

True Repentance

Let's talk about what the Christian Bible means by repentance towards God.

The first mistake in trying to understand what it means is to go to an English dictionary for a definition of the word “*repent.*”

Contemporary dictionaries tell us how words have come to be understood at the time the dictionary was compiled.

But a modern English dictionary does **not** tell us what was in the mind of a person who was writing 2,000 years ago in Greek about things that were first spoken in Aramaic, for example.

Webster's 'Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary' says this of the word repent: 1) to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life; 2a) to feel regret or contrition; 2b) to change one's mind.

Webster's first definition is exactly what most religious people believe Jesus was talking about when He said, “*repent and believe.*”

They believe that Jesus means that only people who repent, that is, stop sinning and change their ways, will be in the Kingdom of God.

But the fact is, that is precisely what Jesus was **not** saying.

Common mistake

It is a common mistake for Christians to think of repentance as ceasing to sin. “*If you had really repented, you wouldn't have done it again,*” is a refrain many tormented people have heard from well-meaning, law-upholding spiritual counsellors.

We are told that repentance is to “*turn around and go the other way,*” and it is explained in the context of turning away from sin and turning toward a life of obedience to God's law.

With that idea firmly in mind, Christians set out with the best of intentions to change their ways. But along the way, some ways change, and some ways seem to stick like super-glue. And even the ways that change have a nasty way of cropping up again.

Is God satisfied with such mediocrity, such hit-and-miss obedience? “*No, He is not!*” the preacher exhorts, and the vicious, gospel-crippling cycle of commitment, failure and despair takes another spin around the going-nowhere rat-racetrack of futility.

And just when we are feeling frustrated and depressed about our failure to measure up to the high standards of God, we hear another sermon or read another article about “*real repentance*” and “*deep repentance*” and how such repentance results in a complete turning away from sin.

So, we crank up the commitment and go at it again, with the same miserable, predictable results.

And our frustration and despair deepens, because we realise that our turning away from sin is anything but “*complete.*”

We can only assume we have **not** “*really repented.*”

Our repentance was not “*deep*” enough, or “*heartfelt*” enough or “*true*” enough. And if we have **not** really repented, then we must **not** really have faith.

Which means we must **not** really have the Holy Spirit.

Which means we must **not** really be saved.

Finally, we either get used to living like that, or, as many have done, we finally throw in the towel and walk away from the whole show people call ‘Christianity’.

Repentance towards God is simply not about a new and improved you.

Repent and believe

“Repent and believe the gospel,” Jesus declares in **Mark 1:15**.

Repentance and faith mark the beginning of our new life in the Kingdom of God.

They **don’t** mark it because we did the right thing.

They mark it because that is when the scales fall off our darkened eyes and we at last see in Jesus Christ the glorious light of the liberty of the sons of God, [**Romans 8:18-21**].

Everything that ever needed to be done for human forgiveness and salvation has already been done through the death and resurrection of the Son of God.

There was a time when we were in the dark about that. We couldn’t enjoy it or rest in it because we were blind to it.

We thought we had to make our own way in this world, and we spent all our effort and time ploughing as straight a furrow in our little corner of life as we could manage.

We devoted all our attention to keeping our life and our future safe and secure.

We worked hard to be respected and appreciated.

We stood up for our rights and tried not to let anybody or anything take unfair advantage of us.

We fought to protect and preserve our reputation, our family, our belongings.

We did everything in our power to make something worthwhile of our lives, to be winners and not losers.

But like everybody who ever lived, it was a losing battle.

Despite all our best efforts and plans and hard work, we simply cannot control our lives.

We cannot keep disasters and tragedies and failures and pains from coming out of nowhere and shattering what little scraps of hope and joy we have managed to piece together.

Then one day, for no other reason than that He wanted to, God let us in on the way things actually are.

The world is His, and we are His.

We are dead in sin, and there is no way out.

We are lost blind losers in a world of lost blind losers, because we don't have the sense to hold the hand of the only One who knows His way around.

But that's okay, because He became a loser for us through crucifixion and death, and we can be winners with Him by joining Him in His death so that we can also join Him in His resurrection, [Romans 6:3-11].

In other words, God gave us good news!

The good news is that He has personally paid the heavy price for all our selfish, rebellious, destructive, evil lunacy.

He has freely saved us, washed us, purified us, dressed us in righteousness and set a place for us at His eternal banquet table.

And through the gospel, He invites us to trust Him that it is so.

When, by the grace of God, you come to see that and believe it, you have repented.

To repent, you see, is to say, *"Yes! Yes! Yes! I believe it! I trust Your word! I'm leaving behind this rat-race life of mine, this pointless struggle to hold together with chewing gum and baling wire this death I thought was life. I'm ready for Your rest. Help my unbelief!"*

Repentance is a change of how you think.

