

## **CAN YOU REPENT WHEN YOU CAN'T APOLOGIZE?**

**Today's Text:** Hosea Chap. 7

### **Extracts:**

***“When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was uncovered, and the wickedness of Samaria for they have committed fraud; a thief comes in; a band of robbers takes spoil outside. They do not consider in their hearts that I remember all their wickedness; now their own deeds have surrounded them; they are before My face. ...They did not cry out to Me with their heart when they wailed upon their beds. .. They return, but not to the Most High” [Hos. 7: 1, 2, 14, 16]***

*At the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Marion Jones won 5 medals (3 gold and 2 bronze) in track and field events and became one of the world's most famous athletes. Soon after, there were allegations that she had used performance-enhancing substances which she vehemently denied. However, on Friday, 5 October 2007, she pleaded guilty before a US District Court for lying to federal investigators. Addressing the media soon after, with tears in her eyes, she admitted disgracing her family, nation and self and asked for forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>*

*Marion Jones has done what is hardly common. In the face of public shame and a looming sentence to prison, she openly admitted guilt and apologized to those that she had offended. Then she asked for their forgiveness. Most of us can hardly do that. For one reason or the other, we find it difficult to apologize or to admit fault. Look at your vehicle insurance policy. The first thing they tell you in the event of an accident is not to admit liability in writing or otherwise! In the law courts, even when somebody was caught red-handed committing a crime, s(he) pleads “not guilty!” So, if we cannot own up for offences that we have committed against fellow human beings that we can see, how can we repent for our sins against God that we cannot see? Why do we find it so hard to apologize? Can we truly repent without first apologizing?*

*Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.*

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Marion Jones ends career after guilty plea,’ Washington Post and the Associated Press, Sat., Oct. 6, 2007; [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/othersports/2003929091\\_jones06.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/othersports/2003929091_jones06.html)

## 1. Apology and Repentance are inter-related

An apology has the following aspects:

- We admit guilt to the person (s) that we have offended by accepting responsibility for the wrong;
- We tell them that we are sorry for what we have done; and
- We ask for their forgiveness and promise not to do it again

In today's Bible text, God upbraided the people of Israel for being *thieves* and *robbers* [**Hos. 7: 1**], for being *wicked* and *adulterous* [**vv. 3, 4**]. These are all offenses against fellow human beings. Perhaps the only sin that they directly committed against God was *idolatry* [**v. 16**]. When we repent for our sins, we admit our guilt, confess the sin (s) to God and ask for His forgiveness [**1 Jn 1: 9**]. In most cases, the sins that we are confessing may have been committed against fellow human beings for, in the words of Jesus, whatever we do to the least of His brethren, we do unto Him [**Matt. 25: 40**]. Yet, most of us who claim to confess their sins to God hardly first apologize to those that they have offended! What could be responsible for that?

## 2. Why we cannot apologize

Among so many reasons, the following should be noted:

### a) *We may be ignorant of the offence*

We may not know that we have offended unless the offended party brings it to our attention. So, how can we apologize for an offence we hardly know about? We can offend others in the way we speak or behave. Unless such 'offenses' are brought to our notice, we may not be in a position to apologize.

Take the case of the two-and-a-half tribes of the children of Israel [during the days of Joshua] that built an altar on the frontier of the land of Canaan by the Jordan on their return to their own possession after helping the other tribes to fight for theirs [**Josh. 22: 10-34**]. As soon as word reached the other tribes, they "gathered together at Shiloh to go to war against them" [**v. 12**]. Can you imagine that? The so-called offending party did not even know that their action had been seen by others as an act of rebellion! Happily, wise counsel prevailed on the side of the 'offended' party. They sent a team to go and find out why the other party had rebelled. In the process, they discovered that the altar was not built to rival the one for all Israel in Shiloh but as a memorial to future generations on their side of the Jordan that they shared a common heritage with those on the opposite side of the river.

### b) *We may feel a sense of right*

Even when we know that we have offended, we may feel ‘righteous indignation.’ We may feel that we have a right to offend because we have had it and enough is enough! A child that snaps at a nagging mother may not feel that he has offended for insulting his parent. A coward who is finally able to stand up to a bully may have a sense of triumph even when the bully is innocent on that occasion.

Take Hagar, the maid to Abram’s wife, Sarai. As soon as she had conceived a child by Abram, “her mistress became despised in her eyes” [Gen. 16: 4]. In other words, she no longer treated her with respect. For that, Sarai deserved an apology from Hagar. When it did not come, her mistress treated her harshly. In response, she fled from her presence [vv. 5, 6]. She fled into the wilderness, feeling offended herself! It was there that the Angel of the Lord told her to go back to her mistress and “submit yourself under her hand” [vv. 7-9]. Of course, she would have to apologize first on her return!

c) *Apology may be seen as a sign of weakness or defeat*

Many of us may know that they have offended and that they are in deed wrong. However, they cannot bring themselves to apologize to the offended party because it will be seen as a kind of weakness or defeat. How many military dictators do you know that will apologize to innocent citizens that they have brutalized? How many authoritarian parents will apologize to their children that they have repressed? How many nagging wives will own up when their husbands have done nothing wrong?

d) *Perhaps it is due to pride*

Pride may be a better explanation for our refusing to apologize. Most rebellious people, whether children against parents or ambitious subordinates, are too proud to accept any wrong, not to talk of apologizing for it. That is why such people would rather go down to defeat and self-destruction than own up for any wrong doing.

