

Two Letters to Theodore After His Fall - Part 2

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prioritizing spiritual health and seeking God's forgiveness, highlighting the possibility of repentance and restoration through God's mercy and love.

Topics: "Repentance", "Gods Mercy"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the power of repentance and the mercy of God, using examples from the Bible and real-life situations to illustrate how even those who have fallen into great sins can rise again through sincere repentance. He emphasizes the importance of not despairing of one's soul, as God's love and forgiveness are always available to those who turn back to Him. Chrysostom highlights the need for genuine confession, hope, and a firm commitment to change in order to break free from the bondage of sin and experience the blessings of reconciliation with God.

Transcript

For if, even as it is, when we have not this power in ourselves, we make violent efforts, and give ourselves up to shadow painting, and because we cannot in reality produce bodily beauty, cunningly devise imitations by means of paints, and dyes, and dressing of hair, and arrangement of garments, and pencilling of eyebrows, and many other contrivances: what leisure should we have set apart for the soul and serious matters, if we had it in our power to transfigure the body into a really symmetrical shape?

For probably, if this were our business, we should not have any other, but should spend all our time upon it: decking the bondmaid with countess decorations, but letting her who is the mistress of this bond-maid lie perpetually in a state of deformity and neglect. For this reason God, having delivered us from this vain occupation, implanted in us the power of working upon the nobler element, and he who cannot turn an ugly body into a comely one, can raise the soul, even when it has been reduced to the extremity of ugliness, to the very acme of grace, and make it so amiable and desirable that not only are good men brought to long after it but even He who is the sovereign and God of all, even as the Psalmist also when discoursing concerning this beauty, said And the king shall have desire of your beauty.

Do you see not also that in the houses of prostitutes the women who are ugly and shameless would hardly be accepted by prize-fighters, and runaway slaves, and gladiators: but should any comely, well-born and modest woman, owing to some mischance, have been reduced to this necessity, no man, even among those who are very illustrious and great, would be ashamed of marriage with her? Now if there is so much pity among men, and so much disdain of glory as to release from that bondage the women who have often

been disgraced in the brothel, and to place them in the position of wives, much more is this the case with God, and those souls which, owing to the usurpation of the devil, have fallen from their original noble condition into the harlotry of this present life.

And you will find the prophets filled with examples of this kind, when they address Jerusalem; for she fell into fornication, and a novel form of it, even as Ezekiel says: To all harlots wages are given, but you have given wages to your lovers, and there has been perversion in you beyond all other women, and again another says You sat waiting for them like a deserted bird. Jeremiah 3:2 This one then who has committed fornication in this fashion God calls back again. For the captivity which took place was not so much by way of vengeance as for the purpose of conversion and amendment since if God had wished to punish them outright, He would not again have brought them back to their home.

He would not have established their city and their temple in greater splendour than before: For the final glory of this house He said shall exceed the former. Haggai 2:10 Now if God did not exclude from repentance her who had many times committed fornication, much more will He embrace your soul, which has now fallen for the first time. For certainly there is no lover of corporeal beauty, even if he be very frantic, who is so inflamed with the love of his mistress as God longs after the salvation of our souls; and this we may perceive both from the things which happen every day and from the divine Scriptures.

See at least, both in the introduction of Jeremiah, and many other places of the prophets, when He is despised and contemned, how He again hastens forward and pursues the friendship of those who turn away from him; which also He Himself made clear in the Gospels saying, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You that kill the prophets and stone them that are sent unto you, how often would I have gathered your children together even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not?

Matthew 23:37 And Paul writing to the Corinthians said that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not reckoning their trespasses unto them, and having committed unto us the word of reconciliation. We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating by us; we beseech you on behalf of Christ be ye reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 Consider that this has now been said to us. For it is not merely want of faith, but also an unclean life which is sufficient to work this abominate enmity.

For the carnal mind we read is enmity against God. Romans 8:7 Let us then break down the barrier, and hew it in pieces, and destroy it, that we may enjoy the blessed reconciliation, that we may become again the fondly beloved of God.

