

Repentance: The Way Back to God

“As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting...” -2 Corinthians 7:9

I don't know what your life has been like. But I know how you can be on a fresh, new page and leave your past behind. Through repentance. Every good thing God wants to pour into your heart, your marriage, your home comes through repentance. It means change in every way and at every level! It involves your mind—recognition of sin. Your emotions—heart-felt sorrow. Your will—resulting in a change of behavior.

We've got to be willing to see our sin in the mirror. Sin often falls into three big categories— pride, pleasure, and priorities. Pride is sinful, self-centered thinking, whether it's pride of position, prestige, or power. Pleasure is a big category of sin when we seek it at the wrong time, with the wrong person, in the wrong measure, or in the wrong activity. That applies to sex, substance abuse, and “stuff”! Priorities—that's the good that's often left undone and neglected toward self, others, and God.

You may be saying, “But Pastor James, I'm totally a sinner.” Well, so am I. What should we do about that? Repent!

FIVE MARKS OF GENUINE REPENTANCE

I believe there actually are measurable evidences of genuine repentance. Jesus challenged His hearers to “*bear fruits in keeping with repentance*” (Luke 3:8). Repentance is the root I can't see, but if the heart is repentant, there will be visible fruit on the tree. Here's what I mean, taken from 2 Corinthians 7:9-11: “*As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss*

through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you proved yourselves innocent in the matter.”

1) Grief over sin. Verse 9: “You felt a godly grief.” If you really repent, you’ll feel grief about the sinful choices that you’ve made. Job was a righteous man by human standards, but after he met with God he said, “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). When you come to church, here’s a way you can know you’re meeting with God: you have a sense of your own unworthiness.

It’s possible to see your sin and feel grief, but not be repentant—that’s the “worldly grief” described in verse 10. There’s a rejection of God in all sin. So if you don’t feel grief over any of those things, you’re not repenting. And if you’re not repenting, you won’t change.

2) Repulsion over sin. Verse 11: “See what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you.” The repentant heart is obvious—there’s an eagerness to get this business done with God. Also

notice... “what indignation.” A feeling of strong opposition. The thing once desired isn’t attractive anymore.

The prodigal son woke up one morning in a pig wallow and came to his senses, “What am I doing here!?” That’s how we’re supposed to feel about our sin. Is there anything in our list of sins that repulses you? Ask the Lord to give you genuine, earnest grief and repulsion of sin.

3) Restitution. Now this is the key mark of true repentance: restitution. Notice again verse 11, “what zeal, what punishment!” When repentance is happening in your life there’s an energetic pursuit of fixing the fallout from your sin.

Zacchaeus is the poster-boy for this. As a tax collector, he had

cheated. When he repented, what was the first thing he said? “I’ve got to give the money back. It doesn’t belong to me.” That’s restitution that comes from repentance. You don’t just want to be right with God, but right with the people you injured. That’s why Paul commended the Corinthians’ “eagerness to clear yourselves” (verse 11).

No matter what you see in the rearview mirror of life, you can experience God’s grace and forgiveness. You can be on a clean page under the grace of God, but you can’t be right with God if you don’t want to be right with the people your sin has injured.

4) *Revival Toward God.* There will be a renewing joy over a restoration of your relationship with the Lord. Paul is observing that in the Corinthians when he says “what fear” (verse 11). Before, they were involved in all kinds of sin and didn’t care what God thought. “You’ve changed,” Paul says.

Fear of God is the starting place for revival. When repentance happens, the joy of the Lord comes back. This is the place not many people know to go. But you can go there. David did after sin and repentance—“Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51:12).

5) *Moving forward.* Here’s the final mark—moving forward. Looking back, wishing you had done things differently, is a symptom of worldly repentance. But if my grief is God-focused, then I experience grace and cleansing. That’s why Paul says in verse 9, “so that you suffered no loss through us.” If you respond to the Word of God, there’s only a better place with others and a better place with God and grace flowing into your life.

It’s easy to spot people who haven’t repented. They’re living in the past, filled with regret. “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (verse 10). If I asked you to drive home and never take your eyes off the rearview mirror, what would happen!? But so many people spend their lives looking in their rearview mirror. Genuine repentance frees me from regret! It’s an awesome provision of God.

HAVE YOU REPENTED?

We've all got to have true repentance. We'll know it's true if we have grief over sin, repulsion over sin, restitution toward others, revival toward God and if we're moving forward with our life, not looking back. "Today is the first day of the rest of my life." That's a fruit of repentance. "I'm going forward now in God's grace. I can't fix the past, but I can do a whole lot about tomorrow. I can do a whole lot about today."

So, the time is now. If you want to begin the work of genuine repentance in your life, pray to God right now:

Lord, right now, I'm letting go. I'm letting go of sin, of self, I'm letting go of private pleasure that doesn't honor You. I'm letting go of bitterness, resentment toward others, hateful feelings, I'm letting go of these things, Lord. As best as I know how, I'm repenting of them. Produce grief over sin in my heart. How could I spit in the face of grace? How could I slap away the hand of God? I have turned away and felt the sting of that. Now I'm turning to You. Cause me to feel the sweetness of restoration. Cause me to feel the rightness of reconciliation to You. Father, engrave upon my heart lessons of repentance. How good it is and how much grace flows to humility before You. Change me. Revive me, O Lord. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation. Revive me according to Your Word. I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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