It is a change of perspective, from seeing yourself as the centre of the universe to seeing God as the centre of the universe, and trusting your life to His mercy.

It is to surrender.

It is to throw down your crown at the feet of the rightful Ruler of the cosmos.

It is the most important change you will ever make.

Not about morals

Repentance is **not** about morals. It is **not** about good behaviour. It is **not** about *"doing better."*

Repentance is putting your trust in God instead of in yourself, your wits, your friends, your country, your government, your guns, your money, your authority, your prestige, your reputation, your car, your house, your job, your family heritage, your colour, your sex, your success, your looks, your clothes, your titles, your degrees, your church, your spouse, your muscles, your leaders, your IQ, your accent, your accomplishments, your charity work, your donations, your kindness, your compassion, your self-control, your chastity, your honesty, your obedience, your devotion, your spiritual disciplines or anything else you can come up with of yours or associated with you that I left out of this long sentence.

Repentance is putting all your eggs in one basket – His basket. It's getting on His side, believing what He says, throwing in your lot with Him, giving Him your allegiance.

Repentance is **not** about promises to be good.

It is **not** about teeth-clenched straining to *"put sin out of your life."*

It is trusting God to have mercy on you.

It is trusting God to fix your evil heart.

It is trusting God to be who He says He is – Creator, Saviour, Redeemer, Teacher, Lord and Sanctifier.

It is dying, dying to your need to be thought of as right and good.

We are talking about a love relationship – not that you loved God, but that He loved you [1 John 4:10].

This Person is the very fountainhead of all that is, including you, and it has dawned on you that this Person loves you for who you are – His beloved child in Christ – certainly **not** for what you have, or what you have done, or what your reputation is, or how you look, or any other characteristic you have, but purely and simply for you in Christ.

Suddenly nothing is the same.

The whole world has suddenly become bright.

All your failures no longer matter.

They are all redeemed and made right in Christ's death and resurrection.

Your eternal future is assured, and nothing in heaven or earth can take your joy away from you, because you belong to God for Christ's sake [Romans 8:1].

You believe Him, you trust Him, you put your life in His hands, come what may, whatever anyone says or does.

You then can be to others lavish in forgiveness, in patience, in kindness, even in losses and defeats – you have nothing to lose, because you have gained absolutely everything in Christ [Ephesians 4:32].

The only thing that matters to you is His new creation [Galatians 6:15].

Repentance is not just another worn out, hollow, moth-eaten commitment to be a good boy or girl.

It is dying to all your big images of yourself and putting your weak, loser hand in the hand of the Man who calmed the sea [Matthew 8:26-27].

It is coming to Christ for rest [Matthew 11:28-30].

It is trusting His word of grace.

God's initiative, not ours

Repentance is about trusting God to be who He is and to do what He does, not about your good deeds versus your bad deeds.

God, in His perfect freedom to be exactly who He wants to be in His love for us, decided to forgive our sins.

Let's be very clear about this: God forgives our sins – all of them – past, present and future.

He does **not** tally them [John 3:16].

Jesus died for us while we were still sinners [Romans 5:8].

He is the slain Lamb, and He was slain for us, for every one of us [1 John 2:2].

Repentance, you see, is not a way of getting God to do what He has already done. Rather, it is believing He *has done it* – saved your life forever and given you a priceless eternal inheritance – and such believing blossoms into loving Him for it.

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,” Jesus told us to pray.

When it dawns on us that God has, for reasons entirely internal to Himself, simply decided to write off our lifetime of selfish arrogance, all our lies, all our cruelty, all our pride, lust, betrayals and meanness – all of our evil thoughts, deeds and plans, we have a choice to make.

We can praise Him and thank Him forever for His indescribable sacrifice of love, or we can go right on living the *“I’m-a-good-person-don’t-think-I’m not”* rat-race life we all love so much.

We can believe God, we can ignore Him, or we can run scared of Him.

If we believe Him, we can walk in joyous friendship with Him (and since He is a friend of sinners, all sinners, that makes everybody, even bad people, our friends too.)

If we don’t trust Him, if we think He won’t or can’t forgive us, we can’t walk joyously with Him (or with anybody else, for that matter, except for people who behave like we want them to.)

Instead we will be afraid of Him and eventually despise Him (and everybody else who doesn’t stay out of our way.)

Two sides of the same coin

Faith and repentance go hand in hand.

When you put your trust in God, two things happen at once.

You realise you are a sinner who needs God’s mercy, and you decide to trust God to save you and redeem your life.

In other words, when you put your trust in God, you have also repented.

In **Acts 2:38**, for example, Peter told the crowd, *“Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

Belief, or faith, is part and parcel with repentance.

By saying, *“repent,”* he was also implying, *“believe,”* or *“trust.”*

Later in the story, Peter puts it this way, *“Repent and turn to God...”*

This turning to God is a turning away from yourself. It does **not** mean you will now be morally perfect.