14. I know that you are now admiring the grace of Hermione, and you judge that there is nothing in the world to be compared to her comeliness; but if you choose, O friend, you shall yourself exceed her in comeliness and gracefulness, as much as golden statues surpass those which are made of clay. For if beauty, when it occurs in the body, so fascinates and excites the minds of most men, when the soul is refulgent with it what can match beauty and grace of this kind? For the groundwork of this corporeal beauty is nothing else but phlegm, and blood, and humor, and bile, and the fluid of masticated food.

For by these things both eyes and cheeks, and all the other features, are supplied with moisture; and if they do not receive that moisture, daily skin becoming unduly withered, and the eyes sunken, the whole grace of the countenance immediately vanishes; so that if you consider what is stored up inside those beautiful eyes, and that straight nose, and the mouth and the cheeks, you will affirm the well-shaped body to be nothing else than a whited sepulchre; the parts within are full of so much uncleanness.

Moreover when you see a rag with any of these things on it, such as phlegm, or spittle you cannot bear to touch it with even the tips of your fingers, nay you cannot even endure looking at it; and yet are you in a flutter of excitement about the storehouses and depositories of these things? But your beauty was not of this kind, but excelled it as heaven is superior to earth; or rather it was much better and more brilliant than this. For no one has anywhere seen a soul by itself, stripped of the body; but yet even so I will endeavour to present to you the beauty of this soul from another source.

I mean from the case of the greater powers. Hear at least how the beauty of these struck the man greatly beloved; for wishing to set forth their beauty and being unable to find a body of the same character, he had recourse to metallic substances, and he was not satisfied even with these, but took the brilliancy of lightning for his illustration. Daniel 10:6 Now if those powers, even when they did not disclose their essential nature pure and bare, but only in a very dim and shadowy way, nevertheless shone so brightly, what must naturally be their appearance, when set free from every veil?

Now we ought to form some such image of the beauty of the soul. For they shall be, we read equal unto the angels. Luke 20:36 Now in the case of bodies the lighter and finer kinds, and those which have retreated to the path which tend towards the incorporeal, are very much better and more wonderful than the others. The sky at least is more beautiful than the earth, and fire than water, and the stars than precious stones; and we admire the rainbow far more than violets and roses, and all other flowers which are upon the earth.

And in short if it were possible with the bodily eyes to behold the beauty of the soul you would laugh to scorn these corporeal illustrations, so feebly have they presented to us the gracefulness of the soul. Let us not then neglect such a possession, nor such great happiness, and especially when the approach to that kind of beauty becomes easy to us by our hopes of the things to come. For our light affliction, we read, which is but for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:17 Now if the blessed Paul called such afflictions as you know of light and easy, because he did not look at the things which are seen, much more tolerable is it merely to cease from wantonness.

For we are not calling you to those dangers which he underwent, nor to those deaths which he incurred daily, the constant beatings and scourgings, the bonds, the enmity of the whole world, the hatred of his own people, the frequent vigils, the long journies, the shipwrecks, the attacks of robbers, the plots of his own kinsfolk, the distresses on account of his friends, the hunger, the cold, the nakedness, the burning, the despondency on account both of those who belonged to him, and those who did not belong to him.

None of these things do we now demand of you; all that we ask for is that you would release yourself from your accursed bondage, and return to your former freedom, having considered both the punishment arising from your wantonness, and the honor belonging to your former manner of life. For that unbelievers should be but languidly affected by the thought of the resurrection and never be in fear of this kind, is nothing wonderful; but that we who are more firmly persuaded concerning the things of the other world than those of the present, should spend our life in this miserable and deplorable way and be nowise affected by the memory of those things, but sink into a state of extreme insensibility -- this is irrational in the highest degree.

For when we who believe do the deeds of unbelievers, or rather are in a more miserable plight than they (for there are some among them who have been eminent for the virtue of their life), what consolation, what excuse will be left for us? And many merchants indeed who have incurred shipwreck have not given way, but have pursued the same journey, and this when the loss which has befallen them was not owing to their own carelessness, but to the force of the winds; and shall we who have reason to be confident concerning the end, and know certainly that if we do not wish it, neither shipwreck nor accident of any kind will bring us damage, not lay hold of the work again, and carry on our business as we did aforetime, but lie in idleness and keep our hands to ourselves?

