

Repentance

Reading: Matthew 21:28-31 “...but afterward he regretted it and went...”

Introduction:

The word “repent” (or repentance) is a word that we often hear mentioned in the New Testament¹, and it is mostly used in the context of getting people to stop sinning. Most of us would be aware of the fact that repentance is involved in the process salvation. But what does repentance mean? What does it involve? Is it just a case of being sorry for having done the wrong thing? or is there more to it?

In this lesson, we will look at;

- what is involved in repentance,
- the necessity of repentance, and,
- what it means for us in a practical sense.

LESSON

1) What is involved in Repentance?

The reading for this lesson was a parable spoken by Jesus to the chief priests and elders in the temple – see **Matthew 21:23 f.f.** It involved a man who had two sons, and he told his first son, “*Son, go, work today in my vineyard.*”² But the son replied, “*I will not.*”, but afterward, he regretted it and went (to work).

In this short account we see the three main ingredients involved in the process of repentance - knowledge, sorrow and change.

a) Knowledge of what is right and wrong

The first thing that we see from our reading is that the son gained knowledge of what was required of him. His father had instructed him to go and work in the vineyard. Sons were (and still are³) required to be obedient to their parents (**Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 21:18-21**). Therefore, the right thing for the son to do was to go out into the vineyard to work for his father. However, he initially chose to disobey his father and not go.

As we shall see shortly, repentance involves change – change from doing what is wrong to doing what is right. But without knowledge, how would a person know what was right and what was wrong? How would they know when repentance is called for, and when it isn’t? Their conscience may be a guide to some extent, but their conscience may have been trained by culture, worldliness, or error⁴.

Consider Paul. He had “...*lived in all good conscience before God.*” all his life (**Acts 23:1**). In other words, he always did what he thought was the right thing to do, even when he was persecuting the church (**Philippians 3:6**). However, after his conversion to, and knowledge of, the truth (**Acts 9: 17-18; Galatians 1:11-12**), he confessed that, previously, when he thought that

¹ It is also mentioned in the Old Testament, e.g., **Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30; 1 Kings 8:47**.
- Strong’s Concordance, Hebrew word number 7725.

² Quotes are from the New King James Version (NKJV) Bible.

³ **Ephesians 6:1-2; Colossians 3:20; John 15:10.**

⁴ Conscience alone is not a safe guide unto salvation – **Titus 1:15, 1 Timothy 4:2.**

Repentance

he was doing the right thing, he was actually being a “..blasphemer..”, and had acted “...ignorantly in unbelief.” (1 Timothy 1:13).

Biblical knowledge teaches us what is right and what is wrong (2 Timothy 3:16). But simply having knowledge does not constitute repentance⁵. That knowledge must be applied to our thought processes and decisions.

b) Sorrow for having done wrong

The second thing that we notice from our reading is that the son regretted his initial decision. The fact that he had knowingly chosen to do the wrong thing bothered him, and he regretted it, he had sorrow.

In the context of repentance, the scriptures talk about two types of sorrow. One is “...the sorrow of the world...”, the other is “...godly sorrow..” (2 Corinthians 7:10). The “sorrow of the world” is a sorrow that comes from the world’s perspective. For example, having a sorrow simply because we got “caught out” doing the wrong thing. Or a sorrow that our actions “backfired” and didn’t turn out the way that we wanted or expected⁶. The focus for this type of sorrow is the fact that we have caused trouble, most likely for ourselves, but it doesn’t address the problem of the sin involved.

But “godly sorrow” is the type of sorrow that arises because we have done the wrong thing, regardless as to what the consequences were. It is the type of sorrow that stems from the fact that ultimately, whatever it was that we did, it was a sin against God (Psalm 51:4). The focus for this type of sorrow is the fact that we have done wrong, but we want to be right again with God.

Godly sorrow, in and of itself, is not repentance, but it does motivate the sinner towards the type of repentance that leads to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10a). Knowledge and sorrow lead to repentance.

c) Change in direction

The third thing that we can see from our reading is that the son changed his course of action. Initially, he had chosen to disobey his father. But later on, he had come to regret that decision, he changed his mind “...and went..” (we can safely assume) to work in his father’s vineyard.

