

#113 "What Is True Repentance?"

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"I have listened and heard, they have spoken what is not right; no man repented of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone turned to his course, like a horse charging into the battle." - Jeremiah 8:6

To humble oneself is a great challenge considering our desire to be self-made and self-deserving. To pray is an act of boldness and courage for it requires us to believe that it all depends upon God. To seek God's face is a step in the right direction as we seek truth to apply. But to repent is the culminating issue. All has been for naught if we do not let the Spirit of God change us. For revival to occur, repentance must happen. Without repentance there is no salvation or sanctification. Repentance is the stepping stone of growth. God will show us where we come up short, but then we must by faith choose to change and accept His grace at work. This is why I have told people that revival starts with them. It is all up to them. Of course God must do the reviving work, but the time comes for them to make a choice. They must decide, "Do I follow myself or do I now follow God as He is leading me?" At this point, they now know what step they ought to take. To not take it is sin. To take it is a step of personal revival. In that sense, it is all up to us. We must decide if we will repent or not. This is the crisis point for faith.

2 Chronicles 7:14 describes repentance in a very insightful way. It doesn't even use the word "repentance." It says that we must turn from our wicked ways. Repentance requires that we disown, destroy, and get rid of whatever was sinful. It also requires that we turn toward God. It is a U-turn on the spiritual road of life. It is not good enough to just stop the car from continuing on in the wrong direction. The car must be spun around and begin heading toward God's direction. If we had usurped the driver's seat, which we did if we were in sin, we must let God take His rightful place of control. Repentance is a complete 180 degree turn.

The sad part about repentance is that it doesn't get talked about much these days. We talk of asking for forgiveness and accepting Christ, but rarely is repentance used as a part of the gospel message. That is downright wrong and dangerous. Mark 1:14-15 records what Jesus preached as He began His ministry: "Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" It says that Jesus preached the gospel which was to repent and believe that Christ was the Messiah Whom had come to save the world. We have no problem with the believing part. We struggle when it comes to repentance. It is an "ouch" word, a word that we are afraid will turn people off or scare them away. But it was Christ's word, and it is a necessary component of saving faith. Can there be saving faith apart from a genuine repentance? Luke 13:5 says, "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The message is clear. Unless there is repentance of sin and wicked ways, salvation cannot and will not occur.

Peter, when preaching at Pentecost at the advent of the Holy Spirit, says in Acts 2:37-38: "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" These people had heard the gospel message, and they wanted to respond. Should they raise their hand? Should they come forward to the front of the church? Should they kneel in their place? One thing was for sure. They needed to repent. Upon repenting they would be baptized immediately as a public declaration of their faith in Christ and of the washing away of their sins through His blood. They didn't want to wait to show their allegiance. They wanted God's blessing of their obedience and to be welcomed into fellowship with the other believers. Their repentance was what opened their heart to receive the Holy Spirit. The key for the three thousand to be saved was that they repent and turn from their wicked ways and false beliefs to the one true God. Interestingly, the first thing they did was an act of obedience in being baptized. The obedience was a sign of true repentance. Jesus says in Matthew 3:8, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance." Repentance has continued outward signs of its reality. Repentance has fruit. Obedience follows a turning from sin.

What is one way to know if a person has experienced genuine repentance? He must ask himself if he regrets what he has done, not merely what happened to him because of it (2 Corinthians 7:8-11). Would he not have done whatever sin he had committed if he could have done it over? That is regret and a sign of true repentance. Godly sorrow over offending God is part and parcel to a genuine turning back towards God.

The exciting thing about true repentance is that it produces in us anger at the sin that we fell into, and so it burdens us not to go back that way any more. It also motivates us to encourage others to avoid the same pitfall. It produces a healthy fear of God and a fear of the consequences of sin. It also makes us passionate to do right because we see perhaps more obviously and zealously that God's ways are the best ways. To not do God's ways becomes obvious hurt. To do God's ways becomes obvious joy. Life becomes more black and white, and serving God becomes more of a delight. Such passion and zeal to do what is right is also a sign of a changed heart.