And would that we kept them merely to ourselves and did not use them against ourselves which is a token of stark madness. For if any pugilist, leaving his antagonist were to turn his hands against his own head, and deal blows to his own face, should we not, I ask, rank him among madmen? For the devil has upset us and cast us down; therefore we ought to get up, and not to be dragged down again and precipitate ourselves, and add blows dealt by ourselves to the blows dealt by him.

For the blessed David also had a fall like that which has now happened to you; and not this only but another also which followed it. I mean that of murder. What then? Did he remain prostrate? Did he not immediately rise up again with energy and place himself in position to fight the enemy? In fact he wrestled with him so bravely, that even after his death he was the protector of his offspring. For when Solomon had perpetrated great iniquity, and had deserved countless deaths, God said that He would leave him the kingdom intact, thus speaking I will surely rend the kingdom out of your hand and will give it to your servant.

Nevertheless I will not do this in your days. Wherefore? For David your father's sake, I will take it out of the hand of your son. 1 Kings 11:11 And again when Hezekiah was about to run the greatest possible risk, although he was a righteous man, God said that He would succour him for the sake of this saint. For I will cast my shield He says, over this city to save it for my own sake, and for my servant David's sake. 2 Kings 19:34 So great is the force of repentance. But if he had determined with himself, as you do now, that henceforth it was impossible to propitiate God, and if he had said within himself: God has honoured me with great honour, and has given me a place among the prophets, and has entrusted me with the government of my countrymen, and rescued me out of countless perils, how then, when I have offended against Him after such great benefits, and have perpetrated the worst crimes, shall I be able to recover his favour? If he had thought thus, not only would he not have done the things which he afterwards did, but he would have aggravated his former evils.

15. For not only the bodily wounds work death, if they are neglected, but also those of the soul; and yet we have arrived at such a pitch of folly as to take the greatest care of the former, and to overlook the latter; and although in the case of the body it naturally often happens that many wounds are incurable, yet we do not abandon hope, but even when we hear the physicians constantly declaring, that it is not possible to get rid of this suffering by medicines, we still persist in exhorting them to devise at least some slight alleviation; but in the case of souls, where there is no incurable malady; for it is not subject to the necessity of nature; here, as if the infirmities were strange we are negligent and despairing; and where the nature of the disorder might naturally plunge us into despair, we take as much pains as if there were great hope of restoration to health; but where there is no occasion to renounce hope, we desist from efforts, and become as heedless as if matters were desperate; so much more account do we take of the body than of the soul. And this is the reason why we are not able to save even the body. For he who neglects the leading element, and manifests all his zeal about inferior matters destroys and loses both; whereas he

who observes the right order, and preserves and cherishes the more commanding element, even if he neglects the secondary element yet preserves it by means of saving the primary one. Which also Christ signified to us when He said, Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell. Matthew 10:28

Well, do I convince you, that one ought never to despair of the disorders of the soul as incurable? Or must I again set other arguments in motion? For even if you should despair of yourself ten thousand times, I will never despair of you, and I will never myself be guilty of that for which I reproach others; and yet it is not the same thing for a man to renounce hope of himself, as for another to renounce hope of him. For he who has this suspicion concerning another may readily obtain pardon; but he who has it of himself will not.

Why so pray? Because the one has no controlling power over the zeal and repentance of the other, but over his own zeal and repentance a man has sole authority. Nevertheless even so I will not despair of you; though you should any number of times be affected in this way; for it may be, that there will be some return to virtue, and to restoration to your former manner of life. And now hear what follows: The Ninevites when they heard the prophet vehemently declaring, and plainly threatening; yet three days and Nineveh shall be overthrown, even then did not lose heart, but, although they had no confidence that they should be able to move the mind of God, or rather had reason to suspect the contrary from the divine message (for the utterance was not accompanied by any qualification, but was a simple declaration), even then they manifested repentance saying: Who knows whether God will repent and be entreated, and turn from the fierceness of His wrath, and that we perish not?

