

What is Repentance?

by Rev. Tom Aicken

Broadly speaking, repentance is a change of mind resulting in a change of one's way of life. Biblical repentance, however, requires a more precise understanding than that. Such repentance is the other side of a true and saving faith, and always accompanies faith like the two sides of the same coin. If faith is turning to the Lord Jesus Christ, reaching out and receiving Him, repentance is turning away from sin, setting it aside and fleeing from it. One cannot receive Christ without fleeing from sin in doing so, and someone is not really putting any sin away unless he is, at the same time, committing himself to a closer walk with and deeper devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here are seven marks of genuine repentance:

(1) Repentance consists, unfailingly, of a broken spirit (Ps. 51:17), also known as being poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3). This is a true and uncompromising humility; it is to be brought right down to the dust, completely emptied of oneself, so that such a person is constrained to acknowledge his guilt and freely confess that he has nothing in himself to offer as a sacrifice to appease His Creator and Judge who is just and holy and is of purer eyes than to behold evil (Hab. 1:13). Indeed, until a person comes to see himself as the apostle Paul did, as the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), he does not have a clear, scriptural view of his own fallen nature.

(2) Repentance also consists of a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17), which is more than a sorrow sometimes called remorse. Someone may, for instance, feel the pain or grief which comes as a result of a particular loss, or even feel the regret that comes with having been caught doing something he knew was wrong. These are examples of feeling some measure of remorse, and they are very common. Contrition, however, is regretting the wrong itself, feeling the pain of having offended another, and especially viewing his sin as a slap in the face of our holy God. King David, for instance, was well aware that he had sinned against Bathsheba in committing adultery with her, and against Uriah in setting him up to be killed, but the pain that pierced his heart above all others, that outweighed everything else and overwhelmed his soul, was his having sinned against the Majesty on high (Ps. 51:4). Sadly, that deeper kind of sorrow is all too uncommon.

(3) On the one hand, repentance acknowledges the unblemished righteousness of God (Ps. 89:14), and thus the penitent soul accepts not only his guilt and regret for wrong-doing, but also the justice of God in His punishment for sin (Rom. 6:23). Such a person will not try to rationalize his sinful behaviour, in other words, whether to anyone else or even to himself, but would rather submit to Him who judges righteously than deny a single thing that he has done.

(4) On the other hand, repentance also acknowledges the infinite love of God (1 John 4:16), that there is forgiveness with Him (Ps. 130:4), that the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23). It is in the face of such mercy that the penitent sinner stands in awe of the Almighty, in awe that He so loves His own that He would send His only begotten Son to die in their place, that He would make Him who knew no sin to be sin for us in order that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). The love of God is not in conflict with His righteousness as it might seem to some, but the two come together, and each is illuminated in the face of the other – perfect love and perfect righteousness – in that perfect atonement achieved for sinners by the death of Christ at Calvary.

(5) Repentance believes the Word of God, believes all its exceedingly great and precious promises (2 Pet. 1:4), that no one comes to the Father but by Christ alone (John 14:6), that the Lord Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who do come to the Father through Him (Heb. 7:25), and that He will raise each and every one of them up at the last day (John 6:39,40). It is with such confidence that the Christian casts himself upon the Lord and seeks, as one who sees himself as an undeserving sinner, God's mercy above everything else and is so very thankful for it.

(6) In light of everything above, repentance resolves to flee from sin (2 Tim. 2:22). The Christian will fall into sin from time to time, and perhaps even into those same sins he has specifically vowed to put away. Nevertheless, a biblical repentance resolves to continue the fight against sin, and the believer thus takes courage in the fact that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him (Phil. 4:13). At the same time, repentance also resolves to obey Holy Scripture, to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4), and it is precisely such a commitment to God and His Word which helps the converted soul to forsake his sins.

(7) It is believed by some that only unbelievers require repentance, that Christians are already forgiven all their sins and no longer need, therefore, either to repent or to seek any further forgiveness. "In point of fact," they tell us, "to continue repenting for any future transgressions would be to call into question our confidence that we were ever really forgiven in the first place." This reasoning may sound somewhat logical, at least superficially, but it is not what the Bible teaches, nor is it consistent with the marks of genuine repentance listed above. Every time a Christian sins he should feel compelled to repent of that sin – if he commits it seven times, to repent of it seven times – and he should know there is something desperately wrong in his walking before the Lord if he does not.

Yes, "once saved, always saved," as the saying goes. Justification is a grace that can never be lost. But any lover of the Lord, once he realizes that he has offended his Redeemer to whom he owes everything, feels the pain of what he has done and cannot stop himself from crying out with the tax collector, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (See Luke 18:9-14.) Indeed, the more he grows in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, the more he is so constrained.

Is any kind of sin weighing on your heart and dragging you down? Acknowledge it to yourself, confess it before Almighty God, and turn right away from it. The Lord our God has given you every encouragement in His Word to do so (Is. 55:6,7). A genuine repentance brings with it peace of mind. It is evidence of the Lord working in His people to will and to do His good pleasure. As long as you cling to sin, however, and fail to confess it, you are robbing yourself of the comfort and joy that your salvation, if you even know such a blessing, is meant to give you.

True Repentance

(The following article was published in The Presbyterian, Montreal, 1865. The author is unknown, but I think it worth re-printing here.)

A great deal of the repentance which men think very highly of, and on which they place great dependence, is not accepted as true coin in the court of heaven. A man may be very sorry for sinful acts which have brought sad consequences in their train, and yet not repent at all in the sense the Scriptures bid us repent. The prodigal might be very miserable in his poverty, and sigh and mourn when he contrasted it with the comfort and plenty of his old home, but it availed him

nothing until it brought him to say, "I will arise and return unto my father, and say unto him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight.'"

Judas recoiled with horror from his dreadful crime when it was too late to repair the evil, but his sorrow was only remorse, and brought with it no thought of returning to that Saviour he had so injured. "He went out and hanged himself." His crowning sin was only in accordance with all we know of his previous life. He was covetous and dishonest, and of course it required a constant life of deception to escape detection from his associates. There was nothing in his regret that drew him toward the Being he had so injured – no cordial submission to the Divine will, to be dealt with as infinite wisdom should dictate – no humble supplication for forgiveness – no belief in His promises to save unto the uttermost all who came unto Him. Who has ever passed through a season of revival and has not seen marked illustration of this kind of repentance? Conscience is awakened, the soul is tortured with a sense of guilt, and yet it utterly refuses to seek God's favour and forgiveness. After a time the world succeeds in allaying the distress, the seed is choked by thorns, the heart settles down to its old round of hopes and cares and toils – only a shade more hardened than before. While remorse rebels against God's authority, and hates the Being against whom the sin it laments has been committed, true penitence yields itself in humble submission to the Divine will. Poor, weak Eli, when he heard from the lips of Samuel the fearful judgments that were to be executed against his house because of his sinful yielding to his evil sons, only bowed his grey head above his well-nigh broken heart, and answered meekly, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth Him good."

Such repentance is ever the characteristic of the true Christian. The great distinction between the Christian and others is not that they are sinners and he is not, for all come short of what it is their duty to do, and not infrequently good men fall into great sins. David was "a man after God's own heart," and yet we look upon him at one time as a great sinner. All show that their birthplace is a fallen world, and much of its corruption clings to them as long as their home is in it. But for every act of sin the renewed heart is bowed in contrition before God. Its language ever is, "Against thee have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight." However plainly it has been a sin against a fallen fellow creature, it is felt to be a still greater sin against God – a feeling to which the unconverted soul is an utter stranger.

