

## #167 “The Essence of Repentance”

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There is a lot of confusion surrounding the concept of repentance in terms of what defines genuine repentance versus a mere regret over the consequences of poor choices. Scripture is clear, however, as to what leads us to repent, what repentance is, and how we can know if our repentance is, in fact, genuine.

After we have sinned, we are quickly made aware that we are guilty. The Holy Spirit will be active in convicting our hearts of sin and making us feel our guilt and shame acutely. But we can resist, grieve, and quench the Spirit’s loving conviction in our hearts if we harden our wills against God. We can continue to hide sin in our hearts for great lengths of time despite the misery of a double-minded conscience. Even the threat of God’s loving discipline may not be enough for us to want to change. What does move us to change with absolute certainty is God’s kindness. As Romans 2:4 clearly states, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” Believers will not face God’s wrath, so His wrath will never be in play in terms of moving us to own up to our sin. The only thing that will move us to change is kindness. Even before we were saved, God showed us kindness by sending His own Son to the cross to die for our sins. As Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s kindness in salvation is key in moving souls to receive His grace, and His kindness in the lives of us as believers is key in leading us to repentance. That He is so patient with us despite the many times we ignore Him, spite Him, and reject Him can often be enough to move us to own up to our sin as it reminds us of His great love for us and just how much we love Him in return. Sometimes God will show us kindness in disciplining us by imposing some variety of consequences upon us, but even then, we will see that we had given Him no other choice. He will always act in our best interest, for our welfare, and for our preservation. God’s feelings and heart toward us never change, and as our understanding of God’s love and kindness deepens, the less we will want to sin and the quicker we will confess it when we do.

The other thing that moves us to repent is godly sorrow when confronted with the truth from Scripture. Scripture will cut us to the heart (Hebrews 4:12) and remind us of our sin. The internal guilt and agony becomes increasingly unbearable the more we sense God’s love for us. Finally, at some point, we typically are overcome with genuine godly sorrow over what we have done. Godly sorrow is the first step in repentance as we finally acknowledge sin as God’s sees our sin. We choose finally to see it as He does, grieving over its devastating effects and over how we have hurt God’s heart. We are extremely saddened by having run from God and having made an allegiance with the devil. The depth of the depravity of our flesh so amazes us that we sorrow as we turn to God. If we have no sorrow over sin, it is hard to believe that we have truly repented. This is not just regret about being caught or a mere emotionalism or pouring out of tears. Repentance has not just any sorrow but a godly sorrow, one wrought in great grief over wronging Someone we love. It is a very personal sorrow.

This brings us to 2 Corinthians 7:8-11, which says,

“For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it--for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while-- 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. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.”

Godly sorrow according to the will and work of God in our hearts leads to several fruits of repentance. Repentance has clear evidence of a genuine change. Paul says that true repentance produces a “vindication of yourselves.” This involves us coming to our senses when we start thinking and believing that we were really stupid in what we did and that that is not who we really are or what we want to be. We begin affirming truth after truth after truth about who we are in Christ and rejecting the lies that Satan has put in our minds. It is a sort of defense of who we are in Christ and who we want to be as we remind ourselves of our true identity in Jesus. True repentance also produces indignation as we get angry with ourselves for having giving into temptation and not trusting God to escape. We get upset not just because we were caught or now have consequences or a variety of inconveniences to deal with but because we wronged God. True repentance also produces fear as we realize just how close we were to really destroying our lives or hurting someone else. Sin is dangerously deadly, and when we come to our senses, we realize how foolish we were to be playing with fire. True repentance produces a longing for being more like Christ, a longing to get back in the saddle of doing God’s work, and a desire to push forward in obedience. Repentance has a corresponding zeal for righteousness and the commands of Christ. Those who truly repent don’t just crawl ahead, but they start sprinting to avenge for lost time and lost opportunities. They realize that Satan won that round, but they want the next one. They want back in the fight to avenge the wrong and advance the kingdom of God.

These fruits of repentance help us to know whether we have truly changed course in our lives or have just experienced a certain feeling without true godly sorrow. True repentance produces true change. We may fall again in the same way, and certainly we will fall again in some way. But when we do, we need to yield to the Spirit’s conviction, receive the truth of Scripture, turn from our sins, and press on in righteousness. God’s forgiveness is immediate because He is that kind. He is the kind of God that we want to obey and Who deserves our allegiance. Praise Him that He is patient with us and works to keep us on the right track.