

10 Things You Should Know about Repentance

August 14, 2017 | by: Sam Storms (used by permission samstorms.com.)

Repentance is a massively important spiritual issue that calls for careful study and clear articulation. Here are ten things to remember about what it means to repent of our sin.

(1) Genuine repentance begins, but by no means ends, with heartfelt **conviction** of sin. That is to say, it begins with recognition, which is to say, an eye-opening, heart-rending awareness of having defied God by embracing what he despises and despising, or at minimum, being indifferent towards, what he adores. Repentance, therefore, involves knowing in one's heart:

"This is wrong."

"I have sinned."

"God is grieved."

The antithesis of recognition is rationalization, the pathetic attempt to justify one's moral laxity by any number of appeals: "I'm a victim! You have no idea what I've been through. If you knew how rotten my life has been and how badly people have treated me, you'd give me a little slack."

True repentance, notes J. I. Packer, "only begins when one passes out of what the Bible sees as *self-deception* (cf. Js. 1:22,26; 1 Jn. 1:8) and modern counselors call *denial*, into what the Bible calls *conviction of sin* (cf. Jn. 16:8)" (*Rediscovering Holiness*, 123-24).

(2) To truly repent one must also **confess** the sin openly and honestly to the Lord. We see this in Psalm 32 where David describes his experience following his adultery with Bathsheba. When he finally responded to the conviction in his heart it resulted in confession with his mouth.

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. . . . I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin'" (vv. 1-2,5).

David uses three different words to describe his confession (v. 5). He "acknowledged" his sin to the Lord. He refused to "cover" his iniquity. He was determined to "confess" his transgressions. Nothing is held back. There is no cutting of corners. No compromise. He comes totally clean. All the cupboards of his soul are emptied. All little black books are opened and read aloud. His confession is like opening the floodgates of a dam. It may be messy at first, but the release of ever-increasing pressure is life to his burdened heart. David makes no excuses, offers no rationalizations, and refuses to shift blame. He doesn't say, "Well, now wait a minute God. Yes, I sinned. But it takes two to tango. What about Bathsheba's complicity in all this? She's so beautiful and seductive. And my wife wasn't meeting my needs. Besides, the pressures of being King over your people are enormous. Given what I faced on a daily basis, I'd expect you to cut me a little slack." No!

(3) When one truly repents there is an awareness that the sin committed, whatever its nature, was ultimately **against God alone**. In Psalm 51:4 David declared: “Against you [God], you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”

But how can it be against God “only” if he committed adultery with Bathsheba, conspired to kill her husband Uriah, disgraced his own family, and betrayed the trust of the nation Israel? Perhaps David would argue that whereas one commits crimes against people, one sins only against God. More likely still, “face to face with God, he sees nothing else, no one else, can think of nothing else, but His presence forgotten, His holiness outraged, His love scorned” (Perowne, 416). David is so broken that he has treated God with such disregard that he is blinded to all other aspects or objects of his behavior.

(4) Although repentance is more than getting something off your chest or “out of your system,” there is in it a true feeling or sense of **remorse**. If one is not genuinely offended by one’s sin, there is no repentance. Repentance is painful, but it is a sweet pain. It demands brokenness of heart (Ps. 51:17; Isa. 57:15) but always with a view to healing and restoration and a renewed vision of the beauty of Christ and forgiving grace.

In other words, repentance is more than a feeling. Emotion can be fleeting, whereas true repentance bears fruit. This points to the difference between “attrition” and “contrition”. *Attrition* is regret for sin prompted by a fear for oneself: “Oh, no. I got caught. What will happen to me?” *Contrition*, on the other hand, is regret for the offence against God’s love and pain for having grieved the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is possible to “repent” out of fear of reprisal, rather than from a hatred of sin.

(5) Biblical repentance must be distinguished from **worldly or fleshly repentance**.

Nowhere is this difference more readily seen than in Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 7:8-12. Paul had written what we call his “severe” letter to the Corinthians. It was “out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears” that he penned this obviously painful missive (2 Cor. 2:4). He evidently spoke forcefully and unequivocally about the nature of their sin and the need for repentance. In doing so, he ran the risk of alienating them and ending all hope for future fellowship. Whereas he initially regretted having to write it, he later rejoiced,

“not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 7:8-12).

The letter stirred in them a grief or sorrow for sin that was “godly,” or more literally, “according to God” (vv. 9, 10, 11), by which he means that it was agreeable to the mind of God or that it was a sorrow prompted by the conviction that their sin had offended

God, and not simply Paul. This he contrasts with “worldly grief” (v. 10) that is evoked not because one has transgressed a glorious and holy God but simply because one got caught. Worldly grief is essentially self-pity for having been exposed and having thus lost stature, favor, or respect in the eyes of men (not to mention money!). Godly grief is the sort that we saw in Psalm 51:4 where David cried out, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”

If the Corinthians had formerly been apathetic and lackluster in their response to the apostle, now they are earnest (v. 11a) in their zeal to do what was right. If before they had denied their duplicity, this time they were eager “to clear” themselves (v. 11b), not wanting their failures to reflect poorly on Christ and the gospel. Paul’s letter, through the Spirit, had set ablaze an “indignation” (v. 11c) toward themselves for not defending Paul and for having permitted the situation to get so out of hand (and perhaps also against the wrongdoer for the way his actions constituted a brazen defiance of Paul’s authority). All told, it was initially an unpleasant experience for everyone concerned. But in the end, it yielded the harvest of repentance, restoration, and joy.