And God saw their works that they turned from their evil ways, and God repented of the evil which He said He would do unto them and He did it not. Jonah 3:9-10 Now if barbarian, and unreasoning men could perceive so much, much more ought we to do this who have been trained in the divine doctrines and have seen such a crowd of examples of this kind both in history and actual experience. For my counsels we read are not as your counsels nor my ways as your ways; but far as is the Heaven from the earth, so far are my thoughts from your mind, and my counsels from your counsels.

Now if we admit to our favour household slaves when they have often offended against us, on their promising to become better, and place them again in their former portion, and sometimes even grant them greater freedom of speech than before; much more does God act thus. For if God had made us in order to punish us, you might well have despaired, and questioned the possibility of your own salvation; but if He created us for no reason than His own good will, and with a view to our enjoying everlasting blessings, and if He does and contrives everything for this end, from the first day until the present time, what is there which can ever cause you to doubt?

Have we provoked Him severely, so as no other man ever did? This is just the reason why we ought specially to abstain from our present deeds and to repent for the past, and exhibit a great change. For the evils we have once perpetrated cannot provoke Him so much as our being unwilling to make any change in the future. For to sin may be a merely human failing, but to continue in the same sin ceases to be human, and becomes altogether devilish. For observe how God by the mouth of His prophet blames this more than the other.

For, we read, I said to her after she had done all these deeds of fornication, return unto me, and yet she returned not. Jeremiah 3:7 And again: from another quarter, when wishing to show the great longing which He has for our salvation, having heard how the people promised, after many transgressions, to tread the

right way He said: Who will grant unto them to have such an heart as to fear me, and to keep my commandments all their days, that it may be well with them and with their children forever?

Deuteronomy 5:29 And Moses when reasoning with them said, And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, and to walk in all His ways, and to love Him? Deuteronomy 10:12 He then who is so anxious to be loved by us, and does everything for this end, and did not spare even His only begotten Son on account of His love towards us, and who counts it a desirable thing if at any time we become reconciled to Himself, how shall He not welcome and love us when we repent?

Hear at least what He says by the mouth of the prophet: Declare first your iniquities that you may be justified. Isaiah 43:26 Now this He demands from us in order to intensify our love towards Him. For when one who loves, after enduring many insults at the hands of those who are beloved, even then does not extinguish his fondness for them, the only reason why he takes pains to make those insults public, is that by displaying the strength of his affection he may induce them to feel a larger and warmer love.

Now if the confession of sins brings so much consolation, much more does the endeavour to wash them away by means of our deeds. For if this was not the case, but those who had once swerved from the straight path were forbidden to return to it again, perhaps no one, except a few persons whose numbers would be easily reckoned, would ever enter the kingdom of Heaven; but as it is we shall find the most distinguished among those who have fallen. For those who have exhibited much vehemence in evil things, will also in turn exhibit the same in good things, being conscious what great debts they have incurred; which Christ also declared when He spoke to Simon concerning the woman: For do you see, says He, this woman?

I entered into your house, you gave me no water for my feet; but she has washed my feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. You gave me no kiss, but she since the time I came in has not ceased to kiss my feet. Mine head with oil thou did not anoint; but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto you: her sins which are many are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little. And He said to her, your sins are forgiven. Luke 7:44-48

16. For this reason also the devil, knowing that they who have committed great evils, when they have begun to repent, do this with much zeal, inasmuch as they are conscious of their offenses, fears and trembles lest they should make a beginning of the work; for after they have made it they are no longer capable of being checked, and, kindling like fire under the influence of repentance, they render their souls purer than pure gold, being impelled by their conscience, and the memory of their former sins, as by some strong gale, towards the haven of virtue.

And this is the point in which they have an advantage over those who have never fallen, that they exercise more vehement energy; if only, as I said, they can lay hold of the beginning. For the task which is hard and difficult of accomplishment is to be able to set foot on the entrance, and to reach the vestibule of repentance, and to repulse and overthrow the enemy there when he is fiercely raging and assaulting us. But after this, he will not display so much fury when he has once been worsted, and has fallen where he was strong, and we shall receive greater energy, and shall run this good race with much ease.

