



By David Christensen

Mark Twain writes in his autobiography about the killing of a man named Smarr on the streets of Hannibal during his childhood. "Some thoughtful idiot placed a great family Bible spread open on the profane old man's breast" he recalls with horror. The young Mark Twain struggled with the chilling memory of that moment especially as his fears were stirred by the preachers who used such events to warn the people to repent – again and again. He wrote: "Those were awful nights, nights of despair, nights charged with the bitterness of death. After each tragedy, I recognized the warning and repented; repented and begged; begged like a coward, begged like a dog."¹

The theme is familiar to those with an evangelical heritage. Remorse for sin has long been a favorite topic of revivalist preachers, and extended altar calls played on the fears of sinners to come clean and repent. The intention was laudable, but the result was often destructive. I have seen many who "repented" with great tears but never changed their ways. Many still live under the false assumption that a flood of tears equals true repentance. This error is as insidious as the error of penance to those who grew up under Catholicism. Penance turned repentance into a mechanism for earning redemption. Many Protestant preachers turned repentance into an emotional catharsis through altar calls and the "anxious bench." In both views, repentance becomes something we do to earn grace, but grace cannot be earned. Grace cannot be bought by our tears nor earned through our confession.

The “Parable of the Prodigal Son” is better understood as the “Parable of the Searching Father.”² Jesus tells three stories in Luke 15 to illustrate the joy that God feels when sinners repent (Luke 15:7, 10). Repentance is the turning point in each story, but the theological point of each story is the search by the leading actor who experiences super abounding joy over finding what was lost. The sheep that is lost is found after a great search. The coin that is lost is found after a diligent search. In both cases, there is great rejoicing, and Jesus makes the point that there is even greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents! The sheep and the coin “repent” when they are “found.” Neither the sheep nor the coin does anything in the process. Their willingness to be found is the “repentance” in each story. The focus is on the actions of the owner in both cases. The same is true in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

When does the Prodigal Son repent? A common interpretation is to understand the Prodigal Son as repentant in the pigsty when he “*came to his senses*” (15:17). But is this the turning point of the story? Is this true repentance? I agree with Kenneth Bailey when he observes that this is far from repentance and turns the point of the story completely around if we take it as repentance. Notice what the prodigal son says when he comes to his senses.

How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here in hunger! I will get up and go to my father and will say to him, “Father I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.” (15:17-19).

The son betrays his pride even as he begins the long walk home. Hunger drives his desperate plan. Need moves him to take drastic steps. He realizes that he cannot survive in his present condition, so he develops a strategy for survival. He will return to his father but with his own plan – his own solution for the problem. The son has thought it all through. He regrets his choices. He is desperate, but he is still trying to control the process, a sure sign that he is not repentant. Repentance is not a feeling of regret nor a negotiating strategy to get back what has been lost. Whenever the sinner insists on following his/her plan of redemption, the repentance is false.

There are three parts to his plan. First, he will confess his sin. He knows that he must confess sin even to have a chance at success with his plan. The confession of sin is a negotiating strategy, and the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable would have immediately recognized his words as reflecting the words of Pharaoh’s false repentance.

Then Pharaoh hurriedly called for Moses and Aaron, and he said, “I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you. Now, therefore, please forgive my sin only this once, and make supplication to the Lord your God, that He would only remove this death from me. (Exodus 10:16)

Pharaoh’s confession of sin was a ploy to avoid the consequences of his sin. He sought forgiveness for sin as a means to an end. God granted a reprieve knowing his hard heart remained unrepentant despite his confession and his life would soon show the fruits of unrepentance.

Second, he will confess his unworthiness to be called a son. Once again, this confession is designed to soften the heart of the father to accept the son's solution. The son knows that he cannot present his plan to be a hired servant until he acknowledges that he has hurt his father. He may well feel bad about the hurt he has caused, but he uses it to manipulate his father's feelings. He is in survival mode. He will say and do whatever he needs to say and do to soften his father's heart.

Third, the son will present his solution. He will work as a hired hand to pay off his debt. The son sees the problem as a financial issue. The lost money is the problem, so he will propose a financial solution that meets both his need for work and his father's need for payment. He will work his way back to the place of acceptance. He will pay his way. The heart of the son's plan is his proposal to work as a hired hand. Working as a hired hand is not an act of humility because he has already determined that a hired hand is far above where he is now. Working as a hired hand saves his pride. He is earning his keep, paying for his sins.

If this is repentance, then Jesus contradicts the point of the first two parables in this sequence. The sheep and the coin do not work their way back to the owner. The owner must rescue the sheep and the coin. The Father must rescue the son. The owner pays the price of effort to find the lost sheep and the lost coin. The Father pays the price of humiliation to welcome the son without payment by the son for if the son can earn his way back to the Father, then grace has been nullified by works.³ No, this is the beginning of repentance, but it remains to be seen whether genuine repentance takes place in the story. There are elements consistent with repentance. The son is willing to return, confess sin without rationalizing, demanding or explaining the sin. The son even recognizes the debt he owes and is willing to make restitution. These are good omens that might yet lead to true repentance, but pride taints the plan. The son is repenting of the symptoms of sin not the root of sin. The problem is not the money. Yes, he sinned against the father by squandering the money, but the real problem is his pride that led to the money problem. He has not yet surrendered his pride to the Father. Like many who start down the path of repentance, the son still believes that his analysis of the problem is correct. The son still feels that he can fix the problem if he can just get his father to listen to him.