(6) In true repentance there must be *repudiation* of all sins in question and active practical steps taken to avoid anything that might provoke stumbling (cf. Acts 19:18-19). I.e., there must be a deliberate resolve to turn around and walk away from all hint or scent of sin (Ps. 139:23). Paul writes: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:14). If, in our so-called “repentance”, we do not abandon the environment in which our sin first emerged and in which, in all likelihood, it will continue to flourish, our repentance is suspect. To say much the same thing, there must be heart-felt *reformation*, which is to say, an overt determination to pursue purity, to do what pleases God (1 Thess. 1:9).

(7) There are any number of reasons why people, especially men, find it difficult to repent. For example, Satan and the world system have led them to believe the lie that their value or worth as men, indeed, as human beings, is dependent on something other than what Christ has done for them and who they are in Christ by faith alone. If a man believes that other people hold the power to determine his value or worth, he will always be reluctant to reveal anything about his inner life that may cause their estimation of him to diminish.

Thus the failure to repent is a form of *idolatry*. Refusal to repent is to elevate our own souls above God’s glory. It is to place a higher value on the perceived comfort of secrecy than the glory and honor of God. It is to say, “My safety and standing in the community is of greater value than God’s name and fame. I don’t repent because I cherish my own image more than God’s.”

In sum, people don’t repent because they are preeminently committed to saving face. They fear exposure because they fear rejection, mockery, and exclusion. And these are fearful realities only to those who do not yet sufficiently grasp that they are accepted, cherished, valued, and included by Christ.

(8) One's sincere pursuit and faithful embrace of repentance leads to the greatest blessing of all: **forgiveness**! Blessed is the man whose transgressions are "forgiven" (v. 1.). The word literally means "to carry away." David's sin, my sin, your sin, is like an oppressive weight from which we long to be relieved. Forgiveness lifts the burden from our shoulders. Blessed is he whose sin is "covered" (v. 1). It's as if David says, "Oh, dear Father, what joy to know that if I will 'uncover' (v. 5) my sin and not hide it, you will!" David doesn't mean to suggest that his sin is merely concealed from view but somehow still present to condemn and defeat him. The point is that God sees it no more. He has covered it from all view. Finally, blessed is that man or woman, young or old, whose sin the Lord does not "impute" or "count" against them (v. 2). No record is kept. God isn't a spiritual scorekeeper to those who seek his pardoning favor!

(9) Our refusal to repent can often result in **divine discipline**. As David reflected on his sin and the season during which he kept silent, he portrays the impact of his transgression in physical terms.

"For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" ([Psalm 32:3](#)).

The problem wasn't merely the sin he committed but the fact that he failed to repent. He kept quiet about his sin. He suppressed it. He shoved it deep down inside, thinking it gone for good. He ignored the tug on his heart. He denied the pain in his conscience. He numbed his soul to the persistent pangs of conviction.

Some think this is metaphorical language, that David is using physical symptoms to describe his spiritual anguish. Whereas that's possible, I suspect that David was feeling the brunt of his sin in his body as well. What we see here is a law of life in God's world. If you bottle up sin in your soul it will eventually leak out like acid and eat away at your bones. Unconfessed, unrepentant sin is like a festering sore. You can ignore it for a while, but not forever.

The physical effects of his spiritual choices are agonizingly explicit. There was *dissipation*: "my bones wasted away" (cf. [Psalm 6:2](#)). There was *distress*: "my groaning all day long." And David was *drained*: "my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." Like a plant withering under the torrid desert sun, so too was David dried up and drained out from suppressing his sin.

In other words, he was quite literally sick because of his refusal to "come clean" with God. His body ached because his soul was in rebellion. Spiritual decisions often have physical consequences. God simply will not let his children sin with impunity. It was in fact God's hand that lay heavily on David's heart. To sin without feeling the sting of God's disciplinary hand is the sign of illegitimacy.

(10) Finally, the principal reason we are slow to repent is that we simply don't understand **the gospel** and its implications for personal identity and spiritual value. Here is how Gavin Ortlund put it in a recent blog post:

"The gospel alone can free us for honesty, ownership, and admission, because the gospel alone destroys the sting and judgment associated with criticism. The gospel takes away

the fear that drives defensiveness and frees us to openly admit our shortcomings. The gospel says, 'in the place of your deepest failure and shame you are loved most tenderly.' The gospel says, 'your deepest fears were already born by Christ.' The gospel says, 'your sins were exposed and dealt with at the cross. The battle is already over.'"