The word “repent” means *to turn; to change; to go in another direction*. People can have all knowledge, and can even be sorry when they have done the wrong thing. But if that knowledge and that sorrow does not produce a (righteous) change in the person, then repentance has not taken place.

Repentance is not simply a mindset. It is a change in attitude *and action*. The apostle Paul taught that there are “...works befitting repentance...” (Acts 26:20). When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John in order to be baptised for repentance⁷, he told them to “...bear fruits worthy of repentance..” (Matthew 3:7-10). Therefore, when a person is repentant,

⁵ People can know that they are doing the wrong thing, but still have no desire to change their ways.

⁶ For example, a gossip spreads lies about someone else in order to embarrass and discredit them. But when the truth comes out, it is the gossip who ends up being embarrassed, having been shown up to be a liar.

⁷ John 3:11, Acts 19:4

Repentance

there should be some sort of change evident in their lives. In the Biblical context, this involves a change from doing what is wrong to doing what is right. Examples of this type of change can be seen in passages such as **Ephesians 4:17-32** and **Colossians 3:5-17**. These verses give practical examples of areas where change may be required in people's lives.

Repentance, therefore, involves both knowledge and sorrow, but primarily, it is about change. It is a conscious determination to do things differently – to no longer follow the ways of sin – and to follow up that decision by the appropriate actions.

2) The Necessity of Repentance

Now that we know what repentance is and involves, the next question some may ask is, “Is it something that we really have to do?”

For the person who sins but wants to be right with God, the answer is a definite “Yes”. The scriptures show us that repentance is required in order to become a Christian, and is also required as we walk as children of God.

a) For initial salvation

We all sin (**Romans 3:23**). There have been times when all of us have had sinful thoughts, spoken things we ought not to have spoken, and done things that were wrong. These things alienated (or separated) us from God (**Isaiah 59:2**); the One to whom we must all give account (**Romans 2:5-16; 6:23a; 2 Corinthians 5:10-11; Ezekiel 18:20**). Therefore, during their ministries, both John the baptiser and Jesus told people to, “*Repent, for the kingdom⁸ of heaven is at hand.*” (**Matthew 3:2; 4:17**). The kingdom (*i.e.* the church) was coming, and for sinners to gain entrance, repentance would be required. They would need to change their hearts and turn away from a sinful life. In fact, to emphasise the importance of repentance, Jesus spelled it out in no uncertain terms; “...*unless you repent, you will all likewise⁹ perish.*” (**Luke 13:3, 5**).

- God's grace is freely available to all (**Romans 5:18b**), but it is not automatically bestowed (**2 Thessalonians 1:7b-10**). Man must do something first before receiving the benefits of God's grace (**Acts 2:40**).

Therefore, on the Day of Pentecost, when those in attendance realised their need for salvation and asked what they should do, one of the things that Peter told them to do was to repent (**Acts 2:38**).

- these people now had knowledge that they had crucified the Son of God (**Acts 2:36**) – they now knew that they had done the wrong thing.
- these people now had a sorrow for their previous actions (**Acts 2:37**) – they were now “...*cut to the heart.*”.

Peter was speaking under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (**John 16:13; Acts 2:1-4**) – what he told them to do was the command of God (**Acts 17:30**).

⁸ The kingdom is the church – e.g. **Matthew 16:18-19; Acts 2:47 + Colossians 1:13**.

⁹ The word “*likewise*” refers to the events of people perishing, recorded in verses 1, 2 and 4. Jesus is not saying that the unrepentant will perish in the same *manner* (or method) as the people mentioned in these verses did, but simply that the unrepentant will perish as well.

Repentance

The result of their repenting, along with baptism, would be the forgiveness of their sins.

Note: Their change of action associated with repentance would be to acknowledge who Jesus was (**Acts 8:37; Romans 10:9-10**) – the Son of God – and to resolve not to rebel against God again, but rather, to submit to His Lordship (**Romans 6:16-18; James 4:7a**).

b) For on-going salvation

But what about sins committed after we have become a Christian? The scriptures warn us not to continue in sin (**Romans 6:1-2, 15; Ephesians 4:20-24**). We are to “...*abstain from every form (or appearance) of evil...*” (**1 Thessalonians 5:22**).

