



# REPENTANCE

Its Meaning and Application

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## **Repentance Its Meaning and Application**

*“Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks,  
repentance toward God, and faith toward our  
Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).*

There is a great amount of confusion today about the issue of repentance and its relationship with how to be saved. The problem today has to do with the meaning of repentance. Make no mistake about it- repentance is taught in the Bible. John the Baptist preached repentance. Jesus preached repentance. Peter preached repentance. Paul preached repentance. Unfortunately, the simple fact is, over the history of the church the word has changed meaning.

Those of us who believe in salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, have often been falsely accused of not believing in repentance. We do believe in it. But we believe in *Biblical repentance*.

**I would like us to look at 3 major issues or aspects concerning this vital topic:**

### **1. The False Meaning of Repentance**

Unfortunately, the false meaning of repentance is what we usually see as the predominant definition in most dictionaries today.

As an example, Dictionary.com defines repentance as:

- a. deep sorrow, compunction, or contrition for a past sin, wrongdoing, or the like
- b. regret for any past action

Some would say it means to feel sorry for your sins, to feel remorse. Even some Bible dictionaries have the false definition, often starting with the *right* definition, and then transforming it into the wrong definition.

As with many words in our dictionaries, the meaning of the word has actually changed over time. This is acceptable when dealing with secular literature.

However, when we are talking about the subject of becoming a Christian and going to Heaven, changing the meaning of words is another matter. This change of meaning has caused great confusion, and has become a hindrance to people getting saved. What do I mean by this? Simply put, people have turned repentance into some kind of *moral work*. Unfortunately, most people automatically read this *false definition* into the Bible and

come up with a *false way* of salvation. It really becomes a problem when preachers do not understand it and preach error, some not even realizing what they are saying. This only confuses people.

One pastor who clearly *did* understand the issue said this: “We have heard some well-known preachers say, ‘If you want to be saved, repent of your sins, turn from your sins.’ If turning from your sins means to stop sinning, then people can only be saved if they stop sinning. And it is unlikely that anyone has ever been saved, since we don't know anyone who has ever stopped sinning.”

The Bible is abundantly clear on the terms of salvation. We are saved by God's grace alone when we put our faith in Jesus Christ alone as our only way to heaven. The Bible says:

*“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” (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

Notice that it is not of works. It is not man trying to reform his life by turning from evil and trying to live a clean life. This would take effort and work, and salvation is *not of works*.

In Acts 16, the Philippian jailer came in and asked that all important question, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas could have told him anything. What did they say?

*“And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved...” (Acts 16:31).*

There is no mention of the word *repent* or *repentance*, only believing.

Jesus also made the condition for receiving eternal life very clear in John 6:

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” (John 6:47).*

In this verse we find nothing about a requirement of having to cease from doing certain sins or promising to live in a more moral way to be saved.

Some would say repentance means that one has to be *willing* to turn from their sins.

Let's think about this for a moment: If you say that a person has to *be willing* to turn from his sins in order to be saved, then you are saying that a lost person has to

have a *mental commitment* or *intention* to do so. In other words, they are committing or promising to do it in the future.

**Where is that a requirement for salvation in the Bible?** This would be an addition to what Jesus and also Paul said. This is making a deal or contract with God. You are saying to God, “If I promise to stop sinning, then will you save me?” This is the mindset of reforming your life. And in reality, this is works for salvation, for it requires effort.

*The truth of the matter is this: No one has ever stopped sinning until the day they died. A person who has the mindset of trying to reform or clean up their life is trying to live right instead of trusting in Christ. Their focus is on behaving rather than trusting in the finished work of Christ on the cross.*

For those reading this who believe that you have to turn or be willing to turn from your sin to be saved, I have some questions for you:

a. Have YOU turned from all YOUR sins? Be honest! The Bible says you haven't. 1 John, which is written to saved people, says that if you say that you don't HAVE any sin you are deceiving yourself.

