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“For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death,” II Corinthians 7:10.

True and False Repentance

Lesson Aim: to lead each reader to true repentance.

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In agricultural regions of our country, it is not unusual to see a Caterpillar tractor pulling a gang of plows across a field. The plows are thrust deep into the ground—much deeper than ordinary plowing—to turn up the subsoil to be mixed with the topsoil. Farmers report that such deep plowing of the land is necessary in order to secure the greatest productivity.

It seems that the plow of repentance must be driven deeply into the human heart, if there is to be vitality of religion. That is a difficult truth to get across to many people, for Satan has deceived them. Satan has a colossal publicity department, dedicated to persuading people that repentance is an “old fashioned” doctrine which is no longer needed. It is not true.

Repentance is the first step in the soul's return to God.

Tears of repentance are the only “holy water” which God considers valid. People desire to be left alone, but Christians should preach repentance because “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Today's study aims to investigate the Bible doctrine of repentance in order to direct each reader to true repentance.

I. THE IMPERATIVE OF REPENTANCE

The Bible is replete with calls to repentance. Six hundred eighty times the term occurs in the Old Testament. Sixty-one times it occurs in the New Testament. That is a total of seven hundred forty-one references to repentance. How important the doctrine must be!

Repentance was the theme of the preaching of John the Baptist. His

wilderness sermons were, **“Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”** Matthew 3:2.

Jesus began His preaching ministry with the message of repentance. **“From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”** Matthew 4:17.

Repentance was the message of the twelve apostles when Jesus sent them before Him. **“... They went out, and preached that men should repent,”** Mark 6:12.

Repentance is the message Jesus commissioned to be preached to the whole world: **“... that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations,”** Luke 24:47.

Repentance was the “message of the apostles following the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. **“... Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins ...”** Acts 2:38. **“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out ...”** Acts 3:19. **“... Testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,”** Acts 20:21.

Repentance is God's command to all men: **“... The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent,”** Acts 17:30.

Repentance is the only alternative to destruction **“The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,”** II Peter 3:9. **“... Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish,”** Luke 13:3.

II. THE MEANING OF REPENTANCE

The basic meaning of repent is “to turn; to change directions.” Picture a man, traveling in a certain direction. Convinced that he is going the wrong way, he stops, turns around, and takes another course. That is what repentance means: “to turn; to change directions.” There is a true repentance and a false repentance. The motivation which causes one to turn distinguishes the true from the false. In II Corinthians 7:8-11, the Apostle Paul distinguished between true and false motives in repentance. He concluded, **“For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death,”** verse 10.

The Bible addresses its call to repentance to the heart of every man. “Heart” does not refer to the physical organ which pumps blood for the body, but to the center of human personality. True repentance involves the

whole heart, the mind, the emotions, and the will of the man.

In the intellectual realm, “repentance” means, “to have a change of mind.” Jesus told of a man who had two sons. He asked each son to work in the vineyard. One son replied, “I will not,” but afterward he repented (changed his attitude; had a different mind) and went (Matthew 21:28, 29).

Examine the attitude of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-23). He left home because he detested it. How different home looked to him from the perspective of the swine lot in a foreign country. He had a different mind; his attitude changed. Just so, in true repentance, the sinner sees himself as he really is. He understands the truth about his condition and admits that truth to himself. He is convicted of personal sin. No longer justifying his sin, nor boasting of his sin, nor hiding his sin, he admits it. He has had a change of mind toward sin.

In the emotional realm, “repentance” means that one is sorry that he has sinned against God. Regret, even grief, over his sin fills his heart. He experiences the “broken and contrite heart” which God prizes (Psalm 51:17). Like the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, he may weep over his sins (Luke 7:36-50). At least, the love of sin dies in his heart. He had rather have peace with God and assurance of cleansing than to have all the pleasures of sin.

Such a feeling, based upon what he understands, creates in him the prayer, “**God be merciful to me a sinner,**” Luke 18:13.

