

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 44—What is Repentance Unto Life? Q. 87

Introduction

Repentance is an inseparable companion of faith, so that the soul blessed with faith in Christ will also be granted repentance toward God, Acts 11.18.

Two Kinds of Repentance or Sorrow

- I. Legal repentance or worldly sorrow.
 - A. Esau, Ahab, and Judas, Gen 27.34-38; Heb 12.17; 1Kgs 21.20-29; Mt 27.3-5.
- II. Evangelical/Gospel repentance or godly sorrow.
 - A. The Gentiles in Acts 11.18.
 - B. The Jews in Acts 2.38, 41, 47.

The Nature of Repentance

- I. It's a saving grace, causing a soul to turn from sin—which brings death, unto God—who gives life, Acts 5.31; 11.18; 2Tim 2.25.
 - A. It's not a temporary action, a sigh for sin, or a pang of sorrow, which goes away again.
 - B. It's a radically new disposition towards sin as sin that turns from it to God, constantly, continually, consistently—though not without the abiding resistance and skirmishes of the flesh, Rom 7.
- II. It's an abiding grace. Once begun at conversion, it continues until death. It's a wound that never stops bleeding until the heart stops.
- III. It's a sovereign grace, worked by the Spirit of God only in the hearts of the elect, inseparably tied to their regeneration and infallibly giving way to eternal life.

The Author of Repentance

- I. This is not the work of man, Jer 13.23.
- II. It is the work of God Himself, Ezk 36.26-27; Jer 31.18-19; Jn 16.8.
 - A. "The power and principle to repent and believe is from God alone, though the work be ours. 'Tis we that are to repent and believe. Our souls must exert and put forth these acts. 'Twere an absurd thing to imagine, that God should repent and believe for us. They are acts to be performed by us, though the grace and power to do them, is vouchsafed by God, who thereby helps and assists us to work out our own salvation, Phil 2.12-13," Cradock.
- III. It is worked by the Word as the means of this grace, Jer 23.29.
 - A. The Spirit opens the eyes of the sinner to his sin by opening the Law to the conscience of the sinner. In the mirror of the Law, when brought home by the Spirit of God with an eye to save, the sinner sees his sin, his lost and cursed condition, and his need for salvation and a Saviour outside himself, Rom 7.7-12.
 - B. "The soul is driven [out of sin] by the law, but drawn [unto God] by the gospel," Boston.
- IV. It is an inevitable fruit of union with Christ.
 - A. Once spiritually and permanently united to and in radical, participatory communion with Christ, the holy Son of God, the soul cannot love sin as it did, cannot enjoy sin as it did, cannot live in sin as it did, 1Jn 3.4-9.
 - B. Sin swallowed down by a child of God will eventually be vomited up by repentance, 2Sam 12.13. Though it may be a squatter in a season of backsliding, there's simply no longer a home for sin in the heart of a believer any more, because it's become the permanent home of the Holy Spirit of Christ.

The Springs of Repentance

- I. A true sense of sin.
 - A. A sight of sin as sin, Ps 51.3; Rom 7.7; 3.20. The Spirit open's the sinner's eyes.
 - B. A painful feeling of sorrow for it as sin, Acts 2.37. After opening the sinner's eyes, the Spirit then breaks the sinner's heart so that he sees the weight and burden of his sins and that he has all this while been working his own damnation, Ezk 18.31.
- II. An apprehension of God's mercy in Christ, Joel 2.12-13.

- A. *Seeing (by grace) sin as sinful sin, deadly sin, cursed sin, sin against God, and seeing (by the grace of faith) that there is forgiveness and mercy in Christ for sinners, the faith-awakened sinner repents or turns from the sin he sees in himself to the God he beholds in Christ. *This is conversion.*
- B. This is the work of the Spirit, who works *faith and repentance* in the heart to turn a man from himself to the Saviour, from his sin to God. *There's no repentance* or turning from sin to God *without* the preceding *faith* to see, and *there's no faith-awakening without* a consequent *turning* from sin to God. So that when these two are worked in a man by the Spirit of God, he is saved and converted unto God, having become a new creature in Christ.

The Parts of Repentance

I. Humiliation

- A. A godly sorrow for sin as an offense against a holy and gracious God and as the nails to pierce a precious Saviour, 2Cor 7.9.
- B. A holy shame for the nakedness, corruption, pollution, vileness, and defilement caused to self by sin, Lk 18.13.
- C. A self-loathing for all the evil done, Ezk 36.31; Jer 31.19.
- D. A hatred of sin as sin, Ps 119.128; Jer 44.4.
- E. A confession of sin, 2Sam 12.13; Ps 51.3. "Confession of sin is the spiritual vomit of the soul whereby it casts up, the (sometimes sweet) morsels of sin, with loathing and detestation. For though sin were sweet in commission, it is bitter in remembrance and confession," Cradock.
- F. A forsaking of sin, Job 34.32. "The language of his heart is, Lord what I see not to be amiss in myself, do thou show me; and wherein I have done ill, help me by thy grace that I may do so no more (Job 34.32)," Cradock.

II. Conversion or Turning

- A. A turning from sin, both in heart, life, and conduct, Ps 119.104. To repent of sin and continue in the habitual practice of it is a contradiction and neither true repentance nor true faith. All sin is an *aversion from God* and the proper cure of it is by *conversion to God*.
- B. A turning to God, both unto God Himself and unto the duties required by Him, Ps 119.59. In every true penitent there is a notable and remarkable change wrought: a change of mind, heart, and life.
 - 1. His mind is changed by a gracious work of conviction. His heart is changed by a gracious work of humiliation, and godly sorrow, and hatred of sin. And his life is changed by a gracious work of conversion, in which he daily and habitually turns from sin to righteousness, from Satan to God, Isa 55.7.

Inferences

- I. As there's no sin so small that it deserves damnation, so there's no sin so great that it can damn a man who truly repents of it. So take heart. Whatever your sins, the key is: *don't stay in them.* Repent and be healed. —It's not the falling into water that drowns a man, but his staying in it and not getting out. So it's not the falling into sin that ruins a man, but his continuing in it and not having recourse to Christ's blood by repentance. In other words, no sin damns a man but that sin which is accompanied by impenitence and unbelief.
- II. You must have more than Judah's or Esau's repentance if you would ever see heaven. True repentance springs from evangelical/gospel motives, and not merely from shame or the fear of hell and wrath.
- III. An impenitent heart is a sign of a lost state, Rom 2.5.
- IV. To leave sin and not take up the contrary duty is not repentance. In true repentance sin is left and obedience is taken up. It's a turning from sin unto God, a turning from a life of disobedience to a life of obedience.
- V. Go to the Lord for the grace of repentance, which always comes with the grace of faith, and let it work a thorough reformation in your life—a turning from all known sin. Beware of a partial reformation. Partial repentance is no repentance just as partial faith is no faith.
- VI. When you've humbled yourself and repented of your sins, don't rest in your repentance, but go to Christ for pardon. "Rest not on this side of Christ. For not thy tears, but only His blood, can cleanse your conscience from all guilt," Cradock.