What is True Repentance?

Ryan Kingsley 9 May 2024



Do you love the word ‘repentance’? Does it make you think of real change, the power of God, and deep refreshment? It should.

We have all used the euphemisms ‘brokenness’, ‘weakness’ and ‘trip-ups’. Likewise, I’m sure we all love the words, ‘healing’, ‘breakthrough’ and ‘overcoming’. The Bible also uses these and similar terms, but it primarily uses the words ‘sin’, ‘conviction’ and ‘repentance’.

The Counsellor vs Counselling

The precious Holy Spirit is so good at leading us into truth. He is the Counsellor. Together with gifted people, He can reveal default weaknesses and failings in us, where these handicaps came from, and how to break the corresponding lies and fears. The possible danger in this is that it can be interpreted as being easily compatible with our culture’s love of counselling and therapy. A love that can be (but is not always) rooted in a deep fascination with ourselves, our history, our make-up, and our hurts. As Christians, we must be honest about these personal realities, but not at the expense of doing what the Bible emphasises, which is turning away from self and fixing our eyes on the Author and Perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Repentance Brings Renewal

When Peter preached to the very Jews who had crucified Jesus on the day of Pentecost, He was bold and direct. But His words had their intended effect, “Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him … ‘Brothers, what should we do?’” (Acts 2:37, NLT)

Peter’s answer in no way justifies or downplays their sin of murdering Christ (for which our sin is also ultimately responsible). He says to them, “Each of you must **repent of your sins and turn to God …**” and as you do that, the resulting promise will be fulfilled: “Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38, NLT)

Likewise, in Acts 3:19-20a (NLT) it says, “Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord”.

It is this humble act of repentance that opens the door for the Spirit of God to rush in with great renewal and refreshing. True repentance is amazing.

So What is True Repentance?

Let’s start with what repentance is not.

It is Not Regret

Regret is feeling bad because of how things have turned out for me, and I now have these horrible consequences to deal with. For instance: sex outside of marriage led to so much pain, even an unplanned pregnancy, so I wish it had never happened because the consequences are awkward and difficult for me. Or my creative accounting (AKA tax evasion) means I now have to face charges and I might lose everything. This is not repentance.

It is Not Remorse

Remorse is basically feeling bad because of the effect my actions have had on myself and others. For instance, I feel remorse about my adultery because it hurt my spouse and children and destroyed families. Or I feel remorse because abusing drugs led me to steal from my parents, which broke them and their trust in me. While this is all good, it is still not true repentance.

Recognising Our Sin Against God

David said the following after massive moral failure, murder, adultery, and then lying to cover it all up. “For I recognise my rebellion; it haunts me day and night. Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:3-4a, NLT). When the conviction of God came, he took full responsibility and directed his repentance towards the One he had ultimately sinned against.

> I have not only broken His laws, but I have broken His heart.

David had sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, and all of Israel, but his heart’s cry of anguish was that his sin was really against God. This was truly his most horrific thought – I have sinned against the Creator that designed me for His glory; against the Judge to Whom I am ultimately accountable; against my God who loves me. I have not only broken His laws, but I have broken His heart.

This is at the heart of true repentance. Of course we repent to people whom we have sinned against, but we must understand that the sins to which we have become so accustomed in our lives – the sins of anxiety, anger, lust, fear of man – are sins against God. It is firstly a rebellion towards Him and His ways.

How Deep Must Repentance Go?

“Jonny, say sorry to your sister.”

“Fine. Sorry, sister. There I said it.”

“No, say sorry like you mean it!”

“I’m so sorry, sister. I really mean it this time.”

I give up. Every parent has this struggle. Real repentance goes deep – it must be in thought, word and deed.

In Thought

When people really encounter God, they usually fall on their faces, trembling in fear, awestruck by the realisation of His perfection and power and their imperfection and sin. This is vitally important – to have a mind that rightly comprehends His majesty and rightly discerns our own mess. If this revelation has ruined you at some point and continues to do so, then the platform for real repentance is set.

In Word

The Bible says, confess your sins (1 John 1:9). Confession is not a Catholic phenomenon. There is power in our confession to God and, as often as possible, to man as well. There is healing there. I have seen this in my marriage and with many other marriages in counselling. As we speak our apology out loud and 'own our sin', the repentance drops from our heads to our hearts and light floods the situation, even as tears flow.

In Deed

When Jesus came to visit Zacchaeus in his house, conviction came on the corrupt tax collector. His response was beautiful. He didn't beg for mercy; mercy was already being given by the Messiah in his home. No, he said in that moment, 'I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!' (Luke 19:8, NLT). And with this promise of restitution, Jesus stated, 'Salvation has come to this home today'. (Luke 19:9a, NLT)

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True Repentance Produces Fruit

True repentance must produce fruit and restitution must be made, if at all possible. True change will occur where the repentance is real. It may be gradual, a sense of faltering forward, but we cannot stay the same as the power of the Holy Spirit moves in through the door of repentance.

May we be a partnership of churches that never downplays sin or sidesteps conviction. May we use the weapon of humility that we have been given to slay our sin and open the door to the power of the Spirit. May we always repent honestly and deeply before God – in thought, word,

and deed.

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