

# **PART ONE**

## **The Gospel Call**



*Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

—Mark 1:14–15

*I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.*

—Acts 20:20–21

*But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*

—Romans 10:8–10



## CHAPTER ONE



### A Call to Repentance

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*Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

—Mark 1:14–15

*Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.*

—Acts 17:30

According to God's eternal plan and good pleasure, the Son of God, equal with the Father and the exact representation of His nature, willingly left the glory of heaven, was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin, and was born the God-man. He walked on this earth in perfect obedience to the law of God, and then, in the fullness of time, He was rejected by men and crucified. On the cross, He carried the sins of His people, was forsaken of God, suffered divine wrath, and died condemned. On the third day, God raised Him from the dead as a public declaration that His death was accepted, the punishment for sin was paid, the demands of justice were satisfied, and the wrath of God was appeased. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, ascended to heaven, where He sat down at the right hand of God the Father and was given glory, honor, and dominion over all. There, in the presence of God, He represents His people and makes requests and special petitions to God on their behalf. This is the good news of God and of Jesus Christ, His Son.<sup>1</sup>

Having considered this great thing that God has done, we must now turn our attention toward humanity. What is a person's biblical response

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1. This summary is based in part on Westminster Confession, chapter 8.

to the gospel? How should the evangelist direct desperate people when they cry, "What must I do to be saved?" The Scriptures are clear: people must repent and believe the gospel. When Jesus appeared to Israel, He did not plead with them to open their hearts and ask Him in, nor did He direct them to repeat a certain prayer. Instead, He commanded them to turn from their sin and believe the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

### **AN ENDURING AND UNCHANGING CALL**

Before we continue on, we must understand that Christ's command of repentance and faith is still applicable for us today. It would be terribly wrong to think that it was limited to a certain dispensation or directed only to the Jews of the New Testament era. "Repent and believe!" is the gospel call for yesterday, today, and forever. The apostles reinforced this truth and boldly proclaimed it after Christ's resurrection and ascension. Note the apostle Paul's declarations:

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20–21).

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

These texts and several others prove that there is no ground for any argument that would relegate repentance to some earlier dispensation or diminish its part in modern-day evangelistic preaching. "Repentance unto God" was the call of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the confessions and preaching of the most pious and useful theologians, preachers, and missionaries throughout the history of the church. The Westminster and New Hampshire Confessions state respectively:

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace; the doctrine thereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ (15.1).

We believe that repentance and faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces (art. 8).

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2. See Mark 1:14–15 for one example.

## THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF GENUINE REPENTANCE

Since the call to repentance is an absolute necessity in the proclamation of the gospel, we need to have a right understanding of the nature of repentance and its manifestation in genuine conversion. The following are eight essential characteristics of true biblical repentance:

- change of mind
- sorrow for sin
- personal acknowledgment and confession of sin
- turning away from sin
- renunciation of self-righteousness or good works
- turning to God
- practical obedience
- continuing and deepening work of repentance

It is imperative for us to understand that these characteristics of genuine repentance will not necessarily appear in their fullest or most mature form at the moment of conversion but will continue to grow and deepen throughout the believer's life. It would be terribly misleading and destructive to suggest that true conversion requires that a person should attain a depth of repentance and faith that is rarely seen in the life of the most mature Christian. Jesus Himself said that even the faith of a mustard seed is sufficient to move mountains if it is genuine.<sup>3</sup> At the time of conversion, a person's grasp of the heinous nature of sin may be meager, but it will be real. The depth of a new convert's brokenness may be slight compared to that of the mature believer, but it will most certainly be genuine. The final evidence that a person's repentance and faith are unto salvation will be that both these graces will continue to grow and deepen in his or her life through God's enduring work of sanctification. With these clarifications and cautions in mind, let's take a closer look at each of these characteristics.

