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What Is Repentance?

By the late C. D. Cole

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent", Acts 17:30.

Repentance is essential in salvation and is one of the chief elements in conversion. Repentance is a part of the commission of Christ to His servants. Luke 24:47 tells us, "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem". Repentance is associated with remission, but on the one hand there is no remission apart from the shedding of blood; there is no remission apart from repentance on the part of the sinner. Sometimes preachers cry, "believe, believe", when they should be saying, "repent, repent". To an impenitent sinner, the urging of faith is like casting pearls before swine. It is like urging a well man to take medicine and is like begging a rich man to beg for alms. Repentance is the effect of seeing oneself as he actually is, ruined, guilty and undone and in danger of hell. Repentance is the effect of seeing sin in its true colors. The natural man is color blind. That ugly thing we call sin is bright and entrancing to him. The natural man has a ruined taste calling sweet bitter and bitter sweet. He confounds good and evil confusing the question of right and wrong. Repentance is the work of God in the soul and is produced by the withering work of the Holy Spirit, who takes the sword of the word and slays man's natural self-esteem and self-righteousness causing the man to cry, "What Must I do to be saved?"

NECESSITY FOR REPENTANCE

John the Baptist, our Lord, and the apostles emphasized the necessity for repentance. Suppose God should save us without repentance on our part, then we would:

1. be delivered from punishment without any grounds for gratitude. Without repentance the sinner would not be grateful for escape from his punishment.
2. be delivered from punishment without being delivered from the love of sin. We would perpetuate rebellion by transferring rebels from earth to heaven. Salvation would be only a change of environment. One important element in repentance is hatred of sin and abhorrence of self.
3. refusal to repent is worse than the sin for which we ought to repent. Lets look at the following illustration: A man tells a lie, which is an awful sin, but the refusal to repent is worse than the act of lying. Why? Because in lying the man might have acted impulsively and through weakness, but refusal to repent is an attempt to justify his act of lying. It is saying that he had the right to lie. I once had a friend who said that he had never done anything to repent of. Refusal to repent is an attempt to justify the sin, or to ignore the sin.

NATURE OF REPENTANCE

What is repentance? What does one do in repenting? How may I know whether or not I have repented? These are vital and practical questions.

Let's first deal with the nature of repentance negatively.

1. It is not a work to be done by the sinner in order to obtain salvation. This would conflict with all Bible passages that tell us that salvation is without works. Ephesians 2:8-10, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. "Not of works, lest any man should boast. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

Titus 3:5, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;"

II Timothy 1:9, "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

2. Repentance is not self torture of the body. It is not to be confused with penance. Penance is the effort to atone for wrong done; its an effort to pay for salvation and to do something to bring God under obligation to save us. Monk does penance by sleeping on the hard floor or by wearing a hair shirt, or by some other torture of the body. When Anselm of Canterbury died, his garments were found to be full of vermin he had harbored in doing penance. Luther tried to find peace with God by climbing the stairs of St. Peters on his hands and knees.
3. Repentance has nothing to do with bodily exercise. Repentance is an inward attitude of the mind, heart and will rather than outward exercise of the body. The position of the body is not vitally important. One may repent as Job did, sitting in dust and ashes, while another may repent standing in the temple smiting his breast as the publican did. Still another may repent, as many have, while sitting in a pew at church.
4. It is not grief and tears given as the price of salvation. In repentance there is godly sorrow, but that sorrow does not make atonement for sin. Our tears must not be

mixed with the blood of Christ as the price of salvation. We do not sail to heaven on the salt sea of our tears, but on the red sea of Christ's blood.

In repentance, the sinner is not trusting his tears but he is grieving because he has nothing in or of himself to trust. In repentance the sinner is not bringing something to offer for salvation for he realizes that he has nothing to offer. Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling, are words of the penitent and believing sinner.

5. Repentance is not a hard term imposed by God. This would be inconsistent with God's love. God would not love us and give His son to die for us and then impose some hard term upon us as the price of salvation. This would also be inconsistent with God's way of salvation, which is not hard but easy. If salvation is by grace through faith, if it is not of works and is without money or price; if it is the gift of God, how can it be on hard terms. Salvation is made hard not by God but by the pride of the natural heart. It is pride and self-sufficiency that leads a man to ask, "What good thing shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" We must indeed strive to enter in at the strait gate, but this striving is not with an unwilling Saviour, but against a nature that wants ground for boasting. Everything in our old self-confident and self-centered nature is up in arms against God's way of salvation through faith in Christ.

Now let's consider the positive side of the nature of repentance.

1. Repentance is a change of mind and is the result of an after thought or reflection on past conduct. Substitute change of mind for repentance and it makes good sense.

Romans 11:29, "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance".

Hebrews 12:16-17, "Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. "For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears".

2. Evangelical repentance, or saving repentance has a moral element. It is a change of view of feeling and of purpose concerning sin. There are three elements:
 - (1) An intellectual element, in which is perceived or realized. No repentance until sin is recognized. Nobody but a conscious sinner

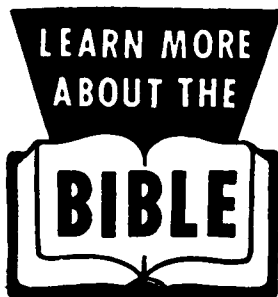
can repent. Recognition is not the only element of repentance. Another element is confession. "I have sinned", was proclaimed by hardened Pharaoh, by double-minded Baalam, remorseful Achan, insincere King Saul and by despairing Judas. However, none of these men repented unto life.

(2) There must be an emotional element, or a Godly sorrow, or sorrow towards God, not towards death or punishment. A man may be sorry for his sins because he sees they are ruining him and his family. A drunkard may hate his drinking because he sees it is injuring himself and taking bread out of the mouth of his wife and children. The sorrow involved in repentance is a sorrow because sin is against God.

(3) There is a volition element in which there is a change of purpose. The will is involved, purposing to forsake sin to change the way of living, to turn from sin.

All elements in repentance are exemplified in the case of the prodigal son. He came to himself; that is he perceived or realized that he had done wrong in leaving his father's house and wasting his substance in riotous living. There was the emotional element; he had a different feeling; he took his condition to heart; he felt sorrowful about what he had done. There was the volitional element. His will began to work and he said, "I will arise and go to my father." In repentance we have sins perceived; sins abhorred and sins forsaken.

Repentance involves two facts: Sin and Grace. If there is no sin, there is no need for repentance; and if there is no grace there is no need of repenting.



CHRIST IS THE ONLY ANSWER

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