*“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).*

b. How many sins do you need to turn from? It would only make sense that you would need to turn from all of them. Yet, that is impossible.

c. If not all of them, then which ones? Is there a list somewhere in Scripture of those we must turn from?

d. What about the sins of omission? Some examples of this are: not loving the Lord every minute with all your heart, soul, and mind; passing opportunities to witness; not loving your wife as Christ loved the church; not praying for people as often as we should.

e. What about the sins of the heart, such as pride, jealousy, envy, lust?

f. What happens if you stop the sin, but then start again? Do you lose your salvation? Does it mean that you never had salvation to begin with? Some say that repentance is going in one direction, and then you turn around and go in the other direction. What if you turn around again? Were you never



saved to begin with?

g. How many successes prove you are saved?

h. How many failures prove you are lost?

i. If you have to be willing to turn from all your sins, then where does it say that in the Bible? How willing do you have to be?

These false definitions of repentance are a form of reformation, which is self effort, which is trying to live right. Does trying to live right save a person? No. That would be works for salvation. Even if you couple it with faith, you end up with a false gospel of grace AND works. Yet the Bible says that salvation is *not of works, lest any man should boast*.

Satan has done a great work through a false definition of repentance. It is a major part of the culture of the “church” today. It is taught in many of the pulpits, commentaries, hymnals, study Bibles, and Sunday School curricula.

Now, let me pause at this point and make something clear: For those who have been saved through faith in Christ, it IS God’s will that we live godly and pure

lives, not to be saved, but because we are saved. The Bible declares:

*“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;”  
(Titus 2:11-12).*

But trying to live a pure life never saved anyone. This is not a requirement for Heaven.

**Let me draw your attention to some interesting facts about the teaching of repentance from the Bible:**

a. There is *not one verse* in the Bible that says that repenting of *your sin* will get you to Heaven. *Not one verse* says that you must repent of your sins to be saved.

b. The 3 books of the Bible that are focused on salvation more than any of the others are John, Romans and Galatians.

With that in mind, the gospel of John never uses the word *repent* or *repentance*. Yet the gospel of John is “God’s gospel tract”, so to speak. What do I mean? It states:

*“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:30-31).*

John uses a form of the word *faith* 98 times, yet *not once* does he mention the word *repent*. If repentance as defined by most people today was a requirement for salvation, then certainly the book that was written for the express purpose of leading people to Christ would include it.

The book of Romans uses *repent* twice, but they are 2 different Greek words. Yet *faith* is found 39 times. Those 2 places are:

*“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?”  
(Romans 2:4).*

Here Paul uses the Greek word *metanoeo*. This means to change your mind.

*“For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Romans 11:29).*

Here the Greek word is *ametamelētos*. It means irrevocable.

The book of Galatians never uses the word *repent* at all. Yet it is a book that strongly defends and explains the gospel of grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

We must ask, why is it that the three New Testament books that deal with salvation more than any of the others never say one time that we must turn from our sins, be sorry for our sins, or be willing to turn from our sins, to be saved? The reason is simple. *It is because false repentance is not required for salvation.* So then, what does it mean and where does repentance fit into the picture?

## **2. The True Meaning of Repentance**

a. The Old Testament. Let me say that there is no direct grammatical relationship between the Hebrew and Greek words for repentance. The KJV translators decided to use the same English word in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, we find there are two Hebrew root words translated as *repent*. The first is the word *nacham*, which appears in its various forms 108 times. It means *to sigh or breathe deeply*. Out of the 108 times this Hebrew word is found,

it is translated as *comfort and comforter* 66 times. Only 41 times is it translated *repent*. It is also translated as the word *ease* 1 time. This word *nacham* is usually used in reference *to God, not man*. The other Hebrew word is *shub* which basically means to *turn* or *return*. This is used 391 times. It is also translated as *again*, and is used 248 times. It is only translated as *repent* 3 times.

If repentance means "turning from one's sin," a problem arises. As we read the Old Testament we not only have a God who frequently turns from His sins, we also have a God who frequently refuses to turn from His sins! This simply makes no sense, seeing *God has no sins to turn from*. This fact should sound an alarm in the mind of any Bible believing Christian about the meaning of repentance.

b. In the New Testament, the primary Greek word is *Metanoia*: *meta*: to change. *noia*: the mind. It means to change the mind, to think differently. *Every time* the word *repent* is used in the Bible when referring to salvation from Hell, it is either the noun or verb form of this word, meaning *to change your mind or thinking*. There are 2 other words translated *repent*, but *every time* the reference is *dealing with being saved eternally*, it is *metanoia* or *metanoeo*.

