

## Repentance

Sometimes we hear of a leader, perhaps a politician, apologizing for something that they did. Usually, these apologies happen after it has been found out that they have done something immoral, and the information has been made public. We wonder if their sin had remained hidden if they would have shown so much regret. We have seen the news stories where the politician stands before the microphones with his “supportive” wife beside him, announcing that he is sorry for his indiscretions.

The word, “sorry,” has the same roots as “sorrow.” Both of these words are rooted in the older word which means “painful” or “full of sores.” Being sorry means that we feel mental or emotional pain because of what we have done. Or, if we are cynical, we believe that the politician feels pain because he was found out and his actions could affect both his relationship with his constituency and his chances of being re-elected. When someone is sorry, we have to be careful to define what they are sorry about. What is it that is giving them the pain: that they sinned or that they were found out?

Repentance is a little different from being sorry, at least in the history and origin of the word. “Repentance” comes from the Latin root and has as its root the same word which gives rise to “penitent.” To be penitent is to regret something that one has done. Sorrow (feeling mental pain) might be rooted in the fact that one has been found out, but repentance is rooted in the fact that one realizes that what they have done is regrettable. The politician who repents is truly sorry for what he has done and not merely sorry that he has been caught.

In the New Testament the word that is translated into the English, “repentance,” is a lot stronger. The Greek word is a compound word meaning literally “to think differently about something.” The word can be broadly used, and an example might be, “After driving the Toyota Tundra, he came to believe that not all good pick ups are made in North America.” We could also say that he repented of his previous belief in that he changed his mind. When used in the Bible, repentance, while it begins with changing one’s mind, it doesn’t end there. Repentance always involves action of some sort.

In the Old Testament one of the Hebrew words that is often translated as “repentance” can also be translated as “turn around.” In that sense, we could say that the traveler repented of his decision to head west and began to head south instead. Repentance, as we find it in the Bible, often involves a complete change of direction, usually causing one to head in the other direction. But, it is not a forced turning around, for the repentant one has already become convinced in his mind that the previous direction of travel was wrong, moving him to go in a different direction.

To become repentant, then, is to first become convinced that what we were doing was wrong and in so becoming convinced, we turn around and try something else. Perhaps a better way to translate the Hebrew and Greek words is “convert.” The word, “convert,” comes from the Latin which would mean “to turn together.” If we put that together, we could say that repentance means that not only are our minds changed about something, but our direction quickly follows.

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If we think about it in those terms, it is impossible for someone to continue to willfully sin if they truly believe that that sin is harmful to themselves and others or if they believe that that sin is harmful to their relationship with God. Repentance always involves a lifestyle change of some sort, for what begins in the mind must be played out in real life. It is true, however, that sometimes repentance takes a long time and many tries. We often find ourselves reengaging in the same sin again and again even though we may have repented of it. We might turn around and start to move in the opposite direction of the sin but then fall back into that sin once again. We would hope, though, that after repeatedly repenting (following one's changed mind) that the attraction of sin would grow weaker, and we would become more successful in turning away from it.

But we don't have to do this alone. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit does work in us, changing our minds so that our sin is no longer so attractive. In fact, as the Spirit works in us, sin can become quite repulsive, even to the point that we no longer want to engage in it, and our repentance becomes permanent. It is necessary, in fact, if we truly want to turn away from sin, to seek the Spirit's help, knowing that he will help us to think what is right so that we can do what is right.

We always need to evaluate if we are merely sorry that we have been caught or if we are truly repentant. To be sorry is to feel pain. To repent is to have one's mind changed and allowing that change in our minds to cause us to move in the opposite direction away from sin. By God's grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, we can be "converted" so that we move away from sin to becoming more Christlike.

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