### *Change of Mind*

In the New Testament, the word *repent* is most frequently translated from a Greek verb that is constructed from another verb that means "to perceive or understand" and a preposition that denotes change.<sup>4</sup> Repentance,

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3. Matthew 17:20

4. *Metanoéo*. "The preposition *meta* used with verbs of motion and of mental activity indicates a change in the meaning of the simple verb." *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:357.

therefore, involves a radical change in a person's perception of things or in his view of reality. In the Scriptures, this change of mind is never confined to the intellect but has an equally radical effect on the emotions and will. In summary, genuine repentance begins with a work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the sinner, whereby He regenerates the heart, illumines the mind, and exposes error by a revelation of divine truth. Because of this divine work, the sinner's mind is changed and his view of reality is radically altered—especially with regard to God, self, sin, and the way of salvation.

The Scriptures teach that prior to conversion, a man is darkened in his understanding and walks in the futility of his mind.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, his mind is hostile toward God, suppresses the truth of God, and cannot subject itself to the law of God.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the unconverted person has a completely distorted view of reality, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he is wrong about everything that truly matters. He knows something of the one true God and His majesty, but he does not think it necessary to honor Him as God or give thanks.<sup>7</sup> He is filled with self and sees the promotion of self as the end of all things. The laws of God are written on his heart, but he does not think it necessary or advantageous to follow their dictates. Instead, he fights against his conscience and seeks to suppress what he knows to be true.<sup>8</sup> He knows that all who commit evil deeds are worthy of death, but he does not think it necessary to fear. He not only does the same things but also gives hearty approval to those who practice them.<sup>9</sup> His own mortality confronts him as death swallows up everyone around him, but he does not think the plague will ever reach his doorstep. To put it simply, the unconverted person is wrong and yet arrogantly continues to do what is right in his own eyes.<sup>10</sup> He is on a way that seems right to him, but its end is the way of death.<sup>11</sup>

However, at the moment of conversion, the Spirit of God regenerates a person's heart, and the truth enlightens his darkened mind. Then, as a blind man given sight or a sleeper awakened from a dream, he is made

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5. Ephesians 4:17–18

6. Romans 1:18; 8:7

7. Romans 1:21

8. Romans 2:14–15

9. Romans 1:32

10. Judges 17:6; 21:25

11. Proverbs 14:12

aware that his entire life has been governed by his own delusions and that he has been wrong about everything. For the first time in his life, he sees and acknowledges what is true. His wrong and even blasphemous thoughts about God are replaced by a meager yet accurate understanding of the one true God. His vain opinions of his own virtue and merit are replaced by an awareness of the depravity of his nature and the utter wretchedness of his deeds. His arrogance, self-confidence, and independence are replaced by genuine humility, mistrust of self, brokenness over sin, and dependence upon God, to whom he looks for pardon. He then casts himself upon the mercies of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ and sets himself to doing the will of God. Thus, his mind has been changed and his life transformed. He has repented.

Saul of Tarsus is a great example of biblical repentance. In his ignorance and unbelief, he saw Jesus of Nazareth as nothing more than an impostor and a blasphemer, and he thought that all who followed Him were worthy of imprisonment and death.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he went to the high priest, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” and asked for letters so that “if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2–3). Yet on Saul’s way to Damascus, the glorified Christ confronted him.<sup>13</sup> At that moment, Saul’s entire view of reality disintegrated. He discovered that he had been wrong about everything. He had thought that Jesus of Nazareth was a blasphemer, only to discover that He was the Son of God, the promised Messiah, and the Savior of the world. He had thought that righteousness was earned through obedience to the law, only to discover that there was nothing good in him and that salvation was by grace through faith and not of oneself, but a gift of God.<sup>14</sup> He had thought that the disciples were the enemies of Israel and unfit to live, only to discover that he was persecuting the true Israel and putting to death the sons and daughters of the living God.<sup>15</sup> Thus, he sat alone for three days “without sight, and neither ate nor drank” (Acts 9:9). Through one encounter with the truth that is Christ Jesus, Saul of Tarsus, the proud and self-righteous Pharisee of Pharisees, was broken into a million pieces. Yet,

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12. Acts 9:1–2; 1 Timothy 1:13

13. Acts 9:3–8

14. Romans 7:18; Ephesians 2:8–9

15. Acts 8:1; Romans 8:14–15; Galatians 6:16

through the illuminating and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, his heart and mind were changed, and his life was radically altered forever. He repented, got up, and was baptized; he took food and was strengthened. Then he immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:18–22). The news spread throughout all the churches of Judea that ““He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy”” (Galatians 1:22–23).