It means you have turned away from your personal ambitions of making yourself worth something to Christ and instead put your trust and hopes in His word, His good news, His declaration in His own blood of your redemption, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal inheritance.

When you trust in God for forgiveness and salvation, you have repented.

Repentance towards God is a change in the way you think, and it affects everything in your life.

The new way of thinking is the way of trusting God to do what you could never do in a million lifetimes.

Repentance is not a change from moral imperfection to moral perfection – you are incapable of that.

Corpses don't improve

You are incapable of moral perfection because, the fact is, you are dead.

Sin has made you dead, as Paul says in **Ephesians 2:4-5**. But even though you were dead in your sins (**being dead is what you have contributed to this process of forgiveness and redemption**), Christ made you alive (**this is what Christ has contributed: the whole thing**.)

The only thing dead people can do is nothing.

They cannot be alive to righteousness or to anything else, because they are dead, dead in sin.

But it is precisely dead people, and only dead people, who get raised from the dead.

Romans 6:1-11 [New King James] *“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Raising the dead is what Christ does.

He does not pour perfume on corpses. He does not prop them up and dress them in party clothes and wait for them to do something righteous. They are dead. They can't do anything.

Jesus isn't the least bit interested in new and improved corpses.

What Jesus does is resurrect them. And again, corpses are the only kind of people He resurrects.

In other words, the only way to enter into Jesus' resurrection, His life, is to be dead.

It doesn't take much effort to be dead.

In fact, it doesn't take any effort at all.

And dead is precisely what we are.

The lost sheep did **not** find itself before the shepherd went looking for it and found it [**Luke 15:1-7**].

The lost coin did not find itself before the woman went looking for it and found it [**verses 8-10**].

The only thing they contributed to the whole process of their being sought, found and rejoiced over in a big party was being lost.

Their utter, hopeless, lostness was the only thing they had that allowed them to be found.

Even the lost son in the next parable [verses 11-24] finds himself already having been forgiven, redeemed and fully accepted purely on the basis of his father's lavish grace, **not** on the basis of his "work-my-way-back-into-his-good-graces" plan. His father had compassion on him without ever hearing the first word of his "I'm so sorry" speech [verse 20].

When the son finally accepted in the stench of the pigpen his deadness and lostness, he was on his way to discovering something amazing that had been true all along: his father, the one he had rejected and disgraced, had never stopped loving him passionately and unconditionally.

His father flatly ignored his little scheme for redeeming himself [verses 19-24], and without even a probationary waiting period, restored him to full rights as son.

Likewise, our utter, hopeless, deadness is the only thing that allows us to be resurrected.

The initiative, the work and the success of the whole operation is entirely the Shepherd's, the Woman's, the Father's, that is God's.

The only thing we contribute to the process of our resurrection is being dead.

That is as true for us spiritually as it is for us physically.

If we cannot accept the fact that we are dead, we cannot accept the fact that we have, by the grace of God in Christ, been raised from the dead.

Repentance is accepting the fact that you are dead and receiving from God your resurrection in Christ.

Repentance, you see, is **not** bringing forth some good and noble work or mouthing some emotion-laden speech designed to motivate God to forgive you.

We are dead, which means there is absolutely nothing we are capable of doing that could possibly add anything at all to our being made alive, [John 15:1-5].

It is a simple matter of believing God's good news of forgiveness and redemption in Christ through which He resurrects the dead.

Paul articulates the mystery, or paradox if you prefer, of our death and resurrection in Christ in **Colossians 3:3**: "*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*"

The mystery, or paradox, is that we have died, yet we are, at the same time, alive, but that life, which is glorious, is **not** apparent: it is hidden with Christ in God, and it will **not** appear as it actually is until Christ appears, as **verse 4** says: "*When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*"

Our life is with Christ.

When He appears, we will appear with Him, because He is, after all, our life.

So let's come at this again.

Dead bodies can't do anything for themselves. They can't change. They can't "do better." They can't improve.

The only thing they can do is be dead.

God, however, who is the very Source of life itself, absolutely loves to raise the dead, and in Christ, does just that, [Romans 6:4].

The corpses bring nothing to the process except their deadness.

God does it all. It is His work, His alone, from beginning to end.

Which means there are two kinds of raised corpses: those who receive their redemption with joy and those who, preferring their familiar deadness over life, despise it, close their eyes, clasp their hands over their ears and devote all their energies to pretending they are not still dead.

So again, repentance is saying “Yes!” to the gift of forgiveness and redemption that God says you have in Christ.

It is **not** doing penance, making promises or drowning in guilt.

That’s right. Repentance is **not** about a never-ending string of “*I’m deeply sorry*” or “*I promise I won’t do it again.*” Let’s be brutally honest. Chances are you *will* do it again, if not in actual deed, at least in thought, desire and emotion.