This is best exemplified by Satan who after falling from heaven still desired to exalt his throne above the stars of God, ascend “above the heights of the clouds” and be “like the Most High” [Is. 14: 13-14].

e) *Fear of repercussions*

Perhaps the greatest deterrent to owning up for our errors is the fear of the repercussions. The insurance company does not want you to accept responsibility for any accident so as to minimize paying damages to the other party. The criminal that refuses to plead guilty is scared of going to jail. The offender may even nurse the feeling that s (he) may not be forgiven. So, rather

than face public disgrace, many people would rather carry their guilt to their graves than own up to those they have offended.

From the forgoing, we see that most of us have a long way to go with true repentance. *If we cannot apologize to human beings that we can see, how can we truly repent before God that we cannot see?*

### 3. Understanding true repentance

God told the children of Israel that He was prepared to heal them of their sins but “none among them” called upon Him [**Hos. 7: 1, 7**]. They did not return to the Lord their God nor seek Him for their evil doing [**v. 10**]. Even when they called on Him, they did not cry out to Him with their heart even though “they wailed upon their beds” [**v. 14**]. Clearly, they were deceiving themselves to believe that they were repenting, whereas they were far from it. For example, when the children of Israel asked God why they should fast when He did not seem to notice, He replied [**Is. 58: 6-9**]:

*Is this not the fast that I have chosen; to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? ... Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you. The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, “Here I am.”*

Here again, we see that what God counts as fasting and repentance has to do with our relationship with fellow human beings. When we offend them and we cannot apologize to them and seek their forgiveness, how dare we come to God and claim to be repenting?

Let us audit our repentance practices, some of which are as follows:

#### a) *We may be blame shifting*

We may think that we are repentant whereas all we are doing is blame shifting. We blame shift in several ways, such as:<sup>2</sup>

- *Others made us do it; therefore, we are innocent!* . For example, after eating the forbidden fruit, Adam blamed his wife and God, saying, “The woman whom You gave me to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.” His wife in turn shifted the blame to the serpent, saying, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” [**Gen. 3: 12-13**].
- *Others did it, not us at all.* For example, when the prophet Samuel blamed king Saul for not completely destroying the Amalekites and

<sup>2</sup> See ‘Blame shifting is not repentance,’ *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 3, No. 3: 20 Jan. 2002; [www.bibleresourcecentre.com](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com)

their possessions as required by God, the king replied that he had obeyed the voice of the Lord “but the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best things which should have been destroyed to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilead” [1 Sam. 15: 20-21]!

- *Others are worse than we are.* For example, in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the Pharisee prayed as follows, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men-extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector” [Lk 18: 10]! When did hypocrisy stop being a sin?

Clearly, blame shifting can never count as true repentance.

b) *We may merely be remorseful*

To show remorse is to feel *sorry for* what we have done *but not necessarily out of a repentance motive*. For example, some *Al Qaeda* operators who saw the damage to the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 might have felt remorseful about the number of innocent people who died there but were hardly repentant for the deed. Criminals hardly show any remorse until they are caught and tried, and may be on the verge of being hanged (for murder) or going to jail. Judas Iscariot held on to the 30 pieces of silver that he was paid for betraying Jesus until he saw Him crucified on the cross. He returned the money to the Jewish leaders, saying, “I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood” [Matt. 27: 4]. I doubt if he asked for Christ’s forgiveness or else he might not have hanged himself!

Clearly, *apology and repentance go hand in hand*, especially when the offence affects fellow human beings. For example, when the prodigal son returned to his offended father, he said, “I have *sinned against heaven and in your sight* and am no longer worthy to be called your son” [Lk 15: 20]. His apology to his father confirmed his repentance to God. Therefore, *when you make up with those you have offended, you have repented*.

#### 4. Conclusion: Listen to Jesus!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His hearers as follows [Matt. 5: 23-24]:

*Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Gift here represents your worship, including confession, thanks and offerings. Jesus is telling you that the starting block is reconciling with those that you have offended. Have you gone to them to admit guilt and ask for their forgiveness? Do

you honestly think that time is a healer, that God will forgive you your unconfessed sins against others? Yes, the offended party may have forgiven you with or without your apology because God commands it [Matt. 6: 14-15], but has He forgiven you?

As Marion Jones broke down in tears several times during her media confession, she said, “I recognize that by saying I’m deeply sorry, it might not be enough and sufficient to address the hurt that I’ve caused you. Therefore, I want to ask for your forgiveness for my actions, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.” Her mother whose hand was resting on her arm throughout her speech said, “Good job!” Marion may have been publicly shamed. She has lost her Olympic medals. She may even go to jail. But, she has apologized. She has reconciled with her ‘brothers and sisters’ and, therefore, God has also forgiven her. She can now go back to offer her gift that had been waiting at the altar of God’s love since the year 2000. Now, she has peace of mind.

Alleluia!