Paul describes this radical reversal of his life that began on the road to Damascus in the following words. In them, we discover the power of a mind changed and a heart renewed by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit:

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Phil. 3:7–9).

### *Sorrow for Sin*

A Hebrew term that adds to our understanding of *repentance* is the verb *nacham*. It is derived from a root that reflects the idea of “‘breathing deeply,’ communicating the physical display of one’s feelings, such as sorrow, regret, or contrition.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, biblical repentance not only involves a change of mind but also a genuine sorrow for sin.

The slightest true comprehension of our sinfulness and guilt will lead to genuine sorrow, shame, and even a healthy hatred or loathing of our sin and ourselves. Ezra the scribe declared that he was “ashamed and humiliated” to lift up his face to God because of Israel’s sins (9:5–6). The prophet Jeremiah cried out, “We lie down in our shame, and our reproach covers us. For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God” (Jer. 3:5). The prophet Ezekiel was even so bold to declare that when disobedient Israel finally recognized the heinous nature of its sin against the Lord, it would loathe itself in its own

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16. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:570.

sight for all the evil things it had done.<sup>17</sup> Finally, writing to the believers in Rome, the apostle Paul noted that they were still ashamed of the things they had done prior to their conversion.<sup>18</sup>

Such talk seems out of place in a world and evangelical community overrun with the psychology of self-esteem, but sorrow, shame, and self-hatred are biblical truths and an essential part of genuine repentance in both the Old and New Testaments. These teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul give clear evidence of this truth:

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:13–14).

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Cor. 7:9–10).

Faced with the reality of what he was and what he had done, the tax collector accompanied his confession with brokenness, deep remorse, and humility. In the case of the Corinthian church's carnality and pride, sorrow was not only appropriate but was also considered to be "according to the will of God." In both cases, however, it is important to notice that sorrow and shame were not the goal, but the means to a greater end. The publican's self-humiliation led to his justification, and the sorrow of the believers in Corinth led to repentance without regret, resulting in salvation.

Although there is a "sorrow of the world" that is without faith and leads to death as in the case of Judas Iscariot, we should never look negatively at the godly sorrow that accompanies genuine repentance and leads to life (2 Cor. 7:10). It is the testimony of Scripture that God highly esteems such sorrow. He will not despise "a broken and a contrite heart" (Ps. 51:17), but rather He looks to the one who is "poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isa. 66:2). Though He dwells on a high and holy place, He is also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in

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17. Ezekiel 20:43

18. Romans 6:21

order to revive them.<sup>19</sup> As Jesus taught us in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

### *Personal Acknowledgment and Confession of Sin*

Repentance not only involves inward sorrow of the heart but also personal acknowledgment and open confession that God’s opinion of us is true and His verdict is just: we are sinners, we have sinned, and we deserve divine condemnation. Biblical repentance always involves an owning up to what we are and what we have done. This truth runs contrary to the beliefs of our contemporary culture. We are a self-excusing and self-justifying people who, according to popular thought, are never truly at fault, but we are always victims of some malicious and often nameless power beyond our control. We find or invent the cleverest means of attributing our sins to anything or anyone outside of ourselves. We self-righteously point the finger at society, education, upbringing, or circumstance, and are appalled and even angered at the slightest indication that guilt should be laid at our feet. However, when we are converted, we have a radically altered understanding of this opinion of the age. For the first time in our lives, we turn our indicting finger back upon ourselves and honestly own up to our sin. Our mouths are shut, and we see ourselves as accountable to God.<sup>20</sup> We offer no excuse and seek no avenue of escape.