Let us then in future set about our return, let us hasten up to the city which is in Heaven, in which we have been enrolled, in which also we have been appointed to find our home as citizens. For to despair of ourselves not only has this evil that it shuts the gates of that city against us, and that it drives us into

greater indolence and contempt, but also that it plunges us into Satanic recklessness. For the only cause why the devil became such as he is was that he first of all despaired, and afterwards from despair sank into recklessness.

For the soul, when once it has abandoned its own salvation, will no longer perceive that it is plunging downwards, choosing to do and say everything which is adverse to its own salvation. And just as madmen, when once they have fallen out of a sound condition, are neither afraid nor ashamed of anything, but fearlessly dare all manner of things, even if they have to fall into fire, or deep water, or down a precipice; so they who have been seized by the frenzy of despair are hence forward unmanageable, rushing into vice in every direction, and if death does not come to put a stop to this madness, and vehemence, they do themselves infinite mischief.

Therefore I entreat you, before you are deeply steeped in this drunkenness, recover your senses and rouse yourself up, and shake off this Satanic fit, doing it gently and gradually if it be not possible to effect it all at once. For to me indeed the easier course seems to be to wrench yourself once for all out of all the cords which hold you down, and transfer yourself to the school of repentance. But if this seems to you a difficult thing, that you should be willing to enter on the path which leads to better things, simply enter upon it, and lay hold on eternal life.

Yea, I beseech and implore you by your former reputation, by that confidence which once was yours, let us see you once again standing on the pinnacle of virtue, and in the same condition of perseverance as before. Spare those who are made to stumble on your account, those who are falling, who are becoming more indolent, who are despairing of the way of virtue. For dejection now holds possession of the band of brethren, while pleasure and cheerfulness prevail in the councils of the unbelieving, and of those young men who are disposed to indolence.

But if you return again to your former strictness of life the result will be reversed, and all our shame will be transferred to them, while we shall enjoy much confidence, seeing you again crowned and proclaimed victor with more splendour than before. For such victories bring greater renown and pleasure. For you will not only receive the reward of your own achievements, but also of the exhortation and consolation of others, being exhibited as a striking model, if ever any one should fall into the same condition, to encourage him to get up and recover himself.

Do not neglect such an opportunity of gain, nor drag our souls down into Hades with sorrow, but let us breathe freely again, and shake off the cloud of despondency which oppresses us on your account. For now, passing by the consideration of our own troubles, we mourn over your calamities, but if you are willing to come to your senses, and see clearly, and to join the angelic host, you will release us from this sorrow, and will take away the greater part of sins. For that it is possible for those who have come back again after repentance to shine with much lustre, and oftentimes more than those who have never fallen at all, I have demonstrated from the divine writings. Thus at least both the publicans and the harlots inherit the kingdom of Heaven, thus many of the last are placed before the first.

17. But I will tell you also of events which have happened in our own time, and of which you may yourself have been witness. You know probably that young Phœnician, the son of Urbanus, who was untimely left an orphan, but possessed of much money, and many slaves and lands. This man, having in the first place bidden complete farewell to his studies in the schools, and having laid aside the gay clothing which he formerly wore, and all his worldly grandeur, suddenly arraying himself in a shabby cloak, and retreating to

the solitude of the mountains, exhibited a high degree of Christian philosophy not merely in proportion to his age, but such as any great and wonderful man might have displayed.

And after this, having been deemed worthy of initiation into the sacred mysteries, he made still greater advances in virtue. And all were rejoicing, and glorifying God, that one nurtured in wealth, and having illustrious ancestors, and being still a mere youth, should have suddenly trodden all the pomps of this life under foot, and have ascended to the true height. Now which he was in this condition, and an object of admiration, certain corrupt men, who according to the law of kindred had the oversight of him dragged him back again into the former sea of worldliness.