When God tells an unsaved man to repent, He means for that man to change his mind about the way of salvation and to believe or trust in Jesus Christ as his only way to Heaven. It is natural for man to think that he can earn his way to Heaven by his good works. When he understands that he is a sinner and cannot save himself, and instead he trusts in Jesus Christ as his only means of salvation, *that man* has repented. He has changed his mind. This definition and explanation is very clear in Hebrews 6.

*“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,”*  
(Hebrews 6:1).

Now let me repeat: Does this mean that we shouldn't live for Christ *once we are saved*? No! We certainly should live for Christ, but it is not a requirement to receiving salvation.

Remember: An unsaved person cannot really please God even if he does “good works.” Romans 8:8 is crystal clear on this:

*“So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God”*  
(Romans 8:8).

Isaiah also addressed this issue of our own good works as well:

*“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isaiah 64:6).*

Any person trusting in their future performance is in fact trusting in their works for salvation. The Bible is clear that we are saved by grace through faith, *apart from works*.

*“But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:5).*

### **3. The Application of Repentance**

I would like to cover in order several New Testament passages on the issue of repentance that often come up in the discussion of this issue. Remember: **NOWHERE** in the Bible does it say that turning from sin or being sorry for sin will secure you a place in Heaven.

a. **Matthew 3:2** And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

What did John the Baptist mean? The Jews needed to change their thinking (minds) about Jesus because most of them believed that they would enter the kingdom simply because they were Jews, the children of Abraham. This is brought out in the context. Look at v.9.

**Matthew 3:9** And **think not** to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

John was trying to get them to see that salvation was in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. How do we know that? Paul explained John's message of repentance in Acts 19:

**Acts 19:4** Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, *saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.*

b. **Mark 1:15** And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

Jesus, who was the King, came offering the Kingdom.



The Kingdom was at hand because the King and Messiah had come. This was good news! What should have been their response? Repent and believe the gospel. The gospel is the good news concerning His Son, Mark 1:1.

*Repenting* here in the context is clearly linked with what one *believes*. In other words, change your mind, and believe the gospel instead of believing whatever you have been believing. Today, whenever a person puts their trust in Christ, somewhere along the line they have repented from some other idea of salvation or a savior. They have changed their thinking. As we have seen, this was the case of the Hebrew believers in Hebrews 6.

Paul preached the same truth in Acts 20:

**Acts 20:21** Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, **repentance toward God**, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

When a person trusts in Jesus Christ, he is repenting of his former belief. It is either faith in self being repented of or faith in one's religion. *As a Christian*, is it good to repent (have a change of mind) *concerning* our sins? Of course, but do not mix this up with a promise to reform

the life in order to be saved. The two are not the same.

c. **Luke 13:1** There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

**2** And Jesus answering said unto them, **Suppose ye** that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things?

**3** I tell you, Nay: but, **except ye repent**, ye shall all likewise perish.

They needed to think differently. This is a change of mind.

**4** Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, **think ye** that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?

**5** I tell you, Nay: but, **except ye repent**, ye shall all likewise perish.

It was very common for people *to think*, as even they do today, that every time something bad happened to someone, it was because of sin in their life. Jesus was speaking to people *who thought* they were better than others. The issue in this passage is self-righteousness. And what did He tell them to do? Repent! *They* needed to have *a change of mind, a change in their thinking*. They

needed to see their own sinfulness, and trust in the Lord. They too were lost and sinners, in need of salvation. Notice He brought up the issue of them *thinking* that the others were sinners above or worse than someone else. He was trying to get them to see that they were all “in the same boat”.

d. **Acts 2:38** Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Repent: *metanoeo* to change your mind or to have another mind. They needed to change their thinking concerning *who Jesus Christ was*. The Jews had rejected Him as God and their Messiah. They needed to believe in Him instead. We see here two vital points:

1. *To tell them to turn from their sin would be an impossible command to fulfil.* It was a once and for all sin they committed in the past, impossible to do again.
2. *To tell them to be sorry for it doesn't change or fix anything.* It was history.

e. **Acts 17:30** And the times of this ignorance God

winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

We need to understand the context. Paul was preaching to lost Gentiles who *did not know* who the Lord Jesus Christ was and what He had done for them.