In the volitional realm, “repentance” means that one repudiates sin by an act of his will. Based upon what his mind knows and his emotion feels, he resolves to turn from sin to God. Such a turning to seek pardon and cleansing is the sign of true repentance. Again, examine the case of the prodigal son. Having recognized his foolish decision to leave his father's house, and regretting his rash act sufficiently, he became willing to do something about it; he resolved, “**I will arise and go to my father . . .**” Luke 15:18. Then, praise the Lord, “. . . **he arose, and came to his father . . .**” Luke 15:20. Such an act of the will is the ultimate in real repentance.

Look back upon your own experience of repentance. You probably did not recite those three phases to yourself. You probably did not say, “First, I must change my attitude. Then, I must feel sorrow. Finally, I must make up my mind to seek the Lord.” No, you did not; but if you carefully evaluate your experience, that is what you did. Recognizing yourself to be a sinner (mind), you were grieved that you had sinned against God (emotion), and you resolved to come to Him for forgiveness (will). The elements were there. There is no true repentance apart from the mind, the emotion, and the will.

Coming to God in true repentance involves three things: (1) One must confess (agree with God) that he is a sinner. (2) He must resolve to be forever done with his sins. (3) He must ask for forgiveness and cleansing. Those three simple steps will bring the blessing of forgiveness.

III. THE DIFFERENCES IN REPENTANCE

There is a “godly sorrow” which “worketh repentance unto salvation.” There is a “sorrow of the world” which “worketh death.” Read II Corinthians 7:10! How may one distinguish between “godly sorrow” and the “sorrow of the world”?

It is not enough to be sorry over sin. In itself sorrow has no healing power before God. To be accepted before God, sorrow must be God-ward. “. . . A man repents when he turns to God, sees his conduct as God sees it, submits to God's judgment and asks God to forgive him. Sorrow for wrongdoing, which leaves God out of account, is merely remorse, that melancholy compound of self-pity and self-disgust. So far from healing and uplifting, remorse depresses and embitters”—R. V. G. Tasker, in **Tyndale Commentary** on II Corinthians.

A godly sorrow is marked by grief that one has sinned against a holy God. A sorrow of the world is marked by grief that one has been caught in sin. True repentance thinks of sin as a violation of God's holiness. False repentance thinks of sin as a violation of man's happiness. True repentance brings with it nothing that produces regret. False repentance brings with it nothing but regret. Godly sorrow (Moffatt translates it, “the sorrow that God directs”) is remedial. The sorrow of the world is destructive. False repentance leads to despair. True repentance, prompted as it is by godly sorrow, produces the delight of forgiveness and acceptance before God.

Repentance for sin always involves the forsaking of sin. True repentance is not a tearful cheek washing between sinful binges! The turning of repentance is twofold—from sin and to God. There can be no turning to God unless there is a turning from sin. Listen to what God says about repentance.

“Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon,” Isaiah 55:6, 7.

Selfish sorrow flees from sin because it fears sin's penalty. When fear of suffering is past, the attitude changes, and one returns to his sin. Godly

sorrow flees from sin because it is convicted of guilt. When guilt is dealt with in forgiveness, devotion to God keeps one from returning to sin. True repentance is not selfish, but godly.

True repentance is a holy exercise of the soul. It is more than regret—a criminal will regret that he got caught. It is more than conviction of guilt—many admit guilt but do nothing about it. It is not remorse—that is mere sorrow about sin. True repentance is a change of attitude toward sin. It is a change of emotion in that love for sin dies in the heart. It is a change of the will, for one had rather seek peace with God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin. True repentance inspires the resolve, “No more living in sin.” True repentance is a holy exercise of the soul because it turns one from sin to God.

Who needs to repent? Sinners need to repent, else they will perish (Acts. 5:31; Luke 13:3). Christians also need to repent (Revelation 2, 3). The Christian life is a life of repentance. The Holy Spirit leads the believer to greater holiness. As each step is taken the growing Christian turns from his former immaturity and seeks God's greater maturity. You need to repent in order to know God and to grow in grace. **“Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”** Matthew 3:2.

Questions

1. What is repentance?
2. What Scriptures call men to repent?
3. What is the mental part of repentance?