And so, having flung aside all his habits, he again descended from the mountains into the midst of the forum, and used to go all round the city, riding on horseback, and accompanied by a large retinue; and he was no longer willing to live even soberly; for being inflamed by much luxury, he was constrained to fall into foolish love intrigues, and there was no one of those conversant with him, who did not despair of his salvation; he was encompassed by such a swarm of flatterers, besides the snares of orphanhood, youth, and great wealth.

And persons who readily find fault with everything, accused those who originally conducted him to this way of life, saying that he had both missed his spiritual aims, and would no longer be of any use in the management of his own affairs, having prematurely abandoned the labours of study, and having been consequently unable to derive any benefit therefrom. Now while these things were being said, and great shame was felt, certain holy men who had often succeeded in this kind of chase, and had thoroughly learned by experience that those who are armed with hope in God ought not to despair at all of such characters, kept a continual watch upon him, and if ever they saw him appear in the market place they approached and saluted him.

And at first he spoke to them from horseback, askance, as they followed by his side; so great was the shamelessness which had at first got possession of him. But they, being merciful and loving men, were not ashamed at all of this treatment, but continually looked to one thing only, how they might rescue the lamb from the wolves; which in fact they actually accomplished by means of their perseverance. For afterwards, as if he had been converted by some sudden stroke, and were put to shame by their great assiduity, if ever he saw them in the distance approaching, he would instantly dismount, and bending low would listen silently in that attitude to all which fell from their lips, and in time he displayed even greater reverence and respect towards them.

And then, by the grace of God having gradually rescued him out of all those entanglements, they handed him over again to his former state of seclusion and devout contemplation. And now he became so illustrious, that his former life seemed to be nothing in comparison with that which he lived after his fall. For being well aware by experience of the snare, and having expended all his wealth upon the needy, and released himself from all care of that kind, he cut off every pretext for an attack from those who wished to make designs upon him; and now treading the path which leads to heaven, he has already arrived at the very goal of virtue.

This man indeed fell and rose again while he was still young; but another man, after enduring great toils during his sojourn in the deserts, with only a single companion, and leading an angelic life, and being now on the way to old age, afforded I know not how a little loophole to the evil one, through some Satanic condition of mind, and carelessness; and although he had never seen a woman since he transferred

himself to the monastic life, he fell into a passionate desire for intercourse with women.

And first of all he besought his companion to supply him with meat and wine, and threatened, if he did not receive it, that he would go down into the marketplace. And this he said, not so much out of a longing for meat, as because he wished to get some handle and pretext for returning into the city. The other being perplexed at these things, and fearing, that if he hindered this he might drive him into some great evil, suffered him to have his fill of this craving. But when his companion perceived that this was a stale device, he openly threw off shame, and unmasked his pretence, and said that he must positively himself go down to the city, and as the other had not power to prevent him, he desisted at last from his efforts, and following him at a distance, watched to see what the meaning of this return could possibly be.

And having seen him enter a brothel, and knowing that he had intercourse with a harlot there, he waited until he had satiated that foul desire, and then, when he came out, he received him with uplifted hands, and having embraced and fervently kissed him, without uttering any rebuke on account of what had happened he only besought him, seeing that he had satiated his desire, to return again to his dwelling in the wilderness. And the other, put to shame by his great clemency, was immediately smitten at the heart of compunction for the deed which he had perpetrated, followed him to the mountain; and there he begged the man to shut him up in another hut, and, having closed the doors of the dwelling, to supply him with bread and water on certain days, and to inform those who enquired for him that he was laid to rest.

And when he had said this, and persuaded him, he shut himself up, and was there continually, with fastings and prayers and tears, wiping off from his soul the defilement of his sin. And not long after when a drought had settled on the neighbouring region, and all in that country were lamenting over it, a certain man was commanded by a vision to depart, and exhort this recluse to pray, and put an end to the drought. And when he had departed, taking companions with him, they found the man, who formerly dwelt with him, there alone; and on enquiring concerning the other they were informed that he was dead.

