

REPENTANCE

We live in a superficial age, and nowhere is superficiality more accommodated and welcomed than in the religious world. In his first sermon, Jesus warned of the frivolity of “street-corner prayers,” crowing our charity, boasting our giving, and flaunting our spirituality. Don’t do it, he said –never let your Christianity degenerate into pomp, parade, demonstration or “show-biz.” Don’t let it become a “stage-show.”

Fight to keep the humility in Christianity. Did you ever suspect that some folk who repent loud and long are really just bragging? The reality of all true Christianity is seen by God in the “closet of the soul.” “Break up your fallow ground, sow not among the thorns” (Jeremiah 4:3). Christ preached repentance, and when he was about to ascend to heaven, he commanded that repentance should be preached in his name.

Every decision to follow Christ must take root in the deep-plowed ground of repentance. Hearts must be stirred to seriousness. We must resist the urge to “prophesy smooth things” (Isaiah 30:10), in order to make folk feel spiritual, or feel good about themselves.

Repentance is not just a change in direction; it is a change of mind. It is more than understanding the folly of sin; it includes a different attitude toward it. Repentance is to change your mind –not just your actions. There are all sorts of reasons why people change their actions; many of them have nothing to do with God. Repentance is doing right, on account of the fact that you “think right.” It proposes that right thinking precludes right doing. A person may do right toward you; however, his actions are of little consequence if he does not “feel right” toward you. God wants people to “feel right” about him.

John Milton said that repentance is “The golden key that opens the palace of eternity.”

We shall look at the Who, What, When, Where, and the Why of repentance.

First, the Where of Repentance. Where do we find such an idea? I believe repentance is supported by the entire Bible. Jeremiah 25:5 has it, “Turn now, everyone of you, from your evil way and wicked doing.” Ezekiel 14:6 says, “Therefore say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations.” Such texts are typical to the Old Testament.



The New Testament opens with the voice of John the Baptist, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the Wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the regions along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance'" (Matthew 3:2-8).

The Bible says in Matthew 4:17, "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The word repent is used 45 times in the Old Testament with the meaning of "sigh, or groan, or lament," and 600 times with the meaning of "turn, or return." In the New Testament it is used 61 times with the meaning of "think differently" –to change your mind. Where do we find the idea of repentance? Everywhere in the Bible.

Now, let's look at the What of repentance. What, exactly, is it? The most advanced idea of the word repent is found in the New Testament, as we might expect. There are two words in the New Testament which are translated as "repent." One is *metanoia*; it comes from two smaller words –*meta*, to change, and *noia*, mind. Put them together and you have *change mind*. So, it is not just to forsake sin; it is not just to be aware of the consequences of sin; it is not just to be sorrowful about the results of sin; it is not just a reformation of our lives. It goes much deeper; it is a change in our thinking, or our attitude regarding sin. It affects our behavior as a result of our new thinking and our new feelings about it. With repentance, we begin to have God's view of sin.

In the New Testament there is another word translated repent; it is the word *metamellow*. It is also made up of two smaller words. First *meta*, to change, and second *mellow*, or after-care/annoyance. In this case what is regretted is not the sin itself, but the outcome –we are annoyed by the results. What bothers us in this case is the consequence of sin, not that we are the cause.

Judas had this kind of repentance. He was not sorry that he did it; he was only sorry for the way things turned out for him. "When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood'" (Matthew 27:3-4).

True repentance involves more than regret for a deed gone sour –it also changes us. It says, right thinking is the basis for right living. To repent is to alter one's way of looking at life; it is to take God's point of view, instead of one's own.

For every truth, there is a counterfeit truth that may look even better than the truth itself. When we look at the What of repentance, perhaps there is an advantage in looking at What it is not.

Repentance may be accomplished by tears; but, it is not tears. Some folk are naturally soft at heart. They weep easily. Their liquid grief flows over the least little thing. They are cut to heart by another's misery –the

story of the cross; they weep for the pity of him who hung there –for the harm and pain that came to his body. They are not weeping so much for the fact that their sins put him there, as for the fact that he was there. They also weep for the cat that got hit in the road –even if they have never met it. That is not bad; I’m just saying that neither is it repentance. “But drops of grief can ne’er repay the debt of love I owe; here Lord, I give myself to Thee, tis’ all that I can do.” Liquid grief does not constitute a change of mind. Neither are good notions repentance. We know only too well that bad notions can be stirred up in godly people, and good notions in bad people.

