

Christian Communicators Worldwide

The believer in Christ is a lifelong repenter. He begins with repentance and continues in repentance. (Rom. 8:12-13) David sinned giant sins but fell without a stone at the mere finger of the prophet because he was a repenter at heart (2 Sam. 12:7-13). Peter denied Christ three times but suffered three times the remorse until he repented with bitter tears (Mt. 26:75). Every Christian is called a repenter, but he must be a repenting repenter. The Bible assumes the repentant nature of all true believers in its instruction on church discipline. A man unwilling to repent at the loving rebuke of the church can be considered nothing more than “a heathen and a tax collector.” (Mt. 18:15-17)

What is repentance?

Repentance is a change of mind regarding sin and God, an inward turning from sin to God, which is known by its fruit—obedience. (Mt. 3:8; Acts 26:20; Lk. 13:5-9) It is hating what you once loved and loving what you once hated, exchanging irresistible sin for an irresistible Christ. The true repenter is cast on God. Faith is his only option. When he fully knows that sin utterly fails him, God takes him up. (Mt. 9:13b) He will have faith or he will have despair; conviction will either deliver him or devour him.

The religious man often deceives himself in his repentance. The believer may sin the worst of sins, it is true; but to remain in the love of sin, or to be comfortable in the atmosphere of sin, is a deadly sign, for only repenters inhabit heaven. The deceived repenter would be a worse sinner if he could, but society holds him back. He can tolerate and even enjoy other worldly professing Christians and pastors well enough, but does not desire holy fellowship or the fervent warmth of holy worship. If he is intolerant of a worship service fifteen minutes “too long,” how will he feel after fifteen

million years into the eternal worship service of heaven? He aspires to a heaven of lighthearted ease and recreation—an extended vacation; but a heaven of holiness would be hell to such a man. Yet God is holy, and God is in heaven. He cannot be blamed for sending the unholy man to hell despite his most articulate profession (Heb. 12:14).

What are the Substitutes for true Repentance?

1. You may reform in the actions without repenting in the heart. (Ps. 51:16-17; Joel 2:13) This is a great deception, for the love of sin remains. (1 Jn. 2:15-17; Acts 8:9-24) At this the Pharisees were experts. (Mk. 7:1-23) The heart of a man is his problem. A man may appear perfect in his actions but be damned for his heart. His actions are at best self-serving and hypocritical. What comes from a bad heart is never good. “Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.” (Jas. 3:11-12)

2. You may experience the emotion of repentance without the effect of it. Here is a kind of amnesia. You see the awful specter of sin in the mirror and flinch out of horror yet immediately forget what kind of person you saw (Jas. 1:23-24). It is true, repentance includes sincere emotion, an affection for God and a disaffection for sin. Torrents of sorrow may flood the repenter’s heart, and properly so (Jas. 4:8-10). But there is such a thing as a temporary emotion in the mere semblance of repentance; this emotion has very weak legs and cannot carry the behavior in the long walk of obedience. Your sorrow may even be prolonged. Yet if it does not arrive at repentance, it is of the world and is a living death—and maybe more (2 Cor. 7:10). It is an old deceiver. Judas had such remorse but “went and hanged himself.” (Mt. 27:3-5)

3. You may confess the words of a true repenter and never repent. (Mt. 21:28-32; 1 Jn. 2:4, 4:20) Confession by itself is not repentance. Confession moves the lips; repentance moves the heart. Naming an act as evil before God is not the same as leaving it. Though your confession may be honest and emotional, it is not enough unless it expresses a true change of heart. There are those who confess only for the show of it, whose so-called repentance may be theatrical but not actual. If you express repentance to appear successful, you will not be successful at repenting. You will speak humbly but sin

arrogantly. Saul gave the model confession (I Sam. 15:24-26) and later went to hell. Repentance “from the teeth out” is no repentance.