But they, believing that they were deceived, betook themselves again to prayer, and again by means of the same vision heard the same things which they had heard before. And then, standing round the man who really had deceived them, they besought him to show the other to them; for they declared that he was not dead but living. When he heard this, and perceived that their compact was exposed, he brought them to that holy man; and they having broken through the wall (for he had even blocked up the entrance) and having all of them entered, prostrating themselves at his feet, and informing him of what had happened, besought him to succour them against the famine.

But he at first resisted, saying that he was far from such confidence as that; for he ever had his sin before his eyes, as if it had only just taken place; but when they related all which had happened to them they then induced him to pray; and having prayed he put an end to the drought. And what happened to that young man who was at first a disciple of John the son of Zebedee, but afterwards for a long time became a robber chief, and then again, having been captured by the holy hands of the blessed Apostle returned from the robber dens and lairs to his former virtue, you are not ignorant, but know it all as accurately as I do: and I have often heard you admiring the great condescension of the saint, and how he first of all kissed the blood-stained hand of the young man, embracing him, and so brought him back to his former condition.

18. Moreover also the blessed Paul not only welcomes Onesimus the unprofitable runaway thief, because he was converted, but also asks his master to treat him who had repented, on equal terms of honour with

his teacher, thus saying: I beseech you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds, who was aforesaid unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me, whom I have sent back to you; thou therefore receive him, that is my very heart, whom I would fain have kept with me, that in your behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the Gospel; but without your mind I would do nothing that your goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will.

For perhaps he was therefore parted from you for a season that you should have him back for ever; no longer as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially unto me; but how much rather to you both in the flesh and in the Lord? If then you hold me as a partner, receive him as myself. And the same apostle, in writing to the Corinthians, said, Lest when I come I should mourn over many of those who have sinned beforehand and have not repented; and again, as I have said beforehand, so do I again declare beforehand, that if I come again I will not spare.

Do you see who they are whom he mourns, and whom he does not spare? Not those who have sinned, but those who have not repented, and not simply those who have not repented, but those who have been called once and again to this work, and would not be persuaded. For the expression I have said beforehand and do now say beforehand, as if I were present the second time, and being absent I write, implies exactly that which we are afraid may take place now in our case. For although Paul is not present who then threatened the Corinthians, yet Christ is present, who was then speaking through his mouth; and if we continue obdurate, He will not spare us, but will smite us with a mighty blow, both in this world and the next.

Let us then anticipate His countenance by our confession, let us pour out our hearts before Him. For you have sinned, we read, do not add thereto any more, and pray on behalf of your former deeds; Sirach 21:1 and again a righteous man is his own accuser in the first instance. Let us not then tarry for the accuser, but let us seize his place beforehand, and so let us make our judge more merciful by means of our candour. Now I know indeed that you confess your sins, and call yourself miserable above measure; but this is not the only thing I wish, but I long for you to be persuaded that it can justify you.

For as long as you make this confession unprofitable, even if you accuse yourself, you will not be able to desist from the sins which follow it. For no one will be able to do anything with zeal and the proper method, unless he has first of all persuaded himself that he does it to advantage. For even the sower, after he has scattered his seed, unless he expects the harvest, will never reap. For who would choose to fatigue himself in vain, if he was not to gain any good from his labor?

So then he also who sows words, and tears, and confession, unless he does this with a good hope, will not be able to desist from sinning, being still held down by the evil of despair; but just as that husbandman who despairs of any crop of fruit will not in future hinder any of those things which damage the seeds, so also he who sows his confession with tears, but does not expect any advantage for this, will not be able to overthrow those things which spoil repentance. And what does spoil repentance is being again entangled in the same evils.

For there is one we read, who builds, and one who pulls down, what have they gained more than toil? He who is dipped in water because of contact with a dead body, and then touches it again, what has he gained by his washing? Even so if a man fasts because of his sins, and goes his way again, and does the same things, who will hearken to his prayer? And again we read if a man goes back from righteousness to sin the Lord will prepare him for the sword, Sirach 26:28 and, as a dog when he has returned to his vomit,

and become odious, so is a fool who by his wickedness has returned to his sin. Proverbs 26:11

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