Solemn vows and resolutions are often substituted for repentance. Josh Billings said, “The hardest sinner in the whole lot to convert is the one who spends half his time sinning and the other half in repentance.” I expect that is because there is no deep change –just an incessant series of regrets.

When I was a boy, a prominent radio/TV personality got cancer. His name was Arthur Godfrey. We all loved Arthur; however, he did border on the fringes of irreverence and sometimes snuggled up too close to the profane. He made our mothers blush. When Arthur got cancer he made many public promises to God that he would serve him for the rest of his life, if God would only cure him.

I do not remember that Arthur talked about God very much after he was cured. His chief religious activities became fighting the Chesterfields –that he had once advertised –and fighting the detergents, that were killing our rivers and streams. He had caught up with the ecosystem –and good for him. However, you don’t need to be a Christian to do either of those things. Repentance is not “making a deal with God.” And, I’m not saying that Arthur was not a Christian; I’m simply saying that repentance is not striking a bargain with God.

Repentance is the work of God in our minds. It is when sin is seen to be against God –a challenge to his authority, a rejection of his wisdom, and a despite of his love.

Too many people sorrow because they have been discovered, and the shame of their exposure hurts their pride. Godly sorrow is different. The Bible say, “Godly sorrow works repentance (metanoia –change of mind) to salvation, not to be repented of (metamellow –not regretted of): but the sorrow of the world works death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). The result of true repentance is salvation.

Gardiner Spring wrote, “It is one thing to mourn sin because it exposes us to hell, and another to mourn for it because it is an infinite evil; it is one thing to mourn for it because it is injurious to ourselves, and another thing to mourn for it because it is wrong and offensive to God. It is one thing to be terrified; another to be humbled.”

That puts us to the Why? of repentance. “God looked down from heaven on mankind, to see if there were any that were wise, who sought God. They were all fallen away, they were all alike perverse; there was no one who did good, no, not one ...they do not call upon God” (Psalm 53:2-4).

John said, “And this is the judgment (this is the problem), that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not

come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3:19-21).

Why repent? Because we don't see things right. Repentance does not so much eradicate sin in our lives, as give us a different view of it. "Of all acts of man, repentance is the most divine, while the greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none" ~ Thomas Carlyle.

Some people repent of their sins by thanking God that they aren't half as bad as some of their neighbors.

Repentance is a gift from God. It is a gift God wants to give, and one which we do well to receive. It is something in which God seeks our cooperation. It is the stair-step that leads into the presence of God.

The Who of repentance is Us. When Paul preached the sermon about the Unknown God in Athens, he said, "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30,31).

We all need a change of mind that leads to a change of heart. Repentance is not something we do to win God's compassion –we already have God's compassion. Repentance is what we must do to acknowledge God's truth. No matter what our nationality, position, or condition, we are in need of repentance. *We all need* to see things as God sees them.

Repentance is not just for sinners, it is also for saints. The saints at Corinth repented. "Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance" (2 Corinthians 7:9). The Christians who had "left their first love" at the church at Ephesus were asked to repent (Revelation 2:5).

There is a *general repentance* that will bring one to Christ and make you a Christian. There is also a *specific repentance* that will bring you back to Christ if you are already a Christian. Repentance is for everyone, everywhere.

When we look at the When of repentance, we see that it covers time past, present, and future. What do we mean by that? True repentance has a multi-period, multi-time quality. It looks upon things past with a weeping eye; it looks upon things present with a humble eye; and it looks upon things future with a cautious eye. Repentance is for everyone, everywhere, all the time. You needed it in the past, you need it now, and you may be sure that you will continue to need it in the future.. Humble people are good at repentance. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13). That's me!

And the number 1 rule is always, "Don't make a show out of it." If you do, it is still nothing. A show is nothing.