4. You may repent for the fear of reprisal alone and not for the hatred of sin. Any man will stop sinning when caught or relatively sure he will be, unless there is insufficient punishment or shame attached (I Tim. 1:8-11). When there are losses great enough to get his attention, he will reform. If this is the entire motive of his repentance, he has not repented at all. It is the work of law, but not grace. Men can be controlled by fear, but what is required is a change of heart. Achan admitted his sin after being caught but would not have otherwise. Find his bones in the valley of Achor; his soul, most likely, in hell. (Josh. 7:16-26)

5. You may talk against sin in public like a true repenter but never repent in private. (Mt. 23:1-3) The exercise of the mouth cannot change the heart. Your sin is like a prostitute. You are speaking against your lover in public but embracing her in the bedroom. She is not particular about being run down in public if she can have your full attention in private. “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (Jas. 4:4)

6. You may repent primarily for temporal gains rather than the glory of God. There are gains for the repenter, but the final motivation for repenting cannot be selfish. Self is a dead, stinking carcass to be discarded. We are to repent because God is worthy and is our respected authority, even if we gain nothing. Indeed, our repenting may appear to lose us more than our sin had gained. (Mt. 16:24-26; Phil. 3:7-8) And this is a test of true repentance.

7. You may repent of lesser sins for the purpose of avoiding the greater sins. (Lk. 11:42) We try to salve our nagging conscience by some minor exercise of repentance, which is really no repentance at all. The whole heart is changed in the believer. The half repenter is a divided man: part against sin and part for it; part against Christ, part for Him. But one or the other must win out, for man cannot serve God and mammon (or any other idol); he must love the one and hate the other. (Mt. 6:24)

8. You may repent so generally that you never repent of any specific sin at all. The man who repents in too great a generality is likely covering his sins. (Prov. 28:13) If there are no particular changes, there is no repenting. Sin has many heads, like the mythological Hydra. It cannot be dealt with in general, but its heads must be cut off one by one.

9. You may repent for the love of friends and religious leaders and not repent for the love of God. (Isa. 1: 10-17) A man talked into repentance may reform for the love of friends or the respect of the spiritually minded, yet do nothing substantial. If a man turns from sin without turning to God, he will find his sin has only changed its name and is hidden behind his pride. Now it will be harder to rout for its subterfuge. You have loved others but not God. And you have loved yourself most of all. Lot's wife left the city of sin at the insistence of an angel and for the love of her family, but turned back. She had left her heart. "Remember Lot's wife." (Gen. 19:12-26; Lk. 17:32)

10. 'You may confess the finished action of sin and not repent from the continuing habit of sin. If a man is honest, he is a good man in human terms; but he is not a repenting man until the sin is stabbed to death. He must be a murderer if he would be God's: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (Rom. 8: 13) God knows what you have done; what He wants is obedience. (Lk. 6:46)

11. You may attempt repentance of your sin while consciously leaving open the door of its opportunity. A man who says "I repent" but will not leave the source or environment of that sin is suspect. Though some situations which invite temptation cannot be changed, most can. A man who will not flee the setting of his temptation when he is able still loves his sin. A mouse is foolish to build his nest under the cat's bed. "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." (Rom. 13:14)

12. You may make an effort to repent of some sins without repenting of all the sin you know. The businessman learns to show concern for the needs of his clients, yet he batters his wife through neglect. Another gives his money in the offering plate weekly but steals time from his employer daily. Every man boasts of some sins conquered, but true repentance is a repulsion of sin as a whole. The repenter hates all sin, though he fails more readily in some than in others. He may not know all his sins, but what he knows he spurns. Repentance is universal in the believer; the spirit is willing even when the flesh is weak (Mt. 26:41).

Repentance and faith are bound together. A repenting man has no hope for obedience without faith in the source of all holiness, God Himself. In repenting of sins, he loses his self-sufficiency. God is his sanctifier. (Jude 24-25; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 1 Pet. 1:5)

Repentance is a gift of God (Acts 11:19; 2 Tim. 2:25) and a duty of man (Acts 17:30; Lk. 13:3). You will know if it has been granted by the exercise of it. (Phil. 2:12-13) Do not wait for it; run toward it. "Be zealous and repent." (Rev. 3:19) Pursue it and you will find it; forget it and perish.

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