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<https://apriestoftheorthodoxchurch.wordpress.com/2018/01/08/why-we-keep-going-back-to-our-repented-sins/>

Why we keep going back to our repented sins

Generally we do not realize that in our life of contrition we don't go far enough. We think repentance is to be sorry, to be contrite. And thus we are genuinely sorry for our sins, only to go back to them afterwards. This is puzzling to many: they go to confession, they are truly sorry, are even moved to tears, but then they go right back to the sins they regret. This is so because contrition is one thing and repentance is another. These are entirely different words in the New Testament. What the Lord and John the Baptist and all the Apostles call for is not contrition, to be sorry, but repentance, which literally means a change of the self. This change of the self and the avoidance of sin that it brings are not the same thing as being sorry and do not come from being sorry, because they do not come from the self. In order to be sorry I must look **at myself**, analyze myself, even if without self-condemnation. Paradoxically enough, contrition is still self-centered. Radical inner change only comes from Christ, from looking **at Him**. Repentance is a forgetting of the self in an ecstatic focus on Christ. It is a reorientation of my whole life, from me to Him, a reorientation of my mind and of my heart from my sinfulness to His goodness. The facing of Him, the vision of Him is the only truly transformative experience and such is repentance. This mystery is revealed to us by the parable of the prodigal son. He says, "Father, I have

sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Now this is contrition: he is looking at himself, is thinking of himself, of what he has done, and he is sorry. But then he suddenly sees his father for what he is. He, who didn’t truly know his father yet, sees his father’s goodness and forgiveness and unconditional and infinite love for him. It is this, his father’s presence, that changes him radically, takes hold of his heart and his mind, seeps into him down to his innermost sinews. This is penitence! It comes only from seeing God.

This mystery is also beautifully expressed by Elder Aimilianos in the following words, which I posted before: *Thinking of my own sinfulness brings the need for contrition (μεταμέλεια). We are not speaking yet about repentance (μετάνοια), but about contrition. Repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit. God will give it to me. For example, you did something and then say “No, no, what have I done? Who’s listening to Geronda?” This is being contrite. But when I call you and tell you, “My child, what have you done?,” if you confess your error and say “Punish me, Geronda!”, and I don’t punish you, but rather grant you to take Communion, you will say, “How good is Geronda! How I am and how he is! Look at the grace of God! To sadden God!” Now repentance begins. Contrition is one thing, repentance is another.*

As the Elder points out, truth is that we don’t even truly see our sins and understand them truly until we have surpassed contrition and are in repentance. Only in the light of God’s love for us are our sins truly revealed, more and more, even all the way, to the point where we understand that “we have done nothing good upon this earth,” as the Liturgy of St. Basil says.

Now this doesn’t mean that we don’t need contrition. Far from it! This means that we need to realize that contrition is only the beginning of a road that takes us to a radically different place, an earthly pointer to a heavenly reality. We do not understand these distinctions and therefore we stay in the same place of the self, in contrition, thinking that with our sorrows we have accomplished everything, and then we go back to the very sins we are sorry about.