

Repentance: A Profound Turnaround!

Previous articles in this series showed how we attain biblical understanding and spiritual growth through prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting. What do we do then? This article shows how we must further use and apply that understanding!

by Don Hooser

Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" The question was addressed to Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:16). What would your answer be?

Here was Jesus' answer: "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." When the man asked, "Which ones?" Jesus quoted several commands from the Old Testament, mostly from the Ten Commandments (verses 18-19).

This is one of many, many scriptures that make it absolutely clear that God still requires obedience to His instructions—yet many Christian churches teach the opposite! Why? Because of human nature influenced by Satan and this world under his sway! "For the outlook of the unspiritual nature is enmity with God; it is not subject to the law of God and indeed it cannot be" (Romans 8:7, Revised English Bible, emphasis added throughout).

But God's laws are good and good for us! If we want to become more and more like Jesus Christ, God's laws *define* the godly character He wants to see in us.

Two obstacles and a twofold solution

Two major obstacles stand in the way of our attaining eternal life. First, it's impossible for us on our own human strength to perfectly obey God's commandments. Second, even if perfect obedience from now through the rest of our lives were possible, it still would not make up for the guilt of past sins. The death penalty we had incurred would not be removed.

So what are the solutions? First, we must somehow receive God's forgiveness for all our past sins. Second, we must receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit that will gradually replace our ingrained selfish nature with a new Christlike nature.

And what must one do to receive these precious gifts? In Acts 2 we read about the apostle Peter preaching to the assembled crowd on the day of Pentecost. His powerful sermon convinced those gathered that

Jesus was the promised Messiah and that their sins were responsible for His death on the cross. How did they react?

"Now when they heard this, *they were cut to the heart*, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, *what shall we do?*'" (Acts 2:37). They felt the deepest shame and sorrow.

They were willing to do whatever it took to obtain forgiveness, reconciliation to God and salvation.

"Then Peter said to them, '*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (verse 38).

Each part of Peter's authoritative statement has great significance. And note that in this one sentence Peter refers to the twofold remedy for human sinfulness: forgiveness of sins *and* the gift of God's Holy Spirit!

shame and sorrow.

But feelings alone aren't enough. Saying "I'm sorry" over and over again is not enough. The biblical meaning of "repent" emphasizes *change*—change of attitudes and actions to completely forsake one's lifestyle of habitual disobedience. A bibli-



God expects deep feelings of sorrow for our sins. The more we recognize how numerous our sins have been, and how evil they are in God's sight, the greater will be our shame and sorrow.

What is repentance?

On a later day, Peter similarly instructed others, "*Repent therefore* and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). In both cases the first thing Peter said to do was "repent." What exactly is that? It's *vitaly important* that we understand!

Dictionary definitions of "repent" and "repentance" emphasize *feelings* of remorse, regret, contrition and penitence for one's wrongdoing. Indeed, God expects deep feelings of sorrow for our sins. The more we recognize how numerous our sins have been, and how evil they are in God's sight, the greater will be our

cal synonym for repent is *turn*. Paul said, "I preached that they must repent of their sins and *turn* to God and *do* the things that would show they had repented" (Acts 26:20, Today's English Version).

Besides one's initial repentance, a person must repent each time he realizes he has slipped and sinned. Because people's lives are generally headed away from God, the initial repentance is a surrender to God and an about-face to head in God's direction. After that, whenever a believer does stray even a little from the "way of God," He must repent of that, making a course correction to get back on track with God (Acts 18:25-26).

Repentance, Penance and Grace

It's essential to understand that God is pleased with repentance but *not penance*. An ascetic form of penance is to act penitent or remorseful and punish oneself (see Colossians 2:18-23). Another form of penance is trying to do enough good deeds to outweigh and make up for one's sin. Both imply that we must *pay for our own sins*—but none of us could ever do enough to pay for even one sin.

All sins are evil because they violate the perfect, loving laws of our Creator God. The only sacrifice great enough to pay for the guilt of our sins has already been offered—the suffering and death of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. So doing penance is a gross insult to God. It implies that Jesus' sacrifice and God's grace are unnecessary.

And what is God's "grace"? It is the totality of all the gracious gifts that God offers to mankind. And among the greatest of those gifts is the complete forgiveness of all past sins. That, in turn, opens the door to all the rest of God's gifts, including the ultimate gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23). "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8, King James Version).

But don't get grace confused with its counterfeit—"cheap grace." Grace means forgiveness of past sins, not permission to continue sinning, as Satan would like for us to think. Jude warned of "godless men, who change [pervert] the grace of our God into a license for immorality" (Jude 4, New International Version).

Grace is made possible by Christ's sacrifice and by Him serving as our merciful Mediator, Advocate and High Priest (1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 2:1-2). "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest . . . let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).