We accompany our personal acknowledgment of guilt—our taking full responsibility for our deeds—with an honest transparency before God and a heartfelt confession of sin. The word *confess* comes from a Greek word that literally means “to speak the same thing.”<sup>21</sup> In the divine work of conversion, God opens up the heart of the sinner and speaks to him about his sin. The Word of God, living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, pierces the very depths of his heart and exposes even its deepest thoughts and intentions.<sup>22</sup> Then, for the first time in his life, the sinner comes face-to-face with his sin and understands something of its heinous nature. It is ever before him, and, try as he might, he cannot remove the horrid image of himself that he sees.<sup>23</sup> He can no longer hide but must acknowledge his sin before God and confess his transgressions

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19. Isaiah 57:15

20. Romans 3:19

21. Greek: *homologéo*.

22. Hebrews 4:12

23. Psalm 51:3

to the Lord.<sup>24</sup> Like David, he is compelled to cry out in full recognition of his guilt and in willing confession:

Against You, You only, have I sinned,  
And done this evil in Your sight—  
That You may be found just when You speak,  
And blameless when You judge (Ps. 51:4).

The prophet Hosea describes the believer's new transparency before God, by which he enters into agreement with Him and openly confesses that everything God says about him is true:

Take words with you,  
And return to the LORD.  
Say to Him, "Take away all iniquity;  
Receive us graciously,  
For we will offer the sacrifices of our lips" (14:2).

It is important to note that such sensitivity to sin and confession of it is a mark of a true believer, but the lack of such is evidence that a person may still be in an unconverted state. The apostle John writes, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us [i.e., we are not Christian]. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness [i.e., we are Christian]. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us [i.e., we are not Christian]" (1 John 1:8–10).

One of the greatest evidences of true conversion is not sinless perfection, as some have erroneously supposed. Instead, it is sensitivity to sin, transparency before God regarding sin, and open confession of sin.

### *Turning Away from Sin*

In the Old Testament, the word *repents* is translated primarily from a Hebrew word that means "to return or turn back."<sup>25</sup> It implies not only a turning away from evil, but also a turning to righteousness.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, one of the telltale signs of genuine repentance will be honest and sincere forsaking or turning away from sin. The abundance of tears a person may shed or the apparent sincerity of his confession alone is never definite

24. Psalm 32:5

25. Hebrew: *shuwb*.

26. Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, 2:909.

evidence of biblical repentance. All this must be accompanied by a turning away from that which God hates and opposes. This truth is so clearly set forth in the Scriptures that it requires very little commentary, as in these three verses from the prophet Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord GOD: "Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations" (14:6).

Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed (18:30–31).

"As I live," says the Lord GOD, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (33:11).

It is an undeniable biblical truth that genuine repentance will manifest itself in a turning away from sin. However, this truth about repentance has often led to confusion and fear, among even the most pious believers. Such confusion often manifests itself in the following questions: Have I truly repented if I again commit the sin that I have renounced and abhor? Do my frequent failures indicate that I am unrepentant? This very sensitive question requires a great deal of balance. On the one hand, a frequent return to sin and lack of any sustained victory over it may be evidence of a superficial and unbiblical repentance. This is why John the Baptist admonished the Pharisees to "bear fruits worthy of repentance," and Jesus declared, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matt. 3:8; 15:7–8).

On the other hand, regardless of the progress a believer has made in sanctification, even the most mature one will find the Christian life to be a great struggle against sin with frequent battles, great victories, and discouraging defeats. On this side of heaven, no believer will ever make a complete break with sin to be immune from its deception and free from all moral failure. Although true believers will grow in their forsaking of sin, sin will still be a repetitive malady in their lives. Although it may become less frequent or pronounced, sin will never be eradicated completely until the believer's ultimate glorification in heaven. Although God has promised to cleanse us "from all [our] filthiness and from all [our] idols," the most mature believer among us will at times be caught

in the very sin that he or she has renounced (Ezek. 36:25). Though we struggle against sin and run for holiness as one who runs for the prize; though we discipline our body and make it our slave; and though we walk in this world with the greatest care and wisdom, we will find that we are not yet perfected and still in need of repentance and grace.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, believers should not despair about the battle they wage or their frequent need of repentance as they struggle against sin. The reality of such a struggle is a mark of true conversion. The false convert—the hypocrite—knows no such battle. It is important to remember that God does not promise His presence to the one who is perfect, but to the one whose life is marked by a broken and contrite spirit and who trembles at His word.<sup>28</sup>

