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THE NEW TESTAMENT'S MESSAGE OF Repentance

Some people believe that “people don’t change.” That implies that people *can’t* change even if they want to. Without doubt, change is difficult.

Yet the heart of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ affirms that change is not only possible but also a command from God. John the Baptist prepared the way for the Savior with the message that all must repent (see Matthew 3:1–6). His scathing critique of the Pharisees and Sadducees—“O generation of vipers . . . bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matthew 3:7–8)—emphasized their need to change. No one was exempt.

It is easy for us to minimize the need for change in our lives. We live in a world where many people want to live and let live. Yet the New Testament makes clear how great the change is that God expects of all: that we become a new man or a new woman in Christ (see Galatians 6:15).

The Gospel of Luke concludes with the resurrected Lord’s unexpected appearance to His disciples, who were gathered together after His Crucifixion. The Lord told them they were to be His witnesses and that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations” (Luke 24:47). Likewise in our own day, the Lord has directed His leaders to “say nothing but repentance unto this generation” (D&C 6:9; 11:9).

Rather than focusing on outward observances alone, the Savior calls men and women to first make real, fundamental changes inside themselves.

Outward Performances

Jesus was born into a world where the law of Moses guided the religious life of the nation of Israel. It focused on outward performances, on specific actions that were required or forbidden.

The Pharisees, the primary teachers and interpreters of the Mosaic law in the synagogues, searched the books of the Old Testament and found, according to their reckoning, 613 different commandments.¹ They believed that if the people kept every one of these, they would be righteous. In the Doctrine and Covenants, we learn that this “law of carnal commandments” continued “until John” (D&C 84:27).

With the Savior’s earthly ministry came a different focus. He fulfilled the law of Moses and taught the higher law, which emphasized the inner attitudes: the condition of one’s heart and the motivations and desires that lead to all outward actions (see 2 Nephi 26:1; D&C 88:78). For example, the religious leaders of Jesus’s day put much store in ceremonial cleanliness and dietary rules, but Christ said:



“Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.

“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:

“These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man” (Matthew 15:18–20).

The law of the gospel raised the bar profoundly. “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13) was ratcheted up to condemn the anger that is the first step toward murder. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14) became an injunction not to even look “on a woman to lust after her” (Matthew 5:28). Instead of demanding an “eye for [an] eye” (Leviticus 24:20) when wronged, we must return good for

evil, even to the point of loving our enemies (see Matthew 5:44). These are not *natural* responses or ways of living. But the Savior seemed to be calling men and women to make real, fundamental changes inside themselves rather than focusing on outward observances alone.

In our day we may fall into a self-satisfied routine of gospel living. We tell ourselves, “I go to church, I pay my tithing, I live the Word of Wisdom—I’m doing just fine.”

A Parable of Repentance

Without realizing it, we may fall into the same trap as the Pharisees and Sadducees, ignoring those sins that don’t show to the outside world.



Luke recounts a parable from the Savior that should cause us to think carefully about our own lives. In the parable, a Pharisee praying at the temple thought he had no need to change. Like those to whom the Savior spoke the parable, the Pharisee “trusted in [himself] that [he was] righteous” (Luke 18:9). He recited all his goodness: he fasted twice a week and paid tithing. In his pride he felt he had nothing left to work on.

“God, I thank thee,” he said, “that I am not as other men are” (Luke 18:11).

“Standing afar off” was a publican—a tax collector who was much despised in that day. Unlike the self-congratulatory Pharisee, the publican “smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Which one received Jesus’s approval?

Contrasting the two attitudes, Jesus said, “I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other.” Then the Savior added, “For every one that exalteth himself [like the Pharisee] shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself [like the publican] shall be exalted” (Luke 18:14).

The publican recognized his need for change, for repentance. Unfortunately, the Pharisee was blind to his need for improvement. Where are we in our willingness to repent and become what the Savior wants us to be?

This parable warns us against becoming comfortable with our commandment keeping. We must continually strive for the inner change that comes from recognizing that we too—all of us—are sinners. As we do so, humility enters our hearts and minds sufficient to enable further repentance. In our prayers, we will always be better served by an attitude of “God be merciful to me a sinner” than thinking we are better than others.

Godly Sorrow

Following the injunction of the Savior (see Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15), His Apostles and their companions went out into the world with a message of repentance. Paul taught that “godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Godly sorrow can come as we face obvious sins. It can also come as we finally face deep-seated patterns and habits that are part of our makeup, realizing that because of them, we fall short of our God-given potential and cause others pain. Paul stressed that in the life of a disciple of Christ, “all things [must] become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

For this to happen, we must “be strengthened . . . in the inner man” until we rise to “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 3:16; 4:13). That puts into perspective just how much work we must do.

Without realizing it, we may fall into the same trap as the Pharisees and Sadducees, ignoring those sins that don't show to the outside world.

In evaluating our need for repentance, we might ask, “Am I impatient, negative, fearful, critical, self-centered, controlling, light-minded, lustful, cynical, or lazy?” This is far from an exhaustive list, but it’s easy to see that no one escapes entirely the weaknesses of the natural man or woman.

Healing through the Atonement

The Atonement of Jesus Christ can not only cleanse us of sin but also help us overcome the inner weakness that comes from being born as natural men and women in a fallen world.

Christ’s promise is that “if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

No worldly self-help program or makeover can do this. We cannot make the necessary changes to sanctify ourselves without Christ. Only He can reach deep enough to change us in ways we need to change.

The Holy Ghost becomes the means for transmitting the Lord’s character and light into our own being. Eventually we reach the point where “we have the mind of Christ,”

as Paul told the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Of course, we must be willing to change. We choose whether our weakness will make us humble or send us hiding behind all sorts of rationalizations, as Satan would have us do. Too many excuse themselves by saying, “That’s just the way I am.” This should not be an excuse for a disciple of Christ. To “take up [our] cross” and follow the Savior (see Luke 9:23) requires a willingness to be “dead to sins” and to “live unto righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24), changed in the inner man or woman.

Victory over Frailty

Because His “grace is sufficient,” through the process of repentance, we may win a victory over any frailty we have inherited or developed. It is this kind of change that President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) was referring to when he said, “True repentance involves a change of heart and not just a change of behavior.”²

Clearly it is a mistake to think of repentance as an action that applies only to serious sins. The New Testament makes a great contribution to our understanding of repentance by showing that all of us need repentance daily if we are to make changes in the inner self. The great mistake of the Jewish leaders was that they did not know they needed to change or were unwilling to change.

Repentance is the greatest tool for change we have. In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Since we have been told clearly by Jesus what manner of men and women we ought to become—even as He is (see 3 Nephi 27:27)—how can we do so, except each of us employs repentance as the regular means of personal progression?”³

And as the New Testament makes clear, progression through repentance helps us become like the Savior. ■

NOTES

1. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (1992), “Law of Moses,” 2:811.
2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (2014), 90.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, “Repentance,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1991, 30.



REPENTANCE WORKS

“Repentance is real and it works. . . . It has the power to lift burdens and replace them with hope. It can lead to a mighty change of heart that results in our having ‘no more disposition to do

evil, but to do good continually’ [Mosiah 5:2].”

Elder Allen D. Haynie of the Seventy, “Remembering in Whom We Have Trusted,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2015, 123.