

# Forgiveness and Repentance

## Part 5

**What is repentance? What does it look like?**

*With Study Questions*

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### Preface

I can't remember exactly what the problem was, but I remembering meeting with a pastor/friend in an effort to minister to a mutual acquaintance. As we were seeking to prayerfully arrive at the best course of action for this person, I recall hitting logger-heads on a certain issue which all but paralyzed our ability to come to an agreement on how this issue should be resolved – the issue was repentance.

My pastor/friend was convinced that repentance was merely a change of mind (since that is the literal definition of the word) which did not necessarily include a change in action or behavior. In other words, so long as this person had a correct intellectual definition in his mind regarding who Jesus is, his behavior simply didn't matter and shouldn't be considered a factor regarding whether or not he/she (I truly can't remember) was a Christian.

Years later I heard a prominent pastor on the radio teach essentially the same thing – this pastor taught that he had received Jesus as his Savior one summer then as His Lord the next summer. In other words, repentance, defined as turning from sin and to righteousness, was advisable but not a necessary component of salvation. A person, according to this view, could live like hell yet still go to heaven, provided they merely changed their mind about Jesus.

## Review

In our series on forgiveness and repentance, we defined forgiveness as a decision on the part of the offended person to “send away” the debt of the offending person – to acquit or pardon others the way we, as Christians, have been acquitted by God. Whatever ailments may accompany the issue of forgiveness by the offended party or the offending party, the unwillingness to make a commitment to forgive stalls and corrupts everything; in addition, and more importantly, it is dishonoring to God.

We then pursued understanding why it is so difficult to forgive others. The bottom line of this difficulty is an unawareness or ignorance of the incalculable abyss of our own sin before God – the immense un-payable debt we all owe – as we discussed in the parable of the unmerciful servant, “ALL THAT DEBT!”

We then sought to answer the question ‘should we always forgive, even if there is no repentance?’ If we’re going to forgive as we have been forgiven, there must be repentance on the part of the offender; if there is no repentance, we misrepresent forgiveness. This is not to say that we are to remain inactive in the life of the offender. We are to love, pray and minister to the very person who offended us, in hopes that **“God perhaps will grant them repentance” (2 Timothy 2:25)**. We might add that to forgive someone who doesn’t want forgiveness or seek to repent will appear either silly or condescending. To say “I forgive you” to an unrepentant person could easily be responded to with an indignant, “for what?”

From there we asked the question, ‘Does forgiving always mean forgetting?’ The answer being, ‘it depends.’ If we’re remembering in order to vent, condemn or discharge our anger, we remember sinfully; if we’re remembering in order to be wise and cautious (for the benefit of all – including the offender) then we remember with virtue. Those were the first four issues in the series. The remaining two topics are:

**5. What is repentance? What does it look like?**

**6. How do we reconcile forgiveness as a necessary virtue to salvation? And if there is no repentance, how do we spiritually, emotionally, psychologically or functionally deal with the wound?**

# What is repentance? What does it look like?

## Repentance – A Change of Mind

Back to my discussion with my pastor/friend – he was certainly accurate with his literal (by the letter) definition of repentance. The Greek word is the compound *metanoia* – *meta* meaning change (meta was a column or post, or group of columns or posts, placed at each end of a racetrack to mark the turning place) and *noia* referring to the mind. The difficulty I had with my friend’s definition is that he seemed to think that the changing of the mind could be inert or static or without motion.

Because of this limited understanding of the word, the standard definition is often resisted – that definition being “...**a change of mind leading to change of behavior.**”<sup>1</sup> John the Baptist, decimates that static view of repentance at the very beginning of his preaching:

**Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, <sup>9</sup> and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (Matthew 3:8, 9).**

The Pharisees and Sadducees, at whom these words were directed, took comfort in their blood line – God is unimpressed. An important principle in Bible interpretation is to determine how the Spirit of God uses certain words. The Scriptures need to help us define the proper use of words or terms.

When John preaches that we ought to “**bear fruit worthy of repentance**” the word “**worthy**” is *axios* which was used to describe the bringing up or down the scales to even. In other words, a true changing of the mind (as defined by the Scriptures) will affect the scales of human behavior – a person will seek to behave in a manner consistent with their calling (Ephesians 4:1).

Paul defines repentance well in his discussion with King Agrippa, when he says he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,

**but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that**

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<sup>1</sup>Friberg, T., Friberg, B., & Miller, N. F. (2000). *Vol. 4: Analytical lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Baker's Greek New Testament library (260). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

**they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting (*axia*) repentance (Acts 26:20).**

Biblical repentance is an active changing of the mind about everything – about who God is, who Jesus is, who we are, who we are to trust, how we are to behave and so on. If it is true, biblically defined, repentance, it begins to govern our thoughts, words and actions. To say we have repented only in our mind, but not in our words or deeds, is to be a double-minded man (James 1:8; 4:8) seeking to serve two masters, which Jesus teaches no one can do (Matthew 6:24).

In our struggles with forgiveness and repentance, we might think, “the person who offended me is a Christian – they have already repented.” There were times when I wished I wasn’t a Christian yet, so I could repent and have my sins washed away again – to once again enjoy that refreshment. It seems so much easier to excuse my pre-conversion sins. But repentance and the joy of forgiveness that comes with repentance are not merely for the unbeliever who comes to Christ for the first time.

