

We live in a world where too many times "I'm sorry" means "I'm sorry I got caught." In this sense, the words "I'm sorry" are like an attempt to put a quick patch on a bad tire to get you on the road again. We don't seem to have the time to put into the proper repair of our relationships. Our repentance is not deep enough to do any good.

We want it quick and easy. I remember my aunt telling me one time that the great new thing in Atlanta was a drive-in funeral home. You drove up to the window and gave the name of the body that you wanted to see and they served it up for you. No fuss, no muss, and certainly none of that horrible contact with the grieving family. We are too busy to stop and have real involvement; we just want to throw an "I'm sorry" at them as we go by. This is repentance on the fly, and it is no good at all.

True Repentance can heal relationships; it can make lives grow back together. It is a magical process where the nerve endings are reconnected and are able to re-grow and regain their power. Once the healing is over, the relationship can function as well as it once did. But this is not a trivial process, and it is not easy to accomplish.

Each time we hurt each other we disturb the fabric of our relationship just like when we keep bending metal or plastic; eventually the material comes apart. Repentance is like a glue which we can use to heal the resulting break. We all know how very frustrating it is to try to repair something that is very precious to us. Some problems are like a break in a piece of ceramic; contact cement works very well and you can barely see the crack that marks the damage. But this only works with a break that occurs without stress deformation of the material. In other cases, too much damage has occurred for a quick fix to work. The relationship must then be re-cast or re-molded. Our problem is that we want a sort of superglue that gives this quick fix so that we can continue on our own path, doing the deeds that got us into trouble in the first place.

Let's consider re-telling the story of the Prodigal Son in a little different way. As before, the son asks for his share of the inheritance and goes off on his own path of riotous living. He never calls or writes, and basically acts as if he doesn't have a father. Eventually he is caught in the act and becomes the subject of a full-blown tabloid layout. He exhausts his resources and decides that it was so easy the first time he would just squeeze his father for another round. He comes home and says "I'm sorry!" Overjoyed, the father prepares a feast and the family parties through the night. There is peace for a few days, and then the son asks his father to split the inheritance again. How do you think the father feels now?

Just recently we had a great ice storm in the area and many tree limbs were broken and torn down. As we all know, even healthy limbs fracture under a great enough strain. To heal a broken tree branch, you must hold the pieces together for a good while; there must be a gentle, loving pressure. Super-glue doesn't work at all on trees; the life-force must be given a chance to make repairs. There is sort of a living glue produced in the tree limb that binds to the healing wound. The same is true in animal life as well. There is no quick fix for living things. In a similar way a truly repentant attitude, held for a significantly long time, is essential for the healing of human relationships.

The damage done in a relationship can also be thought of as the invasion of cancer in the body. Saying "I'm sorry" is like removing the big lump of cancer in you that has become obvious. But the cancer may have grown to the point that it has metastasized, digging roots all over the body. It is then too late for simple surgery; a more radical cure is necessary. Chemotherapy is a form of treatment that involves nearly killing the body to kill the cancer. Our repentance sometimes needs to achieve that level of humility, having broken the ego that is at the root of the problem. Continuing oppression proves that repentance is not real. Saying "I'm sorry" is only going skin deep. Being truly repentant goes all the way to the bone.