

Repentance

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Repentance is an essential element of the gospel message. God calls us to repent of our sins in order to receive the forgiveness of our sins in Christ (Luke 24:47; cf. Acts 2:38). Repentance therefore is a mark of a true Christian.

Because the heart of man is deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9), often people will consider themselves to be a Christian while having no desire to turn from their sin. They may even feel guilty about their conduct and its consequences and express a degree of sorrow. They may even make certain changes in their life. However, this response to sin amounts to nothing more than personal reformation and falls seriously short of true repentance. Non-Christians can be sorrowful and change their lives apart from God, yet the central motivation for them is to better themselves. True repentance comes from a heart that is convicted of offending a Holy God.

The meaning of repentance

Repentance in the New Testament (*METANOIA*) literally means "to perceive afterward" (*META*, after, implying change, and *NOEO*, to perceive). Generally speaking repentance is an inward change of mind, affections, convictions, and commitment rooted in the fear of God and sorrow to God for offenses committed against Him. True repentance is necessarily accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ, which results in an outward turning from sin to God and His service in all of life. It is never regretted (2 Corinthians 7:10) and it is given by God (Acts 11:18).

Evidence of true repentance

When a person is sincere in their repentance from sin they are characterized by certain traits. When the Pharisees and Saducees came to John the Baptist for baptism in response to the message "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," John told them "to bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). When a person is truly repentant they will do certain things that will give evidence to the genuineness of their repentance (2 Corinthians 7:5-11). The Scripture describes the following responses of those who repent of sin:

1. A truly repentant person would be unrelenting. The Corinthian church failed to act properly in dealing with a sinning brother in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul rebuked them for this and in their efforts to correct their error they went to the extreme. Their extreme response is recorded for us in 2 Corinthians 2:1-11. Their action of not receiving the repentant brother back into the fellowship was clearly wrong but the motivation for their action was commendable (2 Corinthians 7:5-11).
2. A truly repentant person attempts to repair any damage or repay any debt incurred. This would be done even beyond what is expected. An example of this is Zaccheus in Luke 19:1-10. Zaccheus gave back four times beyond what he had

taken when the Law required only 20% (cf. Leviticus 6:1-5).

3. A truly repentant person would not try to re-establish himself to a place of honor. He would not be concerned with honor for himself when seeking to be restored. An example of this is the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, who saw himself as no longer "worthy" (Luke 15:19).

The role of sorrow in repentance

We need to be careful not to assume that sorrow for sin is the sole indicator of true repentance. Sorrow for sins committed is necessary but sorrow for sins committed does not necessarily mean that true repentance has taken place. Consider 2 Corinthians 7:9 "I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us." Those who possess a godly sorrow will focus more on their moral failure than on just consequences of their sins (Psalm 51).

Those who truly repent will not fight or resist natural consequences such as Saul did over the course of his life. Samuel had made it clear to Saul that because of his sin that the kingdom had been taken from him and given to another (1 Samuel 15:28). But even though this was made clear, Saul continually fought David's rise to power, even after he acknowledged that David would be the next king of Israel (1 Samuel 24:20). Saul was a man who was more concerned about the consequences of his sins than with his own sinfulness. He was more concerned with damage control than he was with his personal righteousness.

Conclusion

True repentance consists of a response from our entire being, our mind, our will and our emotions. While the outward intensity of this response will vary from person to person, every believer in Jesus Christ will experience a full repentance from the heart. We must help people to not accept a selfish response to a God given guilt.

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