So, then, a great balance is required. There are two sides to this coin, and one cannot be lost without the other. On one hand, genuine Christians will experience a gradual progress in sanctification and frequent victories over sin. He who began a good work of repentance in them will continue that work so that it grows and deepens and becomes a greater and greater reality in their lives.<sup>29</sup> However, Christians will never be free from sin completely or without need of the divine gift of repentance. On the other hand, professing Christians who demonstrate no real progress in sanctification and who rarely bring forth fruit worthy of repentance should be greatly concerned for their souls. They should test and examine themselves to see if they are in the faith.<sup>30</sup>

### *Renunciation of Works*

At first glance, this may seem to be an inappropriate characteristic of genuine repentance. After all, we believe we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Furthermore, John the Baptist tells us to bear fruit or do works that are worthy of repentance, and James tells us that faith without works is dead.<sup>31</sup> How, then, is true repentance manifested by a renunciation of works? The answer is in Hebrews 6:1: “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on

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27. 1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Ephesians 5:15

28. Isaiah 66:2

29. Philippians 1:6

30. 2 Corinthians 13:5

31. Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8; James 2:17, 26

to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God." The phrase "repentance from dead works" refers to a renouncing or turning away from any and every hope in some personal work of piety as a means of justification or right standing before God. Any work that a person might rely upon in place of the person and work of Christ is a dead work that cannot save.

Scripture teaches that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone; it is not of works, lest any man should boast.<sup>32</sup> This is why the Scriptures present grace and works as diametrically opposed to one another and mutually exclusive. The apostle Paul sets forth this truth brilliantly in his letter to the church at Rome: "And if [salvation is] by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6).

In classical logic there is a principle called the law of noncontradiction that states that contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time and in the same context. This is true with regard to works and grace as they pertain to salvation. If salvation is by grace, it cannot be by works; if it is by works, it cannot be by grace. Therefore, before a person can exercise true saving faith in Christ, he must first abandon all hope of attaining salvation through any other means.

This abandonment of self-righteousness in favor of Christ alone is one of the great works of the Spirit of God in regeneration. Through the Spirit, the truly repentant person has come to see something of the unattainable righteousness of God and the unsearchable depths of his own depravity. He has been confronted with his sin and made to cry out with the patriarch Job and the apostle Paul:

If I am condemned,  
Why then do I labor in vain?  
If I wash myself with snow water,  
And cleanse my hands with soap,  
Yet You will plunge me into the pit,  
And my own clothes will abhor me (Job 29:31).

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:24).

This new revelation of self and sin leads even the most self-righteous among people to renounce their trust in their own virtue and merit with

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<sup>32</sup>. Ephesians 2:8–9

the same force that they have renounced their most vile and heinous sin. They no longer seek to establish their own righteousness before God by means of works, but “rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). This is powerfully illustrated in the conversion of the apostle Paul:

Though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Phil. 3:4–9).

As in the case of grace and works, true repentance and self-righteousness are diametrically opposed and cannot cohabitate in the same person at the same time. The unrepentant person sees himself in “need of nothing.” However, when the Spirit of God regenerates his heart and illumines his mind, he sees himself as “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). He takes the stance of the publican, who “would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). He comes to God with the attitude of the old hymn writer who penned:

Not the labor of my hands,  
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.  
Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to the cross I cling.<sup>33</sup>

The repentant sinner categorically rejects all the deceitful accolades of a works-based religion. Consequently, his heart overflows with the

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33. Augustus M. Toplady, “Rock of Ages,” stanzas 2–3.

words of the psalmist: “Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but to Your name give glory” (Ps. 115:1). Any suggestion that he is right with God by virtue of his own character or deeds would horrify him. It would draw from him the following declaration of faith: “God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14).

What place, then, do works have in our salvation? Is the Christian to continue in sin that grace may abound?<sup>34</sup> Is he to be void of fruit and personal righteousness? Absolutely not! Those who have truly repented and believed unto salvation have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and recreated in the image of Christ. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature with a new nature.<sup>35</sup> He has died to sin and been raised to walk in newness of life.<sup>36</sup> By the power of regeneration, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the relentless providence of God, the believer will bear fruit and accomplish good works for the glory of God. However, these good works do not result in salvation; rather, they flow from it. The works the Christian accomplishes, which God prepared beforehand so that he would walk in them, are not the cause of his justification but the evidence of it.

