

What Does It Mean to “Repent”?

A son in a large family resented his youngest brother. Whenever he thought the baby of the family was receiving special treatment, he would whack him on the head. Then, as soon as his younger brother started crying, he'd say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Please don't tell Mom and Dad." This scenario of hitting him and then saying he was sorry went on for several weeks.

One day the older brother walloped him and followed up with his usual insincere apology. "This time I really mean it. Please don't tell Mom and Dad. I'm really, really sorry." The younger brother said, "I just want to know when you're going to be sorry enough to quit!"

Repentance means to have a change of heart, which changes the way you behave. It doesn't mean to be sorry, but being sorry enough to quit what you're doing. Second Corinthians 7:10 says, "For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death." **Regret** wishes it could change the consequences of past failures. **Repentance** wants to change future behavior so that past sins won't be repeated.

Repentance is making a **decision in your heart** that you want to **please God more than yourself**, which changes the way you think, speak, and act. Trying to change your behavior without first changing your heart is getting the cart before the horse. You have the order backward. If you try to change your actions without first having a change of heart, it won't be long before you return to your old ways. Repentance is more than just acknowledging that you've done something wrong, but making a decision to change the direction of your life.

Suppose a husband and wife are riding in a car, and the wife tells her husband to turn right at the next street. By mistake, he turns left. When he realizes what he's done, he tells his wife "I'm sorry. I realize that I'm going the wrong way." However, saying that he is sorry won't get them any closer to their destination. He needs to stop the car, turn it around, and go back to the correct road that his wife told him to take in the first place. That's what it means to repent. You do a turn-around.

Some Verses on Repentance

We don't hear too many sermons today about the need to repent because we don't use that word today. Instead, we use the word "change." The Greek word "repent" means "to change the way you think." You cannot be a follower of Christ without repenting (having a change in your heart). Repentance means you stop living for yourself and start living for God.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son rebelled against his father and went to a foreign country. When he ran out of money, he got a job feeding pigs and was so hungry that he wanted to eat the pods. Luke 15:17 says, "He came to his senses," left the pigpen and humbly returned to his father's house. When he repented, he changed his attitude, changed the way he viewed himself and his father, and changed his direction in life. Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son to give us a picture of what it means to repent (Luke 15:11-32).

Jesus said this about repentance:

- "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:32).
- "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3-5)
- "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:7)
- "I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)

The Apostle Paul said:

- “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)
- “I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring...that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.” (Acts 26:19-20)
- “The kindness of God leads you to repentance.” (Romans 2:4)
- “I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.” (2 Cor. 7:9-10)
- Second Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”
- Revelation 16: 11 says, “They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.”

How does a Person Repent?

First, we must see the need to change.

During Jesus' day, the Pharisees were a hypocritical group of religious people who were self-righteous. They thought they hadn't done anything wrong, so there was no need for them to repent (change). The hardest people to reach are those who think they don't need their lives changed. The first step is having the light bulb turn on inside your head so you can see that your life needs a new direction for the better.

Second, we must make a decision to change.

Your desire to change must become greater than your desire to remain the same. John the Baptist said, “Therefore bring forth the fruit in keeping with repentance....The axe is already laid at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3:8,10). John the Baptist said to take the axe to the root and bring forth the fruit of repentance. Why did he say that? If the tree is bearing bad fruit (behavior), then we need to cut the root (the attitude in the heart). Get to the root of the problem, which lies below the surface. Too many people only deal with surface issues and they never get down to the root that is causing the problem. Until change takes place in the heart, our actions will remain the same. Repentance is taking an axe to the root of the problem and then bringing forth good fruit, which means changing behavior in a positive way.

Third, we must surrender to the Higher Power.

If you have tried to change but are unable to do it, you must surrender to your Higher Power—the God who has more power than you. Only the Holy Spirit can give you the power to live like Him. When you make that decision in your heart to surrender all to Him, you've just repented.

Prayer of Repentance: “Lord, I realize that I'm not living in a way that pleases you. I want my life to change but I don't have the power within myself to do that. Jesus, I surrender my life to you and I ask you to give me the power to change. Fill me with the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for hearing my prayer.”

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