

REPENTANCE—Legal vs. True

REPENTANCE is an old-fashioned word, not much used by the modernists and liberals of our day. True repentance and true belief are inseparable. True repentance and true faith are the products of a quickened heart—a work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Spiritual life must precede spiritual acts.

Legal repentance is that regret and reluctance that arises in a person after having done something that they should not have done. This repentance arises from a fear of punishment denounced against sin, but it is not accompanied with the hatred of sin and self. This person may be sorry for that which has been committed, but will not be grieved that they have offended a **Holy God**. Legal repentance fears hell and dreads punishment; for criminals are always sorry that they face punishment (however, sorrow itself is not *true* repentance).

Note these examples of legal repentance in Scripture: Esau, who in desperation repented (Gen 27:38; Heb 12:17) and Judas, who likewise repented (Matt 27:3). Esau and Judas repented, but their repentance was not a “repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). Esau was hated of God (Rom 9:13) and Judas was a “devil” (John 6:70). They were not of Christ’s sheep (John 10:26,27).

A God-wrought repentance is not just confession of sin (Exo 10:16,17). True repentance is not just confessing that Jesus is the Son of God (Matt 8:28,29). Repentance is not just reformation (Matt 12:43-45). Repentance is not just weeping over hearing of funerals and dying loved ones or children. This only stirs our emotions, causing us to weep through natural affections.

WHAT IS REPENTANCE? Saving repentance is wrought in the quickened heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, whereby a person is made to realize his awful, wretched sinfulness. He is humbled by godly sorrow (II Cor 7:9,10), thereby abhorring himself, and cries to God for pardon (Job 42:6). True repentance is basically three things:

1. A change of mind. See Luke 15:11-24. This account is generally called the story of the “prodigal son.” This Scripture shows us a change of mind which is the essential meaning of repentance in the Bible. Notice the son’s words in verse 21: “Father I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.” See the change! The son had before taken his portion of goods and went into “a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living,” but now he is quite different! See also the following passages for this “change of mind”: Matthew 21:28-32; Acts 2:37-41.

2. A change of feeling. Religion without emotion is religion without life! Many love to rejoice in the promises of God, but we cannot truly rejoice until we have come to an experiential knowledge of sin and have “godly sorrow” stain its dye into our hearts. Then shall we weep over our sins, with tears flowing like rivers! See again II Corinthians 7:9,10.

3. A change of purpose. “I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose and came to his father” (Luke 15:18-20a). The Scripture says, “Let the wicked forsake his way” (Isa 55:7) and “whoso confesseth and forsaketh them [sins] shall have mercy” (Prov 28:13). Paul said: “Ye turned to God from idols” (I Thess 1:9). Men must be turned “from the power of Satan unto God” (Acts 26:18). From servants of sin, we become Christ’s slaves when the Omnipotent One looses us from Satan’s dominion (II Tim 2:25,26).

How is repentance produced in the life of an individual? Repentance is the *gift* of God, for He is said to have “granted repentance” unto the “Gentiles” in Acts 11:18. Sinners must be first awakened from their dead state, for it is the Holy Spirit who “quickeneth” dead sinners (John 6:63). No sinner will ever repent until he be *first* given

life to repent. Our salvation is totally of God's grace from first to last, including this gift of repentance (Acts 5:31; Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

What are the *results* of repentance? Acts 3:19, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out..." Scriptural repentance reverences God, hates sin, and melts the heart of the awakened sinner. When the saving grace of God is wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit, a sinner is made to see and sense his sins. He is grieved and humbled before God, and this not just because of the punishment due his sins, but that God has been dishonored and offended, His laws violated; and now the poor sinner realizes his own soul is polluted and defiled. He now has a hatred of sin and a love of holiness!

Why preach repentance if a person can only repent when God grants it? In the first place Luke 24:47 tells us to do so: "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Secondly, because the message of the prophets was repentance: John the Baptist preached repentance (Matt 3:8); Christ himself preached it (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:15); and it was Christ and repentance that was the message given on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), as well as throughout the New Testament. Acts 17:30, "God...now commandeth all men everywhere to repent."

God told Moses in the wilderness journeys of Israel (because of the waters of Marah being bitter) to cast the tree into the waters. When Moses did so, the "waters were made sweet" (Exo 15:22-25). Did the tree cause the sweetness, or was it the obedience of Moses? Neither—it was *God* who caused the bitter waters to become sweet! So, neither is it our obedience in preaching repentance that brings or produces repentance, but it is God and God alone who is the Author of such, who grants repentance to the objects of His love.

True faith in Christ always produces repentance because repentance and faith are twins, they go together. There is never one without the other. It is repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). The truly believing soul repents, and by faith in Christ, and His precious blood and righteousness, sees all he needs for his standing before God in a righteous, forgiven, and justified state. The Lord Jesus Christ "hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." (Acts 5:31). —*James C. Heard*