

Repentance

Repentance is a change of thought and action to correct a wrong and gain forgiveness from God and any other person who is wronged. There are several elements to repentance. Repentance includes acknowledgement and ownership of the wrong, a decision not to repeat the offence, a change in behaviour and an attempt to make restitution or to reverse the harmful effects of the wrong, wherever possible.

Repentance is a central theme of the New Testament.

John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **Mark 1⁴**

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." **Matthew 4¹⁷**

He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **Luke 3³**

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, **Acts 3¹⁹**

Repentance is not just in relation to a person's salvation but God frequently calls on believers to repent of doing wrong. The Bible teaches repentance as a way of life that sets us free and keeps us free from the bondage of sin. When we are convicted of sin and fail to repent, we fail to live the life that God intends us to.

I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged. **2Corinthians 12²¹**

Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. **Revelation 3³**

In Old Testament Hebrew, the idea of repentance is represented by two verbs: שׁוּב *shuv* (to return) and נִחַם *nicham* (to feel sorrow). In the New Testament, the word translated as 'repentance' is the Greek word μετάνοια (*metanoia*), literally means "after/behind one's mind", which is a compound word of the preposition 'meta' (after, with) and the verb 'noeo' (to perceive, to think). In this compound word the preposition combines the two meanings of time and change, which may be denoted by 'after' and 'different'; so that the whole compound means: 'to think differently after'.

Metanoia basically means to change one's mind and it occurs fifty-eight times in the New Testament. Another Greek word *metamelomai* is also translated as repentance, but appears only six times in the New Testament. This second word has the meaning of regret, remorse or deep sorrow, that can lead into true repentance, but which in itself falls short of true repentance. When the Bible speaks of sorrow for something done, and wishing it undone, it uses the word *metamelomai*. When it speaks of the real change of repentance, it uses the word *metanoeo*¹. Sorrow and tears may accompany repentance, but they are not repentance. Likewise, repentance may come without tears.

For instance Judas Iscariot repented after betraying Jesus.

¹ The sin and disorder at the church at Corinth caused Paul to write his first letter to them. In this context Paul said, Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret (*metamelomai*) it. Though I did regret (*metamelomai*) it - I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while (**2Corinthians 7⁸**). Paul regretted sending the letter, but when he saw the good effects, he no longer regretted it. In the same passage Paul used *metanoeo* for true repentance when he said, Godly sorrow brings repentance (*metanoia*) that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (**2Corinthians 7¹⁰**). If he had intended this same meaning in verse 8, he would not have used the word *metamelomai*.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. **Matthew 27**³⁻⁵

The word used for repentance in verse 3 is *metamelomai*. Judas demonstrated a deep emotional sorrow by giving back the silver, admitting he had sinned, and by committing suicide. However, his repentance was not a change of mind toward sin and God. Rather it was regret because of the result of his betrayal of Jesus. Repentance has to do mostly with our thinking and therefore our actions - not our feelings.

An example of repentance occurs in the book of Jonah, when the people of Nineveh were confronted with the results of their sinful ways:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." **Jonah 1**¹⁻²

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city - a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Jonah 3¹⁻¹⁰

First of all they believed what Jonah told them and secondly, they had a change of heart. Putting on sackcloth was a sign of mourning, they were full of sorrow and mourned because of their sin – they had a change of mind. This change of mind resulted in a change in the way they behaved in the future. God's reaction was to have mercy on them and he did not bring the judgement that they deserved.

Jesus acknowledged that what the people of Nineveh did was repentance when confronting the religious people of his time who considered themselves to be righteous.

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. **Matthew 12**⁴¹

God does not want to bring judgement and if we change our ways he is merciful.

For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live! **Ezekiel 18**³²

Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? **Romans 2⁴**

We should aim to have the same mercy towards others as God has to each of us.

So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. **Luke 17³**

Acknowledgement and ownership of sin

Unless we believe that we have sinned we cannot truly repent. We cannot turn away from something that we do not believe that we have done in the first place.

Job did not believe that he had done anything wrong to deserve the suffering he was undergoing. He was angry and questioned God.

If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you? **Job 7²⁰**

Prayers to God or statements to those we have wronged, which start off with "If I have sinned...", are not a true acknowledgement of our wrongdoing towards God and others and so cannot come from a repentant heart. At best, what we are really saying is, "OK *if* you think I'm wrong fine, I'm sorry *if* it helps you. Get over it."

The word "*if*" is the key here. Contrast this with David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. **Psalm 51¹⁻⁴**

David fully acknowledged his own sin. No excuses or mitigation, no being the victim or blaming others. He took responsibility for his own actions. David did use the word "*if*" in relation to sin, but this was in the context of searching his heart to see if he had sinned against God without knowing it. He genuinely wanted to know so that he could repent of it.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139²³⁻²⁴

Equally, we can only repent of our own sin. It has become fashionable in recent years to repent for the sins of our forebears. In recent years different groups have "repented" on behalf of those who were involved in everything from the slave trade to Generation X. The bible makes it clear that each person is responsible for his own sin.

In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'. Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes - his own teeth will be set on edge. **Jeremiah 31²⁹⁻³⁰**

Of course we can acknowledge the sins of others and that we may have in some way or other benefited from their unrighteous acts (for example apartheid or exploitation of third-world resources) and we can do something about our current situation, which may involve repenting for our own wrongdoing or ignorance, but not that of others.

Deciding to turn away from sin

At the heart of repentance is the battle in the mind. Once we have acknowledged our sin, we have a choice to keep on with it or to change our minds with a view to changing our ways.

In my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord! **Romans 7^{22b-25a}**

God always gives us a choice but he never leaves us in any doubt about the way we should go and the consequences of our choices.

