

WHO'S SORRY NOW?
JULY 21, 1985
PSALM 32 I JOHN 1:5-2:2

Two of the most difficult words to say in the English language are "I'm sorry." They are difficult to say when they are really meant. Some store clerks use the words quite loosely, like when you express frustration at not being able to find the item you are looking for, or when you are trying to get information or, worse yet, when you are trying to get satisfaction. In such instances, the meaning of "I'm sorry" is intriguing. "I'm sorry" means "I can't or won't do anything about the problem." Or, "There's nothing I can or want to do." Sometimes they say, "That is someone else's responsibility, not mine. I'm sorry." In such a sentence, "I'm sorry" means "Thank God!"

It is difficult to say "I'm sorry" and really mean the words for the meaning then is often, "I'm sorry I hurt you." Or, "I'm sorry I let you down." How difficult it is to say those words to your spouse or your parent or your child or a coworker.

It is difficult for some of us to say "I'm sorry" to God for then the words means, "God, I'm sorry I hurt you." Or, "God, I'm sorry I let you down." Such an expression is an admission of sin. Traditional theological language says, "O Lord, I have sinned. O, Lord, I am a sinner." Few of us want to admit sin. A woman recently told me, "I'm not a sinner. I'm not a bad person." Telling God she is sorry is just not part of her experience.

Moderns, especially church persons, have a difficult time relating to sin. David Head in his book, He Sent Leanness, rewrites the Prayer of Confession to suit our modern mood:

Benevolent and easy-going Father, we have occasionally been guilty of errors of judgment. We have lived under the deprivations of heredity and the disadvantages of environment. We have done the best we could in the circumstances; and have been careful not to ignore the common standards of decency; and we are glad to think that we are fairly normal. Do thou, O Lord, deal lightly with our infrequent lapses. Be thy own sweet Self with those who admit they are not perfect; according to the unlimited tolerances which we have a right to expect from thee. And grant us as indulgent Parent that we may hereafter continue to live a harmless and happy life. Amen.

Dr. Karl Menninger in his best seller, Whatever Became of Sin? in effect called this modern attitude toward sin "hogwash!" Menninger was especially severe with liberal religion which has been telling people there is no such thing as sin. For some time now, many people have assumed that what was once called "sin" is now called "alternate lifestyle," "social maladjustment," "failure to

live up to one's full human potential," or "behavior which is the result of inadequate education." God, that ultimate authority by whom all human behavior was once judged, has been reduced to a kindly, all-affirming, all-accepting indulgent Santa Claus who blesses everything and damns nothing.

Our Scripture lessons this morning point to truths which may be more relevant than we have realized. There may well be a relationship between sin and depression, sin and stress, sin and fatigue. Listen to Psalm 32:3,

When I did not confess my sins, I was worn out from crying all day long. Day and night you punished me, Lord; my strength was completely drained, as moisture is dried up by the summer heat.

Perhaps when you feel depressed, worn out, weak, frazzled, it is because you have not confessed your sins! New idea! Perhaps there is something deep within you that is affecting your attitude and dissipating your energy.

Most sins are buried alive. They struggle and shriek beneath the weight of daily life piled on top of them. But, cover-ups never work! The lesson from I John uses strong language to denounce cover-ups. (1:8) "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and there is no truth in us." The author uses even stronger language. Not only are you deceiving yourself but you are calling God a liar. (1:10) "If we say that we have not sinned, we make a liar out of God, and his word is not in us." God's word is prevented from living, growing, flourishing in you when you deny your sin, when you deceive yourself, when you cover-up. The trouble is the sins don't stay covered up; they attempt to push themselves into awareness but succeed only in going far enough to drain energy. Strength is dried up as moisture is dried up by the summer heat. Confession is the act of bringing the sins up into the level of awareness and consciousness where you then can deal with them.

Some therapies teach you to lower your standards so you can be comfortable with your sin. They deal not with the sin, but with the standards, the values and ethics. Confession and repentance begin with the sin, not the standards. Some modern theologies teach you to deny the reality of sin in your life. You are encouraged to become passive and, therefore, vulnerable.

On the other hand, are those persons who do not deny their sin but bask in it! They berate themselves and beat themselves unmercifully. They wallow in their inadequacies, feed on their failures, rejoice in their self-pity. Such persons need to go beyond groveling in their sin to admitting their sin and saying, "I'm sorry!" They get trapped in their inadequacies and go around in circles, unable to break the bond of their sin. They need to become genuinely sorry for their sin; they need to get sick of it, tired of it; turn it over to Jesus Christ and get forgiven.

Sin is whatever binds you and prevents you from living your life as God intended you to live. Sin is whatever separates you from God

and from your best self. Sin is whatever inhibits you and prevents you from living in freedom as Christ sets you free.

Sin is rebellion--eating the apple in spite of God's instructions. Sin is an act of hostility, pride and obstinacy, refusing to put God at the center of your life. Sin is guilt. Guilt is the consequence of rebellion. There is a sign--WET PAINT. DO NOT TOUCH. I touch. That is the rebellion. But, when the act is ended, my fingers have paint on them. That is the guilt. Guilt hangs on throughout a person's life, often strangling a person.

Sin is not only an act such as rebellion and a feeling such as guilt; sin is a condition, a bondage. Sin is helplessness, being overwhelmed by forces that determine our deeds. Paul lamented, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." We are free and responsible but, at the same time, we are helpless and enslaved.

Jesus sets us free. Whatever needs to be done to forgive, cleanse and free us from the power of sin, has been done by Jesus Christ. The Christian experience is essentially one of empowerment. "If we confess our sins," our lesson today promises, "God will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

What to do with sin is admit it, say "I'm sorry" and get forgiven. Let Jesus wash those sins away. The psalmist promised in Psalm 32, "Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned." Perhaps the cause of some depression is sin; the cause of some weariness and weakness is sin. If so, the antidote is confession and forgiveness. Happiness is confessed sin.

A priest in a small town had a pack of small boys visit him in his rectory; they said they wanted to confess something. One boy after another said he was guilty of "throwing peanuts in the river." This baffled the priest but he let them continue. The last child was the smallest. The good Father hoped he might get a clue from him, but the little boy said nothing about peanuts. "What about throwing peanuts in the river?" asked the priest. "But Father," answered the bewildered little boy, "I'm Peanuts!" Happiness is saying "I'm sorry." Happiness is confessed sin.

Many thousands of alcoholics and former drug addicts are staying sober and clean by energetic application of AA's Twelve Steps which are grounded in confession. An alcoholic seeking recovery begins with the honest confession, "I am an alcoholic." One alcoholic told his story:

My continuing recovery from alcoholism is based on the program of rigorous honesty outlined in A.A. I found it absolutely brutal to look at the truth about myself shown in a written moral inventory. When I admitted these things, the results were unbelievable. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life, but it brought me a freedom and release I never thought possible.

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The experience of this alcoholic is the experience of the gospel. When you honestly look at yourself, admit the sin, confess it to God, God will forgive you your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. That is the promise. Do you know the freedom? Do you know the love of Christ? Do you know the power of the Holy Spirit? Can you sing, "O happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away"?