What is God's way? It is the way of genuine love, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Jesus Christ taught that the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for our fellow human beings (Matthew 22:37-40). And love for God includes obedience to His laws. "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

The Ten Commandments broadly define *how* to love God and *how* to love one's neighbor, which includes everyone. The other spiritual laws in the Bible give us additional details about how to love God and all people. (For a good understanding,

please download or request our free booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

Repent of what?

This brings us to the question, "Of what do we repent?" The answer is *sin*. But what is sin? Ask a dozen people and you would likely get a dozen different answers. But the *Bible* is where we should look for the correct answers to life's important questions.

The clearest definition of sin is found in 1 John 3:4: "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness." Any breaking or violation of God's law is sin.

Repentance, therefore, means to turn away from *lawbreaking* and turn to *lawkeeping!* God summed up true repentance when He pleaded with His people: "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity [lawlessness] will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezekiel 18:30-31).

God then went on to express His deep love and desire to forgive and save everyone: "For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies . . . Therefore turn and live!" (verses 31-32). Yes, you can have a joyous life now—and, more importantly, everlasting life!

In addition to repenting of our sins, we must repent of sinful attitudes and the downward pull of human nature, as they are the main cause of our sinful actions. Jesus made it clear that, compared to God, all of us are evil (Matthew 7:11). God said, "The heart is the most deceitful thing there is, and desperately wicked. No one can really know how bad it is!" (Jeremiah 17:9, Living Bible).

Like King David, we must repent and pray, "Wash me . . . create in me a clean heart" (Psalm 51:7-10).

Godly sorrow vs. worldly sorrow

God gave us a conscience so that when we are aware of wrongdoing, we will feel guilt, shame and sorrow. Once a person clearly sees the great love of his Creator plus his own *lack* of love, of gratitude and of righteousness, he should feel truly sorry—with godly sorrow!

Paul explained, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians

7:10).

What is the difference between the two kinds of sorrow? Godly sorrow is directed toward God (Psalm 51:4; Acts 20:21). It is grief and mourning over having disappointed and transgressed against Him, the One who gives us every good thing. It leads to a permanent commitment to *change*—to truly repent.

Worldly sorrow, however, is *self-centered*—feeling humiliated that one's wrongdoing has been exposed, or feeling sorry for oneself because of the penalties he is suffering, such as Esau experienced (see Hebrews 12:16-17).

In Romans 7, we read how the apostle Paul felt deep sorrow over his sins of commission (doing sinful things) and sins of omission (failing to do the right things). In Psalm 51, we read of David's heartfelt prayer of sorrow and repentance. When the patriarch Job came to better understand the greatness of God and at the same time better understood his own weakness and self-righteousness, he said, "Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

It is very hard for human beings to see their faults, admit them and apologize. But real repentance requires confessing your sins to God, telling Him how sorry you are and asking for His forgiveness—and *determining to change, to strive with His help to turn from and overcome your sins*. (God does not require confessing to another person in order to obtain forgiveness.)

David said, "I acknowledge my transgressions" (Psalm 51:3). John said, "If we [we who are already Christians!] confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Remember that whenever God's children stumble, our Father in heaven is ever willing to help us back on our feet. But we must repent, confess and ask for help. After that, know that God has forgiven you. Then joy and peace of mind should once again blossom and dominate your heart because you know that your sins are no longer separating you from God (Isaiah 59:2; Psalm 32:1-2).

Steps to repentance and forgiveness

So what must take place for us to receive God's forgiveness and grace? First, a person must be spiritually called or drawn by God. Jesus said, "No one can

come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

To call someone, God causes him to hear (or read) the preaching of the “gospel” (God’s plan for the salvation of mankind) while using His Holy Spirit to enlighten and convict the person with spiritual understanding (compare 2 Thessalonians 2:14; Matthew 13:11; 1 Corinthians 2:10-14). If, through *The Good News*, you are coming to understand biblical truths you have never learned before, God may well be calling you.

Once God calls a person, He expects a twofold response expressed by Jesus in Mark 1:15—“Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Faith and grace are gifts of God (Ephesians 2:8). Likewise, God *grants repentance*, especially when a person prays for it (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). And Paul said, “The goodness of God *leads you to repentance*” (Romans 2:4).

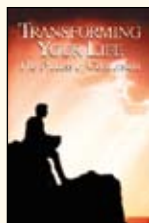
As we read in Acts 2:38, once a person repents and believes the gospel, he must then be baptized to receive forgiveness of sins and spiritual conversion. The word *baptize* means immerse, and other scriptures clearly show that Peter meant total immersion in water as a sign of one’s repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Master.

Let us all give heed to Christ’s warning—“Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). And Paul tells us that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Remember that God loves and wants to save every single person. He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). In Luke 15:10, Jesus said, “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Will the next one be you? **GN**

Recommended Reading

What exactly is God’s calling? What does He call us from, and what does He call us to? What does He expect of us, and what does He want us to become? How is He involved in this process, and what does it lead to? All the steps to repentance, forgiveness and spiritual growth are explained clearly in our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Download it or request your free copy today!



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