But the reality is that we will still make mistakes and sin from time to time (**1 John 1:8**). We can even see examples in God’s Word where members of the Lord’s church in the first Century engaged in sin (*e.g.* **Acts 8:18-21; 1 Corinthians 5:1-2; Revelation 2:20**). However, in each of these cases, repentance was called for (**Acts 8:22; 2 Corinthians 2:7** [implied from the context]; **Revelation 2:22**). The Christian who strives to “...*walk in the light as He is in the light...*” will have a penitent and “...*contrite heart...*” when they have sinned, and “...*the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin...*” (**Psalm 51:1-4, 17; 1 John 1:7, 9**).

3) What it means for us

Whether we are currently a child of God or not, we are going to have to be engaged in “...*works befitting repentance...*” (**Acts 26:20**) if we wish to be pleasing to God (**Colossians 1:10**). As we saw earlier, repentance is one of the requirements for obeying the gospel. It is also required of Christians who sin.

Note: We do not “earn” our salvation by these works – we are ultimately saved by God’s grace (**Ephesians 2:8**) - but these works are required as part of our faithful obedience to Him (**John 14:15; Romans 1:5; 6:16**).

Therefore, as we live our lives as Christians, there should be a continual transforming (or change) process happening as we put away those things that are of the world, and we replace them with the things of God (**Romans 12:1-2**). To help us understand this change process, I would like us to briefly look at two examples from the New Testament where we can see “*works befitting repentance*” happening in people’s lives.

- i. **Luke 19:1-10** Our first example is a man called Zacchaeus. He was a rich tax collector living in Jericho, a town near the Jordan river, east of Jerusalem. Generally, Jewish tax collectors in those days were hated by their fellow Jews, because they collected the taxes on behalf of the Roman occupiers. Some of them became quite wealthy as a result of over-charging people for the taxes, and pocketing the surplus¹⁰.

Other than being a rich tax collector, the scriptures don’t tell us anything about Zacchaeus’s lifestyle before we get to **Luke 19**. But we see that when

¹⁰ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible, Volume 5, Q-Z, page 606, “Tax Collector”.

Repentance

he heard that Jesus was in town, he sought Him out, and Jesus went to his home and spent some time there. We don't know exactly what Jesus taught him, but at the end of their meeting, we do see two distinct acts of repentance coming from Zacchaeus;

- he would give half of his goods to help the poor. Perhaps up until now, he had been guilty of indifference towards the poor (**Deuteronomy 15:7-11**), just like the rich man in **Luke 16:19-21**. But now, he would do something practical to help them, and,
- if he had defrauded anyone while collecting the taxes, he would restore to them four times what he had (incorrectly) taken. In other words, he would pay them back four times the amount in question.

ii. **Acts 16:16-34** The Philippian Jailor. Again, we don't know anything about this person's background. However, when Paul and Silas had been unjustly beaten and cast in to prison, there is no record of the jailor showing any care or compassion for them. In fact, he made very sure that they were put in a place in the prison that would make it very difficult for them to escape (vs.24). Perhaps he saw them as another couple of "trouble-making Jews".

However, after the earthquake, he feared that the prisoners had escaped, so he sought to take his own life. This provided an opportunity for Paul to teach him the gospel – and not just to the jailer, but also to his family. And now we see a change in the Jailer. "...he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes...he brought them into his house [and] set food before them..." (vs.33-34). Rather than leaving them to "rot in jail", he now provided them with medical aid, hospitality, and food.

We can learn a lot from these two men.

When it comes to the need for repentance, the Word of God provides us with the knowledge of what is right and wrong (**2 Timothy 3:16; Psalm 119:105; Hebrews 4:12**). His commandments are not arbitrary – they are for our good (**Psalm 34:10b; 69:16a**). He made us (**Genesis 1:26**), He knows what is good for us, and so He teaches us through His Word (**Psalm 25:8-13**) the ways of righteousness.

When we become aware that we have sinned, we need to have a regret;

- a regret that we have sinned against God,
- a regret that motivates us to change our ways to do what is right.

Every soul is important to God, and when just one sinner repents, there is joy in Heaven (**Luke 15:4-7**). Why? Because God doesn't want anyone to be lost (**2 Peter 3:9**). When a sinner repents, they have turned around from heading towards condemnation and destruction, to a path that leads to righteousness and eternal life (**Romans 2:7-10**).