

# Wisdom of Repentance

## Ecclesiastes 7:3-13; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 7:8-16



Repentance is not a cherished word in our world. When we hear the term, we think of weakness and guilt. We look down on those who deny their guilt and repent, even while we are uncomfortable with those who would accept responsibility for their actions. Repentance sounds too much like some deadly and contagious disease. At heart, however, isn't repentance much more about learning than weakness? Isn't it more about the courage to accept an error and correct our failures?

For the most part, Ecclesiastes is a depressing book. Its message runs to that of an industry seeking to dull discontentment and distract a harried world from the stresses of the day. Ecclesiastes tells how so many things we would strive after are empty and worthless. Money does not bring satisfaction—it breeds the desire for more. Pleasure is a fleeting pursuit, unless at heart we are content and happy from the start. Among its reversals of the expected, we are reminded that a rebuke from the wise is better than the song of fools. We understand the truth of the statement, but to live that truth is another matter altogether. It requires humility. It requires accepting our limitations. It requires that we repent when we find we have been in error—that we change our direction and shoulder responsibility for our actions.

That is not the gospel as we would like to hear it. Our society argues against accepting responsibility. We don't like the sound of that word. We want to believe that somehow responsibility makes us less than free and autonomous. Somehow it feels like a prison that would shackle us and strangle our sense of independence and happiness. It might require us to engage in humility and live for something more than our own pleasure.

Paul appealed to the believers' sense of responsibility in writing to the church in Corinth. In today's passage, he reminds them of being chastised in his earlier letter, applauding the fact of their repentance and change. At heart, they had not desired to counter God's will and design. The repentance they displayed was proof of their desire to serve God in sincerity of heart.

Paul's words had been firm. He had chastised them for allowing factions to rupture their unity and fellowship. He had called them to task for blatant immorality within the church. Paul had laid bare their self-seeking desire to build themselves up at the expense of others. He rebuked them for not living in accordance with the love of Jesus Christ. He had called them to live their lives from the perspective of the resurrection, recognizing that we must live our lives for something more than the momentary pleasures this world strives to attain.

We might have given up on a church seemingly so far distracted from the purposes of the gospel. Just write them off and move on somewhere else, seeking true believers who desire to live in accordance with the will of God in Christ Jesus. Paul did not give up, however. He sent them a letter of rebuke, instead. He did not know how that letter would be received. Initially, Paul was distressed at hearing the reaction of the believers who were saddened and distressed with his harsh words of criticism and reproof. He had not wanted to hurt the church, but he had to call their hand as they were straying from God's plans for unity and love among the believers.

Paul's letter had brought sorrow. It had not made anyone happy. At the same time, the letter had given them a chance to re-evaluate the way they were living out their faith. It called upon them to give a serious look at how they treated one another and the meaning of the grace that Paul had proclaimed in their midst. It called them to assess the difference between the direction of the society around them and the higher call to unity in the gospel.

Sorrow turned into repentance as they recognized that their actions did not match their desire to serve God. On receiving Paul's letter, they had found the courage to work through their sorrow and accept the critique on the basis of its merit. They set aside the desire to protect themselves from review and assumed responsibility for their actions instead. Theirs was a courageous position. They accepted a position of vulnerability in order to grow in faith and dependence upon God. They accepted Paul's word from a stance of humility, stepping back to evaluate the validity of his words.

Paul's words had pointed to their weaknesses, failure, and guilt. He had highlighted their responsibility to live in accordance with the Christ's call, rather than the drive to self-service. Paul had urged them to gather around the banner of humble service to God, accepting whatever cost they might incur along the process. This was a call to growth—growth at a price. It would challenge them to review and reorder their lives under a different scrutiny.

They become unhappy in the aftermath of Paul's letter. They had likely become despondent and even angry. Even so, they allowed the truth in Paul's words to lead them to repentance. Herein was their wisdom. They recalled that they were nothing other than sinners saved by grace. They took a hard look at themselves under the scrutiny of Paul's letter and chose to reorder their priorities. They decided to allow the gospel to make a worthy change in their lives, becoming the servants of God rather than servants of self.

This was no easy task. This was an humbling experience. They would need to distinguish their worth before God from their actions and ideas. They would have to throw themselves once again upon the grace of Christ Jesus, accepting a fresh start from the God of all grace.

Paul had been anxious about their response. He did not know how they would react to his words of criticism and reproof. They had surpassed his expectations. Their sorrow had turned to repentance and the review of wisdom. The Corinthian believers accepted their limitations and cast their lives again upon the grace of God. This was not weakness, but growth. It took courage to accept their failings and trust God to continue to be faithful, loving, and full of grace. They had to decide to entrust their lives to God's faithfulness rather than their own sense of wisdom and direction.

How will we face the failures that we uncover in our own walk of faith? Will we determine to face our failings with the wisdom and courage for repentance as displayed by the Corinthian believers? Will we face the issues that beset us, or will we hide from them? It takes courage to face the issues. It requires us to fall upon the grace of God. It requires us to learn from our failures and trust God to help us pick up the pieces. Will we live according to faithfulness and courage, or will we cower in fear of being discovered for who we really are? It is not easy to face the issues that confront us, but faith is not a life of ease. Wisdom demands repentance and courage. We have the choice to serve God or our fears. Will we trust God to pick up the pieces?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*