#### *Turning to God in Obedient Submission*

Forsaking sin is not an end in itself, but a means to a greater end: a turning to God. Morality is not the same thing as Christianity. Neither does the Christian practice morality for morality’s sake, but for God’s sake and His glory and delight.<sup>37</sup> Although there is a distinctive Christian or biblical morality, Christianity is primarily about God and an intimate, passionate relationship with Him. Jesus described it in this way: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

In using the word *know*, Jesus is not limiting the Christian life to an intellectual endeavor; rather, the knowledge of which He speaks is both relational and intimate. The goal of the Christian life is the pursuit of an intimate knowledge of God that leads to a greater estimation of His worth, a greater satisfaction and joy in His person, and a greater giving of oneself for His glory. As the old catechism states, “Man’s chief end is to glorify

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34. Romans 6:1

35. 2 Corinthians 5:17

36. Romans 6:2–4

37. To practice biblical morality for any reason other than love for God and the promotion of His glory is blatant idolatry.

God and to enjoy Him forever.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, genuine repentance does not stop at turning away from sin, but it is still incomplete until there is a thorough turning to God as the “chief end” of all desire. This truth is especially evident in two Scriptures gleaned from both the Old and New Testaments. The first is from the prophet Isaiah, through whom God declared:

Seek the LORD while He may be found,  
Call upon Him while He is near.  
Let the wicked forsake his way,  
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
Let him return to the LORD,  
And He will have mercy on him;  
And to our God,  
For He will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6–7).

It is important to note that this text clearly places the emphasis on returning to the Lord. The renunciation of sin is not an end in itself, but the first step toward the greater end of returning to God. We turn away from sin so that we might turn to Him. The two things are necessary, because God and sin are mutually exclusive. We cannot cherish nor possess both at the same time.

The second text is in Paul’s first epistle to the church in Thessalonica. He describes their conversion in the following words: “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9–10). Once again, it is evident that a person’s turning away from sin is secondary to the primary goal of turning to God. The evidence of true conversion among the believers in Thessalonica is that they not only turned from their former idolatry, but they also turned to the living and true God in obedient service. Moreover, they had such a longing for Him that they were patiently awaiting, amid much affliction, His final and full revelation in the second coming of His dear Son. As is the case of all true repentance, there was a “turning away from” and a “turning to.” There was a rejection and renunciation of sin and a passionate desire and longing for God.<sup>39</sup>

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38. Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 1.

39. Other texts that demonstrate the twofold nature of biblical repentance include the following: Isaiah 45:22; Lamentations 3:39–41; Joel 2:12–14; Zechariah 1:3.

*Practical Obedience*

A life marked by simple and heartfelt obedience to God's commands may be the most obvious and certain proof of true repentance. A person may boast of an inward passion for God and of sincere feelings of piety, but such claims are valid only to the degree that his life conforms to the commandments of Scripture. The strong words of John the Baptist leave no room for misinterpretation. A person is able to make a claim to repentance only to the degree that he bears fruit "worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8). A fruitless life proves counterfeit emotional manifestations of contrition. This is a warning to us all, for the axe of God's judgment is already laid at the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As faith without works is both dead and useless, so repentance without fruit is a powerless counterfeit that cannot save.<sup>40</sup> However, if a person's heart has truly turned Godward, he will evidence it by a newfound practical obedience to the will of God. Even though repentance involves the mind and the emotions, it is ultimately proven true or false by a person's willful submission to God's commands.

Lest we attempt to explain away John the Baptist's warning as an antiquated prophetic message meant for another age, we would do well to remember that his doctrine is also found in the teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul, respectively:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven (Matt. 7:19–21).

Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and *do works befitting repentance* (Acts 26:19–20, emphasis added).

