

The Heart of Repentance

God's plea to humanity throughout the ages can be summarized in one word: "Repent!" But that requires change—a change that begins deep within.

"Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin" (Eze. 18:30).

"God . . . now commands all men everywhere to repent" (Ac. 17:30).

"And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Rev. 9:21).



Sin is the great destroyer of human happiness. Ever since Adam and Eve tossed God overboard in the Garden of Eden, sin has had its way with the human race, leaving a trail of misery and suffering in its wake. The Biblical response to sin is a plea for *repentance*, defined as "a change of heart." If poor decision-making got us into our sin problem, then improved decision-making must play a role in rectifying the problem. That's why we see so many demands for repentance in the Bible.

But what does repentance consist of? By definition, it means a commitment to making serious changes in my life. Those changes encompass several areas of thinking and behavior.

First, repentance requires *a genuine sorrow over sin*. This is much more than being sorry that I got caught; it's regret that I committed the sin in the first place. Depending on the severity of

the sin, this sorrow could involve a good deal of emotional distress over the transgression and its consequences. I will not shrug off sin as a minor "oops," but as an insidious cancer that is corrupting my character. I truly hate what sin is doing to my life.

Some people regret the mistakes they have made but cannot bring themselves to admit it to others. So repentance also requires *a confession of sin*, a frank admission to others that I have failed. To those who have been harmed by my offense, confession comes in the form of an unqualified apology. There will be no excuses, no blame-shifting, no attempts to minimize the gravity of the error. I own my mistake, and I accept full responsibility. However hard it may be, I will acknowledge my sin to others.

But repentance doesn't stop there. It includes *a determination not to repeat the mistake*. Regret for past mistakes is meaningless if there is no genuine effort to learn from those mistakes. I must arm myself with a grim determination to abandon bad habits and replace them with new habits. I may have to make some difficult decisions regarding my lifestyle, such as breaking off relationships with people and places that have had a bad influence on my judgment. People should be able to see in my outward conduct what the Bible calls "the fruits of repentance" (Lk. 3:8-14).

All these things are important, but there is one more element in repentance that seldom gets the attention it deserves—and it is the most important element of all. It involves a change that touches the deepest recesses of my soul. Repentance is, more than anything else, *the anguish of knowing that I have betrayed God*. I have broken trust with the truest friend I could ever hope to have. I have failed to live up to the purpose for which He created me. The heart of repentance is this willingness to surrender my haughty, self-centered pride and fall at God's feet to beg His forgiveness. Until I experience the agony of knowing that I have broken God's heart, all the other aspects of repentance are mere window-dressing designed to fool bystanders.

Repentance alone, of course, is powerless in the absence of divine grace, and that's where the blood of God's Son comes into play. But that sacrifice was not given to grant us license to go on sinning. It was offered in behalf of those who are serious about their sin problem and are desperate to do something about it. Repent!

— David King