

What Is Repentance?

I have been privileged to visit a country where Christians were nicknamed “repenters.” Is that a label that would suggest itself, let alone stick, in the society where you or I live? Would it readily apply to you? For many, *repentance* might be almost a dirty word, if it is used at all. I know one man, having been a Christian for about thirty years, who said that he had spent nearly twenty-five of those years in churches where repentance was never preached. To call for and to cultivate a spirit of repentance flies in the face of the spirit of our age; anything that threatens to make us feel bad about ourselves is frowned upon. Repentance is considered to be a terrible assault on our self-esteem, a tragic wounding of our sense of our own worth. Yet you cannot become a Christian without repentance. Similarly, you cannot remain a healthy child of God without repentance.

So what is *repentance*? It is, fundamentally, a thorough and radical change of the heart that results in a thorough and radical change of the life. We find one of the finest brief definitions in the Westminster Catechism and in some of its sister and daughter documents:

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

This definition captures briefly but superbly the biblical essence of repentance. I hope that as we work through this matter, this sweet summary will begin to glow with scriptural light and stir and encourage your soul.

We should begin by making plain that repentance belongs with faith. We cannot disentangle or divide these two graces, and no one should attempt to do so.

As John Murray explains, "Saving faith is permeated with repentance and repentance is permeated with faith." Christ saves through faith, and we should not give that place to repentance. Nevertheless, a faith that knows nothing of sorrow for sin with a yearning for holiness and increasingly complete obedience to the will of God in Christ is not a saving faith. As we will see, in the same way that we need a repenting faith, so we need a believing repentance. Repentance is too often overlooked as faith's ugly cousin, when she ought to be celebrated as her beautiful twin sister.

In addressing the issue of repentance, it is helpful to have in mind a passage like 2 Corinthians 7:9-11:

Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

These words contain many of the elements that we must consider, and we will address some of them in specific detail. From this and other portions of our Bibles, we must identify some principles of repentance, glance at some portraits of repentance, and conclude with some thoughts on the practice of repentance.