, emphasis added). This is not the treatment accorded to hired servants! And the father also says, *And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found* (15:23–24; underlining added). Both in terms of his treatment of the Prodigal, as well as by his direct announcement, the father proclaims the returning young man to be his son.

But it should be noted carefully that he is not *just now* becoming his son. On the contrary this same son, previous to this moment, had been *dead* and *lost*, but is now *alive* and *found*. These words of course do not mean that this son had somehow literally

lost his life. Instead they describe his period of separation from his father. On the level of the entirely human experience in this parable, the father has felt the absence of his son as deeply as if he had died, because he had totally lost contact with him. Their reunion is like a glorious coming to life and a joyful rediscovery of the shared father-son experience. Any father who has long been separated from a son whom he loves dearly can fully relate to these words.

### **An Enormous Waste**

Once one properly understands this parable as applying to the restoration of a straying Christian, its vital lessons leap to life. To begin with, just as the Prodigal *wasted his possessions with prodigal living* (15:13), so also the straying Christian wastes the resources God has placed in his possession. Time spent out of touch with God is an enormous waste of time, energy, strength, ability, and opportunity. When such a Christian is restored to the Lord, he often experiences profound regret for what has been wasted during his period of separation from God. This is especially true when the separation has lasted for years, as it sometimes does. I actually know fellow Christians who have expressed exactly this realization to me.

### **A Deep Sense of Unworthiness**

In returning to God, particularly after a long separation from Him, repentant Christians are likely to experience a deep sense of unworthiness. They may feel that they have disgraced the Christian name and they may be all too aware of bringing disrepute to God their heavenly Father. Such Christians need to be reassured of the full and gracious acceptance God extends to them when they return. Their forgiveness is complete and they need not feel as if they are forever second-class Christians, as if they now served God as mere hired servants. Instead they should be encouraged to enjoy all the privileges of sonship, symbolized by the robe, the ring, and the sandals.

## **Lost Opportunities**

But as is transparent from the story, though the Prodigal returns to the full experience of sonship, he does not get back the possessions he has foolishly squandered. Restoration for the straying Christian is real, but the loss of time, potential, and opportunity is equally real. The portion of any Christian's life that is spent away from God, as well as the rewards that might have been earned during that time, are permanently lost.

## **A Time to Rejoice**

But though all this is true and sobering, it does not destroy the reality of the joy that should always be a part of the "homecoming" of a repentant son. The parable assures us that God our Father always rejoices when one of His sons comes home. And if He does, so should we.

## **No Grounds to Doubt**

Finally, as this story shows, if one properly understands the gospel of grace, the backsliding Christian will have no grounds to doubt his salvation, even when he is in the far country of sin. Like the Prodigal himself, he will still know that he is a son of the Father whose fellowship he has left. Needless to say, this assurance can be a powerful incentive for the backslider to "go home!"

Years ago, I heard a young man in a Baptist church up north give his testimony about returning to God from a deeply backslidden condition. But he assured us that he always knew he was a Christian because he had learned with regard to salvation that "there was nothing I could do to earn it, and nothing I could do to lose it!" If all churches taught the gospel that clearly, they would lay a solid foundation for the return of more than a few prodigal sons!

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