Susan is brokenhearted. Her husband, Bill, committed adultery and she has left him. When she met with her pastor, she told a story of a man who had been very controlling and demanding. She will not go back to his abusive ways unless Bill changes. Bill comes to meet with the pastor. He knows he messed up. He acknowledges that he has sinned, but he wants the pastor to know about Susan's failings too. She just never met his needs, and he found love with another woman. Bill lays out his plan for dealing with the matter. He is willing to confess his sin to the leadership of the church, but he wants them to know how rotten his wife has been, so they will understand what happened. The pastor begins to probe Bill's heart with questions, and he quickly becomes defensive. He's already said what he did was wrong and he doesn't want to rehash it anymore. What's done is done. Bill argues that he should be forgiven and welcomed back into the church. He thinks the pastor and the church are acting like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The church should forgive him, and the pastor should stop digging into his life. He should be welcomed back into the church just like the Father welcomed the prodigal son.⁴

We can see all the signs of an unrepentant heart in Bill's story. He still wants to call the shots, solve the problem himself. He demands forgiveness from others and blames those who won't accept him back. He is angry with people who want to rehash his sin. He just wants to get back what he lost as quickly as possible. Susan, he says, is bitter and her fight over money in the divorce proves how unfair she is. Bill wants to get on with his life without acknowledging the inner motives that drove him to sin. He has the solution all worked out. He accuses the church of being the only "army that kills its wounded."

The desire to deserve forgiveness drives much false repentance. The core issue is pride, and false repentance does not want to relinquish the pride. Tears hide the pride behind a façade of emotions. In false repentance, the person is not yet ready to change core behaviors and turn away from the inner sin of pride. The prodigal son is still the same person he was when he left, chastened by his failures but focused on his solutions. He just wants to get his life back in order. He wants to manage the problems caused by his sin – to earn back his place in the Father's household.

Surprise!! The Father sees from a distance the son returning and runs to welcome him. The father's actions are embarrassing. Kenneth Bailey comments. "Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. To do so is deeply humiliating. This father runs. The boy is totally surprised. Overwhelmed, he can only offer the first part of his prepared speech, which now takes on a new meaning."⁵ The son truly repents now in the face of his father's grace. Forgotten is the elaborate plan to pay back the father, to earn his own way, to fix the problem. He expresses only the first two statements in his confession – I have sinned, and I am not worthy to be called a son (vs. 21). Here is true repentance. No plan. No plea. No explanation. No argument. No demands for acceptance. The son accepts the father's plan, the father's grace, the father's payment, the father's welcome. The grace of the father humbles the son, and he lets go of his pride at last. Grace ceases to be grace when demanded. Grace is only grace when freely given. Grace cannot be earned. Forgiveness cannot be demanded, only accepted. Accepting grace is deeply humbling.

The hero of the story is not the son who found a way to earn back His father's favor. The hero of the story is the father whose love changed the heart of the son and whose grace restored him to the family. The parable of the searching Father is the third parable in this trilogy explaining God's love. Finding equals repentance in all three parables. God searches for the wandering sheep. God diligently seeks to find the lost coin. God welcomes the prodigal son home when he is still far off by rushing to him on the road. God is the hero of all three stories. Our repentance coincides with God finding us. God does not wait for us to turn our lives around and get ourselves straightened out like the Jewish Rabbis taught. Jesus is expressing a revolutionary concept. God searches for us. The initiative is God's. Repentance is a response to the change that God is moving in us by His search. We do not seek God. God seeks us. We repent because God searches for us.

The essence of true repentance is found in accepting grace. Many pursue repentance in pride. Many change their mind about the situation but explain away the sin. Many agree that what they have done is wrong without ever agreeing that what they are is sinful. Many cannot let go of their pride by insisting on pursuing their plan. Many determine to work harder, longer

and more carefully to avoid the sinful problems and pay back the God who loves them but this very determination betrays the false repentance. Many cannot accept grace. They may even demand forgiveness as due them for their tears. Tears can be a very important part of the repentance process, but repentance must go deeper than our tear ducts to reach our attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles.

The only way to repent is to accept the gracious terms of the Father. It is humbling. Repentance is surrender. It is letting go of our agenda to accept His. It is becoming soft in his hands, pliable putty to be molded as He wants. Repentance requires a willingness to be found and a readiness to be accepted without a determination to be invincible.

¹ Mark Twain, The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Charles Nieder, ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 42 quoted by C. John Miller in Repentance and 21st Century Man (Fort Washington, PA.: CLC Publications, 1975 revised edition, 1980), pp. 21-22.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, “*The Pursuing Father*,” Christianity Today (www.Christianitytoday.com). I am indebted to Kenneth Bailey’s explanation of the parable but I think “searching Father” is more accurate than “pursuing Father” to describe His actions in this parable.

³ Kenneth Bailey writes: “*In short the first two stories are Augustinian. The sheep and the coin must be rescued. But if the Prodigal manages to make his way home by his own efforts, then the third story is Pelagian or at least Semi-Pelagian. That is, it teaches that people are not impeded by original sin or depraved wills and can by their own effort, without divine grace, take steps toward salvation.*” (Ibid.)

⁴ The characters are fictitious, drawn from my experience as a pastor for many years.

⁵ Bailey, p.22.

