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The Five Paths of Repentance

St. John Chrysostom

Early Church Father and Doctor of the Church



St. John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople at the beginning of the 5th century, here outlines the five paths of repentance (Hom. De diabolo tentatore 2, 6: PG 49, 263-264). This excerpt is used in the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for Tuesday of the 21st week in ordinary time with the accompanying biblical reading being the call of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 1: 1-19).

Would you like me to list also the paths of repentance? They are numerous and quite varied, and all lead to heaven.

A first path of repentance is the condemnation of your own sins: Be the first to admit your sins and you will be justified. For this reason, too, the prophet wrote: *I said: I will accuse myself of my sins to the Lord, and you forgave the wickedness of my heart.* Therefore, you too should condemn your own sins; that will be enough reason for the Lord to forgive you, for a man who condemns his own sins is slower to commit them again. Rouse your conscience to accuse you within your own house, lest it become your accuser before the judgment seat of the Lord.

That, then, is one very good path of repentance. Another and no less valuable one is to put out of our minds the harm done us by our enemies, in order to master our anger, and to forgive our fellow servants' sins against us. Then our own sins against the Lord will be forgiven us. Thus you have another way to atone for sin: For if you forgive your debtors, your heavenly Father will forgive you.

Do you want to know of a third path? It consists of prayer that is fervent, careful and comes from the heart.

If you want to hear of a fourth, I will mention almsgiving, whose power is great and far-reaching.

If, moreover, a man lives a modest, humble life, that, no less than the other things I have mentioned, takes sin away. Proof of this is the tax-collector who had no good deeds to mention, but offered his humility instead and was relieved of a heavy burden of sins.

Thus I have shown you five paths of repentance; condemnation of your own sins,

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forgiveness of our neighbor's sins against us, prayer, almsgiving and humility.

Do not be idle, then, but walk daily in all these paths; they are easy, and you cannot plead your poverty. For, though you live out your life amid great need, you can always set aside your wrath, be humble, pray diligently and condemn your own sins; poverty is no hindrance. Poverty is not an obstacle to our carrying out the Lord's bidding, even when it comes to that path of repentance which involves giving money (almsgiving, I mean). The widow proved that when she put her two mites into the box!

Now that we have learned how to heal these wounds of ours, let us apply the cures. Then, when we have regained genuine health, we can approach the holy table with confidence, go gloriously to meet Christ, the king of glory, and attain the eternal blessings through the grace, mercy and kindness of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

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