

Repentance: an Opportunity for God's Mercy

by *St. Clement of Rome, Early Church Father*



This excerpt from St. Clement's First Letter to the Corinthians urges us to take advantage of the opportunity that God offers us to repent, change our lives, and receive God's mercy. It is used in the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for Ash Wednesday with the accompanying lenten biblical reading taken from Isaiah 58:1 - 12. The letter was written around the year 95 AD by St. Clement, bishop of Rome and third in succession from St. Peter, to the Church at Corinth. This first letter of Clement was copied by the Corinthian Church and circulated all over the empire, rendering the very first papal "encyclical." It was so highly regarded by the universal church that for several centuries the Church in Egypt and elsewhere regarded it as one of the New Testament scriptures.

Let us fix our attention on the blood of Christ and recognize how precious it is to God his Father, since it was shed for our salvation and brought the grace of repentance to all the world.

If we review the various ages of history, we will see that in every generation the Lord has *offered the opportunity of repentance* to any who were willing to turn to him. When Noah preached God's message of repentance, all who listened to him were saved. Jonah told the Ninevites they were going to be destroyed, but when they repented, their prayers gained God's forgiveness for their sins, and they were saved, even though they were not of God's people.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the ministers of God's grace have spoken of repentance; indeed, the Master of the whole universe himself spoke of repentance with an oath: *As I live*, says the Lord, *I do not wish the death of the sinner but his repentance*. He added this evidence of his goodness: *House of Israel, repent of your wickedness. Tell the sons of my people: If their sins should reach from earth to heaven, if they are brighter than scarlet and blacker than sackcloth, you need only turn to me with your whole heart and say, "Father", and I will listen to you as a holy people*.

In other words, God wanted all his beloved ones to have the opportunity to repent and he confirmed this desire by his own almighty will. That is why we should obey his sovereign and glorious will and prayerfully entreat his mercy and kindness. We should be suppliant before him and turn to his compassion, rejecting empty works and quarrelling and jealousy which only lead to death.

Brothers, we should be humble in mind, putting aside all arrogance, pride and foolish anger. Rather, we should act in accordance with the Scriptures, as the Holy Spirit says: *The wise man must not glory in his wisdom nor the strong man in his strength nor the rich man in his riches. Rather, let him who glories glory in the Lord by seeking him and doing what is right and just*. Recall especially what the Lord Jesus said when he taught gentleness and forbearance. *Be merciful*, he said, *so that you may have mercy shown to you. Forgive, so that you may be forgiven. As you treat others, so you will be treated. As you give, so you will receive. As you judge, so you will be judged. As you are kind to others, so you will be treated kindly. The measure of your giving will be the measure of your receiving*.

Let these commandments and precepts strengthen us to live in humble obedience to his sacred words. As Scripture asks: *Whom shall I look upon with favour except the humble, peaceful man who trembles at my words?*

Sharing then in the heritage of so many vast and glorious achievements, let us hasten toward the goal of peace, set before us from the beginning. Let us keep our eyes firmly fixed on the Father and Creator of the whole universe, and hold fast to his splendid and transcendent gifts of peace and all his blessings.