Yes, you are sorry, maybe even deeply sometimes, and you truly don’t want to be the kind of person who will do it again, but that’s definitely **not** the heart and core of repentance.

Remember, you are dead, and dead people act like dead people.

But even though you are dead in sin, you are also, at the same time, alive in Christ, [**Romans 6:11**].

But your life in Christ is hidden with Him in God, and it doesn’t show itself very consistently or very often – yet. It’s **not** going to be revealed for what it really is until Christ himself appears.

Now that’s where faith comes in.

Repent and believe the gospel.

The two go hand in glove. You can’t have one without the other. To believe the good news, that God has washed you clean in the blood of Christ, that He has healed your deadness and made you alive forevermore in His Son, is to repent.

Likewise, to turn to God in your utter helplessness, lostness and deadness, receiving His freely given redemption and salvation, is to have faith, to believe the gospel.

They are two sides of the same coin, and it is a coin God gives you for no other reason, no other reason at all, than that He is righteous and gracious towards us.

Behaviour not a measure

Now of course, someone will say, repentance towards God will result in good morals and good behaviour. And I do not dispute that.

The problem is, we love to measure repentance by the absence or presence of good behaviour, and that is to tragically misunderstand repentance.

The honest truth is that we do **not** have perfect morals or perfect behaviour, and anything short of perfection is simply **not** good enough for the Kingdom of God.

So let’s dispense with any nonsense about how “*if your repentance is sincere then you will not commit the sin again.*”

That is precisely **not** the point of repentance.

The point of repentance is a change of heart, from being on the side of yourself, from being in your own corner, from being your own lobbyist, press agent, union rep and defence attorney, to trusting God, to being on His side, to being in His corner, to dying to yourself and being God's completely forgiven, redeemed and beloved child in Christ.

To repent means two things we don't naturally like.

First, it means facing the fact that we are sinners, [Romans 3:23], a perfect description of us.

Second, it means facing the fact that we are no better than anybody else. We are standing in the same soup line with all the other losers for mercy we don't deserve, [Philippians 2:1-4].

In other words, repentance emerges from a humbled spirit.

This humbled spirit is one that has no confidence left in what it can do; it has no hope left, it has given up the ghost, so to speak, it has died to itself and put itself in a basket on God's doorstep.

Say 'Yes!' to God's 'Yes!'

We must get rid of the hideous notion that repentance is a promise **not** ever to sin again.

First of all, such a promise is pure hot air. Second, it is spiritually meaningless.

God has declared an almighty, thundering, eternal "*Yes!*" to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repentance is your saying "*Yes!*" to God's "*Yes!*" It is turning to God to accept His blessed gift, His righteous declaration of your innocence and salvation in Christ.

To accept His gift is to acknowledge your deadness and your need of life in Him. It is to trust Him, to believe Him and to put yourself, your being, your existence, all that you are, in His hands. It is to rest in Him and to give Him your burdens.

So why not rejoice in the rich and burgeoning grace of our Lord and Saviour and take our rest in Him?

He redeems the lost. He saves the sinner. He raises the dead.

He is on our side, and because He is, nothing can come between Him and us – no, not even your wretched sins, or your neighbour's. Trust Him. It's His good news for all of us. He is the Word, and He knows what He is talking about.

How can we show our gratitude towards God for all that He has done for us?

How can we worship Him in "*spirit and truth*" [John 4:23] as He desires we should?

Romans 12:1 [NIV] "*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship.*"

The Greek word translated "*bodies*" is "*soma*" meaning the whole life force we have originally received from the Creator God, our physical body, our mind, and our "*human*" spirit, [Job 32:8].

We in this action sacrifice our will and seek to do the will of God Who owns us, [Acts 20:28].

Romans 12:2 [New King James] "*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*"

This renewing of our mind is done by the Holy Spirit, God, Who owns us.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 [New King James] *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”*

This re-educating of our minds will in the end bring glory to God, as His characteristics gradually become ours, [**Galatians 5:22-25**].

We will then be fulfilling God’s original reason for creating human beings.

Genesis 1:26-27 [New King James] *“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”*

The meaning of the Hebrew words used in these two verses help us understand this original plan of God.

“*Image*” is translated from the Hebrew word “*tselem*” meaning resemblance, shadow, outward form, a material representation.

“*Likeness*” is translated from the Hebrew word “*demûwth*” meaning manner, attributes, in other words, character.

Note only “*image*” was created in human beings because character “*likeness*” can only be created by spending time in the presence of the Person [God] Whose character we wish to reflect.

Hence human beings are given a period of physical life in which we can, as the Holy Spirit actively works in us, [**John 14:17**] and the “*fruits*,” the characteristics of God develop within us, [**Galatians 5:22-25**].