**Acts 17:23** For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.

In v.23 we see that Paul keys in on the inscription to the *unknown God*. Here is an explanation of the passage, starting in v.23. Notice the words *unknown*, and also *ignorantly*. They needed a change in their *thinking*. He was providing the information they needed. He says God commands all men everywhere to repent.

Think about this:

1. If repent means to *turn* from sin, or *be sorry* for sin, how does that *take away* sin? How does that bring salvation? It doesn't. We need a death payment.
2. If repent means to *be willing* to turn from sin, that

still doesn't take away the sin. Where is faith in this? *Believing is what brings salvation.*

*“And they said, **Believe** on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31).*

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever **believeth** in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).*

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that **believeth** on me hath everlasting life” (John 6:47).*

3. Since repent means to *change their mind or thinking*, that is exactly what they needed to do. They needed to see the Lord Jesus Christ as God and the One and only Savior. This is a matter of changing their minds. It is only then that they would see their need and trust in Christ.

f. **2 Corinthians 7:8** For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though *it were* but for a season.

Repent in this verse is a different word from *metanoeo*, which means a change of mind. This word is *metamelomai*, which means regret.

It could be translated this way: **2 Corinthians 7:8** For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not **regret** it; though I did **regret** it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while.

**2 Corinthians 7:9** Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.

*Notice that there is a distinction here between sorrow and repentance. In v.9 this word repentance is metanoeo, which means to change your mind or attitude.*

**2 Corinthians 7:10** For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

This verse uses 2 different Greek words for repentance, yet only translates them with the same English word. This leads to confusion. The first word is *metanoia*, meaning a change of mind. The second word for repent is *ametamelētos*, meaning irrevocable.

Many want to use this verse for going to Heaven, or salvation, but that is not the context. It is Paul dealing with the saints at Corinth. They were already believers. Yes, Christians need to repent as well as lost people. We see this in Revelation 3:19 as well. Christians many times need to have *a change of mind* concerning the way they are thinking. They also need to have *a change of mind* concerning the way they are living.

*As one commentator says: “‘Repent’ is the translation of a Greek verb *metanoeo*, meaning to have another mind, to change the mind, and is used in the New Testament to indicate a change of mind in respect to sin, God, and self. This change of mind may, especially in the case of Christians who have fallen into sin, be preceded by sorrow (2 Cor 7:8-11); but sorrow for sin, though it may cause repentance, is not repentance.”*

While there are other references to repentance in the Bible, I trust that the passages covered in this brief booklet have been helpful and enlightening. We all need to repent as people. We all need to have *our thinking changed* from our own ideas to what God says.

## **ARE YOU SURE OF HEAVEN?**

Dear friend, while reading this booklet you may have

come to the realization that you have been trusting in your good works to get you to heaven. You cannot be saved that way. Let's review and take some time to read and understand the following truths:

The Bible tells us that we are all sinners, less perfect than God.

*"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" (Romans 3:23).*

To sin is to *miss the mark* of God's perfection. We have all violated His word and broken His commandments. The price that God demands for the payment of sin is death. If you choose to pay for your own sin, you will have to die and spend forever separated from God in Hell.

*"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"*  
*(Romans 6:23).*

God's Word also says that no sin can enter Heaven because Heaven is a perfect place, and sin would bring death. Man must be sinless in God's eyes to enter Heaven.



*“And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life” (Revelation 21:27).*

There is absolutely nothing you can do to obtain the sinless perfection God requires for eternal life. No amount of good works or sincerity can give you the righteousness needed. The Bible says,

*“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” (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

Because God loves you, He sent His Son Jesus Christ-- God in the flesh-- to earth to take your place and make the complete payment for all your sin. Three days later, He came back from the dead proving the payment was accepted by God the Father.

*“But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).*

All you must do to possess everlasting life is believe, or trust, that Jesus Christ alone paid the price for your sin.

*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).*

God promises that if you put your trust in Christ alone you will receive, at that very moment, everlasting life. He cannot lie. Because He has promised it, on the authority of God’s Word, you can be sure of going to Heaven today.

*“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; **that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God**” (1 John 5:13).*

Why not, right now, trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior? If you do, He will give you eternal life and you will be *secure forever*.

If you have any questions about the Bible, salvation, or how to grow in the Christian life, please feel free to contact me.

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