## **Definitive Repentance**

The Scriptures teach two types of repentance – they could be called *definitive* repentance and *ongoing* repentance. We clearly see a call to a first-time definitive repentance included in preaching the gospel to unbelievers. Both John the Baptist and Jesus came preaching that unbelievers ought to “**repent for the kingdom of God is at hand**” (Matthew 3:1, 2; 4:17). Clearly Peter taught the same at Pentecost:

**Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).**

It is this definitive repentance that we should be praying for when it comes to our unbelieving friends and family. But that doesn’t mean we don’t need to be continually repenting ourselves. There should be ongoing repentance.

## **Ongoing Repentance – Mortification and Vivification**

Six times in His letters to the seven churches in first two chapters of Revelation, Jesus calls those who have already made professions of faith to repent (Revelation 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). The apostle Paul, writing to professing

Christians rejoice that his letter led them to repent, explaining that repentance is where godly sorrow actually leads the faithful (2 Corinthians 7:8-10).

It is this ongoing repentance that can be defined by the terms mortification and vivification. As a culture very familiar with Spanish, these words can be easily understood. *Mortification* meaning to “**put to death the deeds of the body**” (Romans 8:13) and *vivification* means living unto Christ by putting “**on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him**” (Colossians 3:5, 10).

In short, for the Christian, repentance means continually turning from and putting to death the sin which we ever contend with and turning to and bringing to life that which is good and right – all the time calling on Christ for forgiveness and rejoicing in the continual, never-ending mercies of God.

A good biblical example of this ‘turning from and turning to’ is found in Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus. In the very first verse we’ll read we will see the same root word *noos* for “**mind**” in verse 17. You’ll also notice the continual call in the life of a Christian to no longer walk, think or behave as an unbeliever. This is followed by specific examples of turning from one thing and turning to another:

**This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind,<sup>18</sup> having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart;<sup>19</sup> who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.<sup>20</sup> But you have not so learned Christ,<sup>21</sup> if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus:<sup>22</sup> that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,<sup>23</sup> and be renewed in the spirit of your mind,<sup>24</sup> and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, putting away lying, “Let *each one* of you *speak truth with his neighbor*,” for we are members of one another.<sup>26</sup> “*Be angry, and do not sin*”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath,<sup>27</sup> nor give place to the devil.<sup>28</sup> Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with *his* hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.<sup>29</sup> Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.<sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for**

**the day of redemption.** <sup>31</sup> **Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.** <sup>32</sup> **And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:17-32).**

Repentance means actively turning from one thing and to another. For the unbeliever it means turning from whatever sin or ungodly life and world view may be your current master and turning to Christ. Perhaps the most dangerous thing for an unbeliever is to turn from a sinful lifestyle but not turn to Christ – leaving his house/soul empty. Jesus seems to indicate that this man will be re-entered by seven more evil spirits than he originally had (Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24, 25).

For the believer repentance means continually turning from sin and turning to righteousness – always calling upon Christ for forgiveness and continually praising His Name for granting it.

### **Repentance or Penance?**

How does this all speak to our interpersonal relationships? First, the ongoing repentance relates to remembering the sins of others, especially if we are to help each other with the ongoing repentance – something we are all called to do.

**Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted (Galatians 6:1).**

Secondly and, in my opinion, more importantly, we all need to recognize that repentance is not the same as *penance*. If we're to forgive others as we have been forgiven, there must be repentance but we should never demand penance. It has been my observation that most of us are more concerned with penance than repentance. What is penance?

Penance (from Latin *poena* "penalty") means to pay for your sins, versus the similar sounding word, penitence which is a disposition of sorrow or contrition leading to repentance. Penance is a Roman Catholic sacrament where the penitent sinner presents himself to the priest, accuses himself of his own sins, after which the priest pronounces absolution and imposes satisfaction – which might involve praying certain prayers or doing certain duties.

It is this imposing of satisfaction which marks the huge distinction between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, since Protestants (at least should) recognize the full satisfaction for our sins is found in the blood of Christ. We do not believe that we in any way, or in any category (justification or sanctification) pay for our sins – nor does God call us to pay for our sins but to trust in Christ who paid the ransom Himself (Matthew 20:28).

When we as Christians rebuke a brother who has sinned against us, we are to loving them to repentance, then upon that repentance, forgive them (Luke 17:3, 4). We are not to seek to punish them for their sins against us. It is nowhere found in the Christian idea of dealing with sinners that we are to make them pay for what they did to us (when I say “pay” I don’t mean there should be no restitution in repentance – if someone owes a debt they should pay it – I mean pay in terms of suffer).

It is here that Peter calls us to follow the example of Christ:

**But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.** <sup>21</sup> For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: <sup>22</sup> *Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth*; <sup>23</sup> *who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously*; <sup>24</sup> *who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes you were healed.* <sup>25</sup> For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (1 Peter 2:20b-25).

Suffering brings out our true colors. In our desire to follow Christ we must recognize God’s sovereign hand in our suffering and “**take it patiently.**” We are not to “**revile in return.**” And we are certainly not to take matters into our own hands but commit ourselves “**to Him who judges righteously.**”

Certainly there should be repentance; we’ve discussed that thoroughly. But if Jesus doesn’t demand penance for sins (which are primarily committed against Him) how can we?



## Questions for Study

1. Review and discuss the first four points in the series on forgiveness and repentance (pages 2, 3)?
2. Define repentance. What would biblical repentance look like in a person's life (pages 4, 5)?
3. What is the difference between *definitive* repentance and *ongoing* repentance (pages 5-7)?
4. Define and discuss mortification and vivification (pages 5-7).
5. Contrast repentance with penance. How are they different? What does it mean to be penitent (pages 7, 8)?
6. How can we imitate Jesus when we've been offended or hurt (page 8)?