Scripture strictly condemns any attempt at earning a right standing before God through human merit or works; however, repentance and faith are the result of the supernatural recreating work of the Spirit of God.<sup>41</sup> Such a work of grace will always manifest itself in the transforma-

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40. Matthew 3:10

41. Galatians 3:10

tion of the believer's life and the bearing of fruit. As the Lord Jesus Christ sets forth in the Sermon on the Mount, those who have truly repented and believed will be known "by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16–20). This does not mean that the truly repentant will always live in perfect conformity to the will of God without the blemish of disobedience. Nor does it insinuate that he will always bear abundant fruit like the blessed man of Psalm 1:3:

He shall be like a tree  
planted by the rivers of water,  
That brings forth its fruit in its season,  
Whose leaf also shall not wither.

However, it does mean that he will be inclined toward God's commands, and a simple, practical obedience will mark his life. Those who make a claim to repentance without the fruits that most certainly must follow can have little assurance of the validity of their claim and the right standing before God that they suppose.

#### *Continuing and Deepening Work of Repentance*

The final characteristic and ultimate test of all genuine repentance is its continuation and growth throughout the believer's life. Through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, the God who begins a work of repentance in us will perfect it; He will see to it that it matures and deepens throughout our lives.<sup>42</sup> This truth is revealed in the very beginning of Christ's teachings recorded in the gospel of Mark: "Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (1:14–15). In the original Greek text, the commands to repent and believe are both written in the present tense, which indicates continuation. To communicate the proper meaning, Christ's admonition might be translated this way: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; therefore, live a life of repentance and faith in the gospel."

The evidence that a person has truly repented unto salvation is that he continues repenting throughout the full course of his life. Although he must struggle against the flesh, the deceitfulness of sin, and a hardening of the heart, repentance will mark his life. For this reason, in some places of the world, true Christians are scandalously referred to as "repenters"

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42. Philippians 1:6

because an ever-growing, ever-deepening, ever-maturing repentance marks their lives.<sup>43</sup>

This same truth is set out for us in the Beatitudes, where Christ declares, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). In this text, the phrase “those who mourn” is translated from a present-tense participle that indicates continuation. Christ is not pronouncing a blessing on those who momentarily or sporadically mourn, but on those whose mourning marks their lives. Although Christ’s words need no further validation, they have abundant support throughout the Scriptures. The Lord affirmed the same truth through the prophet Isaiah: “But on this one I will look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word” (66:2).

Often in contemporary Christianity, repentance is referred to as something like a flu shot or a vaccination for polio—something that someone does at the moment of conversion and then is done with once and for all. Yet this is contrary to the Scripture’s view of repentance. In fact, the evidence that a person has truly repented unto salvation is that he is still repenting today and that his repentance has both increased and deepened since the day of his conversion.

Hardly anyone would object to the truth that we live in a superficial age in which the secular and the religious person seem to walk arm in arm toward the same goal: the pursuit of happiness *in this life*. Consequently, the great taboo in culture and contemporary Christianity is to make mention of anything that might rain on someone’s parade, hurt someone’s feelings, or undermine someone’s self-esteem. People are not only *not* to pursue the Christian graces of repentance, brokenness, and mourning, but they also must avoid them at any cost. For this reason, many among God’s children are greatly hindered in their Christian life. They fail to understand that repentance is not only the essential first step toward salvation, but also the very catalyst of true joy.

At conversion, a person begins to see God and himself as never before. This greater revelation of God’s holiness and righteousness leads to a greater revelation of self, which, in turn, results in a repentance or brokenness over sin. Nevertheless, the believer is not left in despair, for he is also afforded a greater revelation of the grace of God in the face of

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43. Evangelical believers in Romania are often referred to as “repenters” by those who are contrary or hostile to their faith.

Christ, which leads to joy unspeakable. This cycle simply repeats itself throughout the Christian life. As the years pass, the Christian sees more of God and more of self, resulting in a greater and deeper brokenness. Yet, all the while, the Christian's joy grows in equal measure because he is privy to greater and greater revelations of the love, grace, and mercy of God in the person and work of Christ. Not only this, but a great interchange occurs in that the Christian learns to rest less and less in his own performance and more and more in the perfect work of Christ. Thus, his joy is not only increased, but it also becomes more consistent and stable. He has left off putting confidence in the flesh, which is idolatry, and is resting in the virtue and merits of Christ, which is true Christian piety.