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. **Deuteronomy 30¹⁹**

Changing our sinful ways

James says that the man who hears God's word and does nothing about it is like a man who looks in the mirror and immediately forgets what he looks like! (**James 1²²⁻²⁵**). Just saying sorry is not enough. True repentance is always accompanied by a change of behaviour.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. **Matthew 3⁸**

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. **Acts 26²⁰**

Jesus told a story about two sons who their father asked to work in his vineyard.

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. **Matthew 21²⁸⁻³²**

The first son had a change of mind and it was accompanied by action. This is repentance. The second son said all the right things but took no action. This is hypocrisy.

In more modern times we have seen some repentances that have made the news all over the world. For example, when President Clinton was brought to account for his sexual sin with an intern at the White House called Monica Lewinsky, he made a speech, which showed that he understood, at least intellectually, what repentance meant.

I agree with those who have said that in my first statement after I testified I was not contrite enough. I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned. But I believe that to be forgiven, more than sorrow is required - at least two more things. First, genuine repentance - a determination to change and to repair breaches of my own making. I have repented...Second, what my bible calls a "broken spirit"; an understanding that I must have God's help to be the person that I want to be; a willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek; a renunciation of the pride and the

anger which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain. **Bill Clinton 11/09/98**

Repentance and genuinely attempting to change our ways is a prerequisite for receiving forgiveness from God (and others). In the parable of the unmerciful servant the king has cancelled the debt of one servant who immediately goes out and behaves in an unmerciful way to a fellow servant. When he hears of this unrepentant behaviour the king changes his mind and decides not to forgive the first servant

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. **Matthew 18³²⁻³⁵**

Asking forgiveness is unconditional and based on a decision to repent of our sinful thoughts, attitudes and actions. Saying we are sorry is not the same as asking for forgiveness. It is based on emotion and may well be conditional.

Making restitution for sin

Making restitution for sin was part of the law given to Moses in the Old Testament and was seen as an integral part of the process of repentance. For instance, in respect of theft:

If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed. A thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, he must be sold to pay for his theft. If the stolen animal is found alive in his possession- whether ox or donkey or sheep - he must pay back double. If a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray and they graze in another man's field, he must make restitution from the best of his own field or vineyard. If a fire breaks out and spreads into thorn bushes so that it burns shocks of grain or standing grain or the whole field, the one who started the fire must make restitution. If a man gives his neighbour silver or goods for safekeeping and they are stolen from the neighbour's house, the thief, if he is caught, must pay back double. But if the thief is not found, the owner of the house must appear before the judges to determine whether he has laid his hands on the other man's property. In all cases of illegal possession of an ox, a donkey, a sheep, a garment, or any other lost property about which somebody says, 'This is mine,' both parties are to bring their cases before the judges. The one whom the judges declare guilty must pay back double to his neighbour. **Exodus 22¹⁻⁹**

In the New Testament we have the story of Zacchaeus:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."
Luke 19¹⁻¹⁰

When Zacchaeus repented, his natural reaction was to pay back four times what he had cheated others out of. Jesus' reply is interesting because he recognised true repentance in the actions of Zacchaeus and said that it meant salvation had come to him.

The attempt to put things right wherever possible is a fundamental part of repentance and is often missed out. We think that because we have owned up to the wrong we have done, thought better of it and changed our behaviour that this is the end of the matter. Sometimes it is, particularly if the sin is confined to our thoughts and attitudes but if our sin has been in words and deed, we need to make restitution for the damage we have done, wherever we can.

An example would be where a Christian has fallen into sexual sin and leaves his wife for another woman. After a while the woman he has taken up with becomes a Christian and he returns to the Lord. They get married and everything is now OK. Well, not exactly no. He may have returned but has he put things right with his former wife, his children (if there are any) and those he has hurt. Has he repented towards his second wife for his behaviour before they were married? Has he repented of his sin or just altered his status to fit in more comfortably with his circumstances? Is he truly repentant or just sorry?

Another common example would be if someone were to spread gossip or talk in some way about a third-party only to discover that what they were passing around was untrue. They may realise that they have done wrong, repent and stop talking in such a way but do they go back to those that they have gossiped with and put them right about the wrong things that they have said? Very rarely does this happen. So can we say that this is true repentance or is it simply that they got caught out this time and were sorry for it?

Repentance is sometimes confused with penitence, which means to carry out some (often religious) act of contrition as a means of expunging or making restitution for an offence. This is a practice that rose early in church history and, whilst restitution is undoubtedly part of repentance, the concept of making acts of penitence as a substitute or supplemental to the completed work of Jesus on the cross is completely alien to New Testament teaching.

The legalistic, religious mind will see "confession" of our sin and doing penance as a kind of transaction to "wipe the slate clean" and then going on to continue in sin until the next "confession." If we love Jesus we will not want to sin and we repent because we want to preserve our relationship with him.

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? **Romans 5^{20b-21} & 6¹⁻²**

Conclusion

God requires us to live a life of repentance - a readiness to turn back to him when we are off course.

Repentance means:

- Acknowledgement and ownership of my sin

- Deciding to turn away from my sin
- Changing my sinful ways
- Making restitution for my sin

If we do not repent when convicted of sin, we fail to move on in God's grace and the sin will continue to affect us (David said, "My sin is ever before me.") and cripple our walk with God and our fellowship with others.

When we truly repent God promises:

- Salvation
- Forgiveness of sins
- The gift of the Holy Spirit
- Times of refreshing
- Restoration

(Acts 2³⁸, Acts 3¹⁹, 2Corinthians 7¹⁰, Jeremiah 15¹⁹)