

“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” (Lk 15:7)

✠ Lecture XVI: The Saving Repentance ✠

There are many differences between the Orthodox Church and the Protestant denominations concerning repentance. The following is a summary of these differences:

- Many Protestant denominations emphasize the role of grace in repentance and neglect the human free will and striving. They claim that grace *alone* will save the person.
- Others consider repentance a mere human work and hence say that it plays no role in salvation since, in their minds, salvation is through faith *alone* without any human work.
- The practice of repentance itself is different because Protestants concentrate on happiness and joy without giving the spirit an opportunity to regret and feel sorry for the sin.

✠ Symbol of Repentance in The Old Testament:

- Salvation in the Orthodox concept is available only through the precious blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Passover lamb was a symbol of our Lord Jesus Christ, “...For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor 5:7). Through the blood of the lamb, the children of Israel were saved from the fatal plague, “For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you” (Ex 12:23)
- In this example of the Passover lamb and the doors stricken with blood, we notice a very significant symbolism that highlights the role of repentance in salvation. The Passover lamb must be eaten with unleavened bread (Ex 12:8) and no leaven would be kept in all the quarters for seven days.

→ “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days, and no leavened bread shall be among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters.” (Ex 13:6-7)

- The Lord emphasized strongly the removal of leaven from the houses and set a sever punishment of cutting off anyone who would dare to eat leavened bread.

→ “For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.” (Ex 12:15) - “... You shall eat unleavened bread ... For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.” (Ex 12:18,20)

- Leaven is a symbol of evil and sin while unleavened bread is a symbol of righteousness and purity. St. Paul said, “Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8)
- The removal of leaven (sin) was a symbol of repentance and the seven days represent the whole life because the number (7) is a symbol of perfection. Therefore, though a person may escape the death by the plague through the blood of the lamb, this person will be cut off the congregation if he/she eats leaven, “...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13:3). Also the Passover lamb was to be eaten with **bitter herbs** (Ex 12:8) that represent the role of regret and sorrow associated with repentance, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation” (2 Cor 7:10). So even though the Passover lamb reminded the Israelites with the joy of salvation, it had to be eaten with bitter herbs. Indeed, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4)

✚ Biblical Verses About the Importance of Repentance:

- “Thus says the Lord God: Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations” (**Ezek 14:6**). “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin... I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore turn and live” (**Ezek 18:32**)
- “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say: Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (**Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15**)
- “...I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (**Mt 9:13; Mk 2:17; Lk 5:32**)
- “Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.” (**Mt 11:20; Lk 10:13**)
- “John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (**Lk 3:3; Mk 1:4**). “Therefore bear fruit worthy of repentance” (**Mt 3:8**).
→ We know that “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (**Rom 6:23**). The above verse means that the blood of Lord Jesus Christ will remit **only** the sins that we repent about.
- When the Lord sent His disciples, it was written, “So they went out and preached that people should repent” (**Mk 6:12**)
- “...Unless you repent, you will likewise perish.” (**Lk 13:3,5**)
- “Thus it was written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations.” (**Lk 24:46-47**)
- “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” (**Acts 2:38**)
- “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.” (**Acts 3:19**)
- “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel.” (**Acts 5:30-31**)
- “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” (**Acts 11:18**)
- “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” (**Acts 17:30**)
- “...I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision but declared ... that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” (**Acts 26:19-20**)
- “The Lord is not slack concerning His Promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (**2 Pet 3:9**)
- “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath.” (**Rom 2:4-5**)
- In the Holy Book of Revelation, it was written twice, “Repent, ... or else” (**Rev 2:5,16**) also, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent” (**Rev 3:19**)

✚ What Exactly is Repentance?

Repentance: “To feel regret over (an action, intention, etc.) **As to change one’s mind** (Webster’s New World Dictionary). St. Paul said, “... be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (**Rom 12:2**) – “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (**Eph 4:23**) - “For to be carnally minded is death but to be spiri-ually minded is life and piece” (**Rom 8:6**). This change in one’s mind must be accompanied by change in one’s actions, “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (**Col 3:9-10**) – “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor working with his hands what is good that he may have something to give to him who has need” (**Eph 4:28**)

‡ **FAQ:**

Q1: What is the sin that will never be forgiven?

A1: There is no sin without forgiveness except the one without repentance. Our Lord said, “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men” (**Mt 12:31**). The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (**Jn 16:8**) if we refuse the work of the Spirit within us, we will not repent and this is considered blasphemy against the Spirit and consequently it is not forgiven. So blasphemy against the Spirit means refusing repentance.

Q2: Why do we have to confess to a priest? Why not burry one’s head in one’s handkerchief and tell God that one is sorry?

A2: First of all, confessing to a priest doesn’t mean that you cannot burry your head in your handkerchief and tell God that you’re sorry. Second, if this method of being sorry is not effective when you are caught by a traffic policeman, why then should it be effective with God? Since sin is a result of pride “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall” (**Prov 16:18**), it requires humiliation and mortification of the ego, which is available when one exposes one’s faults to a fellow man. Finally, confessing to a priest gives you an opportunity to receive guidance and to hear advice, which helps you to resist sin and grow spiritually.

Q3: Why confess to a priest? May be he is not as holy as the penitent!

A3: That indeed could be, but though he is not holier in his person, he is holier in his power because our Lord gave this power to His Church – only the Church claims it and only the Church exercises it. The mayor of a town may not be as good as some of the citizens, but he has the power that the citizens do not have; so it is with the priest who is an instrument of the Lord. Nevertheless, a confessor should be wise in selecting the father of confession.

Q4: How can a human being forgive sins? Isn’t forgiveness for God alone?

A4: There are three types of forgiveness:

- a) God’s Forgiveness
- b) Peoples’ Forgiveness
- c) The Priests’ Forgiveness

→ God’s forgiveness means that He is the Judge of all the earth (**Gen 18:25**).

→ People’s forgiveness means their acceptance of other peoples’ apologies and confessions, reconciling with them and not holding any grudges. As we pray saying, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”, here the first two types of forgiveness are combined; God’s & Peoples’.

→ The priests’ forgiveness is basically the declaration, through the Holy Spirit, of God’s forgiveness. During our Lord’s incarnation, He was forgiving sins; that is to say that through the instrumentality of the human nature He was forgiving sins. Here is an anticipation of the fact that it is through humanity that God will continue to forgive sins; i.e. through those who are endowed with the Sacramental power of ordination to do so, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them” (**Jn 20:22-23**). Man cannot forgive sins, but God can forgive sins through man as St. Paul explains, “All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and **has given us the ministry of reconciliation ... as though God were pleading through us:** we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” (**2 Cor 5:18,20**).

‡ **Comment:**

Notice the difference between the result of the forgiveness of lay people and the forgiveness of the priests:

→ When someone sins against you, repents and then confesses to you and you forgive their sin, God will forgive YOU not the confessor (**Mt 6:14-15; Mk 11:25-26; Lk 6:37**)

→ When someone repents and confesses to the priest and he forgives their sin, God will forgive the confessor NOT the priest (**Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23**)